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(the Case of Belarus)**

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Introduction

The wave of democratic electoral revolutions in the Eastern Europe and post-Communist Eurasia revived one of the most appealing and at the same time disputable arguments in the theory of democratization: that is, that is, that successful democratic breakthroughs in one of several places help to shape the timing and dynamic of transformation in others, where the regime change has yet to occur. This interconnectivity of transitions in time (and space) is described in terms such as ‘contagion’, ‘diffusion’, or ‘demonstration effect’. Indeed, although hardly a decisive factor, the evidence that contagion played certain important role in transmitting the spirit of democracy and techniques for achieving it from Serbia in 2000 to Georgia in 2003 to Ukraine in 2004 to Kyrgyzstan in 2005 is evident. Needless to say that there is more than enough evidence that a large community of activists, policy advisors, local and international NGOs, and media, were purposefully involved in translating the experience, strategy and tactics of successful revolutions to the new territories. This often led to a feeling of *deja vu* once an observer saw TV scenes of yet another autocrat being ousted and a new democratic leader being installed by the people’s power.

Why contagion is so important and vivid in this wave of democratic revolutions? First, as Valerie Bunce asserts,¹ this is a unique fellowship of democratic activists in the entire post-Communist world (that is, spreading from Prague to the Far East in Russia) who share the common experience of the past and on its basis develop a sense of responsibility for helping so far less fortunate neighbors and comrades to achieve their dreams and goals.² In the broader sense, contagion is definitely facilitated by the proximity of historical experiences and present-day concerns and dilemmas staying for the societies in the region: in other words, as

¹ Valerie Bunce’s keynote address at the Fisher Forum on Color Revolutions at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, http://atlas-real.atlas.uiuc.edu:8080/ramgen/reec/reec-v-2005-1/smil/reec20050912_Valerie_Bunce.smil

² Ask Czech or Polish activist involved in democracy promotion in Ukraine, and she or he will reply something like that: ‘we were helped a lot in our struggle for freedom in the past, now we want to pay back our debts by helping people in the East.’ Now, Ukrainian enthusiasts will tell the same about the reason to be involved into helping pro-democracy forces in Belarus or Azerbaijan.

far as they face similar problems, they audiences throughout the post-Communist world may have immediate understanding of what sort of solutions are suggested to them by the roaming revolutionaries. Second is a generation profile of new democracy-builders in the region: most of them are relatively young and relatively idealistic personalities, many well-travelled and well-proficient in foreign languages, who combine the sense of purpose with the feel of adventure. Third is the dramatic proliferation, over the last decade and a half, of the democracy promotion community and the international civil society. Much of it initially settled in the region with the more humble tasks of 'assisting' in democratic transformation in early 1990s, and benefited from the initial benevolence and readiness to play democratic games of the incumbents who took the reigns of power immediately after the collapse of the Soviet system. Fourth is the advance of computer technology, international electronic media, and mobile communication that made recent revolutions truly the first 'hi-tech' political transitions in history. Newest technologies allow inspirational images of people power as well as knowledge and political know-how spread at the speed the newest technology can accommodate. And while off-limits for many in the impoverished societies of Eurasia, computers, mobile phones, and satellite dishes are definitely in use by the activists in the region. Needless to say, these newest technologies assisted enormously in mobilization and coordination of both electoral efforts and street protests during the recent revolutions.

But democrats and revolutionaries are not the only ones who can learn from the past and apply the knowledge to fulfill their political goals. Indeed, their antagonists appeared to have mastered the science and crafts of democratic transitions in order to stop them at their borders. What is more, they are becoming increasingly aware that, paraphrasing George W Bush's second inaugural address, 'survival of autocracy at home increasingly depends upon the failure of democracy abroad.' The first trend, learning to combat the democratic contagion, is an essential element of the new political trend in post-Communist Eurasia, defined by the

author as *preemptive authoritarianism*³. The second trend, joining efforts to combat democratic contagion, is reflected what can be defined as *authoritarian international*, which is rapidly emerging in the post-Soviet space.

This paper consists of three parts. The first explains the concept of preemptive authoritarianism. The second gives an overview of preemption may be done in a nearly perfect manner in the case study of Belarus, the country where it was used most extensively and proficiently. The third highlights the international dimension of preemptive authoritarianism on the example of Belarus-Russia cooperation, that increasingly spreads into the area of combatting democracy. A brief conclusion summarises implication of preemption and authoritarian international for scholars and democracy builders.

Conceptualizing and Explaining Preemption

Preemption is a strategy to combat the democratic contagion that is pursued in anticipation of a political challenge, even when there is no immediate danger of a regime change. Preemption thus aims at political parties and players that are still weak. It removes from the political arena even those opposition leaders who are unlikely to pose a serious challenge in the next election. It attacks the independent press even if it reaches only small segments of the population. It destroys civil society organizations even when these are concentrated in a relatively circumscribed urban subculture. Last but not least, it violates the electoral rules even when the incumbent would be likely to win in a fair balloting. This type of

³ Examples of preemptive attacks against democratic movements following the Ukraine's events are ubiquitous. The Belarusian president has strengthened his security forces and introduced a new law that allows the police to shoot street protesters when the president deems necessary. In Kazakhstan, a major opposition party has been outlawed. Moldova, something of a post-Soviet oddity but still a semi-authoritarian country, blocked the entrance of Russian and Belarusian observers (mobilized by the Moldovan opposition) to its parliamentary elections last March. In Tajikistan, the government issued new regulations restricting contact between foreign diplomats and local civil society groups. And in Russia, President Putin recently announced an upcoming ban on democracy assistance from abroad. Almost all surviving Eurasian autocrats have issued public statements vowing not to admit another "colored" revolution on their home territories, referring to what had happened elsewhere mostly as terrorism and banditry.

preemption (attacking the opponents and the infrastructure of the opposition and civil society), that can be named *tactical preemption*, does not exhaust the repertoire of available means of combatting democratic contagion. Another, more profound instrument, is *institutional preemption* that consists of tightening of the fundamental rules defining the political game, once again, before the opposition becomes strengthens. Examples of institutional preemption include rewriting the constitutions to strengthen presidential powers and deplete ones of parliaments and local legislatures; amending electoral rules to ensure stable majorities of loyalists in the parliaments; adoption of tougher media and libel regulations; restricting, delegating and even criminalizing certain types of civil society activities. Last but not least instrument is *cultural preemption*: that is, manipulation of public consciousness and collective memory to spread stereotypes and myths about the domestic opposition, democracy in general and democracy promotion in particular, the West, and former Communist countries that turned to the democratic track, to instigate public fear and aversion of the very idea of regime change.

Before going further with the analysis, three specifications concerning the concept of preemption need to be made. First, preemption is not purely voluntaristic, but is pursued on the already well-nurtured ground. For example, twisting institutions to ensure advantage for the incumbent is easier, and in many cases, only possible when disbalances in favor of presidential authority already exist and the regulations concerning freedom of opinion and association are not sufficiently democratic and transparent to start with. Likewise, cultural stereotypes have more chance to be imposed on the population when they strengthen and amplify already existing collective memories, myths, fears, and prejudices. And weak and disunited opposition is much easier to be taken down by the repression than the one that is professionally organized and politically efficient. Moreover, preemption does target those

‘hard’ factors of political and social life that can be potentially upsetting for the autocratic incumbents. In fact, some of our definitions, (such as institutional or cultural preemption) are mirror images of the independent variables (‘incumbent capacity’, ‘anti-incumbent identity’,⁴ ‘semiauthoritarianism’⁵) used by the scholars to explain successful episodes of post-Communist regime change.

Second, the autocratic incumbents’ capabilities to learn and hence effectively use preemption are also affected by structural factors, as well as by time. Thus, it is logical that the pre-conditions for electoral revolutions first matured in unconsolidated semiauthoritarian regimes that were prone to the regime change by the very flaws in their construction. With no experience in sight, soft authoritarians were more likely to fall into complacency and arrogance of power (contrasted to the knowledge acquired by the opposition through contagion and diffusion) was an important agency-related factor that allowed for the regime change to happen. Indeed, for example, a great deal of explanation of Milosevic’s regime fell down in 2000 has to be attributed to the fact that Serbian strongman was the first one in the region to be taken down by the electoral revolution. While his regime was growing increasingly hardline in 1998-2000, Milosevic still did not have an advance warning of the danger presented to him by uncontrolled factors of social and political life that he chose to tolerate. In contrast, opposition, civil society, and democracy promotion community could have learned from the experiences of Philippines in 1986, Chile in 1987, and even elections in Romania, Croatia, or Slovakia, although those were not electoral revolutions but where many of the instruments, such as voter mobilization, were finetuned before they were applied by the Serbian opposition. Kuchma or Shevardnadze might have learned something from the Milosevic’s downfall, but Serbia seemed to be far off their own domains, and both leaders and their subordinates chose instead to contemplate why Georgia or Ukraine ‘was not Serbia’.

⁴ Lucan Way, “Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Political Competition in the Fourth Wave: The Cases of Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine” *World Politics*, 57 (January 2005).

⁵ Michael McFaul, “*Transitions from Post-Communism*,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16, No.3 (July 2005), pp. 5-19.

Once the wave of democratization wiped out the semiautocratic regimes, however, more resilient and consolidated ones remained in place. So, once the remaining autocrats enjoyed structural advantages to preserve their power, one more: knowledge of the techniques most likely to be applied to them and, in more general terms, awareness of the danger of the democratic contagion, has been added by the opportunity to observe the wave of revolutions at large. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine that was the true watershed in the political development of the region, due to that country's size and geopolitical importance. Once an electoral revolution had occurred so deep in Soviet territory and in the country thought secure for post-Soviet authoritarians, the possibility of contagion and diffusion could no longer be discounted. And while democrats found themselves agitated and hopeful, by the Orange revolution, their thinking was often locked in now standard pattern of regime change. Meanwhile, the incumbents immediately began using their structural advantages to further consolidate their regimes and make technologies of electoral revolution obsolete.

Third, preemption is not a substitute for a lacking democratic (or quasidemocratic) legitimacy of the incumbents. In fact, one of the main purposes of the advance strikes against protagonists of democracy is, by means of removing visible and credible democratic alternatives from the public horizon, to strengthen the popular perception that the incumbent is the only available and realistic choice and that notwithstanding possible rigging, he could have been elected even in a free and fair ballot. This last implication of preemption may be particularly counterintuitive for external observers of the region. Having access to independent information and various reports produced by the opposition and international monitors, they often fail to realize that the domestic audiences may not have access to the same data and sources, and that the governments do a thorough advance work to discredit them just in case if they eventually get it. Likewise, political repression, when compartmentalized (i.e., applied to a fairly limited segment of the society) is maybe more visible from abroad than from inside undemocratic countries. Same applies for the vote fraud,

especially once techniques for its administration become more sophisticated and are not limited to primitive ballot-stuffing and multiple votings (it should be added that the authoritarian regime possess instruments of derailing attempts to produce any credible alternative information about the voting outcomes, for example, by disorganizing or banning altogether exit polls and removing ‘unreliable’ election observers). One more important factor is general apathy and lack of interest in politics among vast layers of population in repressive society, that definitely helps repression (and preemption) to go unnoticed. In these conditions, when, when repression is compartmentalized and political alternatives are not only weakened but also invisible for the audience, it is easy for incumbents to sell their message that the opponents cannot defeat them because they are clueless and unprofessional, i.e., they fail the test of democratic contestation. Needless to say, another common message, that the failed opposition can only exist as mercenaries of external forces, usually follows and is often accepted as a logical conclusion.

The Belarus Case: Lukashenka’s Learning Curve and Landmarks in Perfecting The Policy of Preemption

Belarus is in the focus of analysis in this paper since this post-Soviet country in particular has brought the policy of preemption to perfection – and to some extent became a model for ‘catching-up’ autocrats. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has made frequent headlines in the last decade by relentlessly cracking down on the political opposition, and the country now ranks among the most oppressive regimes in postcommunist Eurasia. The Belarusian leader’s authority is based not only on outright repression, however, but also on a fairly high level of popular backing. His flamboyant autocratic style finds favor with a vast

constituency of rural and elderly voters still nostalgic for the communist era; his oratorical skills and ability to manipulate public opinion through mass media are hard to beat; and his economic policies provide for a fair degree of social cohesion. Moreover, the weakness of a “widely popular national identity that can be framed in anti-incumbent terms”⁶ severely disadvantages the nationally-minded opposition.

Nevertheless, Belarusians do not seem to lag hopelessly behind their neighbors in terms of appreciation of democracy and reform: Indeed, some international opinion surveys rank them as the most committed democrats in the former Soviet Union.⁷ Lukashenka’s approval ratings rarely exceeded 50 percent in the last decade. And Belarusian national identity gradually strengthened over a decade and a half of independence. Considering these circumstances, it becomes clear that the unlikelihood of political change in Belarus in the foreseeable future is primarily a result of Lukashenka’s policy of preemption, which he has perfected since his accession to power a decade ago.

Lukashenka’s initial expertise in preemption had nothing to do with contagion but was rather a logical necessity as far as he strove to accumulate and preserve power. He launched his political career as a maverick parliamentary deputy and head of a collective farm. He captured public sympathy in 1993 as chairman of the parliamentary anticorruption commission, a position he used to promote his stature among potential voters in advance of the 1994 presidential election. Capitalizing on public outrage during the worst period of economic decline and collapsing living standards, he used corruption charges to back up his claim that the country was being robbed by the elites. Lukashenka also attacked the government for allowing the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which he insisted served no purpose but to facilitate the robbery of the state.

⁶ Quote from Lucan A. Way “Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Political Liberalization in the Western former Soviet Union, 1992-2004.” *World Politics*, forthcoming. (page 3 in the manuscript)

⁷ Christian Haerpfer, “Electoral Politics in Belarus Compared,” in Elena Korosteleva, Colin Lawson, and Rosalind Marsh, eds., *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 85–99.

The June 1994 presidential elections ended in a huge upset. Still a political outsider, Lukashenka triumphed with 80 percent of the vote in the second round against Prime Minister Viachaslau Kebich.⁸ Although he lacked the support of a political organization and was ostracized by the entire political spectrum—from Kebich’s conservative government to the nationalist opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BPF)—Lukashenka managed to take advantage of the public confusion and disorientation that prevailed in the postindependence era. His success also was made possible by the fair degree of political openness that had followed the demise of communism. Belarus had been the last former Soviet republic to establish the institution of the presidency; this had prevented the concentration of power and left room for a certain level of political and social pluralism (although the former party *nomenklatura* was never displaced). In 1994, the electoral process was relatively free and fair, in part because the incumbents had not yet discovered the finer points of manipulation and rigging. Finally, although major media outlets were controlled by the state, they respected freedom of speech and provided fair campaign opportunities for all contestants.

Lukashenka’s convincing victory in a clean election made a strong impression on the public consciousness: For years to come, it remained the foundation for popular perceptions of his invincibility at the polls. But experience also made Lukashenka realize the potential threat of ‘people power’ to an incumbent who experiments too much with democracy. As Lukashenka came to power virtually out of nowhere, he did not have a support base within the state machinery; all he could initially rely on was his sky-high approval rating. Within months of his July 1994 inauguration, however, his popularity began deteriorating due to persisting economic decline. As a result, he faced two tasks on his quest to unlimited power. First, to trounce the existing opposition. Second, to consolidate his gains so that the opposition would have not had a chance to rise again.

⁸ For more details on Lukashenka’s road to power, see Vitali Silitski, “Explaining Post-Communist Authoritarianism in Belarus,” in Elena Korosteleva, Colin Lawson, and Rosalind Marsh, eds., *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*. The best Russian-language source is Alexander Feduta, *Lukashenka: Politicheskaya Biografiya* [Lukashenka: Political Biography] (Moscow: Referendum, 2005).

Cultural Preemption: Defeat of Nationalism and Promotion of ‘Incumbent-Friendly’ Identity

The first task was achieved by carrying out, in May 1995, the constitutional referendum on giving Russian the status of the official language, changing state symbols to remodelled Soviet-era ones, and approving integration with Russia. The referendum ended up in a resounding victory for Lukashenka, as all the questions passed with huge majorities. This act of cultural preemption had a profound effect on future political developments in Belarus. By uprooting the feeble results of the national revival in the early 1990s of the new regime, it firmly linked Lukashenka to the Sovietized political outlook of the majority of Belarusians. In other words, the Communist-era ‘Soviet Belarusian’ patriotism that the referendum revived as de-facto official ideology of the new regime, was a basis for blocking the creation of ‘anti-incumbent identity’ that would have enabled mass mobilization by the opposition. The opposition itself was deprived of moral ground as long as it was associated with descendants of Nazi collaborators during World War II (particularly, the selling point of the official propaganda was that the independence-era national symbols, the white-red-white flag and ‘Chase’ coat of arms, were used by the pro-German nationalists during the war). Moreover, as far as Lukashenka confirmed his pro-Russian orientation through this plebiscite, he won much sympathy and support inside Russia, where he began to be seen as its only faithful ally in the near abroad. As a result, political and economic support for Lukashenka’s regime did not wait to arrive.

Institutional Preemption: Legalization of Presidential Absolutism and Its Aftermath

The second task was fulfilled through conducting in November 1996 a constitutional referendum that amended the Basic Law so that all formal power and control over all branches of the government, including judiciary and legislature, was transferred into the hands of the President. Once again, this was an act of political necessity: the parliament, elected in May 1995 elections and by-elections in December 1995, had only a weak democratic opposition, and not a single representative of the main opposition party, the Belarusian Popular Front, as it was trounced by the referendum results. Nevertheless, the new legislature proved to be of little help to Lukashenka, as the communists and the agrarians eventually joined the democrats in opposing his power grab. Moreover, the Constitutional Court continued to show remarkable independence by striking down nearly twenty presidential decrees in 1995-96. In November 1996, opposition MPs initiated impeachment proceedings; this attempt failed, however, due to the government's blackmailing of parliamentary deputies and Constitutional Court justices.

Lukashenka responded to this resistance by calling a second referendum for November 1996. On the ballot was an amended version of the constitution, which extended Lukashenka's first term in office from by two years, concentrated power in the hands of the presidency, and replaced the unicameral Supreme Council with a much weaker bicameral legislature consisting of a 64-seat Council of the Republic and a 110-seat House of Representatives.⁹ Presidential decrees were given the status of law, meaning that they would supersede acts adopted by the legislature. Furthermore, the prerogative of appointing members of the Constitutional Court and the Central Election Commission (CEC) was transferred from parliament to the presidency.

⁹ To attract more public interest in the referendum and support for the change in the constitution, Lukashenka proposed three additional questions. Two of them were completely populist: Voters have been asked to reject the abolition of the death penalty and disallow private ownership of land. The last question aimed at a further destruction of Belarusian nationalism: Lukashenka suggested abolishing the independence day celebrated on July 27 commemorating the adoption of the declaration of sovereignty in 1990, and shift the official holiday to July 3, the day Minsk was liberated by the Soviet army from the Nazis. The Supreme Council put three questions in response, asking the voters to approve its own draft of the constitution that eliminated the presidency altogether; to authorize direct election of provincial governors; and to ban uncontrolled presidential funds.

The official tally eventually reported that 70 percent of the electorate had voted in favor of Lukashenka's amended constitution, and even independent postelection polls challenged the referendum results on the constitution by only a few percentage points.¹⁰ As a result, the referendum results, in spite of substantial evidence of abuse and rigging, caused no large public protests. The referendum's only negative effect for the government was that the House of Representatives (handpicked by Lukashenka lower chamber of the new parliament) was boycotted by European parliamentary institutions and Belarus's observer status in the Council of Europe was suspended.

With the 1996 referendum, the institutionalization of personalist authoritarian rule in Belarus was completed. The referendum eliminated all meaningful political competition and evicted the opposition from the decision-making process. Endowed with tsarist powers, Lukashenka had little problem further consolidating his power. First, control over all branches of the government meant almost unlimited ability to manipulate elections and turn them into meaningless exercise. This meaningless, moreover, was firmly institutionalized: the electoral code enacted in 2000 contained no guarantees for opposition presence in electoral commissions, severely restricted the work of election observers, and failed to provide all candidates equal campaign opportunities. Second, Lukashenka was capable to single-handedly restructure security forces and the repressive apparatus of the regime to ensure its absolute loyalty and preparedness to perform whatever task necessary to ensure his survival in office. More specifically, he reorganized the security forces and boosted riot special operation units that have been formed with each 'power ministry' of Belarus (that is, interior ministry, defense ministry and KGB). All these units were conveniently located in or around city capital and were capable to act on the first call. According to unconfirmed reports, secret squads that carried out 'particular' secret tasks were also organized on the basis of special operation units.

¹⁰ Andrei Jekadumau, "Afcyjnuja Vyniki Referendumu 1996 Hody i Dadzenyja Sacyjalahichnyh Dasledvanniau [Official Results of the 1996 Referendum and Sociological Survey Data] In Belaruskaja Palitychnaja Systema i Prezydenckija Vybyary 2001 [Belarusian Political System and 2001 Presidential Elections] (Warsaw: IDEE, 2001), 65.

Allegedly, their first acts was eliminating prominent mobsters, and they then shifted to more specific political tasks.¹¹

Tactical Preemption: Decapitating the Opposition

In 1999, some of the opposition leaders who were considered potential contenders for the September 2001 presidential contest either died or disappeared. First to go missing was Lukashenka's former minister of interior Yury Zacharanka, who had lost his job in 1995 after refusing to evict opposition deputies from parliament and to forcefully disperse a strike in the Minsk metro. Zacharanka had become a leader of the United Civil Party, and just weeks before his May 1999 disappearance he announced the creation of a new opposition group, the Union of Officers. In September of that same year, former MP and chairman of the Central Election Commission Viktor Hanchar disappeared together with his financial backer.¹²

Hanchar's disappearance eliminated the most active, charismatic, and controversial opposition figure. After entering the political scene in 1990 as a newly-elected member of the Supreme Council, he quickly became popular thanks to his photogenic looks, oratorical skills, and legal expertise. Hanchar backed Lukashenka in 1994, but soon began to oppose the president's authoritarian style. He distinguished himself as an energetic and risk-taking opposition leader, whose unorthodox style inspired rank-and-file activists and attracted media coverage. Still claiming to be the legitimate head of the CEC, he organized a "shadow election" in the spring of 1999 to mark the expiration of Lukashenka's term according to the pre-1996 constitution. Although the "balloting" ended in embarrassment, Hanchar gained

¹¹ Information of these units can be found in Alexander Feduta, "Lukashenko: Politicheskaya Biografiya" (Moscow: Referendum, 2005); Pavel Sheremet and Svetlana Kalinkina "Sluchainyi Prezident" (Moscow: 2004);

¹² This was not the only loss by the opposition in 1999. Henadz Karpenka, deputy leader of the United Civil Party, died on April 8 in under mysterious circumstances ostensibly from a brain hemorrhage at the age of 50. Although no credible evidence emerged about the authorities' involvement, Karpenka's abrupt death could not have arrived at a more convenient time for Lukashenka.

popularity among democratic activists.¹³ By the time of his disappearance, he was emerging as a key figure in the opposition, but was still far from becoming its undisputed commander. Nevertheless, Hanchar's commitment to fight openly against Lukashenka was apparently more than the regime could tolerate.

Investigations of these disappearances carried out by the prosecutor-general's office cast suspicion on a special police unit overseen by then national security adviser Viktor Sheiman.¹⁴ Dzmitry Paulichenka, an alleged commander of the unit was arrested in November 2000 in connection with the disappearances, but Lukashenka ordered him out of jail and fired the KGB chief and the prosecutor-general who had pressed charges. Sheiman was then appointed as the new prosecutor-general, which conveniently placed the investigation under his direct control.

Early Acquaintance with Revolutionary Scenarios: Learning from Milosevic's Downfall

Demonstration effect grew in significance in shaping the policy of preemption at the latter stages of Lukashenka's rule. He learned more avidly than his colleagues in the former USSR from the October 2000 overthrow of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević that even a semblance of competitive elections can be a threat to an authoritarian regime. The reason for his watchful attitude towards the first electoral revolution in the post-Communist world partly had to deal with the special bond that developed between two leaders in the time when they

¹³ The logistics of the balloting were as follows: opposition activists carried ballot boxes from door to door, asking the residents to cast votes for one of the two candidates who joined the race. Hanchar declared that 53 percent of the electoral took part in the vote, whereas independent opinion polls discovered that only 5 percent did so. Moreover, out of two "contestants" in the elections, one was in exile (the leader of BPF Zianon Pazniak) and the other was put in prison on corruption charges (the former prime minister Mikhail Chyhir).

¹⁴ According to media reports, the evidence produced by former security officers who defected to the West, and the findings of international investigators, the unit was created out of several security agencies and special operations forces in 1996. See: "Disappeared Persons in Belarus." Report to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe by Cristos Pourgourides. 4 February 2004. <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=http://assembly.coe.int/2FDocuments%2FWorkingDocs%2FDoc04%2FEDOC10062.htm>

shared a dubious reputation of the last dictators in Europe. Moreover, opposition and international NGOs made no attempt to conceal that Belarus would be the first place where the Serbian scenario of the regime change would be attempted for replication. Although his earlier strikes against the opposition had him fully equipped to avoid his colleague's fate, Lukashenka remained anxious. As the presidential balloting approached, he grew highly suspicious of his own inner circle, whereas regime-controlled media began to frame public opinion about the 'Serbian scenario' as, first, an external plot that has nothing to do with the domestic politics, and, second, as a coup that is achieved through the spin created by the opposition and media rather than by genuinely defeating the incumbent. In the course of election campaign and the voting day on 9 September 2001, Lukashenka's regime worked out and applied many of the successful techniques to combat the electoral revolution scenario: such as derailing the work of independent observers, disorganizing exit polls, turning off mobile and internet communications on the election night, and sabotaging mass mobilization by the opposition by blocking democratic activists in the periphery of the country from travelling to the capital for the protests.

Lukashenka's reelection with the official result of 75% of the votes cast¹⁵ was demoralizing for the opposition. Its attempt to mimic Serbia's electoral revolution had been prevented with ease, and the polls showed that Lukashenka would have won even a clean election. The defeat also led to a search for scapegoats within the opposition, and public accusations of squandering democracy-assistance funds made by journalists and disaffected activists generated a publicity disaster. Nonetheless, Lukashenka himself did not feel like long-term political survival was assured. First, following reelection, his popularity witnessed a slump, apparently due to his failure to deliver immediately on his generous campaign promises. Second, some job remained to fully institutionalize his unlimited rule: that is, to

¹⁵ The opposition questioned the official returns, whereas independent polls hinted that at least 25% of the votes were rigged in favor of the incumbent. Still, even these alternative data suggested a huge margin between Lukashenka and his main challenger Uladzimir Hancharyk, who gained only 15% at the official count and 21% according to alternative estimates. See: "25% Dorisovano." *Belorusskaya Gazeta*, 12 November 2001.

remove term limits for presidency that he kept in the 1996 Constitution. And although Belarusian opposition was in shatters and civil society still existed in an embryonic state, it had become clear during the 2001 election that both were gradually expanding and becoming capable of launching nationwide campaigns.

Lukashenka chose not to hold referendum on removing term limits immediately, but rather took a long road, unleashing along the way familiar forces of institutional, cultural, and tactical preemption. Although he easily survived the attempt to oust him in a Serbia-style revolution, he chose to eliminate those elements in uncontrolled political and social life that could have tried to repeat this attempt once again: and, unlike Milosevic, he did not wait until the last moment.

Thus, regulations punishing unauthorized street protests were radically hardened. Protesters at unsanctioned rallies (sanctioned rallies could be held only in one location on the outskirts of Minsk) faced not only physical beatings and imprisonment, but also prohibitive fines of up to US\$2,500—a yearly income for an average family. The regime also forced almost one hundred NGOs to close down or self-liquidate in 2003–2004.¹⁶ Since many of these organizations were prominent human rights groups or regional umbrella NGOs that assisted in the development of grassroots initiatives, the infrastructure of civil society was deeply damaged. Creating new organizations with agendas running counter to official policy became practically impossible, and the media faced severe penalties for reporting on the work of deregistered NGOs.

The independent press was also effectively silenced. Dozens of regional press were closed down or suspended in 2001–2004. After receiving official warnings that they would be closed down, most independent newspapers resorted to self-censorship. The government tightened its grip on electronic media by replacing Russian TV and radio broadcasts with

¹⁶ Alexander Dautin, “Kniga ne dla Shirokogo Chtenia” [Book Not for Common Audience], *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 14 September 2004.

homemade substitutes. This curtailment meant that the regime became the sole source of information for most of the population.

The cost of disobedience was also drastically raised for the general public. The regime stepped up its control over the educational system and closed down several independent institutions of secondary and higher learning. New regulations forbade institutions to grant students and professors leaves of absence to travel abroad, prohibited contacts with Western universities, and even prescribed “measures to prevent access of strange elements on campuses.”¹⁷ In January 2004, the permanent-employment system at state-owned enterprises was replaced with mandatory one-year contracts extended at the discretion of the management. As a result, any form of protest (even passive protest, like refusing to take part in falsification of election results) may bear a very high price for state employees.

Tactical preemption continued with removing prominent opponents from the political scene, although in a ‘soft’ manner. April 2004, Lukashenka ordered the arrest of Mikhail Marynich, a former government minister who had defected to the opposition during the 2001 presidential election and had emerged as one of the strongest potential contenders for the 2006 presidential election. Marynich was sentenced to five years in jail for allegedly stealing computers from his own NGO. His sentence was eventually reduced to two and a half years, and he was eventually released in April 2006 – conveniently, weeks after Lukashenka was re-elected.

Last but not least, Lukashenka managed, in 2001-2004, to reinforce the moral ground for his authority by enhancing propaganda of his own version of ‘Soviet Belarusian’ patriotism. His earlier version of practical ideology proved to be insufficiently reliable to validate his position of unlimited ruler of the country. As pro-Russian rhetoric made it ambiguous over the status of Belarus as independent state (and hence, Lukashenka’s claim to absolute power in this state), possible attacks from Kremlin would have left the Belarus leader with a shaky

¹⁷ “Shutki v Storony,” [No Jokes] *Belorusskaya Gazeta*, 19 April 2004.

prospect for rallying the public in support of his regime. This was particularly visible during the 2002 brawl between Lukashenka and Putin. Started in June 2002 after the Russian leader announced his unwillingness to further subsidize Belarus in exchange of political union, he soon demanded a full unification in the format that would have turn the country into seven provinces of Russia. At the same time, popularity of unification with Russia fell dramatically over the decade of Lukashenka's rule due to gradual strengthening of the Belarusian identity. In response, Lukashenka had to boost pro-independence rhetoric and even started accusing his Eastern neighbor of imperial ambitions. But what Lukashenka pursued was not the retreat to nationalism, but boosting of the earlier version of Soviet Belarusian patriotism, somewhat reinforced with anti-Russian overtones but evoking memories of the Soviet past and World War II to denounce encroachers on the Belarus independence, primarily Russia's oligarchs and remnants of its liberal establishment. Lukashenka also reinforced this ideological cocktail with 'regime patriotism' by personalizing his independence rhetoric by linking in the public discourse the survival of independence with the political and economic model he imposed and with his own ability to stay in power.¹⁸ Eventually, the campaign to support Lukashenka in the constitutional referendum that removed term limits did not even mention his name. Instead, it was carried out under the slogan 'For Belarus!'¹⁹

The results of these series of preemptive strikes became visible once Lukashenka finally decided to carry out the referendum in October 2004, in conjunction with the parliamentary elections. No meaningful resistance was organized even in spite of the fact that opinion polls

¹⁸ In his most characteristic remark, he warned that if he will be defeated in the upcoming presidential elections, "we will loose the country." Lukashenka's address to the Third All-Belarusian People's Assembly, 2 March 2006. *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 3 March 2006.

¹⁹ Lukashenka, however, never endorsed nationalism of his opponents; moreover, while stepping up pro-independence rhetoric, he continued to issue fatal blows to it. Thus, in the same period, the Belarusian language was virtually evicted from official TV, new history textbooks written from ostensibly pro-Russian positions were brought into the school curriculum, and the only Belarusian-language college in Minsk, the National Humanities Lyceum, was closed down. In 2004, when Lukashenka condemned the omnipotent presence of the Russian music on the Belarusian FM station and demanded quotas for local performers, the most popular Belarusian language rock groups were banned from all FM radio stations because they played at the opposition rally (the FM broadcast was eventually filled with the Belarusian-born Russian speaker performers who produced lower-quality substitutes for the Russian pop music).

continuously showed, for several years, that majority of Belarusians would have voted against the proposition. Any attempts to organize it were immediately blocked by the authorities.²⁰ .

According to the official CEC report, 79 percent of all voters supported allowing Lukashenka to run again for president. The official results were immediately attacked for their lack of credibility based on Gallup's extensive exit poll, which indicated that no more than 49 percent had supported the referendum.²¹ There was plenty of evidence to support allegations of massive vote-rigging.²² But Belarusian society at large remained uninformed about these electoral abuses and alternative results, so there was no large-scale resistance against the fraud. Moreover, even 49% constituted a huge increase over 25-30% most polls would get to Lukashenka for two years before the poll was carried out. Street protests drew no more than 5,000 demonstrators on the day of the vote, and they were brutally dispersed. A postreferendum survey found that 48 percent of respondents agreed that the referendum had been conducted in a free and fair manner, and only 35 percent disagreed.²³ Most importantly, the overall perception that Lukashenka could win any ballot remained unchallenged.

Resisting the Orange Threat: The Tool Kit of Preemption Enhanced

²⁰ The announcement of the referendum came on 7 September, the day of mourning for victims of the Beslan massacre in Russia. A crowd of youngsters assembled in Minsk for a memorial rally, had to watch Lukashenka's announcement instead. Only one man in the crowd publicly expressed disapproval: he was immediately arrested and sentenced to ten days in prison for petty hooliganism.

²¹ Don Hill, "Belarus: Election Officials Say Voters Back Lukashenka," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 October 2004. Available at www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/10/80d71056-54eb-42cd-9313-084f9aeceb17.html.

²² Independent observers and opposition activists had unearthed stuffed ballot boxes, pre-marked ballots distributed to voters, and vote-count protocols that had been signed before election day. On pre-signed protocols, see www.charter97.org/bel/news/2004/10/14/elections; on staffed ballot boxes, see www.oscepa.org/index.aspx?articleid=+367+367&newsid=255; on pre-marked ballot papers, see www.charter97.org/bel/news/2004/10/17/lebedka.

²³ Vitali Silitski, "They Knew Too Much: Leading Independent Thinktank Faces Attacks." *RFE/RL Belarus and Ukraine Report* vol. 6 no. 48, 29 December 2004. Available at www.rferl.org/reports/pbureport/2004/12/48-291204.asp

The Orange revolution in Ukraine was a political landmark for the entire former Soviet Union, and, as it was mentioned about, galvanized the use and perfection of preemptive techniques by the surviving authoritarians across the region. Conveniently for Lukashenka, it happened just after he carried out, in October 2004, a constitutional referendum that removed term limits for presidency (and technically provided for his infinite rule) and in advance of his planned re-election campaign in March 2006. His reaction to the events in Ukraine proved that resistance to the democratic contagion has turned into the primary task of the entire regime, regardless of how much of a prospect for a similar scenario of regime change existed in Belarus in reality. Officials of the Belarusian embassy were noticed in the crowds of Kiev's Independence Square, presumably not with the purpose of supporting the revolution. KGB was explicitly demanded by Lukashenka to resist the 'export of democracy' in Belarus. Anti-Orange propaganda intensified in the state media, who shared countless reports, documentaries, propaganda broadcasts, and newspaper articles to explain the population the official take on the revolutions. Security forces began publishing special analytical reports and even manuals unmasking the efforts to organize the regime change in Belarus and giving the officials advance instructions on how to combat the efforts of the opposition.²⁴ And the use of new police tactics to disperse a few small demonstrations in early 2005 made it clear that the country's security forces have been specifically trained to stop street protests at their very start. Overall, it appeared that the regime was overreacting, possibly in part because it fell hostage of its own propaganda: that is, it came to believe that colored revolutions were indeed externally-manipulated events rather than home-grown uprisals against vote rigging.

In the run-up to March 2006 presidential elections, the regime explicitly criminalized most of the opposition-related activities and established a direct legal basis for repression (unlike before, when opposition organizations, civil society activists, newspapers, and journalists were harassed for hooliganism, failure to comply with housing regulations, or

²⁴ A review of the most notorious such report, "Colored Revolutions on Post-Soviet Space: Scenarios for Belarus," can be read in Russian at <http://www.belgazeta.by/20051212.49/010030141/>

persecuted on corruption charges). Thus, Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code established punishment for up to two years prison term for participation in the activities of a deregistered NGO (whereas organizing of such NGO became punishable for up to three years). Article 293 was amended so that teaching or other training of persons for organization of mass disorders may be punished by up to three years in jail. Calls to international community to take actions in detriment to 'the external security of Belarus' became punishable by up to five years. And the new article 'Discreditation of the Republic of Belarus' establishes punishment of up to two years in prison for 'provision of foreign state, foreign or international organization with deliberately false data on political, economic, social, military, or international situation in the republic of Belarus or its power bodies.'²⁵

Tactical preemption got new focus: the main target of attack became not prospective presidential challengers but rather street organizers and grassroots activists who were capable of mobilizing the masses. Two of them, Mikalaj Statkievich, former chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, and Pavel Seviarynec, leader of the unregistered organization Young Front movement, were both sentenced to two years of forced labor in May 2005 for organizing antireferendum protests. Another veteran politician, former member of Parliament (MP) and political prisoner Andrej Klimau, was sentenced to two years of forced labor in May 2005 for staging unsanctioned rallies two months earlier that he'd advertised as the beginning of the democratic revolution in Belarus. And immediately after enacting the amendments to criminal code, the police arrested and charged several activists of Young Front and Zubr movements: both of these are unregistered groups that unite young, radical, and more revolution-minded opposition activists. Another target of repression was election observation, and, in a broader sense, any organization or institution that would systematically question the official election data. Thus, leaders of the largest election monitoring 'Partnership' were rounded up in February 2006 on charges of terrorism and organizing a unregistered NGO.

²⁵ <http://www.charter97.org/bel/news/2005/11/25/new>

Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, the leading independent polling agency that questioned the official election and referenda data in the past, was closed down by the court order in April 2005, whereas conducting public opinion surveys without a license began to be considered as a crime.

The official propaganda was reinforced with new techniques and overtones. Much of it consisted of a traditional repertoire, but was specifically tailored to discredit and demonize the revolutionary aspirations of the opposition. Most importantly, it was enhanced to dramatic proportions, with each of four official TV channels (and few Russian ones that were routinely overlapped with Belarusian broadcasts) repeatedly showing state-authorized documentaries and propaganda shows, sometimes several times a day. Some of that propaganda was typical for Lukashenka's media, for example, production of director Yury Azaronak (now deputy head of State TV and Radio Company), who was instrumental in the success of Lukashenka's first referendum in 1995.²⁶ His new cycles of propaganda, called 'Spiritual War' and 'Conspirology', pictured the battle between Lukashenka and the opposition, and, by extension, the West, as one between the adherents of Christ and the Pharisees (i.e., Jews, Americans, and Europeans).²⁷ This type of propaganda, however, apparently intended to consolidate the base of Lukashenka's traditional supporters. More subtle productions targeted uncommitted and worked to scare them away from political alternatives. Those included the series of shows 'Belarus: the Look from Outside', in which prominent politicians, singers, artists, and sportsmen from abroad praised Lukashenka; and 'Fifteen', a series of documentaries that emphasized day-to-day problems, social hardships, economic decay, civil wars, etc., in every former Soviet republic, except Belarus (naturally, most horrific reports were produced on the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and Georgia). Finally, the regime media attack also targeted the groups where the support for the regime was the lowest, that is, the younger and urbanized

²⁶ His production 'Hatred: Children of Lies' scared the viewers by alternating pictures of the Nazi atrocities with the ones of opposition politicians and rallies, and definitely helped to both pass the questions on symbols and the Russian language and create a long-lasting repulsion of the BPF opposition with the population.

²⁷ At this time, however, Azaronak's production caused some outrage among the Orthodox believers, and Belarusian Orthodox Church even withdrew his works from the church film festival in Minsk in April.

constituency. This audience was targeted not much with verbal propaganda but rather with different series of TV shows, concerts, and discos, that initially had an appearance of apolitical entertainment but by the time of the elections turned into propaganda exercises, with pop singers from Belarus and all over former USSR campaigning, once again, 'For Belarus,' and, now more specifically, 'For the Daddy' (a popular nickname for Lukashenka: this style of message apparently meant to clear the organizers from accusations of illegal campaigning). There was one particularly interesting thing about this pop-propaganda. It was organized and presented in the form of mass rallies of flag-waving crowds, and, colors and messages aside, was somewhat reminiscent of the political-music show scenes that could have been observed during the Orange revolution in Ukraine. In a broader sense, the regime attempted to cap the energies and desires of the younger generation by presenting it an appealing form (just as Ukrainian revolutionaries did it), in which the antirevolutionary message was wrapped.²⁸

During Lukashenka's re-election campaign, the official media perfected themselves in information dramaturgy and media spin by creating virtual conflicts and threats that justified repressive actions of the regime.²⁹ Since he ran for re-election only once before and parliamentary and local elections never presented voters with real choice or drama, election-related information dramaturgy was only occasionally used by Lukashenka before the 2006 campaign. This time, however, the regime felt necessary to employ spin in full swing. One remarkable technique was an 'advance warning' to the society of the possible techniques that can be applied by the opposition while campaigning, with the attached information of the vile secret agenda. For example, the official newspapers would publish extensive excerpts of some classic books on democratization, including Samuel Huntington's 'The Third Wave' (especially his manuals on regime change), and Gene Sharp's 'Technique of Non-Violent

²⁸ Lukashenka was not alone in using this technique: for example, Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbaev went even further, running a 'color-coded' campaign, for his reelection in January 2006.

²⁹ Andrew Wilson. *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World.*: Yale University Press, 2005.

Action;’ or giving particular interpretations to flash mobs³⁰ and exit polls, warning that peaceful techniques of regime change and non-violent actions would be only a cover-up for destructive and potentially bloody efforts that the opposition was planning to apply to take power.³¹ The purpose of these publication was clear: to create fear in the public once it saw the attempts of the opposition to organize such activities. Another tool of information dramaturgy was preemptive revelations publicized by the state security agencies and the official press. For example, arrests of Partnership activists (see above) were accompanied by the revelations of the KGB of the unmasked plot to by election monitors by overthrowing the government through organizing explosions in the center of Minsk on the election day and using the victims as a justification of violent actions against the authorities. This particular provocation was poorly executed, though, as KGB head Sciapan Sukharenka ended up telling the audience completely unbelievable stories, like the one in which he insisted that the opposition was planning to poison running water in Minsk with rotten rats. But the spin worked much better in situation another example, when the government dealt with the protesters who filled the central square in Minsk and occupied it for several days after the voting results were announced. The official media distributed made-up images of prostitution rings and drug addicts, and even spread of contagious diseases on the central square of Minsk on the eve of a crackdown on the protest, in which several hundred activists were announced. The media images helped reduce the size of the protest, and secure overall approval of the public for police actions immediately following it. Overall, by associating violence with the opposition, the government propaganda thus prepared public opinion for whatever measures the regime would take again the opposition. The spin continued after the crackdown was accomplished: for example, after the brutal dispersal of the protests in Minsk on March 25,

³⁰ The official military newspaper, for example, called flash mobs ‘An Instrument of US Imperialism.’

³¹ See, for example, “Tekhnologii destabilizacii.” *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, <http://www.vsr.mil.by/index/nobrev.html>

2006, official media broadcast pictures of riot policemen and official TV crews beaten up by the opposition supporters.³²

How did this new round of preemptive attacks helped Lukashenka in his re-election? One one hand, the 19 March 2006 came with no surprise: the incumbent claimed victory with 83% of the vote, and it appeared that the society overall took positively his message of stability. The opposition, meanwhile, while managing to consolidate the pro-democracy electorate, nevertheless failed to make a great impression on the larger audiences. Less predictably, though, the official announcement provoked a wave of mass protests, starting on election night in Minsk, when at least 20,000 persons assembled on the main square in defiance of threats from the KGB a few days before the vote to prosecute protesters on charges of terrorism, even pressing for death sentences. This spontaneous outburst was partly caused by unrealistic official returns, but was also the result of the overall effort of the opposition during the election campaign, its ability to establish credibility with the core anti-Lukashenka constituency, and the efforts of two opposition candidates, the leader of the united opposition, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, and the former rector of the Belarusian State University, Alyaksandr Kazulin, who managed to campaign energetically in spite of restrictions and repression. The protest continued for several days with a tent camp set up on October Square, emulating the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine in 2004.

The size and persistence of the post-election protest (that must be regarded in the context of a highly repressive state that has a fine-tuned and well-trained security apparatus) confirmed, first, that Increasing political repression has inadvertently radicalised the democratic electorate in Belarus, especially the core of opposition activists who proved ready to engage in seemingly hopeless and illogical protest actions. Second, it showed that civil society, when committed to democracy building in spite of the serious consequences -- even

³² Dozens of opposition supporters were badly beaten on that day, three disappeared and were feared dead. The official TV reported that only one protester, but eight riot policemen, were injured.

criminalisation -- of its activities, can spontaneously self-organized even when the political leaders and street organizers are effectively wiped out by arrests (it should be noted that dozens of opposition activists were rounded up and sentenced to brief terms in jail days before the vote).³³ One more remarkable factor was the emergence of the internet as an important alternative medium of information. During the peak political events, such as the beating of Kazulin by riot police, the voting day, and the protests in the aftermath, the number of visits to the principal independent sites, in spite of the attempts to block them, was several times higher than usual. Likewise, spontaneous protest actions were mostly coordinated online. Internet has also become a tool of campaigning for the “traditional” NGO sector, even if this was a consequence of the near impossibility to continue its work legally. Although internet is still easily blockable by the regime, it appeared that it cannot restrict the access forever and for all, which was enough to create ample opportunities to inform and organize.

However, the Belarusian opposition, due to complete elimination of opportunities to verify the election outcomes and the actual defeat in the elections, did not even try to declare victory for its candidate, merely arguing for a fairer margin separating Lukashenka and his challengers. So, with no political breakthrough in sight, it could not count on sustained public support. Moreover, the security forces remained totally loyal to Lukashenka and blocked off the square, arresting those trying to enter or leave. As a result, the protest quickly dwindled to just a few hundred activists and was ended early on March 24, when riot police destroyed the camp and arrested the campers. Moreover, the show of defiance and activism also highlighted the gap that separates this democratic subculture in Belarus from the rest of society, as combination of fear imposed by the government on some parts of society and acceptance of

³³ Particularly remarkable was the change of mood among Lukashenka’s passive opponents, i.e., those who voted against him in the elections but chose not to join protests or engage in political activism in general. This mood changed from waiting until the political opposition would do something to get rid of Lukashenka to getting ready to make small independent actions by themselves. This segment of the opposition, for example, was responsible for an outburst of unconventional protest activities, such as flash mobs, in the Belarusian capital following the election. Internet blogs and discussion fora were full of spontaneous suggestions and calls for action, be it *samizdat* printing of leaflets or creating alternative web sites to make up for the ones blocked during the campaign.

the regime by others proved to have put insurmountable so far restrictions on the opposition's appeal and following. As a result, the streets and squares of Minsk (in a sharp contrast to Kiev in November-December 2004) witnessed indifference from passers-by and loathing for the protesters from the regime's supporters as much as defiance and solidarity. It appeared that radicalization of the democratic subculture would be brief if this subculture is rather small by itself and comes to understand its own limits, or at least when repression still targets only a limited segment of the society.

Last but not least, the ease and harshness with which the protest was dispersed confirmed that the regime remained capable of efficiently rebuffing any challenge put forward by the opposition, and sent a message to the society that the personal price for disobedience increased even more.

Authoritarian International in Action: Russia's Help for Lukashenka

As was mentioned above, cooperation between non-democratic regimes is an important external dimension of preemptive authoritarianism. This importance is defined by, first, by the increasingly internationalized character of the democratic movement and civil society that transcends national borders and restrictions. Second, democratic breakthroughs in close neighborhood always create new opportunities for aspiring opposition movements in the remaining authoritarian states (in terms of informational and organizational resources provided by sympathetic elites in new democracies, opportunities for legal registration, publication, and training of the activists in near abroad, etc.) Last but not least, smaller authoritarian regimes often need backing and cover-up from larger ones that possess more resources and influence on the international arena. It is in this logic that Russia in particular is

emerging, after its own recent retreat from democratic experiments at home, in the newly-emerging 'authoritarian international.'

It should be noted that politics of Russia's president Vladimir Putin are increasingly reminiscent of what Lukashenka has perfected himself in over the last decade, and are characterized by the same logic of preemption. While Putin's initial ascension to the presidency occurred through a dynastic succession rather than victory in a fair electoral contest, his popularity is still genuine and unmatched for those who attempt to challenge him. Nevertheless, he chose to destroy the independent TV channels that attempted to derail his rise to power in 1999. Similarly, he expelled regional governors from the upper house of parliament in 2000 and replaced them with appointed representatives in 2004—even though most of those expelled fully supported his administration. And in 2005, he pushed through new electoral rules that make it nearly impossible for parties uncontrolled by the Kremlin to pass the threshold to enter parliament, even though Putin's brand of "managed democracy" had already succeeded in keeping them out of the State Duma in the 2003 elections.

For Russia's elite, strengthening the authoritarian international in the near abroad is clearly dictated by the perception that the advance of democracy would reduce its sphere of influence in the region. The degree to which this perception dictates its foreign policy became visible with the failed attempt to promote Viktor Yanukovich's candidacy in the 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine. Once the Orange revolution was not prevented, Russian elites only grew in commitment to fend off democratization elsewhere in the CIS (in the words of Rushailo,) The most vivid and controversial example of Russia's new role in CIS is perhaps Kremlin's full backing of the Uzbek president Islam Karimov after the May 2005 massacre in Andijon, and extradition of Uzbek opposition activists who sought asylum in Russia. Another example is the economic attacks against the newly-democratized states in the former USSR (such as the 'gas attack' against Ukraine, Georgia, and for this reason, Baltic states, in December 2005 that was accompanied by the explicit message against these

countries' governments and political systems). And as the most far-reaching integration project on the post-Soviet space, Russia-Belarus alliance logically becomes a cornerstone this 'authoritarian international,' even in spite of the fact that the relations between Kremlin and Lukashenka's regime are uneasy at some times.

The first example is Russia's efforts of boosting international legitimacy of post-Soviet autocratic regimes, first of all in Belarus, the only CIS autocracy located in Europe and thus most severely scrutinized and criticized by its observers. The team of CIS election observers, usually led by Russia's former national security supremo Vladimir Rushailo, rubber-stamps approving reports of any elections in CIS countries (minus Ukraine or Georgia). Moreover, Russia actively lobbies to undermine international election monitors that it can control, first of all the OSCE observers missions. For the last two years, Kremlin actively lobbied to downsize this dimension of the OSCE activities, threatening to block financing of the organization along the way. When it failed to block international efforts, the official Moscow recently began to engage in the diplomatic counterattacks: thus, after the harsh statement on non-recognition of the 19 March presidential election in Belarus was issued by OSCE, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov accused the observers of 'instigating mass disorders' in Minsk.³⁴

The second example is Russia's role in cultural preemption that extends its geographical borders. Here it should be mentioned that much of democracy-bashing in the former Soviet Union (and given the position of the Russian language, Kremlin-controlled media have a huge impact in forming public attitudes even outside Russia's borders) is going on under the slogan of combatting international terrorism. This message is still credible with the audiences in the former Soviet Union, and is not always understood as a vehicle of anti-Western propaganda, given the fact that Russia joined the tactical alliance with the West in 2001 exactly under this slogan. While the abuse of anti-terrorist rhetoric for the sake of covering up antidemocratic politics in Russia itself is well-known, its security agencies began helping other regimes in

³⁴ «Russian foreign minister accuses OSCE of instigating protests,” Belapan News Line, 24 March 2006. <http://elections.belapan.com/president2006/eng/show.php?show=49325>

establishing a link in public consciousness between democracy and terrorism. Thus, almost a year before the Belarusian KGB chief Sciapan Sukharenka declared that the opposition planned explosions during the elections and even poisoning the water supplies with rotten rats, Russia's FSB director Nikolai Patrushev 'unmasked', in May 2005, a plot by the West to use unspecified terrorist organizations to finance the Belarusian opposition in the run-up to presidential elections.³⁵ It should be mentioned that the similar terrorist allegations have been issued against the opposition in other post-Soviet countries as well, and, more generally, Russian official media spare no effort in discrediting the newly democratized states of Eurasia not only for its domestic but also for a broader CIS audiences. Another form in assisting cultural preemption is the work of Russian spin doctors (who notoriously failed during the Orange revolution in Ukraine) to assist in internal propaganda campaigns. It is not surprising, for example, that the Kremlin's principal spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky who currently hosts a propaganda program on one of Russia's nationwide TV networks, has become a frequent visitor to Belarus, was offered a lavish opportunity of interviewing Lukashenka, praised him in his program, and was possibly involved, alongside Russia's image making agencies, in framing the official propaganda line during and after the elections.³⁶ During the March presidential election campaigns, the Russian media and in part even the Russian-language version of the Euronews channel, replicated the claims of official Belarusian TV networks in the aftermath of the vote that described the failed protest effort in Minsk as an action driven by a bunch of extremists.³⁷

The third example is assisting in tactical preemption. While the most notorious case in this respect was arresting and deporting Uzbek opposition activists from Russia after the Andijon events, similar pattern, although with less grave consequences, emerged in Russia-Belarus relations as well. For most of the last decade, Russia was a relatively safe heaven for

³⁵ Information of the Belarus news agencies, available at <http://www.pravo.by/showtext.asp?1115912591081>

³⁶ See brief transcript of the interview at <http://www.afn.by/news/view.asp?newsid=71486> Official Belarus media welcomed and praised Pavlovsky's work. See, for example, <http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=49872>

³⁷ Russia is currently the largest shareholder in Belarus. The Euronews Russian version coverage and great discrepancies between this and other language version was pointed to by several internet blogs.

the Lukashenka's opponents and his former officials who fell out of favor with the regime. This, however, seems to be coming to an end. According to some reports, Russian FSB officers helped their Belarusian colleagues with leads on the opposition activists who smuggled the banned literature to Belarus during the last election campaign. In another episode, Russian printing houses located in Smolensk refused publication of the Belarus independent press before the election, forcing some of their to suspend altogether. Interesting by enough, Russian embassy in Belarus made little effort in assisting the release of Russian citizens arrested in Minsk following the post-election protests.

Last but not least example is the 'fraternal' economic assistance to help surviving the political storms. Thus, before the March 2006 presidential elections, Russia froze natural gas prices for Belarus at 46 US dollars per thousand cubic meter, only a fraction of a price paid by Ukraine. This subsidy for Lukashenka's 'economic miracle' helped him to maintain impressive rates of economic growth in general and wage hikes in particular, boosting his propaganda of stability as the main theme of the official election campaign. At the same time, such benevolence was meant to send a signal to the less compliant regimes, particularly in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Conclusion

The analysis in this paper add a sombering note to the discussion of further prospects for democratization in post-Communist Eurasia. Lukashenka might be a champion and front-runner in preemption, but his example shows how far it can go and how profoundly it may affect the society to deter political change for a very long period of time. Moreover, other incumbents in the region are definitely catching up. Recent attacks on NGOs in Russia, mysterious killings of opposition leaders in Kazakhstan, and televised revelations of coup

attempts just before the 2005 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan are all examples of preemption being extensively used and perfected elsewhere in the region.

Moreover, authoritarian international is not constricted to Russia and Belarus, but is expanding in the region – and even beyond. Lukashenka himself reportedly acquired China's latest internet monitoring and control technology while in Beijing in December 2005. China's authorities have tightened controls on international NGOs and reportedly sent researchers to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus with fact-finding missions). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has a chance to become another pillar of the authoritarian international, alongside CIS, in the region.³⁸ Elsewhere in the world, democracy promotion groups are increasingly confronting not only outright repression, but the efforts, largely associated with authoritarian petro-states, committed to undermining, countering and reversing liberal democracy. This includes ersatz democracy promotion groups (as in Russia where the Duma allocated \$17 million for "civil society groups"), increased funding for radical Islamist groups from Saudi/Wahabbi, Iranian, and related sources, and reported Venezuelan financing of radical populist or "Bolivarian" parties across Latin America.³⁹ There are also signs of increased cooperation between these states and regimes, as can be judged by Lukashenka's announcement of his willingness to join the Shanghai group in December 2005; or the upcoming Non-Alignment Movement summit in Havana, where Lukashenka and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez are expected to shine alongside Fidel Castro.

Overall, preemptive authoritarianism seems to be not only well-endowed with repressive capabilities and financial means, but also with the intellectual resources. Autocrats can be smart, and their advantage that the examples and systematic studies of democratization present

³⁸ At their July 2005 Moscow summit, Putin and Chinese president Hu Jintao issued an open attack on democracy promotion, attacking those who, they claim, "ignore objective processes of social development of sovereign states and impose on them alien models of social and political systems." "Authoritarian Internationale" Leads Anti-Democratic Backlash," in *Democracy Digest: The Bulletin of the Transatlantic Democracy Network*. Vol. 3, No.1, 31 March 2006, http://www.civnet.org/journals/democracy_digest_3_1.html

³⁹ Ibid.

them with manuals of how to avoid democracy at home, at least for a substantial period of time. They are also not home-ridden anymore, and demonstrate a remarkable capacity to organize internationally and establish some sort of self-defense. Last but not least, they are capable of making preemption legitimate and even fun for home audiences. As of now, it is hard to predict when and where will preemptive authoritarianism run out of steam, and which obstacles will be insurmountable for it. However counterintuitive it can be given the overall tone of the paper, I would suggest that three surprising circumstances that were revealed during the failed post-election protests in Belarus (that is radicalization of the democratic subculture, and, in broader sense, of the part of the society affected by repression; ability of civil society to spontaneously organize; and limitations on the regime's ability to restrict access to information) may be considered as factors that can potentially reverse and even defeat the forces of preemption. On the international front, preemption may eventually stumble at the decaying financial capabilities, and, by extension, political influence of the 'core' petro states that seem to be taking the lead in the authoritarian international. For the foreseeable future, however, we have little else to expect but witness a slowdown, and even reversal, of the recent wave of democratization.