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03



**Democratic Transition in Belarus:**  
Cause(s) of Failure

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the research is to identify the causes of the constant fail of the electoral democratic transition in the Republic of Belarus in the last decade. The qualitative and comparative methods of research were applied. The study examined variation of different significant social, economic and political factors in three election periods. It was discovered that 2001 election was the most favorable period for democratic regime change to take place in comparison with other periods. However, the opposition failed to propose a strong, charismatic candidate. The results of the research revealed that external factor - the relationship with the regional hegemon, Russia, - was persistent obstacle in three examined democratic transition periods. The principal conclusion was that Russian low gas prices and loans that lacked democratic conditionality propped up Belarusian autocratic regime. Thanks to these means, Alexander Lukashenka managed to make semblance of stable economic growth and equality in the country playing on people preferences, which are highly dominated by economic needs.

## I. Introduction

The most recent wave of the Color Revolutions broke out in Serbia. In October of 2000, Serbian democratic opposition succeeded to overthrow the dictatorship of Slobodan Milošević. Next victorious Color Revolution took place in Georgia three years later when Shevardnadze's government was dismissed by democratic forces of Georgia. The Color Revolution had a victorious "snowballing" effect on the Ukraine (Orange Revolution of 2004), Lebanon (Cedar Revolution of 2005), Kyrgyzstan (Tulip Revolutions of 2005 and 2010) and Moldova (Twitter Revolution of 2009). However, many more attempts of democratic transition from authoritarian regimes failed. The most well-known examples are Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Uzbekistan, where government instigated one of the most brutal massacres to oppress the revolutionary movement. The revolutionary chain reaction, expected and promoted by media and scholars, was ruptured by Belarus three times. Belarusian democratic transition failed in 2001, right after Color Revolution took place in Serbia. Although "Orange" revolution in the Ukraine was highly supported and assisted by Belarusian opposition activists and Belarusian ZUBR youth movement, democratic transition in Belarus failed in 2006. Moldovan revolution of 2009 did not produce "snowball" effect on Belarus in 2010 either. Huntington (1991) argues that "snowballing" or, in other words, regional contingency effect is one of the main causes of the democratic transition. However, success of democracy in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova did not have "snowball" effect on Belarus, which means that Belarusian state lacks some contributing factors or has crucial obstacles to democratic transition.

The object of study is democratic transition in the Republic of Belarus. The paper is aimed to answer the question why Belarus has not experienced democratic transition and alteration of autocratic leader in the last seventeen years regardless of several attempts? The subquestion is what factor(s) contributed to the triple failure of the democratic forces to take over? The paper analyses variation of the democracy advocating/impeding internal and external factors during the three democratic transition periods that took place in Belarus in the 2001, 2006 and 2010 presidential election years. It argues that Belarus-Russia relationship led to the consolidation of autocracy in Belarus; therefore, it became the main obstacle to the democratic transition. Reciprocal loyalty of both governments, based on the Lukashenka personal concerns

on preserving its power and Russian geopolitical interests, impedes democratic transition in Belarus.

## **2. Methodology and Structure**

Belarus is a remarkable case study to understand why some states are prone to democratization and others are not. Comparison of three cases of transition within one country give a possibility to trace the dynamics of the variation of the factors that affect regime change within one country under relatively stable circumstances. This allows finding out whether all three democratic 'electoral' revolutions failed because of their unique circumstances or there were constant factors that led to the failure of the regime change. If the second option is correct, removal of these factors significantly increases chances of the Color Revolutions in the state. This case is also interesting for the analysis of the influence of the external forces on the political regime, since Belarus occupies strategically important geographical position between the two regional hegemons, autocratic Russia and democratic European Union.

Samuel Huntington argues that there are two approaches to assess democracy prospects. These approaches are focused on causes and obstacles to democratic transition (Huntington, 1991). Therefore, the examined factors fall into two general categories of 'contributors' and 'obstacles.' The lack of contributing factor becomes an obstacle. Therefore, the paper examines factors that belong to both categories to find out whether the constant absence of the contributing factor or constant presence of the obstacle became a cause of democratic transition failure in Belarus.

The paper analyses three cases that correspond to the three presidential election years as of 2001, 2006 and 2010 accordingly, when the 'electoral' democratic transition attempts took place. Three selected cases share several constant characteristics: 1) the deployment of the 'electoral model' of democratization (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006). The attempts of the democratic transition and regime change took place right after the election; 2) 'snowball effect.' All three attempts of the democratic transition and regime change in Belarus took place after the successful Color Revolutions in Serbia in 2000, Ukraine in 2004, Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and Moldova in 2009; 3) anticipation of the electoral fraud. Opposition and western-democracies publicly declared the elections as fraudulent, because independent election observers found multiple violations during the elections of 2001, 2006 and 2010. The European Union and the

United States have never recognized their results; 4) demand for free and fair election. The post election protests took place after three elections; 5) persistence of the same incumbent. Alexander Lukashenko won all three elections. As of today, he has been serving his fourth presidential term.

The paper applies qualitative research method with and comparative case-study analysis. The research paper has a following structure. The introductory part is followed by literature review and theoretical justification. This part also identifies and defines dependent and independent variables and elaborates research hypotheses. The next sections test the identified independent variables for each out of three cases of democratic transition attempts that took place in the Republic of Belarus after three presidential elections. Last section concludes. The paper relies on the information from the academic journal articles, reports of the democracy monitoring and promoting organizations, analytical agency reports and national polls data, newspaper articles and opposition web-sites.

## **II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Welsh points out that in the wake of these extraordinary events much scholarly attention initially focused on the various causes of regime change in the former Soviet bloc. Other studies placed major emphasis on the prerequisites of democratization: socioeconomic development and the roles of civil society and political culture (Welsh 1994: 379). Thus, there are many different theoretical approaches to identify factors (variables) that explain success of the democratic transition that takes place in different countries under different circumstances. Guo attempted to classify major theoretical studies and identifies four major categories: structure-oriented approach, process-oriented approach, institutional context-oriented approach, and political economy approach. Structure-oriented approach is based on socio-economic and cultural prerequisites defined by level of education and industrialization, economic growth, type of religion, civil culture, and interest groups, before democratic transition occurs. Second approach is based on the strategic choices of the elite groups that decide whether or not the democratic transition should take place. The institutional approach stresses the role of the institutions and civil society as an explanatory variable for the democratic transition. The political economy approach consolidates the idea of the dependency between economic crisis and political transition (Guo, 1999).

White comes to the conclusion that “the countries that experienced a ‘coloured revolution’ between 2000 and 2005 – Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan – were not distinguished by their levels of economic development or levels of inequality of income distribution. By contrast, perceptions of the political system, and of its levels of corruption and responsiveness, were more closely associated with a series of irregular regime changes that had generally been precipitated by a ‘stolen election’ (White 2009: 70). Therefore, political approach is dominant in the study of contemporary Color Revolutions with the emphasis on mobilization of the civil society as a major revolutionary driving force.

Democratic transition in the former communist countries remains one of the most controversial issues for the academic studies. In the past twenty years former communist countries of the Soviet block experienced radical social, political and economic changes. Samuel Huntington (1991) defined this period as a “Third Wave of Democratization.” The results of the “Third Wave” of democratization questioned the idea whether democracy can be exported or not and under which conditions; whether democratic transition in one country is able to produce “snowballing” (Huntington, 1991) or it is a single event that took place under specific favorable circumstances; what circumstances are they, and whether every case is unique or there are some common features.

The ‘electoral’ democratic transition in the postcommunist world received a special name of the Color Revolution, where every case possessed a specific symbolic color. The paper operates with the definition of Silitski. He defines the Color Revolution as “a set of political changes across the postcommunist world that can be divided into three categories: transformative elections, ‘electoral revolutions’ as such, and ‘post electoral’ popular uprisings” (Silitski 2009: 86). In other words, Color Revolution is a form of the non-violent civil resistance that follows disputed falsified elections. Color Revolution incorporates democratic transition, which is defined here as a legitimate transition of power from autocratic regime to democratically elected government. The end result is transfer of state leadership from authoritarian government to the democratic opposition forces. The paper also operates with the concept of democratic transition period which is a time frame for the democratic transition. Helga Walsh defines democratic transition period as “an interval between authoritarian political regime and a democratic regime when legitimate alteration of autocratic leadership takes place” (Walsh 1994: 380).



The 'electoral model' of democratization is a dominant technique of contemporary regime change (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006). This model gives legitimacy to the Color Revolution. The model includes 'the use of such means as elections, opposition unity, nonviolent popular protest against vote fraud, youth movements, humor, and foreign assistance, as well as various forms of election monitoring and parallel vote counts, to defeat illiberal incumbents' (Way 2009: 56). In terms of Belarusian case, popular non-violent protest, organized by opposition, contested the results of the elections and demanded new free and democratic elections. The goal was to defeat illiberal incumbent leader Alexander Lukashenka through legitimate means.

'Radicalization' and 'terror or civil war' stage distinguishes Color Revolution from 'old fashion' 'radical' form of revolution (Goldstone 2009: 31). By comparing color and 'radicalizing' revolutions, Goldstone (2009) concludes that revolutionary actors and participants in 'old fashion' and 'modern' forms of revolution belong to the opposite social classes. 'Color revolutions tend to occur in societies with substantial urban and commercial sectors, organized labor, and moderate social and economic inequality. In color revolutions, defecting elites seek to mobilize mainly urban, student, white-collar, mining, professional, and business supporters' for nationalist and usually democratic goals, eschewing class-based mobilization and attacks on entire elite groups' (Goldstone 2009: 16). Therefore, 'Color revolutionists' appeal mainly to the educated and intellectual middle class, where social change can be achieved without violence and armed aggression from the protesters' side.

### **Factors that Contribute and Impede Democratic Transition**

Huntington (1991) argues that there are factors that contribute to the democratic transition and there are factors that are obstacles. Among contributing factors Huntington emphasizes role of the external democratic forces and 'snowballing'. As mentioned above, the 'snowballing' has never had full effect on Belarus. Notwithstanding several attempts of democratic transition, they were all unsuccessful. Huntington emphasizes that 'if country lacks favorable internal conditions, snowballing alone is unlikely to bring about democratization' (Huntington 1991: 16). Therefore, the internal factors are of the same relevance as external. Herd (2005) comparing Color Revolutions in post-Soviet states and Serbia, found out factors that are common for all cases. They are organized youth movement as a major driving force of the Color

Revolution, united opposition - weak incumbent leader, and vast involvement of the western democracy-advocating Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Bunce and Wolchik (2006) highlight that democracy is more likely to arise in the countries that hold regular elections, have developed civil society, that act as local ally for democratization efforts; [ ] exhibit cooperation among opposition groups, and share borders with states that are both democratic and similar to them (Bunce and Wolchik 2006: 14). Although Belarus holds regular elections, fraudulent manipulations of the current president with the legislation allowed him to be reelected multiple times. Therefore, regular elections per se are not a factor that contributes to democratization. In this case-study this is a precondition for the 'electoral model' of democratization to take place.

Thus, the identified factors fall into three categories, which are political, social, and external forces. Political category includes such factors as united opposition and unpopular incumbent; democracy, advocating youth movement, falls under social category; and external forces are defined by scope of relationship with the regional hegemon and involvement of the Western-funded NGOs into the civil society development. It is presumed that all the identified factors are not isolated from each other and may have similar causal interference. Based on the analysis of four different hypotheses and factors stated above, this paper is aimed to find whether the constant lack of some contributing factors led to the failure of the democratic transition or it was due to the persisting obstacles.

### **1. Political Hypothesis**

Comparing Color Revolutions in Georgia, Serbia, and the Ukraine, McFaul (2005) and Herd (2005) identified that failing popularity of the incumbent leader and united opposition were the necessary conditions for the successful democratic transition. Unresolved geopolitical issues, ethnic cleansing, international intervention, deterioration of the state economy and decline of living standards caused presidential unpopularity of Milošević in former Yugoslavia; corruption, economic stagnation and exposed direct involvement into the murder of journalist Georgi Gongadze undermined popularity and legitimacy of the Ukrainian president, Kuchma; Georgian president, Eduard Shevardnadze, lost political credibility due to state corruption, economic decline and inability to manage the territorial disputes and wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (McFaul 2005).

Strength of the opposition is measured by its unity or, at least, ability to create the perception of the unity and personality of the opposition leader (McFaul, 2005). The capability of the opposition to unite against the autocratic leader before presidential elections, overcome personal ambitions and ideological discrepancies, and become represented by strong charismatic leader raises the opposition credibility among electorate. McFaul (2005) and Herd (2005) found that unified opposition headed by strong leader was a crucial factor in the Ukrainian and Serbian cases and, to the lesser extent, in Georgia. However, personal charisma and strong public speaking skills of Georgian opposition leader, Saakashvili, helped to convince Georgian electorate in the election fraud and brought opposition to power.

Therefore, the united opposition and weak, unpopular incumbent leader are prerequisites for the successful democratic transition. If one of these factors is not satisfied, the transition fails.

## **2. Social Hypothesis**

Youth is a major driving force of the democratic revolutions going back to the Philippines people's power protests in mid-1980s to Nepal in 2006 (Kuzio 2006: 366). Color Revolutions in Serbia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and the Ukraine would be impossible without youth protest movement with catchy slogans and logos (Herd 2005: 4). Under the youth movement the research understands organized and conscious attempts on the part of young people to initiate or resist change in the social order (Braungard and Braungard 1990: 157). Youth groups provide logistical support to the protesters; actively participate in the mobilization of the society and spreading of information. Being technically savvy, young people implement modern technology, which increases the efficiency of the information spreading and advocacy work.

Youth is always in the forefront of the democratic protests and rallies (Kuzio, 2006; Nikolayenko, 2009). Being a symbol of the alteration and modernization, youth facilitates penetration of the new ideas into the society and encourages formation of the active civil society. Moreover, in the aftermath of fraudulent elections, young people were among the first to protest against electoral fraud and among the last to leave protest sites (Nikolayenko 2009: 4). Therefore, strong youth movement is essential for the success of the Color Revolution.

In the real world, youth movement is one of the clearly identifiable common features of the successful Color Revolutions in Serbia, Georgia and the Ukraine. In Serbia it was OTPOR. In Georgia the youth movement was called KMARA. In Ukraine it was PORA (Herd 2005: 4)

Moreover, these organizations stay interconnected and create vast international network. Their well organized network system allowed the exchange of experience, knowledge and training among the young activists from Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Belarus. Nikolayenko (2009) highlights that the youth groups' participation in the democratic transition process is so important that it creates a danger of abuse from the opposition parties that can exploit youth for their personal gains.

Current autocratic regimes respond to the rise of the opposition youth movements with the state-supported youth organizations. This fact demonstrates that youth movement is a power that has to be counterbalanced. Belarusian Republican Youth Movement (BRSM), supported by the Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenka, pro-Karimov Uzbek Kamolot youth organization, and Russian Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement 'Ours!' promoted by the Russian Presidential administrations, are examples of the state alternative to the opposition youth movements. These organizations are often compared with Soviet Komsomol or Hitler-Jugend which represent potential means for future cadres into the state bureaucracy.

It is assumed that being one of the most influential actors of the Color Revolution reform-oriented youth instigates the democratic transformation of the autocratic regime and mobilizes civil society. Therefore, without a strong opposition youth movement 'electoral' democratic transition will fail.

### **3. 'External Forces' Hypotheses:**

#### **3.1. International Democracy Assistance**

Western-founded international organizations provide international democracy assistance by different means of 'international donor support' to the local democracy-advocating NGOs. Besides financial support, these organizations are responsible for the logistics: spreading knowledge about democratic ways of development, sharing experience on democratic transition that took place in other countries, training local activists to mobilize local civil society and teaching opposition accurate electoral campaign techniques. Principle of sovereignty restricts any direct intervention into the internal state affairs. Therefore democratic states exercise the export of democracy through international non-governmental organizations that advocate democracy. 'The international donor support' is crucial in the promotion of democracy and education of the civil society and society in general. International support is especially important

for the post-communist states, where civil society was largely underdeveloped due to the soviet legacy and one-party system.

Patrick defines civil society as "the complex network of freely formed voluntary associations, distinct from the formal governmental institutions of the state, acting independently or in partnership with state agencies Civil society is a public domain that may act as an independent social force to check or limit an abusive or undesired exercise of the state's power" (Patrick 1996: 2-3). One of the critical aspects of the weakness of the civil society of the Third Wave of democratization is "its dependence upon external sources for funding, which compromises independence and accountability to members" (Patrick 1996: 13). Most of the contemporary democracy-advocating NGOs are funded by the United States government which is a major promoter of democracy in the world. This paper disregards major international financial organizations such as International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Although these organizations have enough power to influence the state politics, they are largely concerned about economic situation in the state and its ability to pay membership costs rather than state political regime (Pevehouse, 2002).

By analyzing successful democratic transitions, scholars became aware of the significant role in democratic transition of the "western-funded international organizations that advocate democracy, such as Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as U.S.-funded NGOs such as Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the George Soros funded Open Society Foundation. U.S. embassies and U.S. Agency for International Development projects and programs are also seen as vital to the deployment of the revolutionary technologies that have facilitated regime change" (Herd 2005: 4). Therefore, none of the Color Revolutions was a spontaneous revolt of people against government, rather a product of the application of the old techniques, developed and tested by these institutions over decades (Lendman, 2009). The above mentioned NGOs provide training and financial support to the local social reform-oriented NGOs. They assumed responsibility to revive, consolidate and unify pro-democratic elements in the autocratic states. "USAID, IRI and NDI worked to increase the capability of regional party branches, equip political and civic activists with the skills and knowledge to monitor the election campaigns; and improve the organizing skills, planning capacity and outreach of regional political and civic activists" (USAID Report/Belarus 2001).

These organizations are in charge of strategic advising of the local NGOs and youth organizations on how to campaign for the social change and how to promote growth of the democratically oriented civil society through educational programs, advocacy, and international exchange programs with other NGOs. Strengthening connections among local NGOs and further expansion of the international connections lead to the development of the cross-border NGOs network which contributes to a better-organized exchange of information on techniques of the peaceful resistance to the autocratic regime. The international democracy promoting key organizations are involved into the training of the local activists, leadership building and funding of the independent media. Therefore, such international organizations as NDI, NED, and IRI contribute to the efficiency of the work of the local NGOs, civil society institutions and education of the Belarusian electorate, and activists on how to dispute fraudulent elections and originate the regime change through peaceful massive street protests and non-violent strikes (Lendman, 2009). "These organizations provide access, leverage, information and money that the national NGOs could never expect to have on their own" (Keck and Sikkink 1999: 93).

If international democracy-advocating NGOs are crucial for democratic transition, their absence creates an obstacle for democracy to prevail.

### **3.2. The Relationship with Autocratic Hegemon**

The political regime of the regional hegemon affects political regime of the neighboring state. "External forces can play an active role in promoting democratization and reinforcing democratic consolidation, or they can create disincentives to democratize and undermine democratic reforms." (Ambrosio 2006: 408) Therefore, in order to have a democratic transition state should cooperate extensively with democratic hegemon. Otherwise, if democracy is not a prerequisite for further cooperation, advocated by hegemon, such alliance contributes to consolidation of the autocracy in the state. The democratization literature gives no definite answer whether internal or external forces are crucial to the process of democratic transition. However, in many cases political regime of the more powerful state affects political regime in the neighboring state. Although the principle of sovereignty persists as a dominant principle of international relations, states continue to develop instruments of influence on the political regime flow in the neighboring countries. It mostly refers to the regional superpowers that are highly

interested to be surrounded by allies, rather than states that belong to the counterbalancing superpower block.

According to the realist approach in the international theories, survival forces smaller and weaker states toward bandwagoning, rather than balancing, when such states believe to be surrounded by enemies. Although the Cold War was over twenty years ago, the tensions between the two former rivals still exist, whereas states like Ukraine and Belarus are a "buffer zone" for the political games of the former rivals. It is a very common opinion that Color Revolutions in the former Soviet republics are another form of control over the region that the United States exercises against Russia (Cohen, 2005). Therefore, it can be argued that these tensions "force" ex-Soviet republics to select between membership in the democratic United States camp or cooperation with autocratic Russia. Considering that democracy and autocracy are the opposite types of political regime, this part argues that autocratic regime looks forward to cooperation with the regional hegemon that has similar political regime; whereas autocratic regional hegemon contributes to the preservation of the similar to its own political regime in the neighboring state.

### **III. Case-study Analysis: Belarus**

#### **Consolidation of Autocracy**

Lukashenka, who was first elected in 1994 in a public backlash against economic decline and corruption, remains popular owing to the ability of his government to provide acceptable living standards and full employment to the population (Silitski 2007: 134). Along with employment growth, Alexander Lukashenka managed to consolidate all branches of power in his hands. The Referendum of 1996 became a turning point in the Belarusian democracy when majority (approximately 80%) of the Belarusian voters supported "an authoritarian president with a near-dictatorial executive style and rejected key elements of the democratic state, namely a legislature reflecting the views of the electorate and directly elected local executive power" (Eke and Kuzio 2000: 523). By 1997, the legislature and judicial officials were direct presidential appointees. The consolidation of power continued. The 2004 Referendum abolished presidential term limits. According to the official numbers about 80% of the Belarusian electorate supported Lukashenka's proposal on the unlimited number of presidential terms that

one person can serve. Thus, Alexander Lukashenka was able to guarantee the legitimacy of his future victories and make semblance of democracy in the country. As a result, since 1994, every five years Alexander Lukashenka has legally run presidential campaign and won the election. Legitimacy of the referendum is doubtful. The Article 112 "Questions of the Referendum" of the Electoral Law of the Republic of Belarus bans questions related to the elections of the president or termination of the presidential duties. However, the attempt of the opposition party of Belarusian Popular Front to protest the legitimacy of the Referendum failed.

The former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, in her interview to the CNN Moscow Bureau Chief Jill Dougherty, called the Republic of Belarus "the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe."<sup>1</sup> Geographically Belarus is locked between semi-authoritarian Russia and democratic Europe. From the other three sides, Belarus is surrounded by stable democratic states of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia on the west, by the Ukraine from the south, where successful Color Revolution have already occurred. However, Belarus remains a stable authoritarian regime almost for two decades, where all branches of power lack independence and president exercises absolute control over all meaningful sources of power (Silitski and Pikulik, 2011). Among them are "the judiciary in the country (hiring and firing at will all military and district judges with no parliamentary check); the Constitutional Court (appointing six of twelve members, including the chairman); the lower house of parliament (personally selecting members without election); the upper house of parliament (having the power to appoint one-third of members at any time); all state income and expenditures, and all meaningful media" (Lenzi, M. 2002: 411).

State repressions on independent media started in 1996, when regime shut down Belarus' first private FM station. By the election of 2001 state took control over all domestic radio and television broadcasting. Before the election of 2006 state targeted independent news papers.<sup>2</sup> The opposition press is barely able to reach electorate. By the election of 2010 government implemented extensive internet censorship measures. By 2005 Lukashenka regime took all necessary legislative and non-legislative measures to prevent the spread of democracy-advocating NGOs and rise of any opposition movement. Silitski highlights that "the new police tactics used to disperse a few small demonstrations in early 2005 made it clear that the security

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<sup>1</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/04/20/rice.dougherty/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> 2003 " fifty independent newspapers, by 2005 " only eighteen left. By 2010 " this number was down to dozen. Freedom House.



forces were receiving special training in the quick suppression of street protests (Silitski 2006: 139). By the election of 2010 state implemented the full range of measures to control the society and consolidate its power. Thus, states repressive capacity was built on preventive measures and reached its highest point after the election of 2010, when seven out of nine candidates were arrested and more than 700 peaceful protesters were beaten and jailed (Silitski and Pikulik, 2011). The state repressive capacity is important for the case of Belarus. It defines the framework of the cases and has a different effect on different factors. Although some of the factors like youth movement were able to operate in spite of the state repressions, other factors like western-funded international organizations became largely affected.

## **1. Unpopular Incumbent Leader-United Opposition**

The official results of the 2001, 2006 and 2010 presidential elections, announced by Central Election Committee of the Republic of Belarus, demonstrated extreme popularity of Alexander Lukashenka among Belarusian voters. In general it can be assumed that most Belarusians are satisfied with their president. However, according to the results of the national opinion poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies<sup>3</sup> (IISEPS), the popularity of the current president of the Republic of Belarus varied across three presidential elections. Lukashenka reached the peak of his popularity in 2006. Almost 59% of the respondents of the national poll, conducted right before the election of 2006, said that they would vote for Lukashenka, if the election was to take place the next day.<sup>4</sup> According to 54.6% of the respondents of the 2008 national poll, salaries and pensions in Belarus have been growing only thanks to the personal efforts of the president<sup>5</sup>. In 2001 and 2010, the number of the Lukashenka supporters varied around 31% and 37% accordingly. By 2006, Alexander Lukashenka was able to satisfy major expectations of the Belarusian voters, which are directly linked to the economic stability and financial wellbeing. IISEPS poll, conducted one month before the election of 2006, shows that democratization and independence in Belarus is only fifth concern of the Belarusian electorate, headed by general standards of leaving, rise in prices, improvement of health sector,

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<sup>3</sup> IISEPS was the largest independent polling agency. It was established in the Republic of Belarus in 1992 by group of academics, politicians, businessmen, and journalists. In 2005 IISEPS was shut down by the court order. The agency currently resides in the Republic of Lithuania.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org/edata06-2-1.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org/e9-08-03.html>

and employment<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, opposition campaign, built on advocacy of democracy and freedom, was doomed to failure beforehand. Stable economic growth<sup>7</sup>, rising standards of living, and stable payments of constantly increasing salaries and pensions<sup>8</sup> by government in the state where about 80% of the industry remains in state hands<sup>9</sup>, defined Lukashenka popularity among voters.

Loss of confidence in Lukashenka government, in terms of economic crisis and first signs of economic stagnation<sup>10</sup> in the country, led to the decrease of popularity of the current president in 2010. Making parallels with the Ukrainian president Kuchma it can be argued that public accusation in kidnapping and, presumably, killing of the major opponents of Lukashenka regime, former Minister of Internal Affairs Yuri Zakharenka, 13<sup>th</sup> Supreme Deputy Chairman Viktor Gonchar, opposition supporter Anatoly Krasovsky and Russian journalist Dmitriy Zavadskiy, undermined the popularity of Lukashenka in 2001; whereas unexpected death of the founder and head of the major oldest opposition website charter 97.org, Oleg Babenin, in 2010, which raised rumors about involvement of the government into the issue, also contributed to the decline of the Lukashenka popularity.

While opposition was able to unify for the elections of 2001 and 2006, it failed to do so in 2010. Despite all the efforts taken in 2001 and 2006, opposition did not succeed in convincing Belarusian voters that the final results should be different. The 2001, 2006, and 2010 national opinion polls show that people simply did not know much about any other candidates but Lukashenka,<sup>11</sup> due to the absolute state control over media that Lukashenka government started to execute in late 1990s. Internet, as an alternative, became popular only around 2007. Although 32% of population reported to be the internet users<sup>12</sup> in 2010, only 10% consider internet as a source of information about presidential campaigns and elections.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, it could be argued that political precondition of unpopular leader's unified opposition<sup>13</sup> was relatively satisfied only once before the election of 2001, when two thirds of the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org/edata06-2.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.itu.int>, internet users statistics

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org/estat.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5371.htm>

<sup>10</sup> According to IMF data Belarus experienced decline in GDP growth first time in the past ten years

[http://www.indexmundi.com/belarus/gdp\\_%28official\\_exchange\\_rate%29.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/belarus/gdp_%28official_exchange_rate%29.html)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org>, analytical archives of 2001, 2006 and 2010

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/euro/by.htm>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org/e09-10-10.html>

IISEPS poll participants did not wish to see Alexander Lukashenko to be a president of Belarus.<sup>14</sup> IISEPS analysts argue that accurate presidential campaign led by strong, charismatic united opposition leader would turn two thirds, of those who did not see Alexander Lukashenka as a future president, towards regime change (IISEPS, archive, 2001). Notwithstanding the preconditions revealed by the IISEPS polls, the unified opposition of 2001 failed to persuade electorate to follow the opposition leader, mainly due to his unpopularity<sup>15</sup> among the Belarusian voters.

## 2. Youth Movement

The international youth movement Malady Front (÷Young Frontø) of the Belarusian youth was founded in 1997 by the opposition party of the Belarusian National Front (BNF). Following BNF ideology, with focus on revival of Belarusian language and national identity, Malady Front failed to attract many followers among predominantly Russian-speaking population of Belarus.<sup>16</sup> As a result, ÷belarusification,ö promoted by Malady Front, practically imposed limits on mobilization the youth. Although Malady Front is still active and continues its struggle against regime, in terms of Belarusian social (linguistic) reality this organization is not capable of mobilizing Belarusian youth at the full scale.

Therefore, in winter of 2001, a new youth movement called ZUBR (öBisonö) was founded by the Belarusian activists of Malady Front, Charter 97, and Belarusian Human Rights Group. ZUBR was designed as a replicate of the Serbian revolutionary youth movement OTPOR. Being ideologically incompatible with the current authoritarian regime, ZUBR was denied official registration on the territory of Belarus. Therefore, all members of this organization faced potential persecution from the government for participation in the unauthorized youth movement. The campaign was lunched under the slogan ÷It is time to choose! It is time to clean up.ö ZUBR was the fist that went to the streets of the Belarusian cities

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org>, analytical archive 2001.

<sup>15</sup> The IISEPS national poll revealed that Vladimir Goncharik was on the fifth choice of the Belarusian people in 2001. IISEPS New, June 2001, Issue 2 (20). <http://www.iiseps.org>.

<sup>16</sup> According to the 1999 Census of the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 62.8 % of total population speak Russian language at home. See <http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/p6.php>. According to the 2009 national census, although over 5 million people indicate Belarusian as their mother tongue, less than half of them speaks Belarusian at home, whereas almost 7 million people use Russian as their everyday communication language. Total population of Belarus is 9 503.8 people. See [http://belstat.gov.by/homep/en/census/2009/pc\\_results.php](http://belstat.gov.by/homep/en/census/2009/pc_results.php).

with portraits of the missing politicians and a journalist and publicly asked Lukashenka's government: "Where is Zakharenko?", "Where is Gonchar?", "Where is Krasovsky?", and "Where is Zavadsky?" Due to the ZUBR actions, these names became publicly known and undermined credibility of the president and its government among Belarusians. The fact of their disappearance could not longer be disregarded by the authorities that were publicly accused in kidnapping and murder of the popular political leaders and a journalist. The provocative start of ZUBR, campaigning to undermine presidential authority and revealed illegitimacy of Lukashenka government, was a promising first step to further mobilization of the young Belarusian citizens.

Analyzing youth movements in Serbia, Georgia and the Ukraine, Kuzio emphasizes the role of "humor and ridicule" as one of the tactics applied by young activists to break down fear and mobilize middle aged and older generations (Kuzio 2006: 375). The action "Ultimate Diagnosis," which was a harsh satire on Alexander Lukashenka, was executed by ZUBR activists in Gorky Park four months prior to the presidential election in spring of 2001. "ZUBR made people laugh at what they had been previously afraid of. [...] Dozens of [Lukashenka] masked ZUBRs invited Gorky park visitors to play table hockey, contend in a bag race with Lukashenko or simply take pictures with him."<sup>17</sup> "In the meantime, other activists were distributing "Nasha Svaboda" special issues, dedicated to Alexander Lukashenko's mosaic psychosis, diagnosed recently by Dr. Schigelsky."<sup>18</sup> Although the action was brutally aborted by the police, and many ZUBRs were assaulted, detained and charged, other acts of "Ultimate Diagnosis" took place in dozens of other cities throughout the country, where the main part of Lukashenka's electorate resides. By those acts, ZUBRs were able to reach the middle aged and elderly people. Lukashenka relies on their votes largely because Belarus is demographically old country, where about one third of the population is retired or is about to retire.

More than 1500 actions were organized by ZUBR in 2001.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of failure to change the "electoral" regime in September of 2001, ZUBR intensified its actions advocating regime change and democratic values of freedom. Young activists instigated more unauthorized rallies protesting against Lukashenka's regime. Replicating the actions of Serbian movement OTPOR, multiple posters with a slogan "He must go!" were glued by ZUBR activists in the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://eng.ucpb.org/archive/archive2002/58819-20020114000000-28816>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2001/04/21/01>

<sup>19</sup> <http://eng.ucpb.org/archive/archive2002/58819-20020114000000-28816>

center of Minsk. In order to undermine influence of the Lukashenka government over young Belarusian population, ZUBR launched "STOP-BRSM" campaign in 2004 against presidential Belarusian Republican Youth Movement (BRSM).<sup>20</sup> The objective was to unite young Belarusians against mandatory membership in the BRSM and presidential false promises in exchange of the BRSM membership. Similar actions in other Belarusian towns indicate that the objective was reached. ZUBRs deepened their revolutionary knowledge and skills through participation in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution. By presidential election of 2006, despite of the government repressions, ZUBR was able to develop a wide national network of activists with its representatives (cells) in 152 towns (Nikolayenko 2009). Youth movement became stronger and was a valuable asset for the opposition to succeed during the election of 2006. In both cases, ZUBRs formed a major part of the protesters, who went to the main square of Minsk to protest fraudulent elections and were the last to leave.

ZUBR ceased to exist two months after the election of 2006. Therefore, the 2010 election lacked strong unified democracy advocating movement, although there were other active anti-Lukashenka regime youth movements in Belarus. However, none of them was able to achieve the youth mobilization level of ZUBR during almost six years of its existence. ZUBR was able to find public support and mobilize youth all over the country; whereas contemporary youth movements are mainly concentrated in the capital. It can be concluded that young people of Belarus were major contributors to the democracy spread in Belarus, especially in 2001-2006, when they were able to unify and spread their activities around the state. From the beginning ZUBRs was a very active movement that launched their own actions and participated in the opposition rallies. Although Nikolayenko (2009) argues that Belarusian youth movement was not as well-organized and efficient as Ukrainian one. In terms of Belarusian reality and state repressions, largely absent in the Ukraine, the scale of the youth movement was significant. Therefore, the factor of Belarusian youth movement was not a cause of democratic transition failure in the Republic of Belarus.

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<sup>20</sup><http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2004/03/09/stopbrsm>

### 3. Western-Funded International Organizations

After the Color Revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and the Ukraine, it became evident that none of those revolutions would ever succeed if there were no US organizations like NED, NDI, IRI, Freedom House and Soros Foundation behind the scene. Therefore, it is assumed that lack of the active support from these organizations in Belarus is a cause of the regime change fail. The Belarusian Soros foundation was shut down in 1997 due to its active participation in the protests contesting legitimacy of the 1996 Referendum. However, the United States continued its donor support programs to the Belarusian NGOs through NED, NDI, IRI and USAID programs. Balázs Jarábik (2009) found that there was little cooperation from the European side on this matter, before the election of 2001, although in 1998 OSCE succeeded to open OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Minsk, which later became a major international mediator between Belarusian civil society and Lukashenka government. He argues that "US provided assistance mainly through regranting NGOs, while EU financial mechanisms are tailored primarily at consulting companies" (Jarábik 2009:87). Therefore, the discrepancies between US and EU produced negative impact on coordination of assistance lowering the efficiency of the democracy advocating organizations.

Notwithstanding the suspicious and even hostile attitude of the government to the presence of NGOs and development of the civil society institutions starting from late 1990s, USAID continued to "support NGOs through its political party training programs that have provided skills training to support politically active youth and women, through grants to NGOs in the regions that attempt to provide independent sources of news and information" (USAID Report/Belarus 2001). National Democratic Institute has never been allowed to open a permanent office in the Republic of Belarus although NDI had conducted programs there from 2000. IRI started to assist Belarusian democratic forces in their struggle against regime in 1997. The key working spheres of NDI and IRI were "political party straightening and candidate development, coalition building, women empowerment and youth leadership development."<sup>21</sup>

The 2002 USAID Report highlights "significant gains that were achieved in increasing citizen activism through USAID-funded partner activities: Building Democracy in Belarus, the Civil Society Development program, and Election Action in Belarus. [í ] During the [2001] election year, indigenous grantees conducted 249 public information campaigns, with a total

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<sup>21</sup> <http://iri.org>, Belarus

outreach to 3, 443,707 people. Coalition activities reached over 2,000,000 citizens in rural areas and small towns. USAID-funded programs trained 558 NGO leader representing 373 organization in 16 topics related to advocacy, civic education, lobbying, election programming, and working with mass media (USAID Report/Belarus 2002). Thus, involvement of the USAID into the formation and mobilization of the civil society, which remained underdeveloped and relatively isolated from the larger international civil society after the break up of the Soviet Union, speeded up and straightened the development of civil society organizations in Belarus, prior to the elections of 2001.

The period between 2002 and 2006 is defined by legal repressions, implemented by government against civil society in Belarus. After the election of 2001, legal situation for the civil society worsened. The legislation, adopted by government in 2001, forbade any development assistance to the unregistered organizations. Therefore, it became incredibly hard to officially provide donor support to the democracy advocating organizations in Belarus. The "Orange" revolution in the Ukraine became a catalyst in the relations of Belarusian government and NGOs. It resulted in direct authoritarian assault upon democracy advocating NGOs and foreign aid providers in Belarus. By 2005, most part of the democracy advocating NGOs with an opposition agenda was either denied the official registration or were shut down by the court order. Out of 240 member organizations of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs that took place in 2006, only 100 were officially registered (Silitski, 2007).

The NDI activities on the territory of Belarus were officially forbidden by the Belarusian government in 2005. However, NDI continues its programs from its Belarusian office in Kiev. The office of Eurasia Foundation (EF) was closed in 2004 after the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied its registration. EF was a major promoter of the civil society and economic development through improvement of the small and medium entrepreneurship, creation of the "healthy" business environment and development of the credit unions. In 2004, EF awarded approximately USD 150,000 in grants to the local organizations aimed to improve private sector (USAID Report/Belarus 2005). Fraudulent parliamentary elections and Referendum of 2004 drastically changed European position on democracy promotion in Belarus. However, structural complexity of the decision-making in the European Union hampers its movements on this matter. Donors from individual European states Poland, Lithuania, and Sweden operating through independent organizations, such as Poland-based East European

Democratic Center (IDEE) had more flexibility and resulted more effective in their support of Belarusian civil society.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of 2005, government criminalized participation in the unregistered organizations.<sup>23</sup> Media faced severe penalties for reporting about closed NGOs. The independent press opted for silence and self-censorship after the official warnings to close them down were executed. Belarusian government substituted Russian TV and radio with homemade broadcast (Silitski, 2005). Thus, government became the only source of information and immediately initiated the "brain-wash" campaign that promoted achievements of the current presidential regime. By the election of 2006, all offices of the western-funded NGOs were either denied the official registration or were simply shut down under the bogus pretexts. Thus, government took necessary preemptive measures to weaken the development of the reform-oriented pro-democratic civil society in Belarus before the coming election of 2006.

Even though NDI and IRI were no longer welcomed in Belarus, they continued their support to the opposition and civil society. NDI supported the Ten Plus Coalition, which was an opposition group of democratic parties and civil organizations, and assisted with election of the single candidate (Alexander Milinkevich) from opposition for the presidential election of 2006.<sup>24</sup> IRI was more active during the last electoral campaign. In 2009-2010 IRI worked closely with the opposition providing training in electoral campaign techniques, consulted pro-democratic NGOs and movements on development and distribution of issue-related information.

After the 2006 election, government continued its repressive policies against the civil society. Although the United State government increased funding for the democratization of Belarus and U.S. and EU policies and actions on this matter became more coordinated, the Belarusian state loyalty to the Western international organizations reached its bottom. According to the contemporary USAID reports, NDI, IRI, and Freedom House continue their programs aimed to promote democracy in Belarus from their offices in Lithuania and the Ukraine. However, their actions are very limited on the territory of Belarus. One of the major achievements of the above mentioned NGOs is unification of the opposition in the 2001 and 2006 elections.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://guerillas-without-guns.blogspot.com/2007/02/zubr-in-belarus.html>  
<http://www.gruene-europa.de/cms/default/dokbin/191/191930.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, adopted on January 15, 2005

<sup>24</sup> NDI Annual Report 2005 <http://www.ndi.org>



Thus, the period before the elections of 2001 was the most favorable for the rise of democracy-advocating NGOs and development of the civil society in terms of state legislature. Although there was some misunderstanding between the United States and Europe (due to the enlargement of the European Union, democratization of the neighboring states was not a priority for the EU at that point), the internal state environment was favorable enough comparing to the post 2001 election time. Moreover, the level of the United States participation into the democracy promotion is much higher than the European Union's. Although a degree of support varies, there is continuous support from the international donors in spite of the governmental persecution policies against civil society. Therefore, the factor of absence of the Western-funded organizations is excluded as potential cause of the democratic transition failure; although the scope of the activities was getting narrower from one period to another due to the state restrictive measures.

#### **4. Relationship with Russia**

This part argues that Russia-Belarus relations became a major obstacle for the political regime change in Belarus as well as spread of democracy eastward. Despite of all the discrepancies between the governments, cooperation between the two states benefited both sides: Lukashenka preserved his power, whereas Russia received a stable ally on its western border. After the break up of the Soviet Union, Russia implemented another effort to keep control over the neighboring republics through a newly created regional organization of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Former Soviet republics (except Baltic States and Georgia that joined CIS in two years) signed a set of agreements on cooperation in different spheres of internal and external affairs. However, the project was not fully implemented, and sovereign republics started to drift away from Russia. Belarus was among them.

The revival of the Belarus-Russian relations occurred in 1994, after Alexander Lukashenka became a president of the Republic of Belarus. Shortly thereafter, several bilateral agreements were signed: Treaty on the Union of Russia and Belarus (1996), Treaty on Military Cooperation between Russian and Belarus (1997), and Agreement on Joint Guarantee of Regional Security between Russia and Belarus (1998). In 1999, the Union State between Russian and Belarus was established as a continued process of integration of two states. In 1999, the two states signed and ratified the Program of Economic Cooperation for the next ten years. Monetary

integration, as a part of the Union State Development Program, was scheduled to be implemented till 2005. By 1999, over two hundred agreements have been signed between Russia and Belarus.

The other significant event that made Belarus "closer" to Russia was the Referendum of 1995, when Russian became official state language and vast majority of the Belarusian people decided to return to the independent Republic of Belarus slightly modified Soviet state symbols - coat of arms and red-green flag. Therefore, symbols that identified victorious and independent<sup>25</sup> past of Belarusian land - white-red-white flag and Pahonya ("Chaserö), were substituted by symbols that exposed close historical ties with Russia. Consequently, from the first years of his governance, Alexander Lukashenka emphasized close relationship with Russia, reinforcing people's memories about glorious and prosperous past of Belarus as a part of the Soviet Union to prevent any possibility of the future rise of nationalism in the country. This step was aimed to raise level of credibility of Russia towards Belarus and facilitated further cooperation and integration of the two countries.

The 1995 Referendum overturned nationalization process, initiated in 1991, and practically deprived the state of its uniqueness, national state symbols and language, and prepared the country for its further integration with Russia. On the other hand revived memories of the Soviet past made Belarusians more loyal to Russia and turned them away from looking westward. The constitutional changes after the Referendum of 1996 strengthened the authoritarian regime in Belarus, which had immediate negative impact on Belarus' European Union relationship. "The Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with the European Union, signed by Belarus in 1994, did not enter into force and Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly suspended the guest status of Belarus" (White *et al.* 2010: 348). Facing the possibility of political isolation from democratic west, Belarus practically had no choice left but bandwagoning with Russia.

White *et al.* highlights that "in Belarus, in particular, it has often been difficult to see any linkage between domestic norms and the conduct of foreign policy when all the key decisions are in the hands of an authoritarian president, whether or not he enjoys the support of a popular

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<sup>25</sup> Although there is a common argument that Belarus had never been independent prior to 1991 (except one year in 1918), this is misleading information. In 13 century Belarusian lands were unified into independent state of Great Duchy of Lithuania with Belarusian official state language. Belarusian lands were colonized by Russian Empire by the end of XVIII century.

consensus (White *et al.* 2010: 346). The authoritarian form of regime limits the role of the national identity in the state foreign policy making. On one hand, the revival of the soviet identity in Belarus was aimed to alienate Belarusians from 'Europeanization'. On the other hand, it smoothed the planning integration with Russia. Therefore, national identity was helpful tool that facilitated adjustment of domestic norms to the Russian-oriented foreign policy.

Through infinite promises and endless agreements signed with Moscow on further political and economic integration between the two states, Alexander Lukashenka ensured diplomatic support of his candidacy from Russia during the election of 2001. After numerous diplomatic and financial efforts had been invested by Moscow into the project of Russia-Belarus integration, Russia could not afford the anti-Russian changes in Belarusian foreign policy after the elections. The IISEPS national poll shows that Russian loyalty towards Belarusian president could also produce positive effect on the Lukashenka's leverage. According to the poll, in 2000, the Russian president Vladimir Putin was the most popular leader in Belarus.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, support of this statesman was quintessential for Alexander Lukashenka.

As much as Lukashenka was beloved by Yeltsin, his successor, Vladimir Putin, did not like much the Belarusian president. Trenin emphasizes that 'Putin wanted to bring to an end the games Lukashenka had been playing with former President Yeltsin, endlessly promising integration while profiting from Russian subsidies' (Trenin 2009: 79). However, the outbreak of the Color Revolutions in Georgia and the Ukraine and their, suddenly intensified, pro-European and pro-NATO orientation, made holding onto Belarus more important for Russia. During the elections of 2006, Russia abstained from any moves that could undermine reputation of Lukashenka in Belarus. This explains the reason why Putin withheld his decision on gas price increase until 2007; although in 2005 GazProm declared raising gas prices for all CIS states, including Belarus.

Russian loans, grants and cheap oil and gas supplies<sup>27</sup> allowed the Belarusian president to preserve the Soviet command type of economic development and subsidize multiple social reforms, creating atmosphere of stability and maintaining stable growth of pensions and salaries for the workers of the state industry. Consequently, wellbeing of the Belarusian people became

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org/e6-08-09.html>

<sup>27</sup> Russian natural gas cost Belarus \$22 per 1,000 cubic metres, whereas Ukraine paid \$40, Moldova \$55, Poland \$75 in 2003. Although Russia increased oil prices several times for Belarus, they are still lower, then for any other importer. Moreover, Belarus receives oil from Russia without customs duties for internal needs.

totally dependent on the cheap Russian oil. Price increase at that point would harm economic growth and, therefore, would undermined presidential popularity in the country.

Multiple delegations of the Russian officials went to Belarus to support Belarusian leader and express Russian loyalty to Lukashenka during the election of 2006. Therefore, it was not surprising that Russia, one of the first states, recognized the election and the Russian president first congratulated the winner. Although Lukashenka understood its dependence upon Russia, he continued to balance between Russia and Europe speculating on Kremlin-Western discrepancies.<sup>28</sup> However, another military agreement deepened the interdependence of the two states. In 2009, Lukashenka signed an agreement about a single regional air defense system with Moscow, basically, sacrificing a part of the Belarusian state sovereignty in exchange for another Russian loan.<sup>29</sup>

The Russian-Belarusian relation deteriorated and achieved its negative peak in the middle of 2010, at the height of presidential election campaign, after the Russian TV NTV channel broadcasted a movie *õKrestniy Batskaõ* (*õGod Fatherõ*), which reviled criminal and corrupt nature of Lukashenka dictatorial regime. Furthermore, the authors of the movie publicly criticized Alexander Lukashenka as irresponsible and insincere state leader who does not comply with his own commitments, specifically referring to his relationship with Russia.<sup>30</sup> Although Russian government refused any involvement into the issue and took no responsibility for the broadcasting, it was evident that Moscow was highly disappointed in Alexander Lukashenko and was looking forward to the changes in Belarusian government. Nine days before the 2010 presidential election, Lukashenka went to Moscow and *õcapitulated* over all Moscow demands.<sup>31</sup> As a result the new agreements on the common economic space and customs union was signed, which geopolitically made Belarus attached to Russia tighter then ever. Russian loyalty again ensured Lukashenka's victory during the presidential election of 2010.

Notwithstanding the fact that Belarus-Russia relationship experienced its *õupsõ* and *õdownsõ*, before the elections, Lukashenka managed to regain Russian friendship and ensure Moscow's support. Therefore, it can be concluded that both parties were interested in preserving this relationship. On the one hand, Russia was able to secure its western borders in case of

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<sup>28</sup> In spite of its alliance with Russia, Belarus refused to recognize independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

<sup>29</sup> [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2009/02/03/ic\\_articles\\_112\\_161068/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2009/02/03/ic_articles_112_161068/)

<sup>30</sup> *õKrestniy Batskaõ* (*õGod Fatherõ*) has five parts that can be found on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>31</sup> <http://svpressa.ru/society/article/35339/>

military intervention through means of Belarusian army and space. On the other hand, largely dependant on the energy exports to European markets, Russia took preventive measures to secure its transits through the Belarusian territory. In exchange, Lukashenka was able to preserve and consolidate his power and prevent regime change in Belarus. Cheap Russian oil supplies propped the national budget and guaranteed "Belarusian economic miracle."

According to the World Bank, data national poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line decreased from 46.7% in 1999 to 5.4% in 2009. By 2010, population living below \$1.25 per day was less than 2%. By 2004, the inflation rate declined by three times<sup>32</sup> and continued to decline further. In 2010 the GDP per capita in Belarus reached \$13,097<sup>33</sup>, whereas the same indicator in the Ukraine is almost half then Belarusian one. State experienced constant steady economic growth from 2000.<sup>34</sup> In 2010, the UN ranked Belarus 61<sup>st</sup> by Human Development Index, leaving behind Russia and the Ukraine. Cheap Russian oil ensured economic growth till 2007. "The situation radically changed in 2007, when gas prices rose more than twofold. The current account deficit grew from 1.4% of GDP in 2005 to 6.7% of GDP in 2007" (Shymanovich 2009: 3) Belarusian government compensated budget deficit by external borrowing. Thus, Russia became one of the primary creditors of Belarus<sup>35</sup>, pumping up "money-hungry" Belarusian economy. The high external debt, accumulated by Belarusian state, led to the currency devaluation in 2010. The deep discrepancies with Moscow in 2010 turned Lukashenka to western financial organizations. Thus, in 2010 the economy was saved by IMF without Russian participation. However, insecure about his political future, Lukashenka went to Russia nine days before the election of 2010 and regained Moscow's loyalty.

The results of 2001, 2006 and 2010 IISEPS polls<sup>36</sup> make evident that economic security is a main preference of the Belarusian electorate. Belarusians largely associate first ten years of democracy with lawlessness, economic stagnation, and poverty, not democratic freedoms. This explains why economic needs define choice of the Belarusian electorate. Statistically, Alexander Lukashenka proved to be a strong reliable leader, who was able to build economically

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<sup>32</sup> [http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/national/europheticis/belarus/belarus\\_2005\\_en.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/national/europheticis/belarus/belarus_2005_en.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BLR.html>

<sup>34</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD/countries/BY?display=graph>

<sup>35</sup> 2007 - USD1.5billion, 2008 - USD2 billion, 2009 ó RUS 100 billion, 2011 ó USD 3billion (Shymanovich 2009)

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.iiseps.org/ebullet01-3.html>;

<http://www.iiseps.org/edata06-2.html>

<http://www.iiseps.org/edata10-121.html>;

prosperous Soviet-type socialist state in terms of Belarusian reality and avoid painful structural reforms that had to experience the Ukraine or Russia. Being a non-democratic state, Russia has no democracy promotion policy in its foreign relations agenda. This fact is the most attractive for the autocrat who is willing to preserve its control over the state. The scope of the relationship with Russia varied during three periods. In 2001 it is mostly political and diplomatic. The economic dependence on Russia becomes more evident after 2006; whereas 2010 reveals full scale of the regime dependence on Russia.

#### IV. Conclusion

	<b>2001</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Unpopular incumbent leader ó united opposition</b>	+	-	-
<b>Youth movement</b>	++	++	-
<b>Western-funded international organizations</b>	++	+	-
<b>Relationship with Russia</b>	positive	positive	positive

÷++øfulfilled; ÷+øpartially fulfilled; ÷ønot fulfilled

The analysis of the various factors identified above shows that the 2001 election was the most favorable time for the regime change. All the democracy contributive factors of the united opposition, relatively unpopular incumbent and youth movement were fulfilled. However, the opposition failed to propose a charismatic leader, who would be able to lead people towards democratization in the country. The election of 2006 did not comply with the rule of 'unpopular incumbent ó strong opposition' because of the high popularity of Alexander Lukashenka, largely contributed to his ability to revive the economy. The only contributive factor that was present during the 2010 election was relatively unpopular incumbent. However, in the course of all three elections, it is evident that Russian factor was the most influential and led to the consolidation of autocracy in the state. While alone, factors like western donor support, youth movement, and strong opposition have no enough capacity to produce the regime change; whereas together these factors, fully operating, are capable to overbalance negative Russian factor and further

undermine Lukashenka popularity in the country. State repressive capacity is another limiting factor for contributing variables to operate at the full scale. Fear to be persecuted alienates people from open confrontation with the government.

Although the relationship between Russia and Belarus was not always smooth, Alexander Lukashenka had been able to achieve Moscow's loyalty before each election. Therefore, Russia was interested in him being a president of Belarus as much as Lukashenka was interested in the support from Moscow. Events preceded the 2010 election made it obvious. Although Russian government had never intervened into the internal affairs (helping suppress rebellious opposition, for example), Russian government helped economically and diplomatically maintain Lukashenka autocratic regime. On his side, Lukashenka understood that in terms of economic crisis, Belarusian economy would never be able to survive without the Russian economic support and cheap oil prices. Economic collapse would bring Lukashenka's presidential career to the end. It can be concluded that external factor of relationship with autocratic regional hegemon undermined the democratization of the country in spite of the multiple measures implemented by international democratic community. Therefore, only full scale cooperation between democratic western powers, European Union and the United States, and Moscow, along with further liberalization of Russia will be able to bring down autocratic regime in Belarus.

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