

PREEMPTING DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF BELARUS

Vitali Silitski

Vitali Silitski is a 2004–2005 Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy. In 2003, he was forced to leave his position as associate professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk after publicly criticizing Belarus's government.

In 2001, ten years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the prospects for democracy in its successor states (outside the Baltic) seemed increasingly bleak. Even countries that had begun their independence from the USSR in relatively promising fashion seemed to be sliding back toward autocracy. But then things suddenly seemed to change. A series of dramatic events—Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution, Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, and the Tulip Revolution that ousted Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev following rigged February 2005 parliamentary elections—created a very different set of expectations. Many thought that this new wave of change would spread democratic impulses throughout the region, leading to the ouster of autocrats in other countries.

In reaction to the events in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, politics is indeed changing in postcommunist Eurasia—but in many places it is changing for the worse. Several of the region's surviving autocracies have tightened the reins: Kazakhstan recently outlawed its major opposition party; Tajikistan introduced new regulations restricting contact between foreign diplomats and local civil society groups; Azerbaijan's opposition groups and independent press face a new round of attacks in advance of the November 2005 parliamentary elections; in Uzbekistan, a May 2005 rebellion against President Islam Karimov was violently suppressed; and Russian president Vladimir Putin recently announced an upcoming ban on civil society assistance from abroad and implemented an electoral reform that makes it impossible for parties independent of the presidential administration to win representation in parliament.

Although not all of these actions are directly related to the aforemen-

tioned revolutions, they demonstrate how far authoritarian incumbents are willing to go to protect their power. Veteran leaders of former Soviet republics have openly vowed to avert democratic revolutions in their own countries. They directly attribute the downfall of their Georgian, Ukrainian, and Kyrgyz counterparts not only to activities orchestrated by the international democracy-promotion community, but also to the inherent weaknesses of unconsolidated authoritarian regimes. As many surviving autocratic leaders see it, the great mistake of their fallen colleagues was to tolerate social and even political pluralism, believing that it would furnish them with a respectable democratic façade without endangering the stability of their regimes. The lesson drawn by the autocratic survivors is simple: They must step up repression.

In the post-Soviet countries that have recently experienced democratic breakthroughs, incumbents did try to crack down on political rights and civil liberties, but they were unable to foreclose change. For opposition political and social forces, which had developed earlier in the relatively liberal environment of competitive authoritarianism,¹ were able to withstand the pressure. In contrast, hard-line authoritarian regimes ensure their continued stability and survival not just by sporadic reactions to already existing political and social challenges, but by *preemptive* attacks that eliminate threats before they arise.

Preemption 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.

Although these actions may destroy the regime's democratic image abroad, the public at home may still perceive its leaders to be duly, if not fully democratically, elected. By uprooting political and social alternatives well before they develop into threats, incumbents can win elections long before the start of the campaign. And the validity of their victory is less likely to be contested when the strongest challengers have already been denied entry into the race by disqualification or other more nefarious means. Preemption has an enormous psychological impact on both the political and social opposition; such systematized repression instills in them a sense of hopelessness and imposes the perception that political change is far beyond reach.

Perfecting the Policy of Preemption

One Eurasian country in particular has brought the policy of preemption to perfection—Belarus. 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 "national identity that can be framed in anti-incumbent terms"² severely disadvantages the nationally minded opposition.

Nevertheless, Belarusians do not seem to lag too far 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.³ Lukashenka's approval ratings rarely exceed 45 percent, which is approximately equal to the share of votes that Ukrainian autocrat Leonid Kuchma's handpicked successor Viktor Yanukovich received in the "clean" presidential runoff in December 2004. And Belarusian national identity has gradually strengthened over the past 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 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 that he used to promote his stature among potential voters in advance of the 1994 presidential election. Capitalizing on public outrage during a period of severe 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.

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.⁴ Although Lukashenka 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 learned 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. The 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.

Lukashenka quickly compensated for his deficit of leverage and experience by establishing personal control over most state institutions. For instance, he abolished the autonomy of local governments by having heads of regional administrations appointed by the president. When the opposition attempted to accuse Lukashenka of corruption in December 1994, he responded by introducing censorship in the mass media. The country's most lucrative assets were transferred into the direct control of the presidential administration, while law-enforcement and audit agencies attacked and eventually destroyed private companies that financially supported the opposition.

Decapitating the Opposition

By early 1995, Lukashenka had established personal control over the entire state administration, the economy, and the media; only the Supreme Council (the Belarusian parliament) and the Constitutional Court remained independent. Well in advance of the May 1995 parliamentary elections, he imposed an "information blockade" on the activities of the opposition, and later he also imposed restrictions on campaign spending and coverage of the elections in the media. State propaganda during the election campaign depicted the opposition as descendants of World War II Nazi collaborators. Lukashenka further undermined the opposition by combining the May 1995 parliamentary balloting with his first referendum, which included proposals for making Russian an official language and for replacing postindependence

national symbols with Soviet-era ones—issues that mobilized voters who felt nostalgic about communist rule.

As expected, the referendum proposals passed easily, and not a single BPF candidate won a seat in parliament. The majority of seats went to the communist and agrarian parties, with two smaller opposition factions—liberals and social democrats—gaining control of one-fifth of the seats. 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 the growing independence of the parliament and the Constitutional Court 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 four to seven 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.⁵ 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.

Whereas few allegations of irregularities had accompanied the 1995 referendum and parliamentary election, the 1996 referendum was marked by gross abuse. Independent election observers recorded more than two thousand violations nationwide, but this sparked little public protest. Among the abuses was an early-voting procedure, inaccessible to observers, that forced one-third of all eligible voters to cast their ballots in the two weeks preceding the day of the referendum—before many of them had even received the text of the proposed constitution. Moreover, the president ordered state bodies to disregard a Constitutional Court ruling that the referendum was nonbinding. When the manipulations began to be unearthed, Lukashenka responded by illegitimately firing the head of the CEC, Viktor Hanchar, appointed in 1996 by the Supreme Council.

The official tally eventually reported that 70 percent of the electorate had voted in favor of Lukashenka's amended constitution. Independent postelection polls discovered signs of vote-rigging, but also suggested that cheating had actually changed the results by only a few percentage points.⁶ Three days after the November 24 vote, the Supreme Council was shut down, and the new legislature—made up of hand-picked

Lukashenka supporters—began sitting. The referendum's only negative effect for the government was that the newly appointed House of Representatives 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. Nevertheless, for another five or six years there existed considerable space for independent social activity, civil society groups, an independent press, and even political-party activities. While civil society grew markedly in the late 1990s, however, the political opposition remained in a state of confusion. It had a hard time agreeing on a political strategy, as the regime's firm grip on electoral politics offered little room for meaningful competition. The opposition also lacked the kind of strong leadership that might have been able to unite the disparate parties and NGO groups in an effort to present the public with a credible alternative to Lukashenka.

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 forcibly break a Minsk transit strike. 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 CEC chairman Viktor Hanchar disappeared together with his financial backer.⁷

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 popularity among democratic activists.⁸ By the time of his disappearance, he was emerging as a key figure in the opposition, but was still far from becoming its undisputed leader. 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 advisor Viktor Sheiman.⁹ An alleged commander of the unit was arrested in November 2000 in connection with the disappearances, but Lukashenka ordered him released from 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.

Learning from Milošević's Downfall

As the September 2001 presidential elections approached, Lukashenka was in complete control of the state bureaucracy, the security apparatus, and the electoral process itself. Moreover, he remained popular among the core of his 1994 electorate, and his overall approval ratings vacillated between 33 and 41 percent—far above the support for all opposition candidates combined. Polls showed that three-quarters of the electorate were confident that Lukashenka would win reelection. The opposition was in disarray, suffering from a leadership deficit following the disappearances of its most important players.

In 1999, the opposition (with OSCE mediation) had attempted to negotiate with the government for a liberalization of the electoral law, but that effort had failed. The new electoral law enacted in 2000 contained no guarantees for opposition presence on the CEC, severely restricted the work of election observers, and failed to provide all candidates with equal campaign opportunities. The October 2000 balloting for the House of Representatives weakened the opposition even further, as a deep split emerged between those who boycotted the elections and those who chose to run against the odds.

Lukashenka, however, took nothing for granted. The October 2000 overthrow of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević proved to Lukashenka that even a semblance of competitive elections can be a threat to an authoritarian regime. Although his policy of preemption 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, vowing to punish any opposition inside the regime, and he publicly hinted at suspicions about his chief of staff and the prime minister. Shortly after the voting, both officials were sacked, and several members of the regime who had attempted to run against Lukashenka found themselves behind bars.

During the election campaign, the Belarusian official media were mobilized to discredit the Serbian revolution, portraying it as an opposition attempt to steal the election. The authorities also banned exit polls, dismissing them as an unscientific method of verifying election results. The early-voting mechanism launched in 1996 was used again, this time accounting for 17 percent of all votes. More than two thousand election observers were denied accreditation only days before the elec-

tion—usually on the pretext that they represented organizations which had no right to observe the elections—while those who were allowed to monitor polling stations had to face the harsh reality of organized abuse. The election commission included no members of the opposition, so the vote count was in effect entirely in the hands of the regime. As a rule, the vote counters would be seated with their backs turned to the observers, who in turn were required to keep a distance of several meters from the table where vote was tallied.¹⁰ Monitors were limited to simply recording violations, as the election law contained no adequate provisions for fair balloting.

In a final move to hamper the efforts of observers and opposition groups, the regime disabled the mobile-phone network and cut access to opposition Web sites during the critical hours from when the polls closed until Lukashenka declared victory.

Lukashenka's determination to prevent an electoral revolution was countered by the opposition's own effort to imitate the Serbian scenario. Thus, the opposition managed to achieve some level of agreement before the vote, putting forward one single candidate—Uladzimir Hancharyk, the head of the Soviet-era Federation of Trade Unions. The choice was an obvious attempt to find a "Belarusian Koštunica," a centrist who would attract support beyond the opposition base. But a centrist stance proved insufficient to attract popular support for a highly uncharismatic and somewhat indecisive candidate. Hancharyk also roused no more than lukewarm enthusiasm among rank-and-file opposition members, many of whom favored another contender—Siamion Domash, the former governor of Hrodna province. The opposition's voter-mobilization efforts, modeled on those of Serbia's Otpor movement and the "rock the vote" campaign in Slovakia in 1998, failed to rally voters around Hancharyk's centrist agenda.

The official results gave Lukashenka 75 percent of the votes cast against Hancharyk's 15 percent. The opposition cried foul, claiming that if the vote had been counted fairly, Lukashenka would have failed to win a majority and a runoff would have been required. Nevertheless, efforts to protest the vote-rigging attracted only a few thousand protesters and fizzled out in two days. A few weeks later, independent polls showed that Lukashenka's vote share was indeed grossly inflated, but that he would have prevailed even in a clean election.¹¹ The polls also showed that only 21 percent of the public believed that the election had been rigged to an extent that affected its outcome, and 40 percent thought that the opposition's allegations of vote-rigging were fabricated.¹²

Tightening Control over Society

Lukashenka's reelection was enormously 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. Some oppositionists began to doubt whether the autocratic regime could ever be challenged in a peaceful way. 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's long-term political survival was not assured. Following reelection, his popularity slumped dramatically, apparently due to his failure to deliver immediately on his generous campaign promises. An April 2003 poll showed that only 26 percent intended to vote for Lukashenka in the next presidential balloting, and 63 percent thought that the country needed a new president.¹³ Moreover, when pushing through the 1996 amended constitution, Lukashenka had been careless enough to include a clause that forbade him from running for reelection once his second term expired in September 2006. The clause could only be changed by referendum, but in 2002–2003 not a single independent poll found more than 35 percent of the electorate supporting the removal of the term limit, while opposition to its removal hovered around 50 percent.¹⁴

Once again, however, Lukashenka stood up to the challenge. In 2003–2004, he partially restored his approval ratings by authorizing a massive increase in public-sector wages. He also took new steps to weaken the political and social opposition. 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. In 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 then 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 halved, which means that he will be released shortly after the 2006 balloting.

Lukashenka also took on one area where his control remained relatively lax—social pluralism. Although Belarusian civil society was still in an embryonic state, it had become clear during the 2001 election that it was gradually expanding and becoming capable of launching nationwide campaigns. The regime reacted by forcing almost one hundred NGOs to close down or self-liquidate in 2003–2004.¹⁵ 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 be-

came practically impossible, and the media faced severe penalties for reporting on the work of deregistered NGOs.

The independent press was also effectively silenced. 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 homemade substitutes. This curtailment meant that the regime became the sole source of information for most of the population.

The regime also stepped up its control over the educational system. 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 deny strange elements access to campuses.”¹⁶ The regime also threatened to withdraw the advanced degrees of professors and teachers found guilty of “unworthy behavior,” such as participation in opposition rallies. In 2003, the only Belarusian-language specialized high school in Minsk was closed down for teaching the “wrong” version of national history and allowing discussion of such subversive notions as democracy—which had led Lukashenka to condemn it as a “nest of opposition.” The culmination came in July 2004 with the shutting down of the European Humanities University, the only educational establishment in Belarus that provided Western-style higher education. Artistic expression also became punishable. Following a concert during a July 2004 opposition rally, all the participating musicians—among them some of the most popular Belarusian rock groups—were banned from the airwaves.

Finally, the cost of “disobedience” was drastically raised for the general public, and for state employees in particular. 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.

Arranging for Infinite Rule

With the end of his second term approaching, Lukashenka declared that another referendum would be held, in conjunction with the 17 October 2004 parliamentary elections, to determine whether he should be able to run for a third term. His announcement was timed to coincide with the official day of mourning for the victims of the Beslan massacre in Russia (September 7), and he exploited the tragedy by contrasting Belarus’s stability with Russia’s chaos. The tone of his “campaign for infinite rule” was set immediately: One man watching the live broadcast announcing the referendum on a big-screen TV in the center of Minsk was sentenced to ten days in prison for petty hooliganism just for

shouting “No!” Campaigning against the referendum, though formally legal, was obstructed by arrests, detentions, intimidation, and confiscation of leaflets.

Meanwhile, the official propaganda machine worked at full capacity. The major TV channels broadcast pro-Lukashenka messages several times an hour, while a series of documentaries portrayed opponents of the referendum as Nazis, terrorists, and “seeders of chaos.” But the propaganda campaign also showed a considerable degree of sophistication. Aware of the widespread sentiment against lifting the presidential term limit, the regime focused its campaign not on the actual content of the referendum but on such general issues as peace, security, stability, and the country’s economic well-being. Indeed, the pro-Lukashenka campaign was carried out under the slogan “Vote for Belarus,” personifying the country in the president.

The combination of pressure, slander, and sophisticated propaganda proved successful, and the government won the votes of a considerably larger share of the population than had been predicted. 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, the opposition disputed not merely the extent of Lukashenka’s victory, but its fact as such.¹⁷

There was plenty of evidence to support allegations of massive vote-rigging: Independent observers and opposition activists had unearthed stuffed ballot boxes, premarked ballots distributed to voters, and vote-count protocols that had been signed before election day.¹⁸ But Belarusian society at large remained uninformed about these electoral abuses and alternative results, so there was no large-scale resistance against the fraud. Street protests drew no more than five thousand demonstrators on the day of the vote, and they were brutally dispersed. A postreferendum survey found 48 percent of respondents agreeing that the referendum had been conducted in a free and fair manner, with only 35 percent disagreeing.¹⁹ Most importantly, the overall perception that Lukashenka would win any ballot remained unchallenged.

The concurrent parliamentary election was similarly marred by abuse, harassment, and fraud. Almost half the opposition candidates were denied registration or were disqualified during the campaign. According to the official CEC tally, progovernment candidates won in 108 out of 110 constituencies in the first round, whereas not a single opposition candidate won a seat. Yet it appeared that the opposition would have done relatively well in a free and fair ballot: According to the Gallup exit poll, 32 percent of respondents had voted for democratic candidates. Since the opposition fielded candidates in only 75 out of 110 constituencies, its support could have been as high as 40 percent—an

excellent result considering the crackdown on independent opinion during the campaign.²⁰ While many voters supported the opposition at the ballot box, however, they had no intention of defending their opinions on the streets.

Countering the Orange Revolution

Ukraine's Orange Revolution unfolded only five weeks after the constitutional referendum in Belarus. While the revolt was a wake-up call to many post-Soviet authoritarian leaders, to Lukashenka it only served to vindicate his decade-long policy of preemption. Once again, Lukashenka showed no complacency. He immediately warned those in his inner circle that "modern political techniques and a weakly managed country are pregnant with serious consequences" and he vowed resistance against any attempt to copy the Ukrainian scenario—what he referred to as "acts of banditry"—in Belarus.²¹

The legal space in which the opposition parties in Belarus can operate is steadily shrinking. New housing regulations have given the regime a pretext for closing down local branches of the leading opposition parties registered at residential apartments. Opposition and civil society groups are no longer allowed to rent state-owned property, so many party conferences and NGO meetings take place in restaurants, Western embassies, private apartments, and even forests. The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, which administered exit polls and postelection surveys, has been forced to relocate to Lithuania.

In the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, and in preparation for the July 2006 presidential election, Lukashenka has taken new preemptive measures, removing more opposition figures from the political scene. Mikalaj Statkievich, chairman of the Social Democratic Party, and Paval Seviarynec, leader of the Young Front movement, were both sentenced to two years of forced labor for organizing antireferendum protests in October 2004. Since both had long records of organizing street rallies, their indictments may have been a disguised attempt to forestall street protests following the 2006 election. Moreover, 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.

In the past year, Lukashenka has also reinforced his security agencies and purged their ranks of potential dissenters. KGB chief Leanid Eryn was first suspended and then fired for meeting with opposition protesters who picketed KGB headquarters following the referendum. The security forces have received an implicit order to fight the opposition, and the rules for opening fire in peacetime have been amended to allow the use of firearms not only in cases enumerated in the law, but also "in other cases determined by the president."²² Meanwhile, Pros-

ecutor-General Viktor Sheiman has been appointed head of the presidential administration, which may signify Lukashenka's desire to ensure that nothing similar to the Orange Revolution occurs in Belarus. Since assuming his new office, Sheiman has stated that his goal is to "consolidate the power systems, unify the command structure, and avoid situations such as those that had occurred south of the border."²³

Lukashenka's repressive tactics are not untypical for an authoritarian regime. What *is* remarkable is how, in spite of the scale, intensity, and visibility of the repression, he manages to retain the image of a duly elected leader. The mechanism of validating his rule through tightly controlled elections violates any serious democratic criteria and cannot fool the opposition or the international community; yet so far it has worked only to enhance the dictator's domestic legitimacy. His preemptive attacks have prevented the rise of a credible and visible democratic alternative, and his tight hold on the media has successfully kept most of the public in the dark—either unaware of the massive abuses, or convinced that the regime would win even a clean election. This is one of the main reasons why, despite some sizeable opposition protests over the last decade, postelection nights have always been quiet and subdued.

Preemption serves as an instrument of maintaining both the stability of authoritarian rule and Lukashenka's image as a popularly elected leader. At the time of the 1996 referendum, when unchecked presidential rule was formalized, Lukashenka was highly popular, and he was doubtless capable of defeating the opposition in a fair confrontation. Lukashenka's policy of preemption changed the rules and laid the groundwork for infinite rule long before the autocrat became unpopular.

A similar pattern of preemption can now be discerned in Russia. Although Vladimir 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, Putin 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. This trend casts serious doubt on Putin's commitment to maintaining the remaining elements of Russia's democratic façade. Indeed, his preemptive policies in the past few years may indicate that he intends to follow Lukashenka's path and continue his tenure beyond the expiration of his second term in 2008.

As for Belarus, it appears that the cycle of pointless voting exercises and preemptive strikes against potential political threats will be hard to break. Repression has now reached a level that would make a Ukrainian-style electoral revolution in Belarus almost impossible. As long as Lukashenka can maintain the popular perception that he is invincible at the polls, he will be able to keep the preconditions for a democratic revolution from developing. Belarus may one day follow the path toward democracy, but it is very unlikely that it will be via a Ukraine-style electoral revolution.

NOTES

1. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 51–65.

2. Quote from Lucan A. Way "Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Political Liberalization in the Western Former Soviet Union, 1992–2004," forthcoming in *World Politics*.

3. 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.

4. 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).

5. 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 entirely populist: Voters were asked to reject the abolition of the death penalty and to disallow private ownership of land. The last question aimed at a further destruction of Belarusian nationalism: Lukashenka suggested shifting the celebration of independence day from July 27, the day that the declaration of sovereignty was adopted in 1990, 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.

6. Andrei Jekadumau, "Aficyinya vyniki referendumu 1996 hody i dadzenya sacyalahichnyh dasledvanniau" (Official results of the 1996 referendum and sociological survey data) in *Belaruskaya palitychnaya systema i prezydenckiya vybary 2001* (The Belarusian political system and the 2001 presidential election) (Warsaw: IDEE, 2001), 65.

7. This was not the only loss by the opposition in 1999. Henadz Karpenka, deputy leader of the United Civil Party, died on April 8 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.

8. 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. One candidate was in exile (BPF leader Zianon Pazniak) and the other was in prison on corruption charges (former prime minister Mikhail Chyhir). Hanchar declared that 53 percent of the electorate took part in the vote, whereas independent opinion polls discovered that only 5 percent did so.

9. According to media reports, 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 1998.

10. "Republic of Belarus Presidential Election," final report of the OSCE/ODIHR Limited Observation Mission, 9 September 2001, 23–24. Available at www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2001/10/1237_en.pdf.

11. Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies polls gave Lukashenka 48 percent of the total electorate, with 27 percent for Hancharyk. With 83 percent turnout recorded in the election, this would have translated into 56 percent and 32 percent, respectively. See "25% Rigged," *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* (Minsk), 12 November 2001.

12. IISEPS poll conducted in October 2001, available at www.nisepi.by/pres1.html.

13. Vitali Silitski, "Belarus: The Fall of the Patriarch?" *RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report* 5, 20 May 2003. Available online at www.rferl.org.

14. "Majority of Belarusians Are Against Changes in Constitution," Charter '97 News Service, 9 September 2004. Available at www.charter97.org.

15. Alexander Dautin, "Kniga ne dla Shirokogo Chtenia" (A book not to be widely read), *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 14 September 2004.

16. "Shutki v Storony" (No jokes), *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 19 April 2004.

17. Don Hill, "Belarus: Election Officials Say Voters Back Lukashenka," *RFE/RL*, 18 October 2004. Available at www.rferl.org.

18. On presigned protocols, see www.charter97.org/bel/news/2004/10/14/elections; on stuffed ballot boxes, see www.oscepa.org/index.aspx?articleid=+367+367&newsid=255; on premarked ballot papers, see www.charter97.org/bel/news/2004/10/17/lebedka.

19. Vitali Silitski, "They Knew Too Much: Leading Independent Think-tank Faces Attack," *RFE/RL Belarus and Ukraine Report* 6, 29 December 2004. Available at www.rferl.org.

20. "Exit Poll and Election Success," International Republican Institute external memo, 19 October 2004.

21. Jan Maksymiuk, "Lukashenka Plans 'No Democratic Change' for Belarus," *RFE/RL Belarus and Ukraine Report* 7, 25 April 2005. Available at www.rferl.org.

22. "Vnutrenniye voiska vpolnyat lyuboy prikaz tirana" (Interior troops will fulfill any tyrant's order), Charter '97 News Service, 1 February 2005. Available online at www.charter97.org.

23. David Marples, "Belarus: The Return of Sheiman," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 1, 8 December 2004.