

The Semi-Sovereign State: Belarus and the Russian Neo-Empire

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States sometimes sacrifice sovereignty to other states. What can account for this seemingly irrational behavior? In analyzing Belarus' membership in the Russia neo-empire, I find that four factors explain President Aleksandyr Lukashenka's decision to sacrifice some sovereignty to Russia. The first and previously most ignored variable is the degree of relation-specific assets (RSAs), most notably fuel pipelines. While Russian President Vladimir Putin has attempted to ruthlessly force Lukashenka into acquiescing control over Belarus' pipelines, Lukashenka has held firm, using an aggressive attacking campaign against Putin. This article uses process-tracing to demonstrate how a weak state's leader can use RSAs to his advantage. In addition to the critical and underappreciated role of RSAs, weak nationalism and democratic norms, and Russia's own strong interest in an economic hierarchy play an important role in explaining the current relationship between the two states. By using a rationalist analysis that incorporates norms as independent variables, I join several recent works that integrate rationalist and constructivist approaches.

Belarusian President Aleksandyr Lukashenka has placed his state firmly in a Russian neo-empire. Nationalism, or rather the lack of it, is thought to account for this policy that contradicts the assumption that states strive for full sovereignty. While the phenomenon and study of nationalism is nothing new (Hobsbawm 1990; Brubaker 1992, 1996, 2004),¹ scholars have found the former Soviet region a particularly lucrative mine for analyzing levels and types of nationalism (Khazanov 1995; Laitin 1998; Abdelal 2001; Barrington 2003; Tuminez 2003; Edgar 2004). In these studies, Belarusians are considered distinctively lacking in nationalistic sentiments (Zaprudnik and Urban 1997; Marples 1999; Abdelal 2001; Leshchenko 2004). Indeed, one of the foremost scholars on the state subtitled his book "the denationalized nation" (Marples 1999).

While nationalism may play a critical role in a state leader's decision to forsake some sovereignty, the extant literature tends to suggest that this variable alone accounts for the outcome. In this article, I argue that nationalism only partially accounts for the Belarusian policy of ceding some sovereignty to Russia. In addition to weak nationalism, three other critical factors explain the outcome: relation-

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¹ Hobsbawm (1990) traces it to the late 1700s.

specific assets (RSAs), weak democratic norms, and strong Russian interest in hierarchical relations. Here, I primarily elaborate on the role of RSAs, as scholars have mostly ignored this variable. All factors in combination fully explain Lukashenka's policy toward Russia.

I begin by using basic rationalist assumptions. Contrary to what some critics have argued, rationalist approaches do not demand that all actors have the same preferences.² Analysts must only assume that individual leaders act within a preidentified preference set. Focusing on where a person works and how that shapes his or her particular preferences allows analysts to group individuals into relatively broad categories. Political leaders, as a group, share certain preferences that can be generalized, regardless of culture and geography. Politicians generally have in common robust egos (and perhaps weak superegos), a strong sense of purpose, and a willingness to fight for power. Using these characteristics, we can deduce certain preferences for political leaders, as distinct from the mass of human beings.

Political leaders desire first and foremost to remain in office, and once there, to implement their policy preferences. The office-seeking goal is a widely used and well-supported assumption in comparative politics; it holds particularly well for states in transition where departing political leaders may end up in prison, fleeing the country, or worse.³ Political leaders share a second preference: once in office, a state leader strives to enact his or her policy preferences in both the domestic and international arenas. Thus, states will interact with other states to reap the gains from trade, but leaders will simultaneously attempt to reduce vulnerability to states with which they fear their policy preferences will diverge.

Finally, I assume limited rationality and fixed preferences. Actors intend to be rational, but have cognitive limitations and incomplete information about the situation in which they find themselves.⁴ This is analytically equivalent to saying that there is some degree of uncertainty. I further assume that "preferences are fixed and that changes in behavior are caused by changes in the situation and the information available to actors" (Morrow 1994:19). When presented with external clues or signals, the leaders update their beliefs about this connection. New information, such as public protests or an assassination attempt, may signal to the leader that his beliefs need updating. If this information is signaled to him in a timely and clear manner, the leader will adjust his strategy in order to retain his political support.

These preferences and assumptions apply to all political leaders and are thus consistent with general rationalist approaches. In the subsequent analysis, I elaborate on additional factors that must be evaluated for individual leaders. In addition to material structural factors, two variables involve norms, in the vein of constructivist arguments.

Constructivists focus on the nonmaterial variables of norms, identity, and culture (Ruggie 1983; Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986; Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; Tickner 1992, 2001; Wendt 1992, 1999; Finnemore 1996, 2003; Katzenstein 1996; Keck and Sikkink 1998). The constructivist research agenda has centered on explaining the genesis and evolution of preferences as they relate to these variables. For example, Keck and Sikkink (1998) evaluate how slavery and foot-binding, once accepted practices, came to be seen as inhumane acts. Once these preferences have been identified, a rationalist account can incorporate these variables into the explanation. "Constructivists seek to understand how preferences are formed and knowledge is generated, *prior to* the exercise of instrumental rationality" (Katzen-

² For some of the more prominent work on rational choice approaches, see Elster 1989, Friedman 1996, Green and Shapiro 1994, March and Simon 1958, and Shepsle and Bonchek 1997.

³ The former Soviet region is replete with former leaders surviving assassination attempts.

⁴ Although Williamson uses the term *bounded rationality* (Williamson 1985:47), the analytical purpose of the term is the same: to make clear that planning for all contingencies is not possible.

stein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998:681, emphasis added). Dessler and Owen's 2005 review of four constructivist books demonstrates anew the approach's central focus on how "people interpret actions and events in new, bold, and creative ways even when there is nothing in the logic of the situation that drives them to do so" (p. 598). However, rather than attempting to explain the genesis of norms, a constructivist project, I take as given certain beliefs among the Belarusian population and Lukashenka himself. The evidence below demonstrates that the beliefs I attribute to the actors are indeed the correct ones. In using beliefs as part of the explanation, I follow an increasing number of scholars integrating rationalist and constructivist components in order to provide a full explanation of outcomes (Fearon and Laitin 1996, 2000; Fearon and Wendt 2002; Jupille et al. 2003).

While some identity variables do matter, a common sense of being Slavic brothers does not appear to play a critical role in Lukashenka's choices. While this variable might at first seem plausible, Lukashenka and his Russian counterparts have acted much more like typical political leaders, vying for economic and political security, than leaders imbued with brotherly love. Similarly, the idea of Belarus as the little brother and the obedience it implies is belied by Lukashenka's tough approach. The section below—Pursuing Hierarchy over RSAs—demonstrates the way in which Lukashenka and Russia's leaders have sparred over the extent and type of hierarchy between them. Furthermore, an exclusive focus on a common ethnicity cannot explain the path of Ukraine—another Slavic state—in which its leaders have pursued a slow crawl toward Western policies while keeping Russia at arms-length.

Explanations focusing on domestic political players, including bureaucracies, legislatures, interest groups, media, and the general public, offer a contrasting approach to my focus on the President alone. Analyses centered on domestic politics assume that the assorted actors enact critical roles in the decision-making process and thus appreciably affect the outcome (e.g., Allison 1971; Halperin 1974; Gourevitch 1986; Hermann et al. 1987; Snyder 1991; Bendor and Hammond 1992; Holsti 1992; and Van Belle et al. 2004). While this assumption often holds true, particularly in democracies, the Belarusian President has significantly subordinated these players so that they are but bit actors. This is not to say that he reigns unfettered. Lukashenka's actions are constrained and enabled by other societal factors, such as nationalism and weak democratic norms. Nevertheless, the focus on a single actor works well in cases of authoritarian regimes such as that founded and maintained by Lukashenka.

Factors Affecting Lukashenka's Economic Strategies

Moving beyond general preferences and assumptions, four factors have pushed Lukashenka to pursue a limited hierarchy dominated by Russia: (1) RSAs that primarily leave Belarus vulnerable but also give Lukashenka some leverage in negotiating with Russia, (2) weak Belarusian nationalism that allows Lukashenka to pursue pragmatically the state or states with the most lucrative economic offer, (3) weak democratic norms that enable Lukashenka to engage in authoritarian rule and thus squelch opposition to his economic policies, and (4) strong Russian interests in an economic hierarchy.

RSAs Close Doors

RSAs play a critical, and often overlooked or undervalued, role in explaining relations in the former Soviet region. Unlike leaders in the other major former Soviet states in Europe—Ukraine and the Baltic states—Lukashenka governs a landlocked state that is additionally hampered by a high degree of RSAs with Russia. Economists define RSAs as durable investments made for particular transactions

and for which their value is significantly lower in best alternative uses, or by alternative users, should the original transaction be prematurely terminated (Williamson 1985:55). More succinctly, these are “durable transaction-specific sunk investments” (Joskow 1985:37). All aspects of the definition are critical. The investments must be durable, of significance, and the value of alternative uses must be substantially lower outside of the relationship.

Theorists working in the transaction cost economics tradition argue that RSAs explain the variety of relationships that form between two economic entities: a supplier and a purchaser. Two types of relationships can form: a hierarchical relationship in which one unit buys out the other, or a market-based relationship in which the units continue to buy and sell on the open market. When high levels of RSAs exist between the two entities, each is vulnerable to the other breaking off the relationship. Fearing that the other will act opportunistically, the purchaser tends to buy out the supplier, thus integrating into a firm. Once the purchaser consumes the supplier thus forming a single entity, this particular risk of opportunism evaporates.

As I elaborate below, in international relations, the logic of why two entities merge into one differs from that in a domestic market economy. Nevertheless, the explanatory value of RSAs along with the concept of varying relationships provides useful insights into understanding the emerging relationships between two states.

Instead of the variation being corporations or market-based relationships, state relationships vary broadly between empires and fully sovereign states. In between are levels of reduced sovereignty. In an empire, a larger state swallows a smaller entity in much the same way the purchaser buys out the supplier. Companies can also have less than full buy outs, as in the case of joint ventures. Similarly, a state may sacrifice only some decision making, or sovereignty, to another state while retaining its own personality and legal position in the international system.

Economists have identified three types of specific assets as having significant explanatory power: site, physical, and dedicated (Williamson 1993:17).⁵ Site-specific assets are those that are too heavy or large to move easily to a new location. Physically specific assets contain design characteristics specific to the transaction and have lower values in alternative uses. These assets are physically tailored for a certain project. Unlike site-specific assets, they might be easily transported to another location, but their next best use is of very low value. Dedicated assets involve substantial general-purpose investments that would not have been made if not for a particular relationship. If the exchange were discontinued, the investor would be faced with excess capacity.

Each RSA can be specific in one or more ways. For example, oil and gas pipelines and electricity grids all have three features: they are extremely heavy, making them site-specific assets; they contain specific design characteristics making alternative uses prohibitively expensive, a feature of physically specific assets; and states build them for a particular customer base and therefore assumed demand, qualifying them as dedicated assets.

Several significant RSAs can be found in the Belarus–Russia dyad. First, Belarus relies heavily on Russian fuel. In 2000, Belarus produced only 41,600 barrels per day of oil, a small percentage of what it requires to meet the demand of about 180,000 barrels per day. Russian oil makes up the short-fall. Belarus’ refineries also depend on Russian crude oil. Belarus’ two refineries—Naftan and Mazyr—have a combined capacity of 493,000 barrels per day, more than double of what Belarus consumes. Most exports go to Russia, providing important export earnings for Belarus. In natural gas, in 2001, Belarus produced only 10 billion cubic feet, hardly sufficient for the 598 billion cubic feet the state consumed. As with oil, Belarus closed the gap with Russian natural gas (U.S. Department of Energy 2004).

⁵ For further elaboration on RSAs, see Klein, Crawford, and Alchian 1978, Masten, Meehan, and Snyder 1991, Masten 1999, Shelanski and Klein 1988, and Joskow 1985.

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Second, Belarus counts on Russian fuel to fill its oil and gas pipelines that serve as conduits to Europe. The northern branch of Russia's Druzhba pipeline passes through Belarus, delivering crude oil to a Latvian Baltic seaport as well as to Germany and Poland. Germany relies more on Russian oil than any other foreign producer, with Russian exports accounting for about one-third of Germany's imported oil. Poland relies even more substantially on Russian oil, comprising about one-half of its imports. While the pipelines offer Belarus the opportunity of transit fees, they also further bind Belarus to Russia, given that Russia is the only exporter using the pipelines. Without Russian demand, the pipelines have no value. In other words, they are a dedicated RSA.

Third, Belarus' military-industrial complex intertwines with Russia's. During the Soviet period, the Belarusian economy was responsible for a significant portion of the military-industrial complex outside Russia. Belarus' primary military sectors

include electronics, trucks, computers, and computer-based command and control systems. Rather than manufacturing completed products, Belarus more often develops components that Russian factories assemble. Minsk also produces heavy-duty chassis for ballistic missile and air defense missile support equipment, including for the SS-25 nuclear ballistic missile and the SA-10 surface-to-air missile, both Russian-produced weapons systems (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1993:9). Belarus' military-industrial complex clearly depends on Russian weapons production. Again, without Russian demand, Belarus lacks a client interested and able to purchase its product.

The fourth RSA—geographic position—further constrains Lukashenka's strategic options. This highly durable "asset" only changes when states dramatically redraw borders, an outcome generally associated with high-cost wars. Theoretically, geography can either significantly constrain or expand a state leader's policy options. In Belarus' case, its proximity to Europe would seem to provide ample opportunities. Unlike the states in Central Asia, Belarus can claim a position at the European table. This propinquity could benefit Belarus in three ways: first, Belarusian industries could learn capitalistic principles from their neighbors; second, if it followed Western principles, Belarus could expect higher foreign direct investment and two-way trade activity; and third, other post-Soviet exporters using the trade corridors to European markets could consequently increase Belarus' wealth. As the subsequent discussion reveals, however, Lukashenka forfeited these potential benefits, instead preferring what he perceived to be more lucrative Russian benefits at less political risk.

With the European options tightly constrained, the negatives of Belarus' geographic position dominate. Specifically, Belarus lacks waterways that would connect it to other states and regions that might provide critical resources without demanding the market and democratic reforms upon which the Europeans insist. Contrast Belarus' position with Ukraine and the three Baltic states. Ukraine has pursued energy supplies from Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan as well as via oil tankers, through its access to the Black Sea. Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia all border the Baltic Sea, providing them with numerous alternative energy sources. With only the Russian-connected pipelines, Belarus' options remain limited.

These four RSAs signify the degree to which Belarus' economy relies on the Russian economy. Previous analyses of economic dependency within the former Soviet region often evaluated levels of trade, rather than RSAs.⁶ Using RSAs as the critical factor highlights the degree to which some assets cannot be changed and thus the true level of long-term dependency. Trade figures only capture the level of interaction, not the difficulty in breaking those interactions.

RSAs reveal that Belarus significantly depends on Russia, a dependence that carries a high cost should the relationship end. In turn, however, and less recognized, some of these RSAs leave Russia vulnerable to Belarus. Specifically, Belarus' geographic position along with the pipelines that traverse that geography make Belarus an important conduit for Russian fuels destined for Europe.

Given these vulnerabilities, how do RSAs determine the relationship that develops between two states? In other words, what does the variable predict and what is the causal mechanism that leads to the predicted outcome? Recall that transaction cost economists argue that high levels of RSAs result in vulnerability that then leads to a hierarchical firm. Fearful of the relationship breaking apart, one party buys out the other, thus internalizing the relationship. An equivalent in interstate relations would be an empire, or some lesser form of political hierarchy, such as a customs union governed by one state.

⁶ See Blacker and Rice (2001:237–238) for a critique of using high trade levels to explain Belarus' economic policies.

Despite the similarities, states and their leaders differ in critical ways from economic companies and their leaders. For our purposes, two critical differences apply. First, because such a move demonstrates a significant thrust in foreign policy, states will not merge with the same ease and rapidity that might occur in the case of two economic units. As such, the RSAs must be significant to the political stability of the leadership. Only the RSAs that I have elaborated above have critical explanatory power. An exhaustive list of all companies with RSAs is unnecessary. Second, the logic behind the causal mechanism for state relations differs from that for companies. Economists argue that high levels of RSAs lead to hierarchical firms, as the economic units feel threatened and fear that the other will act opportunistically. But states operate on many dimensions within several larger arenas, such as security, economics, social programs, and environmental issues. Political leaders may then find that RSAs in one area leave them vulnerable, while RSAs in another area leave their partner vulnerable. Taken together, the states may therefore be mutually vulnerable.

Mutual vulnerability allows a state to take hostages, threatening to harm the partner in one arena should it threaten harm in another arena. This hostage taking can occur between or within arenas. For example, if Russian President Vladimir Putin threatens to cut off cheap energy to Belarus, Lukashenka can threaten to stop fuel from flowing through Belarus' pipelines, or to raise transit fees dramatically. In determining the type of relationship that will emerge, analysts need to consider whether there is vulnerability on only one side, or on both. When both sides are vulnerable, we would expect to see an autonomous relationship, all things being equal. The larger state will not be able to force hierarchy if the weak state can use its power to push back. However, if the strongest state—Russia in this case—is not vulnerable, we would expect a hierarchy to emerge, as is occurring with Belarus. This happens because Russia can use its dominance to force Belarus into surrendering some sovereignty.

Weak Nationalism Opens Doors

While RSAs play a critical role in explaining Lukashenka's surrender of some sovereignty to Russia, they alone cannot account for the relationship. A relatively weak level of nationalism among the Belarusian population plays the second critical role.⁷

In the elections that brought Lukashenka to the presidency, the Belarusian citizens unmistakably rejected the one strongly nationalistic party: the Belarusian People's Front. During the Soviet period, Belarus was hardly considered a hotbed of opposition. However, shortly before the Soviet collapse, Belarusians formed a major opposition movement in 1988. Two tragic events led to the movement's birth. First, Belarusians were the primary victims of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident. Because of the direction of the prevailing winds that day, Belarus was more severely hit by radiation than Ukraine, where the reactor was based, or neighboring Russia. The Soviet government maintained a long and dangerous silence and then only slowly and weakly responded to the crisis, leaving many Belarusian bitterly angry. Two years later, in the Kurapaty Forest, Belarusian archeologists discovered about 500 mass graves filled with 250,000 of Stalin's victims. Although two members of a panel that investigated the graves argued that German, not Soviet, forces slayed the victims, evidence indicting the Soviets sufficiently persuaded and angered a group of Belarusians into forming a new organization dubbed the "Martyrology of Belarus." The group's mission was to investigate and publicize crimes carried out in Belarus during Stalin's reign. At their founding

⁷ Although this variable has been widely discussed in the literature, Abdalal (2001) has most carefully articulated the variable and its causal power in explaining economic relations with Russia.

meeting, the group also created the Belarusian People's Front. Founders chose the archeologist who unearthed the graves, Zyanon Paznyak, to lead the new party.⁸

When the state held its first presidential elections, Paznyak was one of the few serious contenders in a pack of 19 candidates. At that time, Lukashenka managed a somewhat obscure government-sponsored anticorruption commission. Other major contenders included the secretary of the Party of Communists of Belarus, the chairman of the Agrarian Union, the prime minister who strongly advocated a Russian–Belarusian federation, and the former leader of the Parliament, Stanislau Shushkevich. Like Paznyak, Shushkevich represented a clear change from the past. He advocated market reforms, continued close economic relations with Russia, and foreign policy neutrality. He was closely associated with the newly formed Belarusian identity, having presided over the Parliament when Belarus adopted its new name and flag and declared its independence (Zaprudnik and Urban 1997:295; Marples 1999:63).

To the surprise of nearly all observers, Lukashenka won an impressive 45% of the vote. In a run-off election, he won 80% of the vote, trouncing the former prime minister. Combined, the two reform candidates—Paznyak and Shushkevich—earned a paltry 23% of the vote. Their resounding defeat suggested a clear Belarusian preference for an assertive pro-Russian foreign policy, little if any market reform, and little interest in Belarusian nationalism (Fedor 1995; Marples 1999:60–61, 69–71). In any case, this is how many interpreted the election.

I argue, however, that the election should be read differently. Lukashenka was most closely associated with his anticorruption campaign, not with a pro-Russian or anti-Western stance. Belarusians were fed up with governmental corruption and lies, which they associated with the Communist regime, and supported the candidate who seemed most likely to address that concern, as well as advocating close economic relations with Russia. In his published campaign platform, Lukashenka argued that “corruption has paralyzed power.” After improving the economy, he vowed to undertake and win a “struggle with corruption and defeat of mafia structures ruling the state.” He further contended that “corruption is a threat to the economic and political security of our state. It means the complete decay of the state administration and absolute loss of control over the state economic sector. This is an obstacle on the road to a law-governed, social and democratic state and the efficient development of production” (Narodnaya Gazeta, June 14, 1994).

Once elected, Lukashenka advocated economic reform, not a return to the Soviet economy. He pledged to run a sharply disciplined regime, to turn away from a command economy, to protect private property, and to collaborate with the IMF (Zaprudnik and Urban 1997:300). His ministerial choices connoted a similar path. He retained the pro-reform National Bank chairman, Stanislau Bahdankevich. The chairman had earlier stated, “While I’m sitting in this seat, there will be no unification of the monetary systems along the lines proposed by Moscow. . . I shall never agree to put the assets of the National Bank at the disposal of another state.” He opposed the idea that “the vital elements of economic policy (taxes, budget, credits) should be determined by an alien, if friendly, state or that there should be a single budget, as there is no single parliament. . . Who will endorse such a budget? There are no representatives of Belarus in the Russian Duma” (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, July 16, 1994). Lukashenka also appointed a prime minister with few ties to the Communist hierarchy (Mikhail Chyhir) as well as a foreign minister known for his pro-Western views (Uladzimir Senka) (Marples 1999:70–72).

Lukashenka’s career path and public proclamations before the election and his immediate post-election appointments were neither strongly pro-Russian nor

⁸ For an extensive account of the graves found in Belarus and the controversy over the evidence, see Marples (1999:54–58). Fedor (1995) and Zaprudnik and Urban (1997:287–288) also discuss the findings, although in less detail.

opposed to Belarusian nationalism. One can conclude, then, that Belarusians were not so much rejecting Belarusian independence and embracing Russia, as supporting a candidate they believed would restore the economy and oust corrupt officials. If Belarusians truly wanted to return to the Soviet period, they would have elected one of the candidates that represented that era, either the Communist Party leader, the chairman of the Agrarian Union, or the former prime minister, all of whom had stronger connections to the prior regime and who would most likely have advocated even tighter relations with Russia than Lukashenka has. This lack of strong convictions on the part of Belarusian citizens enabled Lukashenka to determine where he could make the greatest economic gains for the state while, consistent with his assumed preferences, sacrificing the least personal and state sovereignty.

Weak Democratic Norms Clear the Way to Authoritarian Rule

The third critical variable relates to the type of governmental rule, specifically whether the population and its leaders carry in their hearts and heads established norms for governmental rule, or whether these norms are in flux. Western leaders and scholars sometimes refer to the former Communist states as “transitioning states,” with an implied assumption that these states will naturally transition into democracies (with capitalistic markets, not incidentally). But as the Central Asian states and Belarus have demonstrated, many options exist on the continuum from one-party rule to democracy. Without a dominant coalition demanding that the state move in one direction or the other and lacking a strong normative preference, political leaders can select the institutions that best serve their instrumental individual preferences.

The Belarusians, like citizens in many other newly independent states in the former Soviet region, had no experience with democracy. Unlike the Baltic states in the interwar period, Belarusians had never been independent or lived by democratic rules. Without long-standing norms favoring democracy, as in the United States, or an imposed democracy after war, as in Japan and Germany, Belarusian citizens appeared at least agnostic about the benefits of democracy. Mostly, they focused on a desire to improve their economic lives. Whatever form of government would best supply that security would be their government of choice. The strongest indicator of Belarusian apathy on this point was the poor showing of those political parties that emphasized democracy and other Western institutions.

Without democratic norms to guide Lukashenka, he was left to select his own methods of maintaining office. He had the choice of pursuing an authoritarian regime if that appeared the most economically fruitful, or supporting more democratic principles when those suited him. Without personal predilections or unified pressure for a pro-Western stance, the president did not need to concern himself with pursuing the risky goal of democracy. Furthermore, Russia offered to Lukashenka the option of economic benefits without having to meet the transparency requirements of the World Bank and the IMF or the democratic principles of the European Union (EU) and other Western states and institutions.

Left to select his own governmental system, Lukashenka chose authoritarianism. Within his first 100 days in office, Lukashenka threatened to remove and arrest officials who opposed his policies, including the prime minister and National Bank chairman; vowed to take personal control of the KGB; chastised the media for not being more positive in their coverage of his policies; hinted at eliminating the parliament altogether, calling the body “obstructive” and “dishonest”; and replaced most of the major newspapers’ editors (Marples 1999:72–73). In the Freedom House’s ratings on political and civil rights and press freedoms, Belarus went from a rating of “partly free” to “not free” (2004). In 1996, Lukashenka illegally dissolved the parliament and granted himself another presidential term. In 2001, he won a tainted election in which the government stripped official observers of their

credentials, cutoff internet access to sites run by critics, and arrested opponents (Wines 2001).⁹ Finally, in 2004, Lukashenka used the elections to hold a “flawed referendum allowing him to run without limitations in future presidential elections” (European Union 2005). According to the U.S. State Department, “The country is now run by an authoritarian regime with both the legislative and judicial branches subordinated to the President” (U. S. Department of State 2003).

Having embraced the authoritarian approach to political security, Lukashenka had to ally Belarus with an economic partner willing to ignore or at least downplay his dictatorship. The lack of democratic norms and Lukashenka’s reading of his citizenry suggested Russia as the likely first choice partner.

Russian Desires for Hierarchy Seal Belarus’ Fate

As the leader of the Russian Republic during the waning days of the Soviet Union and then as President of the new Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin espoused a strongly pro-Western approach that came to be called Atlanticist (Dunlop 1997) or internationalist (Aron 1998). According to this view, Russian policy should focus beyond the former Soviet borders and toward “solidarity with the U.S.-led ‘civilized world’” (Aron 1998:24). *Jane’s Intelligence Review* gushed that in Russia “a pro-Western orientation is enjoying a consensus, even among the more conservative part of the military bureaucracy” (August 1, 1992).

This period of unabashed pro-Western rhetoric ended swiftly, in large part because the West was unable or unwilling to cure Russia’s ailing economy. The Russian population and many of its leaders became disenchanted with the West and Yeltsin’s pro-Western policies (Åslund 1995:218; Richter 1996:85; Rubenstein 1997:37–38).

Just as the Russian economy collapsed under the dramatic and swift market reforms, the former Soviet region began unraveling at the seams. Civil wars broke out, or deepened, in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan. The three Baltic states adopted discriminatory policies against Russian nationals, and Ukraine refused to submit to Russian pressure in several important policy areas.

With the West off its pedestal, neighboring states in turmoil, Russian nationals under attack, and the parliament threatening Yeltsin’s political survival, the president switched gears and embraced a Eurasianist view that prevails today. This view recognizes Russia as a unique great power with the former Soviet states falling within its sphere of influence. Eurasianists proclaimed that Russia has “a thousand-year history and legitimate interests” in the former Soviet states and “should not be afraid to use her muscle” in defending state interests (Dunlop 1997:51).

Russia’s focus on the Eurasian region has not been uniform across all states. In the economic arena, Russian leaders have mostly expressed interest in and put pressure on the immediately neighboring states, including Belarus. While Yeltsin and Putin’s enthusiasm for hierarchies with Belarus has waxed and waned over time, Russian leaders have clearly expressed and acted on an overall interest in some type of formal dominance over Belarus. As the dependent variable discussion below illuminates, Russia has signed numerous agreements with Belarus and in many cases has aggressively pressured Lukashenka to surrender more sovereignty, such as adopting the Russian ruble. In contrast to Russia’s willingness to work with

⁹ Whether Lukashenko would have won a fair election is impossible to say. In a repressive state, citizens often feel too intimidated to suggest that they do not support their leader. In addition, scholarly works disagree on the question. For example, Korosteleva (2003) cites a 2002 U.S. Department of State report: “‘Lukashenko retains the confidence of about half of Belarusians—51% express confidence, and 38% lack it.’ Likewise, he still has a popular mandate—‘61% say they voted for him in the September 2001 election and about as many say he deserved to be re-elected (56%)’” (p. 530). On the other hand, Potocki (2002) writes that “‘Lukashenka’s popularity has fallen from 41 percent prior to the [2001] election to under 20 percent today” (p. 154). I was unable to locate the State Department report and Potocki does not cite his sources.

Lukashenka, despite his failure to privatize or democratize, the Western states have placed substantial contingencies on economic cooperation and assistance. For example, the EU has stated that Lukashenka's poor record on democracy has "made it impossible for Belarus to benefit from the EU's Neighbourhood Policy which is based on mutual commitment to common values, including democracy, respect for rule of law, good governance and the respect for human rights, including minority rights" (European Union 2005). The EU's demands thus run counter to Lukashenka's economic and political program. This, combined with strong Russian interest, has pushed Lukashenka into Russia's arms.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze fully the causes of Russian interest, the logic of RSAs hints at two likely reasons: insecurity arising from pipelines to Europe combined with evidence of Lukashenka acting opportunistically. Since the Soviet collapse, Russia has increasingly invested in Belarusian pipelines, expanding capacity for those lines leading to Europe. It has done so precisely because Belarus embraced Russia as its economic partner. With Lukashenka frequently and loudly calling for a Russian-Belarusian union, Russian presidents Yeltsin and Putin could reasonably expect that they would soon dominate their neighbor and its assets. Ironically, the more Russia pursues the hierarchy and invests in Belarus, the greater Lukashenka's leverage. Furthermore, the 2005 election of pro-Western Victor Yushchenko as Ukraine's president exacerbates Russia's vulnerability to Belarus. Yushchenko replaced the clearly pro-Russian Leonid Kuchma, who had just signed a critical economic agreement with Russia. With the Ukrainian loss, more than ever Russia must control Belarus' assets that provide access to the Western markets.

The four variables taken together predict a hierarchy with Russia, but one with limits. The RSAs structurally constrain Lukashenka while enhancing the Russian presidents' desire to dominate Belarus. On the other hand, the RSAs have given Lukashenka a means for mutual hostage-taking, preventing a stronger hierarchy than might otherwise have emerged. While strong nationalism and democratic norms could have pushed Lukashenka toward a Western-focused economic option, their absence enables him to pursue pragmatically whatever policies he predicts will secure his goals of remaining in office while retaining as much autonomy as possible. Finally, Russia's clear interest in some type of hierarchy gives Lukashenka the option of pursuing that path with a strong probability of the economic payoff he desires.

The Dependent Variable

No one can deny that Lukashenka has thrown Belarus' future in Russian rather than Western hands. He has rebuffed advances from the IMF and the World Bank. He has dismissively waved away Western human rights advocates as infringers on his sovereignty. He has loudly and frequently embraced the idea of a Russia-Belarus federation. He has linked both security and economic policies with the neighboring Slavic giant. However, analysts would do well to separate carefully political rhetoric from concrete action. In looking for evidence of a relationship that comprises more than considerable pillow talk, we see some areas in which Lukashenka has given up decision making or sovereignty, while at other times and in other areas, he has successfully fought for Belarus' and, inextricably, his personal sovereignty. When states surrender sovereignty to another state or organization, they enter into what I have elsewhere called a delegated hierarchy.¹⁰

Under delegated hierarchy, a weaker state may choose to give some decision-making authority to another political entity in exchange for a political benefit, whether it be economic assistance, a security guarantee, or some other form of gain that aids the political leader in retaining his political position. For a leader fearful of

¹⁰Avoiding Conceptual Stretching: A Typology of Reduced Sovereignty, International Studies Association annual meeting, Montreal, Canada, March 17-20, 2004.

being removed from office, delegating some sovereignty may spell the difference between political survival and political death.

By focusing on the details of what exactly Belarus has given up, one begins to see that Lukashenka has refused to delegate much of what the Russians have demanded. Analysts have tended to miss this, largely because they have been excessively focused on the cruder question of “Russia or the West?” We can confidently answer this question with “Russia.” But the more subtle question is “How much to Russia?” The answer to this question is “Less than you might think.” Increasingly, Lukashenka has demonstrated that he and his state cannot be conquered easily.

Postindependence Belarus cast itself as the post-Soviet state most willing to rejoin Russia in a newly titled but still largely hierarchical political structure. Despite Yeltsin’s earlier proclamations that the republics should take as much sovereignty as they could handle, he soon set about curbing that sovereignty in ways that would benefit Russia without burdening it with the high costs of hierarchy. One of his first acts was to design and run a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)-wide economic union. However, like most CIS initiatives, the union quickly became mired in heaps of paperwork, resulting in a meaningless union. By 1995, Yeltsin had switched from a multilateral to a bilateral approach, negotiating individually with states and bypassing the complicated and unproductive negotiations that had become associated with the CIS. In January 1995, Russian officials announced that the state would sign a protocol on a customs union and free trade agreement with a subset of the CIS states: Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. When the time came, only Belarus and Kazakhstan signed the accord; Ukraine refused to join on the basis that the agreement did not give all states an equal say.

Customs unions, by definition, call for removing internal tariffs between the member states and harmonizing trade policies toward the rest of the world. What makes this particular customs union unusual—and hierarchical—is the understanding by all parties that Russia would set the external tariff rates and the others were to match those rates. While the agreement suggests that the Russian legislature will take into account the other members’ economic and political interests, no formal mechanism exists. Indeed, there is little reason to believe that the Duma would bow to the interests of smaller states.

Regional scholars have not clearly documented the hierarchical nature of the customs union. The evidence, however, is quite clear.¹¹ Since the union’s inception, Lukashenka has been harmonizing Belarus’ tariffs with those of Russia. In 1995, the Belarusian Cabinet of Ministers approved tariff levels on various goods in line with those established by the Russian Duma. Lukashenka subsequently signed a decree imposing, on Ukrainian imports, a value-added tax with the goal of bringing Belarusian tariffs into line with Russia’s. In 1996, the Belarusian Cabinet of Ministers announced that it was preparing a new list of tariffs to match the changes made in Russia. In 1997, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency estimated that the “Customs Union agreement with Russia—which required Minsk to adjust its foreign trade practices to mirror Moscow’s—has resulted in higher import tariffs for Belarusian consumers; tariffs rose from 5–20% to 20–40%” (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 2003). Russian customs guards, who guard the Belarus border, add to the hierarchical nature of the union.

Russia has occasionally pressured Belarus to adhere to the agreement. For example, the president of Belarus’ gasoline concern once announced that despite the customs union, Belarus would continue charging only 24 cents per liter at a time when Russians were paying 45 cents (*OMRI Daily Digest*, August 4, 1995). After a visit from Russian officials, Belarus reversed itself, stating that the price of oil and

¹¹ For news reports covering the hierarchical nature of the agreement, see *OMRI Daily Digest* and its successor, the *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, February 24, 1995; July 27, 1995; August 11, 1995; Jan. 13, 1996; February 23, 1996; February 24, 1997; and July 27, 1997.

oil products would increase to match those in Russia, as envisioned by the customs union (*OMRI Daily Digest*, August 11, 1995).

Although tensions and imperfections have continued, the two states have deepened and expanded their union. In October 2000, Belarus and Russia expanded the customs union to include three Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The members christened the enlarged union the “Eurasian Economic Community,” the name clearly mirroring the EU’s ancestor (BBC Monitoring International Reports, June 18, 2004). In 2003, the United Nations Secretariat registered the group as an official international organization. The following year, EURASEC—the union’s acronym title—announced that 90% of Belarusian tariffs corresponded to those in Russia (TASS, June 2, 2004).

Member’s voting rights in the EURASEC reflect their contributions to the Community’s budget: Russia has 40% of the voting rights, while Belarus and Kazakhstan each have 20%; and the smallest economies (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), 10% each. To dominate the union, Russia thus requires an alliance with only one more state, enabling it to play the smaller members against each other. To counter Russia, the next two largest states, Belarus and Kazakhstan, would have to ally together as well as bringing in one more Central Asian state.

The EURASEC members envision a comprehensive economic union. The Community reportedly plans to form a free trade zone, harmonize tariffs and nontariff measures, formulate a common negotiating position for the World Trade Organization, introduce common currency regulations, coordinate economic reforms, enact a common payment system, create a common transport market, standardize national education programs, and coordinate border security including common policies on smuggling and other customs violations (RIA Novosti, June 16, 2004). It remains to be seen whether the Community will be another CIS, a major paperwork project with few concrete results, or will truly move toward the EU of Eurasia.

Moving at a much slower pace but of potentially greater importance is the four-state Common Economic Space. In September 2004, Russia and Belarus, along with Ukraine and Kazakhstan, signed numerous agreements expected to enact this wide-ranging union (Official Kremlin International News Broadcast, September 16, 2004). Even without this union, Lukashenka continues to move Belarus toward a Russian-led economic union.

While Lukashenka has surrendered to Russia decision making on tariff levels, he has thus far successfully resisted pressure to sacrifice the Belarusian ruble for the Russian version. Lukashenka’s position contrasts with Belarus’ initial reluctance to leave the so-called Russian ruble zone immediately after independence. Lukashenka’s resistance to the Russian ruble may well stem, at least in part, from Belarus’ experience with the ruble zone.

The ruble zone was the first and most powerful post-Soviet economic hierarchy.¹² With the Soviet collapse, the 15 newly independent states inherited the ruble as their sole currency, leaving the Central Bank of Russia as the *de facto* controller. In 1992, Russia increased its hierarchical power by creating correspondent accounts for the states. The accounts were designed to alleviate arrears between enterprises that were split between two or more states. As a side effect, however, the accounts created noncash rubles for each state, alongside the noncash Russian rubles. This gave Russia the opportunity to create a new exchange rate—one between the various noncash rubles. The Central Bank set the exchange rate at one-to-one, up to a certain limit, after which the non-Russian rubles were discounted. Using these accounts and its monopoly position, Russia granted subsidies to Belarus and the other states via currency transfers from the Russian Central Bank to the other states’ central banks. The individual states retained some credit-granting authority,

¹² For a thorough discussion of the ruble zone, see Åslund (1995).

which they liberally granted to failing industries. This abuse caused high rates of inflation, with many states suffering inflation rates of 1,000% and higher. In response, the Russian Central Bank declared that Soviet and pre-1993 Russian rubles would become worthless within two days. Russia's abrupt proclamation sent the economies of Belarus and the other nine ruble-using states reeling. Despite Lukashenka's attempts to resurrect the hierarchy, by the end of 1995, all states had withdrawn from the ruble zone.

During the ruble zone, Yeltsin acted opportunistically, to Lukashenka's detriment. Lukashenka may well fear even greater acts of opportunism should he now cede currency control. In a 2003 interview, he said that Belarus would re-enter a currency union on two conditions: if Belarus' sovereignty remained intact and if Russia offered "financial guarantees." He added, "I pose the question [to Russia]: Where are the guarantees that our state sovereignty will not be violated, that our people will be independent? What is independence without money?" (*RFE/RL Daily Digest*, July 1, 2003). Lukashenka subsequently wrote to Putin that any conversion to the Russian currency would happen only within the framework of a Russia-Belarus Union (*RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report*, September 16, 2003).

Despite considerable pressure from Russia to surrender Belarus' currency control, Lukashenka has thus far resisted, instead continuing to demand financial compensation and other rewards in exchange for the lost decision-making authority. While Belarus is often portrayed as rushing into the arms of the Russians, the record shows that Lukashenka has been dragging his feet, holding out for concessions.

Pursuing Hierarchy over RSAs

While the common currency zone remains under negotiation, Russia has been aggressively pursuing a very specific hierarchy: control of Belarus' key pipelines. In November 2002, Belarus exceeded the gas imports that Russia allowed under a prior agreement. In retaliation, Russia cut supplies by 50%, a dramatic reduction for a state that depends wholly on Russian imports. The Belarusian government subsequently paid Gazprom \$11 million of the \$282 million it owed, resulting in a slight increase in supplies a few days later. Several days passed before the prime ministers of Belarus and Russia met to discuss the dire situation. Following the meeting, the leaders announced that once again Beltransgaz and Gazprom would form a joint venture, an action obviously linked to resolving Belarus' debts. The two sides had signed an agreement to merge the companies in July 2002, vowing to seal the deal within one year. In November, the Belarusian prime minister promised to put before Belarus' legislature a bill calling for the joint venture's creation no later than July 2003, one year past the original deadline. With the legislature under Lukashenka's thumb, the administration's promise melted seamlessly into action. About one week later, both the lower and upper houses, the latter unanimously and without deliberation, removed the legal ban on privatizing Belarus' natural gas pipelines, thus paving the way for the joint venture. Selling off his state's major bargaining asset would seem a poor decision on Lukashenka's part. Yet, the deal was designed to relieve Russian pressure. The compact would grant Gazprom 25–30% of Beltransgaz as payment for Belarus' debts to the gas company.¹³

The deadline passed without action. As the end of 2003 neared, the Russian prime minister threatened Belarus with an ultimatum: push through the joint venture, or Gazprom would start charging Belarus full market prices for natural gas. If enacted, Belarusians would suffer serious penalties. Russian natural gas

¹³ The details of the November negotiations can be found in the following sources: RosBusiness Consulting Database, November 4, 11, and 22, 2002; BBC Monitoring International Reports, November 10, 20, and 22, 2002; ITAR-TASS, November 11, 2002; and Economic News, November 18, 2002. My thanks are due to Celina Peña for research assistance on this incident.

prices vary significantly depending on the client. For example, in 2002, Belarus paid \$30 per 1,000 cubic meters, while Ukraine paid \$50; the Baltic states, \$70–80; and Poland and Slovakia, \$100 for the same quantity. For years, Russia had privileged Belarus by charging the same prices offered to Russian companies, so-called wholesale prices. If carried out, the Russian threat would significantly cripple Belarusian companies and literally leave Belarusians in the cold (Financial Times Information, BBC Monitoring International Reports, December 17, 2003; Prime-Tass Business News Agency, December 30, 2003; and Agency WPS, The Russian Oil and Gas Report, December 31, 2003).

The year 2004 would show a Lukashenka far tougher than his stereotyped pro-Russian, weak-sovereignty reputation suggests. Rather than buckling to the neighboring giant, Belarusian officials announced on December 30, 2003, that they refused to discuss a joint venture with Russia. The following week, as the new year dawned, Beltransgaz reported that its value stood at about \$5 billion. The Russians scoffed at this figure. In the Russian assessment, \$600 million more accurately reflected the pipeline company's "book value" (Prime-Tass Business News Agency, December 30, 2003; and Interfax News Agency, January 8, 2004).

The competition between the Slavic states heated up; classic mutual hostage-taking ensued. Belarus noted it was considering raising transit fees for Russian oil flowing through Belarusian pipelines to Europe. Ukraine had been charging 73 cents per 100 km, while Belarus offered a low fee of only 51 cents. Belarus now threatened to match Ukraine's higher rates. In response, Russia vowed to reduce its quotas for Belarusian oil products. Hoping for reconciliation, the two states' prime ministers met in Moscow. Binding together two issue areas, the leaders discussed integrating their gas industries and their currencies. They made little progress (BBC Monitoring International Reports, January 9, 2004; ITAR-TASS, January 16, 2004).

Unable to seal a deal, Gazprom stopped supplying Belarus on January 20, 2004. Gazprom offered to resume the flow if Belarus agreed to jump its payments from \$30 to \$80 per 1,000 cubic meters, a 167% increase in fees. Lukashenka refused. With their states' relationship in tatters over these critical RSAs, the two presidents sat down at the bargaining table. Although media reports do not indicate what transpired at the meeting, the outcome was quickly announced. On January 23, just three days after Gazprom's audacious act, the gas again began to flow. Putin subsequently decreed that the Russian government would give Belarus a gas credit. Although his decree counteracted existing law, the Russian president prevailed (AFX European Focus, January 20, 2004; RIA-Novosti, January 23, 2004; Russian Oil and Gas Report, January 27, 2004; and ITAR-TASS, January 29, 2004).

Despite the presidential intervention along with numerous meetings and negotiations between the various economic and political parties, the states failed to reach a lasting accord. In mid-February, with temperatures plunging to -4°F , Gazprom again ceased gas supplies to Belarus. It promised to resume the fuel flows only if Belarus agreed to sell 50% of its Beltransgaz shares to Gazprom. The Russian government-owned company went so far as to offer paying double the current transit fees. Again, Lukashenka's administration held firm, refusing to relinquish its most valuable asset (RIA-Novosti, February 16, 2004; ITAR-TASS, February 19, 2004; The Independent (London), February 20, 2004).

Forced into a corner, Lukashenka fought back with cries of blackmail and cruelty. "This is an act of terrorism at the highest level," he charged (Agency WPS, Kommersant, from What the Papers Say, February 20, 2004). "If Putin wants us to pay this much, let's collect it. Let's take it from medications, from Chernobyl veterans, from those who rotted in the trenches in World War II" (UPI, February 24, 2004).

Adding to his arsenal, Lukashenka used the RSAs to corral allies into his camp. Without gas coming to his own state, the president halted flows to wealthier neighbors. Poland now confronted Putin. The Polish opposition demanded that the Polish infrastructure minister resign his post for failing to diversify fuel sources

(Polish News Company, Polish News Bulletin, Parkiet, February 20, 2004). The Polish prime minister turned on Russia, declaring it “not a very reliable supplier” (European Information Service, Europe Energy, February 20, 2004). With German supplies similarly threatened, the European Commission dispatched an official letter to Moscow demanding to know why Russia was cutting critical gas supplies (European Information Service, Europe Energy, February 20, 2004). Russia finally heeded Belarus, Poland, and the European Commission’s combined cries. On February 20, Russia resumed exporting gas through Beltransgaz’s pipelines, charging \$46.68, higher than the original \$30 but lower than Gazprom’s initial demand of \$80 (Agency WPS, Kommersant, from What the Papers Say, February 20, 2004).

Some press reports portrayed the deal that resulted in renewed flows as a case of Lukashenka caving in to Russian blackmail. Yet, Russia’s ultimate goal of owning the critical pipelines remains unrealized. The Belarusian president has accused Russia of ultimately desiring to own not only its neighbor’s pipelines but also its refineries, electricity grids, and railways—all RSAs (People’s Press Printing Society Ltd., Morning Star, February 20, 2004.) In contrast to selling off these assets, Lukashenka can agree to pay higher Russian prices—on credit—with relative ease. In the past, these credits have been reduced with in-kind payments (including tractors and other equipment) or reduced in exchange for continued military basing rights or lower transit fees. On the most important assets, Lukashenka has refused to concede.

While actual and threatened mutual hostage taking broke the stalemate, a comprehensive agreement has remained elusive. Throughout 2004, both sides refused to budge on their demands. Russia’s willingness to leave Belarusians freezing in February, although temporary, may have left the two states’ relationship in a long-term freeze. In an April 2004 opinion poll, only 13.8% of Belarusians supported the goal of a unified state with Russia (Belapan News Agency, April 6, 2004). As of January 2005, the two states have failed to reach a long-term agreement.

Conclusion

Four factors explain Lukashenka’s decision to sacrifice some but not all sovereignty to Russia. The first and previously most ignored variable is the degree of RSAs. The critical RSAs that characterize the Russian–Belarusian landscape bind together the two states, pushing them into a close relationship based on economic vulnerabilities. While Belarus cannot dominate its stronger neighbor, it can take advantage of those areas in which it has some leverage. Within this particular dyad, Lukashenka has used the oil and gas pipelines that carry critical exports from Russia to energy-thirsty Europe. While Putin attempted to force Lukashenka ruthlessly into acquiescing control over Belarus’s pipelines, Lukashenka held firm, using an aggressive attacking campaign against Putin. Ironically, for an authoritarian leader with a record of serious human rights violations, Lukashenka played the human rights card, characterizing Putin as a heartless man bent on literally freezing the Belarusian citizenry in the name of profits. A considerable part of this article focused on how the RSAs translated into powerful bargaining power for a weak state. This process tracing has been missing from the extant literature.

In addition to the critical role of the RSAs, three other factors explain Lukashenka’s decision to surrender some sovereignty to Russia. First, the Belarusian people have demonstrated a weak commitment to a nationalism that would have forced Lukashenka to turn away from the historically hierarchical Russia. This contrasts significantly with the situation in the Baltic states and, to a lesser extent, Ukraine. Weak nationalism enabled Lukashenka to pursue pragmatically the state with the most lucrative economic offer, which was Russia. While weak nationalism played a critical role, it alone cannot account for the move toward Russia. Without a strong disposition toward being “Belarusian,” Lukashenka could have molded his citizenry toward a pro-Western or pro-Eastern identity. Or even a balanced

approach, as has been attempted in Kazakhstan. In addition, Lukashenka's lack of commitment to democracy enabled him to pursue an authoritarian rule that aggressively attacked the opposition. Finally, Russia's own strong interest in an economic hierarchy meant that Presidents Yeltsin and Putin were willing to aid Lukashenka in his quest to save his state's highly dependent economy. This latter factor closely ties in with the first, the RSAs in the relationship. Without the hard structures binding together the two states and Belarus' critical geographic position relative to the Western oil markets, Russia would likely have been much less interested in offering any economic benefits to Belarus.

Because of its own vulnerabilities, Russia has failed to win as complete a hierarchy as it has pursued. Specifically, Lukashenka has not relinquished control of Belarus' pipeline company nor has he surrendered the domestic ruble. On the other hand, he has willingly given Russia decision-making authority over tariffs. Considering the other two hierarchies that Russia seeks, Lukashenka has succumbed to the leakiest hierarchy, the one he can most easily evade or withdraw from at a future date.

Will Belarus become more embedded in a Russian hierarchy or move toward a more autonomous relationship? The first variable—levels of RSAs—will most likely remain unchanged. No state other than Russia has an interest in providing Belarus with inexpensive fuel, or with building expensive pipelines to the West. With a westward-leaning president now governing Ukraine—the only other state with significant fuel pipelines connecting Russia to Europe—Russia's dependence on Belarus only grows. With it, Russia's interest in ruling a hierarchy with Belarus—the fourth variable—will presumably increase. This may ultimately press Putin, weary of negotiations and bargains, into aggressive actions against Lukashenka. Pushed into a corner, Putin could this time take the draconian measure of completely cutting off gas to Belarus, betting that Russia can better withstand lost revenue from exports to Europe than Lukashenka can withstand freezing temperatures and no transit fees. Under this enormous pressure, Lukashenka would most likely be forced to succumb to a tighter hierarchy.

The two other variables—weak nationalism and weak democratic norms—have enabled Lukashenka to select strategies most conducive to achieving his preferences of remaining in office and enacting policies of his choosing. As the Russian option has shown strains, many Belarusians have signaled a willingness to switch partners. When an independent Minsk-based institute asked Belarusians to decide between Russia or the EU, 47% of respondents selected Russia while 36% went with Europe. Furthermore, 60% supported Belarus becoming a member of the EU (RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report, October 21, 2003). To join Europe, however, Lukashenka would have to believe that it could provide greater economic opportunities than Russia; more importantly, he would have to embrace democracy. Given his brutal policies and the weak economy, democracy would likely spell the end of Lukashenka's reign. Taking into account all four variables, Lukashenka appears unlikely to veer from his current path of putting Belarus "back in the USSR."

The analysis raises important questions about sovereignty and hierarchy in the international system and the role that weak states play in these relationships. The variables elucidated here can be generalized for cases in which weak state leaders must decide what type of relationship to pursue with a strong state. First, it suggests that a weak state bound to a stronger state via RSAs will likely remain in a close economic relationship with that state simply because the bonds are too expensive to break and replace. Although the weak state's leader might choose to surrender some sovereignty in exchange for economic benefits, he may also be able to use the RSAs in mutual hostage taking in order to gain leverage over the dominant state, thus helping reduce the severity of the hierarchy. Although we have not seen it in the Russia–Belarus dyad, if the strong state chooses to use its full might against the weak state, mutual hostage-taking will not save the weaker partner from a highly restricted hierarchy, including full empire. Second, the norms of the population as

well as its leadership affect whether surrendering sovereignty and to which state is a viable policy choice. When democratic norms are weak among the general population and its leaders, authoritarianism becomes an option. Once this path opens up and leaders walk down it, they may cutoff alternative relationships, such as joining the EU. Weighing likely political survival against a weak or nonexistent norm of democracy, the leader will choose survival. Similarly, some populations express fainter forms of nationalism than do others. For contrast in the former Soviet region the three Baltic states present an obvious example. In these northern states, which also had high levels of RSAs with Russia, nationalism coupled with a strong distrust of Russia made a Russian-dominated hierarchy politically suicidal. Opinion polls and the success of nationalist parties provide plenty of evidence that norms in these states differed significantly from those in Belarus. Russian interest in economic hierarchy can also easily be generalized to strong state interest. Although I hint at some reasons behind Russian interest, I treat it as exogenous, demonstrating that it partially accounts for Lukashenka's choice. Nevertheless, the analysis opens the way for further research into why strong states pursue hierarchy.¹⁴ Following the same analytical framework, RSAs, norms, and political factors may well account for strong state interest in hierarchy. Finally, this case establishes both that norms alone cannot account for state relationships, at least in some cases, and that a rationalist approach can be usefully used even in arenas in which issues of identity have been thought to dominate.

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¹⁴ Others have explored the causes behind great powers pursuing full empire (Snyder 1991) or security hierarchies (Lake 1999). However, little has been done to evaluate economic hierarchies and to explore material, normative, and other political variables as competing causes.

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