



# State Clientelism Today: A Case Study of Belarus

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State Clientelism Today: A Case Study of Belarus

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A Thesis in the Field of International Relations  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I discuss the Belarus-Russia client-patron relationship and identify ways in which it has contributed to Aleksandr Lukashenka's survival in power for the last 30 years. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, some former republics, such as the Baltics, completed successful transitions, despite difficulties, to full independence, political democracy, and a free market economy. Others, like Belarus, have not transitioned to democracy nor adopted a free market economic system.

Belarus, despite its official territorial sovereignty, has remained a client of its patron, Russia, and that relationship is in large part the reason Lukashenka has held onto power for three decades. Despite official independence since 1991, Belarus has retrenched and revived its interdependent relationship with Russia. Civil society, pro-democracy forces, and voters have been unable to bring down the Lukashenka regime.

The relationship continues to benefit Russia as well. It has helped advance President Vladimir Putin's objective of keeping a sphere of influence and control over an immediate neighbor to the benefit of Russia's security and to advance its territorial control objectives in the region. Belarus serves as a conduit for helping to meet Russia's objectives in its war with Ukraine, utilizing Belarus's convenient border connection to Ukraine. In doing so Belarus has shown the West that other countries may be prone to Russia's influence.

Both countries enjoy economic benefits in trade preferences and gas and oil product prices. The political cooperation also continues to benefit both Putin and

Lukashenka, as both continue to implement the authoritarian playbook of retaining authoritarian power by persecuting and punishing dissent.

I investigated how each of these parts of the clientelist model were established between Russia and Belarus. I identify specific points and reasons why they remain as patron and client. From my research I was able to draw conclusions about the longevity of this relationship. By analyzing the quid pro quos from ancient times, as well as before both Belarus and Russia existed as nations, through the Soviet years and post-USSR period, I draw conclusions regarding whether the client-patron relationship is likely to continue in the near- to mid-term future and what effects it may have on regional dynamics and the global political environment.

### Author's Biographical Sketch

Ms. Haas has served as a Foreign Service Officer for the U.S. Department of State since 2005, and has worked for the U.S. government since 2001. As part of her Foreign Service career, she currently works as Political Counselor for the Venezuela Affairs Unit in Bogota, Colombia; she was Deputy Spokesperson at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan (2021); Spokesperson (2020-2021) and Deputy Political Counselor (2017-2020) at the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, El Salvador; Deputy Political Counselor at U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She also held other overseas positions at U.S. Embassies in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Mexico.

In Washington, D.C., she has served as the Public Affairs Desk Officer for Russia in the Bureau of European Affairs (2012-2014), Desk Officer for Ecuador in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and Watch Officer in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (2007-2008).

Prior to joining the Department, Ms. Haas worked at the Federal Aviation Administration as an International Aviation Desk Officer in the Office of International Aviation.

Ms. Haas holds a B.A. in Political Science and Spanish Language from Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington (2001). She is fluent in Russian and Spanish, proficient in French, Ukrainian, and Dari. She enjoys traveling the world with her family.

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the most important people in my life: my mother Eugeniya, and my sons Tristan and Kieran, who have been a great source of motivation and support as I completed this program..

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my fellow Extension School community, its professors, and the teachers and mentors in my life, including Adam Resnick and Cecilia Capestany, for their encouragement and mentorship. Since my undergraduate days they gave me the opportunity to give back through a career in public service. As a young woman from the former Soviet Union, trying to find my way, their support was a much needed a source of motivation and encouragement.



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## Chapter I.

### Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union gave way to an era of transitions in the former Soviet space, the reverberations of which continue to the present day. Russia and the republics that encompassed the Soviet Union experienced a relationship of interdependence and were subject to control from Russia in a way that fit the definition of a clientelist dynamic. This relationship contained three main elements, which Osita Afoaku used to define a patron-client relationship: inequality, reciprocity, and proximity.<sup>1</sup> In Marcin Kosienkowski's definition of the patron-client relationship, he includes the beneficial exchange of goods, benefits, political support, and possible military protection.<sup>2</sup>

In this thesis, I focus specifically on the case of Belarus, and analyze its clientelist relationship with Russia during and after the Soviet Union. I look at the way in which this relationship provided Belarus with security, and economic and diplomatic benefits. In turn, Belarus's geographic position and its ideological support have given the Kremlin a buffer and a loyal political ally. In addition to these tangible benefits, the relationship created an emotional connection through shared cultural aspects between the people of

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<sup>1</sup> Osita Afoaku, "U.S. Foreign Policy and Authoritarian Regimes: Change and Continuity in International Clientelism," *Journal of Third World Studies* 17, 2 (2000): 13-40. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45198191>.

<sup>2</sup> Marcin Kosienkowski, "The Patron-Client Relationship between Russia and Transnistria," in Tomáš Hoch and Vincenc Kopeček, eds., *De Facto States in Eurasia* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 183-207.

both countries, a geographic proximity, as well as social and popular experiences, and geographic proximity that have proven difficult to let go of for both sides.

I analyzed different aspects that fostered the continuing clientelist ties and how these enabled the regime of Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenka to remain in power. Due to Belarus's location and its historic and cultural connections, its destiny has been intertwined with Russia's interests for centuries. Even after it was no longer part of the Soviet Union, although technically independent, Belarus walked a fine line politically and economically to stay in favor with its powerful neighbor, often at the expense of its own interests and sovereignty.

I chose to focus on Belarus because I wanted to analyze a country that has not transitioned to a democracy after the breakup of the Soviet Union. This allowed me to analyze the factors that influence this process, particularly when a relationship with a larger, influential nation is involved.

As I discovered through my research, Lukashenka appears to have rejected democracy while sustaining authoritarian rule in large part due to Belarus's connection with Russia—a hypothesis I sought to test further. Furthermore, the longevity of the authoritarian era in Belarus seems to be closely tied to the stages in its patron-client relationship with Russia. Lukashenka's government's rejection of democratization and his sustained hold on power could be viewed as a result or a condition of its clientelist relationship and interdependence with Russia, which remains constant despite revolutions in the region and other efforts by pro-democratic actors and organizations, as well as support from the West, to bring about democracy.

Instead of following a path of democratic transition toward a freer, fairer, and more transparent governance and a free market economy, Belarus has retrenched into authoritarianism, deepening its ideological support for Putin, according to experts like Artyom Shraibman with whom I conducted an interview for this thesis.<sup>3</sup> Today it is viewed by the international community as an authoritarian regime, less independent and transparent, and increasingly more corrupt while persecuting dissent since its declaration of independence from Russia on August 25, 1991.<sup>4</sup>

By forming and then cementing a patron-client relationship, Belarus and Russia satisfied their own interests—in Russia’s case geopolitical, and in Belarus’s primarily economic. Later, Lukashenka used it to his advantage to help him to hold on to power, reinforcing the patron-client dynamic. Thanks in part to the relationship with Russia, Lukashenka has also stifled and punished opposition while resisting democratic forces attempting to achieve a transparent election and democratic transition of power after the 2021 presidential election.<sup>5</sup> Shraibman and other Belarus experts note that Lukashenka and Putin have identified ways to extract certain benefits from each other in exchange for support and political and economic benefits—the definition of clientelism.

I hypothesize that the clientelist relationship between Belarus and Russia is the key factor to the survival of Lukashenka’s power and his retrenchment into authoritarianism. Thanks to the clientelist relationship with its patron Russia, Belarus has endured, in fact becoming a dictatorship, which inhibited its transition to democracy,

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<sup>3</sup> A. Shraibman, interviewed by A. Haas, remotely from Bogota, Colombia, January 3, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> “CIA World Factbook—Belarus,” November 5, 2022. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/belarus/#people-and-society>

<sup>5</sup> “Freedom in the World 2022: Belarus.” <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-world/2022>

while condemning itself to a dependency that has allowed the Lukashenka regime to hang onto power and has staved off the democratization of Belarus for 30 years.

To test this hypothesis, I analyzed when and how this patron-client relationship first formed and how it evolved and was sustained during the Soviet years and after the collapse of the USSR. I sought to identify key inflection points in this process, and then analyze where it is now and what can be expected from this client-patron relationship in the future.

I aimed to answer the following questions:

- What were some of the key events and reasons why Russia and Belarus forged and sustained a patron-client relationship?
- In what ways did the relationship benefit or hinder each country?
- After the breakup of the Soviet Union, how did the clientelist dynamic evolve?
- What might have led to interdependence and the undemocratic regime we see today in both countries?

By analyzing theoretical and empirical research, I hope to contribute new information and elements to the existing academic discussion about how patron-client relationships transform and persist over time. To this end, I developed three hypotheses that form the basis of my arguments and evidence. First, the Belarus-Russia clientelist interdependent relationship appears to rely on the theory that the people of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are one people who share the same history, territory, and genealogy. This belief underlies the argument that it is only logical that they should have a strong relationship between them, politically, culturally, and economically. Russian President Vladimir Putin has often used this argument to justify his view on Russia and

its neighbors, which seems serves as the foundation for his current relationship with Lukashenka and between the two countries.<sup>6</sup> He also cited the need to reunite Russia as a reason for invading Ukraine with Belarus's support. I discuss Putin's arguments in more detail and present what could serve as counterarguments by other historians who disagree with this view of historic oneness.

My second hypothesis is that Lukashenka and Putin strategically used USSR history, its symbols, and some of their respective populations' nostalgia to support their longevity in power and the endurance of their alliance. Initially, when Lukashenka and Putin first ran for president in the early 1990s and 2000s, respectively, both appealed mostly to older voters who longed for the return of the USSR. Using this nostalgia to gain popularity, they strategically resurrected old Soviet symbols to create new propaganda and a neo-Soviet brand of nationalism. Referring to an old World War II enemy, Nazism, both Putin and Lukashenka sent a message that anyone who did not espouse nationalist values was anti-Russia and pro-Nazism.<sup>7</sup> This isolationist propaganda played into Putin's other key argument – the need to unite to guarantee territorial integrity that a potential enemy could attempt to break down by sowing division among the country's people. Putin and Lukashenka revived and re-popularized old USSR symbols to create the appearance of more unity, increase cultural connections between today's Belarus and Russia, and to retain public support. But it also served to instill a stronger sense of nationalism that Putin and Lukashenka hoped would foster rejection of other political

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<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," July 12, 2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>7</sup> E. Korosteleva, I. Petrova, & A. Kudlenko, (eds.), *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century: Between Dictatorship and Democracy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2023): 33-50. doi:10.4324/9781003311454.



ideologies and help stave off color revolutions in Russia and Belarus. I discuss how this effort continues to be an important part of the anti-West and pro-united Russia and Belarus “campaign” by both Lukashenka and Putin.<sup>8</sup>

My third hypothesis is that the patron-client relationship has created an insular authoritarian space in Russian and Belarus whereby Putin and Lukashenka need each other in order to survive in their authoritarian bubble. Belarusian institutions, such as its judicial system, share the same deep-seated issues of corruption and complicity as does Russia. Both face political and economic international sanctions causing them to rely heavily on each other for aid and economic support. The two share similar tactics: stealing elections and using violence to quash protests.<sup>9</sup> Lukashenka has benefited from holding on to power thanks to Russia’s support after Belarus’s disputed election in 2020, and he must now pay back by allowing Russia to use its border with Ukraine to send in military, weapons, and supplies to support Russia’s war with Ukraine.

### Research Methods

My research methods for testing these hypotheses sought to draw comparisons and to argued for and against their validity using diverse methods and evidence, including the following activities:

- Original interviews, which I conducted with a Belarusian political analyst;

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<sup>8</sup> T. Ambrosio, “The Political Successes of Russia-Belarus Relations: Insulating Minsk from a Color Revolution,” *Democratizatsiya*, 3 (December 2006): 407-434.

<sup>9</sup> A. Astlund, “How to Break Lukashenka,” September 2021. <https://frivarld.se/rappporter/how-to-break-lukashenka>

- Accounts by international experts of Belarus's experience, which I found in scientific journals;
- Papers published by organizations such as Freedom House, The Atlantic Council, and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance;
- Information from U.S. government agencies, including USAID and the Department of State websites, which information and accounts by experts regarding U.S. government assistance, analyses of Belarus elections, and international civil society reports of Lukashenka's human rights violations, among others.
- Local government sources helped me compare speeches and public remarks by Putin, Lukashenka, and other regional leaders and U.S. officials, as they pertained to relationships between the countries. These sources provided evidence of shifts in policies toward one another, and how current events such as Putin's decision to attack Ukraine in February 2022, influenced the relationship between the two leaders and countries.
- I compared different factors that influenced the outcomes of elections in Belarus and drew conclusions about the role of the patron's influence or involvement, as well as the role that international support and assistance from Western countries played in the regime's behavior related to the election and whether it influenced the patron state's level of involvement in those elections.

### Limitations

My ability to accurately assess the views of the public in Belarus was limited by the difficulty of conducting reliable surveys in a country where media are fully controlled by the regime, and independent reporting is under attack by the government. The state bombards the public with anti-Western propaganda and stories that heavily favor siding with the patron on regional issues such as the war in Ukraine. Thus my analysis of some data sources was limited.

Media biases due to the regime's strict control of criticism, combined with retribution for any perceived dissent, limited the availability of several sources. Tight controls and high levels of disinformation regarding actual actions by Lukashenka himself around the government's strategies and policies, and the real extent of its agreements with Russia and Ukraine when discussing the war, for example, create a significant margin of error.

Many of my conclusions were drawn based on others' direct research and on the opinions of those few sources who felt safe enough to share them. My research excludes regime insiders.

In addition, pollsters said surveys on political topics are not allowed without special permission from the authorities. Thus, pro-Western polling or survey companies find it extremely difficult to obtain approval.

## Chapter II.

### Belarus and Russia's Historic Origins

My first hypothesis is that the foundation of the Belarus-Russia clientelist relationship appears to be based on the theory that Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians are one people connected by their land of origin, which should be viewed as one land, meaning they belong to the same ethnic genetic group, culture, and language. I will discuss some of the available historic evidence that promotes this theory, and others that dispute it. In the process I hope to answer the questions: Do Belarus and Russia today have the same or different anthropological origins? How did the relationship between the two begin?

#### A Brief History

As a landlocked country, Belarus shares 818 miles of border with Russia, almost 700 miles with Ukraine, 233 miles with Poland, 400 miles with Lithuania, and 199 miles with Latvia. Belarus's past has been intertwined with its neighbors since before it was known as Belarus, with a defined territory and its own language, Belarusian.<sup>10</sup> Due to its close proximity to other European countries, it is not unusual that its national identity has been influenced in varying degrees by its historic connections with its closest neighbors: Germany, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and to the north, the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

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<sup>10</sup> CIA, "The CIA World Factbook—Belarus," March 16, 2024. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/belarus/#people-and-society>

Although historians still debate the exact parameters of Belarus's ancient roots, a look over ancient settlement history makes a strong argument in favor of Belarus's independent origin. Historians who defend the independent-origin view note that the existence of the city of Polatsk (also referred to as Polotsk) as early as 862 AD, shows that portion of Belarus and its people date back to before the existence of Kievan State, which is one of the first examples cited by pro-Great Russia historians to point out evidence of unity between prehistoric tribes of this general part of European territory.<sup>11</sup>

Polatsk was a rival city-state to Kiev in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Historians link Polatsk's rise to prominence to the Vikings with "the arrival from across the sea" of Scandinavian overlord Rahvalod (or Rogvolod in its transliteration from Russian), who ruled Polatsk until approximately 980.<sup>12</sup> Other historic records show that refugees from different Baltic clans founded Polatsk after coming upon it while sailing the Dzvina River. This would further link Polatsk's origins to Nordic clans of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

This differentiation between clans that inhabited the territory of Belarus and those that are linked to modern Ukraine and Russia is also supported by authors Christian Raffensperger and Donald Ostrowski who describe Rus as a large polity that, by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, stretched from the Gulf of Finland to the Black Sea.<sup>13</sup> However, the authors note that most maps of that area do not reflect the various polities that already existed, even prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Most maps of this territory from Medieval times, as noted by Raffensperger and Ostrowski, identify the territory merely as Russia. However, this is not

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<sup>11</sup> A. Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 35.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, *Belarus*.

<sup>13</sup> Christian Raffensperger, and Donald Ostrowski, *The Ruling Families of Rus: Clan, Family and Kingdom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2023).

accurate since Russia is a modern state that includes territories that were not incorporated by Rus until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In their epilogue, Raffensperger and Ostrowski also point out that when discussing Rus, they advise making a differentiation between Rus as a people, Rus as a land, and Rus as governed by different rulers. It is in the details that this differentiation can be discerned. The authors refer to at least 40 examples, documented by Henryk Paszkiewicz, where chronicles dated 912 and 945 from Polatsk, Novgorod First, Kyiv, and Galicia-Volhyn refer to someone travelling from their town to Rus, leading the authors to conclude that travelers viewed Rus as a separate and distinct destination from their place or home of origin.<sup>14</sup>

The authors also note that by the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there was a shift in reference to different parts of Rus, specifically from “large Rus” to “small Rus.” The authors cite Lind who, based on his study of the Novgorod First Chronicle, agreed there is a difference in the references to Rus in 11<sup>th</sup>-century chronicles versus 12<sup>th</sup>-century chronicles. Raffensperger and Ostrowski explained that, in a modern terms, this would be similar saying, “I’m traveling from Dayton to Cleveland” versus “I’m traveling from Dayton to Ohio,” conveying that one could conclude after reading the two examples that in the latter phrase Dayton is not in Ohio, while in the former, it is.<sup>15</sup>

With this differentiation in mind, in some chronicles where authors refer to Rus people being Scandinavians from the north and not those from the south, the description points to a difference between inhabitants. This supports the argument that when these

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<sup>14</sup> Raffensperger & Ostrowski, *Ruling Families*, 245-246.

<sup>15</sup> Raffensperger & Ostrowski, *Ruling Families*, 248-249.

events were written, neither the land nor the people were united or part of the same city, state, or clan. In another instance, Wilson refers to a brief period in 1186 when an “all-Belarusian” state was established covering Minsk, Brest, and Polatsk—although Wilson notes its exact dates cannot be ascertained. Also, in the thirteenth century this state was overtaken by Teutonic knights and subsequently came under the control of Lithuania in 1307.<sup>16</sup>

Before joining Russia’s Bolshevik government, Belarus had its own territorial, cultural, and linguistic identity even if it was tied to the origins of multiple neighbors. Even if a relationship existed between those who lived in the territory now known as Belarus and Russia, Belarusians had similar relationships and varying degrees of mutual benefits, with many different tribes, kingdoms, and groups that now live in the territories of Austria, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and other regional neighbors. This reinforces a compelling amount of evidence that Belarus’s ancient roots may be viewed as parallel or connected with those of ancient clans that evolved beyond its borders. However, they were distinct both in their people’s genealogic and territorial origin—contrary to Lukashenka’s and Putin’s views of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians as “one people.” I will discuss this in more detail shortly.

#### Putin’s Essay

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson, *Belarus*, 43.

I spent some time analyzing Putin's 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,"<sup>17</sup> then analyzed evidence that counters the essay as well. Putin argues that not only are Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians all descendants of Ancient Rus, but that all three peoples are descendants of the same people who are "bound together" by one language, culture, and Orthodox faith. Putin makes the argument that the "oneness" of the three people is based on historic facts, and he believes that anyone arguing against that oneness is trying to "divide and rule" the region—appearing to allude to those who oppose Russia's control over the other two countries.

Putin also cites what he calls "historic evidence of unity and oneness" as a legitimate reason to violate Ukraine's sovereignty, and attempt to exert control over other neighbors, including Belarus. He gives two examples. The first is focused on Kiev being a dominant city in the 9th century, quoting Oleg the Prophet whom, Putin says, referred to Kiev as "the mother of all Russian cities."

Putin argues that during periods of fragmentation of European city states that included ancient Rus, the people in the territory at the time considered Rus to be a common territory and homeland. Putin also argues that while it is true that northeastern Rus, including Kiev, fell under the rule of the Golden Horde, and the southern and western Russian lands were under the control of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, during this period its inhabitants were still the same people and can legitimately be grouped as "Russian" through this period of invasion because of their "oneness" prior to these invasion periods.

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<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*.  
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>



He notes that the nobility known as the “boyars,” who were occupying these lands, had extremely close dealings through interstate marriages and alliances, even fighting side by side against common enemies. He cites the example of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Jogaila, who Putin says joined Mamai, a powerful commander of the Golden Horde in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, to fight against other clans. According to Putin, these kind of interactions prove that Ukraine’s and Russia’s ancestors lived through many of the same historic events during that period, forging a unified cultural identity. He also claims that since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, people in both western and eastern Russian lands spoke the same language and, despite periods of other influences and the presence of other faiths, the majority shared the same Orthodox faith.

Then he moves forward to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when, according to Putin, Moscow became the consolidation point of the territories of Ancient Rus after Prince Alexander Nevsky defeated the “foreign yoke” of the Khan and “began gathering the Russian lands.” This is one of Putin’s central arguments for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and underpins the logic behind Putin’s claim that he has full right to dominate since Russia is the economic and political patron of smaller countries in the region connecting Russia to Europe and Asia. He believes that, very simply, they have always belonged to Russia because of shared effects on these areas and people before Russia became known as an independent state.

### Critiques of Putin's Essay

Many historians and political analysts in the West and in Ukraine and Belarus have highlighted evidence and historic facts demonstrating that Putin's view is deeply flawed. They view his "we are one" argument as one-sided and simplistic while serving his predominantly Russian perspective.

One of the most effective pieces for debunking Putin's claims of "oneness" is a 24-page article by Mykhailo Hrushevsky, first published in 1904 in Ukrainian by the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences and reprinted at least 11 times.<sup>18</sup> Written more than 10 years before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and before the formation of the Soviet Union, Hrushevsky's article directly counters claims such as those by Putin, that the histories of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus are all the same because the peoples of these nationalities and today's nations are one and the same genealogically, culturally, and historically. Hrushevsky argues that the history of these territories is only indirectly and partially related to Russian history and that each place deserves its own independent history.

Hrushevsky's article argues that integrating Belarusian and Ukrainian history into Russia's is "illogical" because they each have their own origins, and Russia has its own. They are not tied wholly to their foundation through the state of Kiev-Rus. Hrushevsky is well-known in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus for his historical work and is highly respected for his scholarly work. Hrushevsky's editor, Andrew Gregorovich, stated that Francis Dvornik of Harvard University views Hrushevsky as the "most objective" Slavic

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<sup>18</sup> Mykhailo Hrushevsky, "The Traditional Scheme of 'Russian' History and the Problem of a Rational Organization of the History of the East Slavs," Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences (1965): 4-24.

historian writing about the history of Cossacks. Hrushevsky's piece was referred to as the "golden standard in its field," and a contribution to which "Russian historians cannot remain indifferent."<sup>19</sup>

Hrushevsky referred to the modern-Russia-centered view of the region's history, similar to Putin's, as a "usual, widely accepted presentation of 'Russian' history" but argued it was illogical and irrational. He places the word *Russian* in parenthesis when referring to individuals of Russian nationality. He believes it is incorrect to use the term "Russian history" because it illogically includes independent histories of its neighbors, referring to Ukraine and Belarus, as well as other countries of Eastern Europe and Eurasia today.

Because he wrote his essay in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hrushevsky unknowingly debunked Putin's arguments for territorial and cultural unification between today's Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, which President Putin made more than a 100 years later. Hrushevsky clarifies that the well-known, accepted version of Russian history begins with a pre-history of Eastern Europe, colonization by non-Slavs (or what Putin refers to in his essay as the Golden Horde), and then formation of Kievan State. According to Hrushevsky, this fast-forward version of the region's history focuses greatly on the development of Kievan State after the 12<sup>th</sup> century, jumps to the rule of Volodimir the Great, and then to the 14<sup>th</sup> century's Principality of Moscow. Thereafter, it mostly focuses on Moscow State and the Russian Empire and its prominence from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward.

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<sup>19</sup> Hrushevsky, "Traditional Scheme," Introduction.

The point Hrushevsky makes is that the Russian version of the region's history understandably focuses on the development and formation of states and governments on Rus's territory. But that version omits claims that, prior to the existence of the Great Russian Empire, other parts of the region were populated and ruled by different and separate governing polities (as I noted earlier). While they may have experienced similar and connected historic events, each subregion had its own, distinct history. Hrushevsky points out that although Russian historians consider the histories of Ukrainian-Rus and Belarusian lands that were outside the Moscow State, such as the formation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, they mention them only on the periphery of what led to the formation of the Russian Empire or as part of the buildup to or basis for the history of the "Russian State." Hrushevsky sees a pattern in how this history of the "Russian State" was transformed into a history of the social and cultural structure.

He also believes that it evolved into a grander scheme when "'Russian history" tended to become the history of the Great Russian people," thereby retaining the same scheme in its main aspects while omitting other less important ones that did not pertain to all but only some of the people in the region being studied—effectively omitting cultural items that pertained to smaller groups. Hrushevsky argues that these omissions were perhaps made, in large part, out of convenience—but it does not excuse them.

One of the more egregious examples is the link, made by the Moscow scribes (as Hrushevsky refers to them), between the southern tribes of the Kievan State and their political structure and culture, with the Volodimir–Moscow principality of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. He believes they make it seem like the second is a point of connection and continuation of the first. He argues that the "Volodimir Period" and the "Kievan Period"

are separate and should not be united genetically as they often were by Moscow history scribes of his time; he insists they are genetically quite different.<sup>20</sup>

Further, Hrushevsky believed the link was irrational because the Kievan period was not a continuation of the Volodimir period since there is no genetic connection between them. He clarified that the Kievan State, its laws, and culture were the basis for one nationality, the Ukrainian-Rus, while the Volodimir–Moscow State was the basis for the creation of another nationality, the Great Russian nationality. This was based in part on historians’ insistence that Dnieper Rus and Northeast Rus were two different phenomena, and their histories were the result of two separate parts of the Russian nationality. Hrushevsky argued these should be referred to as two different nationalities and not two parts of one nationality, as argued by Putin. Hrushevsky underscored that in fact the Kievan Period did not pass into the Volodimir–Moscow Period but into the Galician–Volhynian Period, and then into Lithuanian–Polish period of 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were closely tied to parts of the settlements and groups that were tied to part of the Belarusian genealogical part of the region and people.

This historical detail of the different tribes is evidence that not all clans or groups merged into one through marriage, following disputes, or via trade agreements. They did not all come together in Moscow as a point of reunification and consolidation, as Putin states.<sup>21</sup> Hrushevsky makes a point to conclude that the ethnographic and historical proximity of Ukrainian and Great Russian nationalities should not lead to confusing or merging the two. Each one lived and transformed independently despite having

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<sup>20</sup> Hrushevsky, “Traditional Scheme,” 8.

<sup>21</sup> Putin, *Historical Unity*.

encounters and dealings with each other. Putin mentions these encounters in his essay: “Members of the princely and ‘boyar’ clans would change service from one prince to another, feuding but also making friendships and alliances.”<sup>22</sup> These interactions do not constitute a conversion into one, or that the two parts were identical.

Furthermore, without hitching the history of the Great Russian nationality to Ukrainian or Belarusian roots, it seemed to historians like Hrushevsky that the Great Russian nationality lacked a history of its own prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century before it began to interact with other groups. Hrushevsky argues that under this traditional scheme of merging nations into “oneness,” the Belarusian or “Byelorussian” nationality “is lost completely in the histories of the Kievan State, the Volodimir-Moscow State, and in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.”

Shedding some light on the intricacies of the Lithuanian and the Slav element of the history of formation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Hrushevsky clarifies that there were two nationalities: the Ukrainian-Rus and the Byelorussian. He noted that the Byelorussian lands, as opposed the Ukrainian-Rus lands, were much more closely connected to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Byelorussian lands played an influential role in the sociopolitical system, laws, and culture of the Grand Duchy, and were part of it until its end. This separates Ukrainian-Rus and the Grand Russian nationalities from ancestors who eventually evolved to form the Belarussian genealogical nationality, further drawing an important separation from Russia’s genealogical lineage, contrary to Putin’s claim. In fact, Hrushevsky claimed the Byelorussian nationality strongly influenced the Ukrainian-Rus nationality with its laws and culture, which stemmed from

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<sup>22</sup> Putin, *Historical Unity*.

Kievan State, but that this influence was one-sided, that is, the Ukrainian-Rus received Byelorussian influence, but the influence was not mutual.

Therefore, it is logical to include the history of the Grand Duchy in the history of the Belarusian nationality, but not fair or accurate to include the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the history of modern Russia or of the Russian nationality. Just because it was near the territory and had interaction and historic relation with the history of the former, the latter cannot simply assume it as part of its overall history.



Figure 1. Map of Belarus

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Belarus>.

Some historians argue that Belarus at the end of the nineteenth century had a chance to align itself with the Baltics. In chapter 7, titled “Building Blocks of National Identity,” in his book, *“Belarus: The last European Dictatorship”* Andrew Wilson notes the city of Polatsk was mentioned as early as 862 by historical chroniclers and was the only powerful city in the area for almost two centuries. He adds that if Belarus (though it was not yet known as such) had consolidated in Polatsk, its then most powerful city, “it is possible to imagine the three east Slavic nations developing separately around ‘their’ river systems: Belarus closer to the Baltic Sea and Scandinavia; Ukraine on the Dnieper flowing south; and Russia on the Volga...”<sup>23</sup> By that point, Belarus had evolved through three centuries as at least a community, though not a formal nation. As far as its political alliances, Wilson notes that at the time of the Bolshevik revolution’s success in 1917, Belarusians had at least two other options rarely mentioned by modern historiographers.

This means its relationship with Russia had not been yet cemented as such. Its options included loyalty to historical Litva based on Catholic faith that appeared out of the Polish rebellion – and the second known as “west-Russism,” which supported the tsar and Russian Orthodoxy. This underscores that at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, though some of today’s Belarus belonged to Russia, part of what was Belarus had existed as a place and a people. Belarus was therefore able to establish trade and political alliances with other neighbors besides Russia, meaning that its patron-client relationship was not limited to Russia, and it took convincing on the part of the Bolsheviks to bring Belarus into the Soviet Union. It is important to note that Belarusians’ ancestors had a

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<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Belarus*, 192.



different history, a combination of historical origins and linguistic backgrounds than those predecessors of ethnic Russians. This underscores two important points. One is that Vladimir Putin's argument that Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia are the same people is a gross generalization; and that while the people may have inhabited a large adjacent area known for a period of time as "Kiev Rus," not only did this territory encompass different groups of people at different times, there is evidence to suggest that the polities that ruled it did so separately. It also suggests that polities that later culminated as Belarus, such as Polatsk, dominated the trade and political landscape earlier, in the 800s and 900s, only later joined political unions/treaties that led to Belarus's formation as a Soviet Republic. This information reinforces that Belarusian people are not descendants of ethnic Russians and points to a manufactured or artificially boosted cultural and ethnic "sameness" between the two by Russian and Belarusian governments, likely for mutual political benefit.

### Chapter III.

#### Belarus's Dilemma: National Destiny or Soviet Power

My second hypothesis was that Lukashenka and Putin have strategically used the clientelist relationship to benefit their political agendas. But before delving into what has contributed to the modern dynamic of authoritarianism between the two leaders, it is important to review how Belarus joined the USSR and how that history served as the building block for the close connection between the two nations and its people through culture and symbols. This will help later explain how Putin and Lukashenka continue to use some of their populations' nostalgia for that time as a tool for their grip on power and the endurance of their alliance. This close relationship between Russia and Belarus did not appear by accident. It was honed during decades of conditioning. In this chapter, I will focus on the years prior to the Bolshevik revolution and process of Belarus joining the USSR and then briefly discuss the role Belarus played in 1941-1945 of World War II and Germany's invasion of the region.

Before looking at the process of how Belarus joined the Soviet Union during its formation, I discuss some historic events that point to the fact that some political leaders and groups of Belarus's populations may not have been as in favor of its accession to the USSR. There were a few important showcase moments of independent political efforts to stand up an independent republic by Belarusians before the Soviet Union was formed that are important to mention for connecting the origins and today's apparent resurrection of

Belarus's independent identity from Russia, which Putin and Lukashenka continue to deny.

### Precursors to Belarus's Independent Identity

Wilson describes the period before Belarus joined the USSR in its formation as traumatic, noting that both Soviet and Belarusian nationalist historians describe it as a time of conflict between the “national destiny” or Soviet power.<sup>24</sup> Wilson notes that during the first World War, Belarus attempted to build a nation, but the occupying German forces apparently never backed the Belarusian cause as they did the Ukrainian cause in 1918. According to Wilson, “White” forces were less important in Belarus than in Ukraine. He adds that like Poland, Belarus faced an extra rival in the Lithuanian national movement, which targeted Vilna. Wilson's brief account of this period points to Belarus's difficult position of being unable to secure its independence without support from a stronger partner and instead being forced to choose between possibly a more violent conflict with the Bolsheviks or joining their plans for a union. Right before it joined as a founding member republic of the USSR, Belarus lost much of its territory to Poland and Lithuania, including the city of Vilna and almost all the former tsarist guberniya surrounding the city.

Wilson notes that though some Belarusians attempted to convene an All-Belarusian Congress following the October 1917 seizure of Petrograd, Bolsheviks disrupted it, preventing Belarus from growing its nationalist campaign. They resumed

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<sup>24</sup> Wilson, *Belarus*, 140.

their efforts but were then interrupted by the German advance in 1918 that resulted in an occupation of Belarus that led to a unification of Minsk and Vilna Belarusians in a fight for independence and the eventual establishment of the Belarusian National Republic (BNR). The BNR relationship with Russia was up in the air and according to Wilson, the Belarusians had no real populist socialist party capable of combining national and social messages. The BNR did succeed in forming an independent Republic, established schools and even a university, though only other new European states had recognized it as a nation at the time. Wilson argues that because there was no national movement focused on nation-building and most leaders were focused on their own region or “voblast,” and when the all-Russian Constituent assembly elections took place in November 1917, the Belarusian parties’ support was dismal at 0.6 percent. After continued splits among its leadership and a brief attempt to fight against the Red Army, the BNR ended and many of its leaders returned to the Belarusian Soviet Republic, per Wilson’s account.<sup>25</sup> The BNR lacked the strength to sustain itself and the Soviet troops arrived in Minsk on December 11, 1918. Wilson notes that Bolsheviks did not have a clear plan regarding Belarus at first. In fact, there was a presumption by some that the territory would simply be just another part of the new Russia.

Wilson suggests Belarus joining the union as a separate republic and not just being absorbed into Russia was in the end a strategic move by Lenin who got the idea originally from Anton Lutskevich, who was a leader in the Belarusian independence movement and later became the Prime Minister of the Belarusian Democratic Republic

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<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *Belarus*, 144.

during World War I but was later persecuted by the Soviets. Although Lutskevich proposed the idea of Belarus as continuing to stay territorially sovereign but form a union with Russia, Lenin thought it would be better that a “buffer” be established to fight the war with Poland instead of Russia and expanded the borders of what became the first Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Interestingly, some 70 years later that decision became crucial as it may have helped Belarus establish independence after the fall of the Soviet Union.

According to Wilson, the Bolsheviks’ most notable act in the 1920s was allowing the BSSR to widen its territory (Map 2). But Moscow primarily did this to establish a stronger protective layer around Russia and to counterbalance the Ukrainian Soviet Republic as there was suspicion of anti-Russia sentiment among Ukraine’s leadership. It is logical to conclude that Russia was thinking in terms of strategic defense, given the recent WWI, but it was one of marked quid-pro-quo moves in the Russia-Belarus relationship. Even at that point, Russia was acting strategically and using its “client” to protect itself from potential invasion. Though unpopular at the time, the redrawing of the border and giving Belarus more territory was a strategic trade-off that both appeased Belarus and protected Russia. According to Wilson, records show that those who previously lived on Russian territory voiced their disagreement with having to live on the side of the BSSR after the redrawing of borders, particularly due to new language requirements and other bureaucratic issues.<sup>26</sup> The process of establishing Belarus’s new social, educational, and cultural parameters was considerably painful and delayed, as the

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<sup>26</sup> Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and The Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 105-107.

entity charged with the task “Inbelkult” (Institute of Belarusian Culture), was set up relatively late in the USSR organizational process, in 1922. The establishment of “Inbelkult” that later became the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, was the center for Soviet-Belarusization, led by historian Usevalad Ihnatowski and Vatslaw Lastowski. Wilson calls this process nation-building from the top because it did not appear to be thought through in detail. The threat of imposition of the Belarusian language was markedly unpopular among the peasant villages that had been Russian and would now belong to the BSSR. Much of the decision-making process was quickly taken away from the Belarusian leadership and made from Moscow. The Soviet Belarusian intellectuals were purged, according to Wilson.<sup>27</sup> Wilson quoted Anders Rudling’s “Battle Over Belarus: The Rise and Fall of the Belarusian National Movement, 1906-1931,” in stating that ‘The purges led to the demise of 90 percent of Belarusian intelligentsia.’ He added that after a show trial was organized against the Union for the Liberation of Belarus in 1930, 108 people were arrested, including Lastowski, and the chronicler of the west-Russians Aliaksandr Tsvikevich. Only 20 of approximately 238 members of Belarus’s cultural elite survived. This process, according to Wilson, had all the signs of Sovietization by coercion, as during the Great Purges in 1937-41 between 100,000 and 250,000 were murdered and buried in the woods outside Minsk at Kurapaty.<sup>28</sup> Through this brief recount of the main events that marked BSSR coming into being as such, the Sovietization process was a tragic imposition of the Soviet leaders’ views on how the integration of the new republics should be administered, viewed and organized with a

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<sup>27</sup> Wilson, *Belarus*, 157, per Wilson’s reference to Latyshonak and Miranovich in *Historiya Belarusi*, 168.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, *Belarus*, 158.

focus on quashing dissent or any questioning of authority of Moscow. With Vilnius and its region being pushed back and forth between Belarus and Lithuania by Moscow in a matter of months, a population unclear about which republic or country it lived in, and new, Belarusian Academy of Sciences rewriting the origins of the how it all came to be as in other neighboring republics, it is no wonder the real history and its details of Belarus had faded and any part of history that favored Russia's dominance over the Belarus territory preserved and likely glorified to fit the purpose of the new nation with a centralized government.

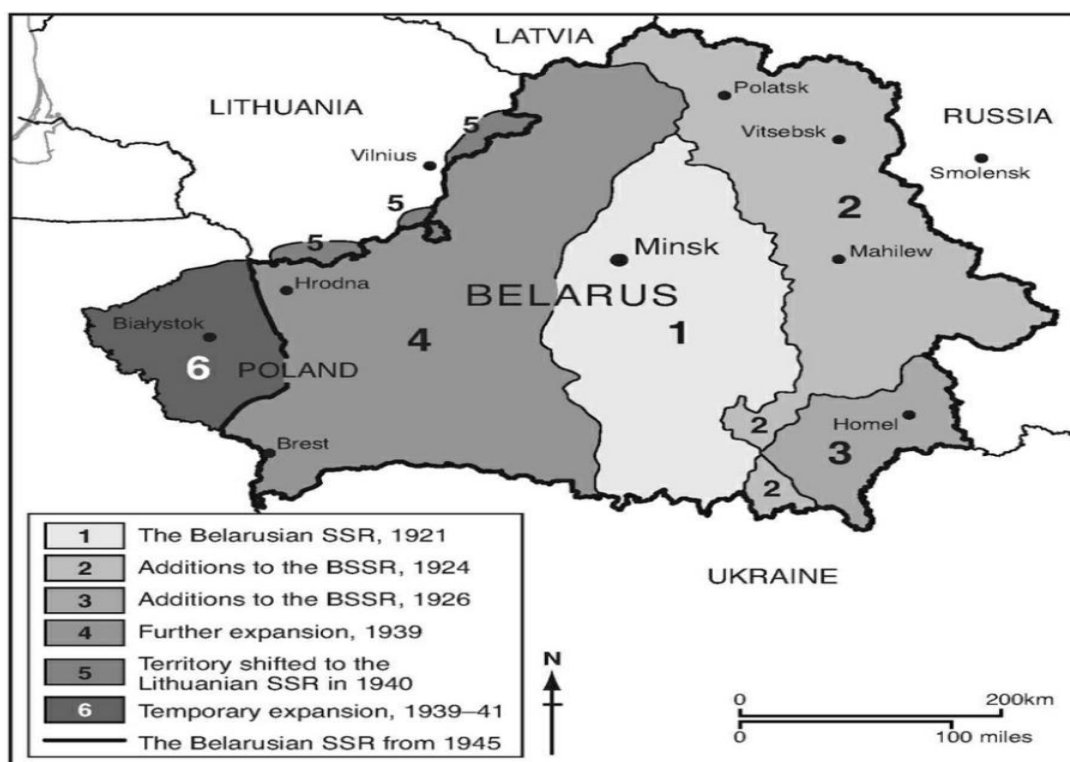


Figure 2. Changing Shape of Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), 1921-1945.

Source: Wilson, *Belarus*, 106.

Lenin's strategic calculus in making Belarus a buffer for Russia's future invasions turned out to be correct. Belarus's value to the Kremlin increased during World War II and after. During WWII, its role as a front-line defense resulted in an estimated half of its population being killed or enslaved in Nazi concentration camps, and most of its cities being nearly leveled; Minsk was razed almost to the ground. Belarus was considered one of the epicenters of the Holocaust, with an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 Jews who were killed or died in what is currently modern Belarus.<sup>29</sup> Post-war statistics used by Wilson estimated that 2.2 million local inhabitants died in the war, with some 810,000 of these are estimated to have been combatants, although not all of them were from Belarus. Even by conservative estimates, no other European country suffered such a high percentage of population loss as did Belarus. An additional 380,000 were forced to serve in labor camps in Germany. Belarus was known as the home of the largest partisan movement, reported to be 370,000 by mid-1944.<sup>30</sup>

Although Belarus's sacrifices were immense during the war, from a political standpoint one could say it was the single largest investment Belarus has made in its relationship with Russia, one that paid massive dividends in compensation and political and economic favor. Lukashenka later used that favor as a tool to remain in power. That brings us to a discussion of the second hypothesis: the clientelist alliance between Lukashenka and Putin enabled them to benefit their respective political agendas, and in fact gave Lukashenka tools to thwart any threat to his authoritarian rule.

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<sup>29</sup> D. B. Meltser and Vladimir Levin, *The Black Book with Red Pages: Tragedy and Heroism of Belorussian Jews* (Cockeysville, MD: Vestnik Information Agency, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, *Belarus*, 165.



### How Lukashenka Propagandized “The Great Patriotic War”

After the war, Moscow poured resources and industry into Belarus to rebuild its economy and infrastructure, after which it became known as one of the more economically stable republics. Not surprisingly, Minsk’s political and economic structures were directly linked to Moscow for several decades as a result.

Belarus had protected Russia in World War II, slowing down the Nazi invasion into Russia by serving literally using its land and people as a shield. After the war, the Communist Party was assertive in including Belarus in its “partisan heroes of WWII” narrative, downplaying the killing of Jews and certain civilians, and combining Belarus battlefield losses with those of the rest of the republics.

Russia clearly saw the advantages of using its client state as a buffer during the war, and the Kremlin undoubtedly recognized Belarus’s potential in future conflicts. Belarus proved instrumental to Russia’s ability to protect its borders, and even now it serves as a buffer between Russia and Europe. There is no denying Russia has used Belarus as a line of defense from attacks, as a political ally that has served as a protective layer from European politics, and a safe corridor to other targets such as Ukraine.

In addition, I would venture that the sacrifices made by the Belarusian people collectively, in the name of what they viewed as their homeland, bore a strong sense of nationalistic pride from having shared and endured such a tragic war both as a people and sharing it with other republics. To compensate for taking these WWII atrocities, Belarus became a model of successful post-WWII reconstruction efforts, given generous resources by the Kremlin as compensation for the war—another benefit of being a faithful client. This view is supported by David Marples and Varanika Laputska who

examined how shared historical memories of WWII played a defining role in the formation of a common national identity. They also analyzed how the same common historic memory was used by Lukashenka as the cornerstone of his propaganda and a focus on loyalty to that historic memory as a means to alienate the opposition.<sup>31</sup> Marples and Laputska argue that it is due to the combination of this shared historic memory of WWII and appealing to the population's perception of that period as being an experience of common suffering, that Lukashenka won the support of some sectors of society. I will expand on this in the next chapter.

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<sup>31</sup> E. Korosteleva, I. Petrova, and A. Kudlenko, (eds.), *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century: Between Dictatorship and Democracy*, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies (London: Routledge, 2023), 16.

## Chapter IV.

### Post-World War II Russia–Belarus: Loyalty and Benefits

To begin this chapter, I will discuss how the clientelist relationship with Russia after World War II propelled Belarus to its position as one of the most economically and politically compensated and supported republics. Then I will discuss how the Soviet leadership in both Moscow and Minsk used the memory of WWII sacrifices to influence the collective memory and identity of the two republics in relation to each other.

The Soviet era solidified the relationship between Russia and Belarus and continues to affect their alliance today. Belarus was conditioned to be a loyal ally of the Kremlin in the years following World War II, with several Belarusians acting as loyal subjects to the Soviet General Secretary (Stalin, followed by Khrushchev and Brezhnev). The partisans built a history around their greatness in building a united home for 15 different nations, and saving the world by defeating Hitler, according to history taught in Soviet schools. Belarus was viewed as a key player in the growing Soviet empire and a force to be reckoned with in Europe, helping push Moscow's agenda in the international arena, including through acquiring a separate seat in the United Nations since 1945.

The Cold War with the United States was another key motivator uniting various parts of the USSR against one common enemy by promoting national pride through military strength, propaganda, culture, sports, and economic strength. As the Communist Party began to raise its own elite, Belarus produced a respected group of "exemplary" citizens. There were leaders like the First Secretary of the Communist Party and then

Deputy Chairman of the Politburo, Kiryla Mazuraw, and writers like Mikhail Zimianin, editor of the top national Soviet print daily *Pravda*. Belarus was the production center of partisan literature and propagandistic films via its Belarus Film studio. It was also a hub of the industrialization efforts, linking the interdependent economies of the Warsaw Pact. These achievements, and the involvement of Belarus and its people as part of the Communist vanguard, resulted in at least two generations of Belarusian citizens who were born during and after World War II who did not know a different world from that of Belarus as a leading republic of a thriving USSR by the early 1980s.

Through this effort, the Soviet Communist Party fostered an important sense of camaraderie and connection between its people, which contributed to a shared historic memory and complicity during the post-war economic reconstruction and growth periods. Marples and Laputska argue that the regime's venture into historical past is part of its self-justification as well as its present and future tie to Putin's Russia. They stated that Lukashenka extended the propagandization of the Great Patriotic War from Soviet times.

The authors also explained that during the Khrushchev years in the Soviet Union (1960-1964) and especially under Brezhnev (1964-1982), the anniversary of WWII was harnessed for propaganda purposes, "initially to legitimize the Communist State and provide it with *a raison d'être* that supersedes the original focus on the October Revolution."<sup>32</sup> The authors refer to the designation of Brest Citadel as a "Hero Fortress" in 1965 and Minsk as a "Hero City" in 1974, as examples of these Soviet-era commemorations 20 years after the end of the war as a way to renew the population's

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<sup>32</sup> Korosteleva, Petrova, & Kudlenko, *Belarus*, 19.

patriotism and the continuing commemorations and dedications of memorials that continue in modern day. On these occasions, Lukashenka dresses in the military uniform of a general, saluting the parading troops, then followed by a remembrance speech. Marples and Laputka point out that the Lukashenka regime narrative of the WWII experience conveniently omits evidence of anti-Semitism among the partisan regiments during WWII and ignores other underground groups that were anti-Soviet.

These examples and the propagandizing of WWII historic memory are relevant because Lukashenka, when he was a new leader in 1994 who assumed power in an independent Belarus, inherited the Great Patriotic War rituals as a basis of state propaganda, as did Putin later. Both have used it to demonize Nazi occupation forces and tie that demon to modern pro-democratic opposition and international governments or civil society that supports democracy.

## Chapter V.

### The Rejection of Democracy and Retrenchment Into Authoritarianism

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Belarus did not transition to democracy, instead choosing to side with Russia, continuing to depend on client benefits from its patron state, and strengthening its clientelist bond. In this chapter I discuss whether certain internal factors such as the state of the Belarusian economy, and external pressures such as color revolutions in neighboring countries, Europe, and the U.S. affected the regime and its bond with Russia.

Unlike other post-Soviet neighbors during late 1990s and early 2000s, the Belarusian economy at first showed a respectable level of economic growth. Some argue that a conservative approach to reforms was the right move because it prevented the economy from going into freefall and buttressed it against a crisis that was deeply felt by consumers in most other post-Soviet republics transitioning during the 1990s.

Belarus adopted a limited number of privatization reforms after independence, but those it launched before 1995 were reversed by the end of the decade. With only 20% of its GDP coming from its private sector, compared to 67% on average across its neighboring counterparts,<sup>33</sup> the economy grew by 8.1% on average per capita from 1996 to 2008, according to the World Bank.<sup>34</sup> Korosteleva, et al., note that Russia's subsidies stimulated growth in production, and consumption contributed to the growth.

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<sup>33</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Annual Report 2005. file:///C:/Users/MyPC/Downloads/financial-report-2005-english.pdf

<sup>34</sup> Korosteleva, Petrova, and Kudlenko, *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, 67.

Korosteleva, et al., also found that during the initial transition from the centrally planned administrative system, most Central Europe and Baltic states (CEBs) began ambitious reforms by aligning themselves economically with the European Union while also implementing massive deregulation, privatization, and liberalization policies. However, in an attempt to avoid the system shock of sudden reforms, Belarus maintained its main trade and investment with Russia as its partner and exports customer. In 1994-1995, some partial open market reforms were passed, but compared to some transitioning neighbors in similar conditions, including Russia, output declined and unemployment rose.

In 1994, Lukashenka won the presidency on a populist ticket that appealed to voters who yearned for things to go back to the way they were. That jelled with the energy and mining industries that are the backbone of Belarus's economy. Authors [Aleś Alachnovič](#) and Julia Korosteleva observe that instead of pushing through the hard times that came with reforms, and expanding them to transition Belarus to a free market economy, Lukashenka reversed those reforms in 1996, setting the stage for a state-controlled capitalist economic model for the next decade.<sup>35</sup> As in Soviet times, Lukashenka continued to use the economy as a tool to ensure stability and retention of control. Alachnovič and Korosteleva note that during his first few years in office, in close coordination with Russia, Lukashenka set up a system of regular state intervention by

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<sup>35</sup> Aleś Alachnovič, and Julia Korosteleva, "Stolen Decades: The Unfulfilled Expectations of the Belarusian Economic Miracle," Chapter 5, in Korosteleva, et al., *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*.

injecting public-funded investment and applying inflation controls while benefiting from direct and indirect subsidies from Russia in imports and favorable gas prices. This approach appeared to be mutually beneficial for several years for both countries.

According to Astlund, Russia's yearly subsidies to Belarus amounted to approximately US\$6 billion, approximately 19% of its US\$32 billion GDP in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>36</sup> By maintaining the status quo, Belarus avoided a contraction in national production and had a reliable customer for its most productive industries in exchange for cheap gas, which helped continue its economic growth. Since Belarus has always depended on foreign trade, the curated boost in production of its exports helped stimulate growth.

Russia and Belarus also established the Customs Union in 1995, which resulted in an even wider range of benefits for both. Korosteleva and Lawson concluded that Belarus took advantage of cheap loans, and combined state ownership with control measures, which all together created an illusion of a fast-growing economy that some political scientists called the Belarusian "economic miracle."

Besides economic benefits, this growth period of approximately 10 years appears to have enabled Lukashenka to establish a base of voter supporters as well as an inner circle of loyalists whom he placed in positions of power. The process of turning public industry and banking into a series of quasi-state-owned enterprises created a new Belarusian elite of rich cronies, including those in the security and military forces, who built a strong security and support network around Lukashenka. As Belarusian analyst

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<sup>36</sup> Astlund, "Break Lukashenka."



Artyom Shraibman said in an interview: “Their mutual support has enabled President Lukashenka to survive the peak of the political crisis that engulfed the country following the (2020) contested presidential election.”<sup>37</sup>

Some of these long-term loyal figures in the cabinet have moved through different positions in the Lukashenka administration for almost 20 years, and continue to insulate him as the leader. Shraibman pointed out that even before the disputed 2020 election, Lukashenka prepared by appointing his most trusted former security and military officials to prominent civilian positions. He appointed former head of Belarus’s defense ministry, Roman Golovchenko, as prime minister. Former KGB operative Igor Sergeenko became head of the presidential administration at the end of 2019, and one of Lukashenka’s longest associates, Viktor Sheiman, who has served in high security-related positions, became his unofficial chief advisor. If they become disloyal or disgruntled, insiders are replaced quickly and often persecuted. *Siloviki*, as they are known in Russian, are rotated regularly between positions and are encouraged to monitor and report on each other. Lukashenka rotated out former State Security Council Valery Vakulchik and Minister of the Interior Yury Karayev in 2020, removing them out of Minsk and assigning them as inspectors in provincial regions of Belarus.

Shraibman believes that Lukashenka has used the relationship with Putin, although fraught at times, to help Lukashenka remain in power. Shraibman said that although Lukashenka may have considered shifting his ideological stance after the economic benefits of post-Soviet era dried up and Russia changed its economic and trade

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<sup>37</sup> Artyom Shraibman, *Lukashenka’s Vicious Circle*, November 17, 2020. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/83247>

strategy, Lukashenka found a way to bounce back. It is not just Russia that keeps Lukashenka propped up, it is the man himself, who has figured out strategies to use the patron to continue fulfilling his overall goal: to keep his regime in power.

## Chapter VI.

### Shared History as an Authoritarian Tool

The transition from the USSR to independence, and to reconcile their shared past, forced Belarus to come to terms with the myths versus realities of its national identity and its future. One could argue that Belarus is still in the process of that transition. In this chapter, I analyze how Belarus's clientelist relationship with Russia transformed after Belarus became independent.

### Propaganda

It is important to discuss the importance of symbolism and the transition of propaganda from Soviet to independent times. Lukashenka built his political career and won the presidency using Soviet nostalgia as a campaign tool to invoke nationalism among a certain portion of the voter population.

Much of Soviet nationalism was built on a sense of pride that the Soviet army defeated Hitler. Lukashenka, and later Putin, bolstered that pride, maintaining it with nostalgic memories of shared sacrifice and bittersweet victory in a conflict in which more soldiers from the Soviet Union died than from any other country. Both have expanded nationalist pride in their governing policies, creating an ongoing pro-World War II memory campaign that has been adapted in their education curriculums. Both leaders continue to spin it into a political brand.

Both have instilled in newer generations of Russians and Belarusians memories of the “Great Patriotic War” as a central point of state propaganda.<sup>38</sup> The aim of this propaganda was to tie what is perceived as most sacred in the Belarusian identity to Lukashenka, and in Russia to Putin—even though both men are too young to have fought in WWII themselves. This tactic is a chapter in the Communist Party playbook which both have resurrected from their childhoods to appeal to their base and invest in a new generation of supporters. Lukashenka has conveniently omitted wartime internal violence by the Red Army, Stalinist terror, and persecution of dissenting or opposing views, instead adopting repressive tactics, intimidation, and intolerance which, in both countries, is punished by persecution.

### Symbols

Author Natalya Chernyshova noted that Lukashenka assumed the public mantle of leader in the Belarus-Russia “integration project.”<sup>39</sup> Like Lukashenka, who returned to using the Belarusian red and green flag from Soviet republic times, Putin also recycled Soviet-era symbols such as adopting new words to the melody of the Soviet national anthem and replacing it as the official anthem in 2000. Lukashenka decreed that Russian would be a state language, along with Belarusian, making it easy to maintain a connection with Russia on social and cultural levels.

More importantly, the revival of WWII as the single most important event in history has helped both leaders put a name and face on an old ghost that many believe

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<sup>38</sup> Korosteleva, et al., *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Natalya Chernyshova, “The Soviet Roots of the 2020 Protests,” Chapter 3, in Korosteleva, Petrova and Kudlenko, *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, 67.

took taken away loved ones: Fascism and Naziism. Naming any government opponent as a “Nazi” reinforces an excuse put forth by Putin, who launched his war on Ukraine in order to “de-Nazify” that country. Although that narrative lacks legitimacy to an informed and educated public, for a certain demographic with little access to independent media or pro-democracy information—as is the case in Belarus—a return of the Nazi threat may encourage that demographic to perceive the return of a Soviet-like political rule as a desirable solution.

## Chapter VII.

### Lukashenka's Resistance to Color Revolutions and Western Influence

A wave of peaceful, continuous, often spontaneously organized protests that became known as “color revolutions” swept through the former Soviet republics in the early and mid-2000s. Their aim was to reignite hope in a democratic future, even as autocratic governments tried to fend off any opposition. While the protests eventually succeeded in bringing about change in countries like Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, and eventually Ukraine, others were only partially effective or not at all.

Belarus and Russia led the effort to thwart color revolutions by blocking the movement through the use of repression and violence; limiting access to the internet, social media, and cellular signals; actively weakening and encumbering civil society; tampering with election results; shuttering independent media outlets; and kicking out international development agencies and civil society.<sup>40</sup> Lukashenka actively limits the presence of international observers during elections, jails opposition politicians and protesters, and has adopted other measures that Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak Brudny refer to as “anti-color revolution” policies.<sup>41</sup> The authors attempt to explain why some authoritarian leaders try to thwart color revolutions, noting that certain political scientists have explained this from a “structure-centered” perspective. They claim it is the presence

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<sup>40</sup> Vitali Silitski, “‘Survival of the Fittest’: Domestic and International Dimensions of the Authoritarian Reaction in the Former Soviet Union Following the Colored Revolutions,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, (2010): 339-350.

<sup>41</sup> Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M. Brudny, “No More Colour! Authoritarian Regimes and Colour Revolutions in Eurasia,” *Democratization*, 19, no. 1 (2012): 1-14.

or combination of conditions: an institutionalized party rule supplemented by either a religious or ideological factor; or a cohesive, coercive apparatus involving the military and security forces; or discretionary state control over the economy. Finkel and Brudny noted that in Russia and Belarus, “the authorities devoted substantial effort toward ideological issues, such as presenting the anti-national and predatory nature of the pro-democracy organization and ideology.”<sup>42</sup> But the authors also noted that it is more about what tactics work to suppress the color revolutions in countries where there is no longer a popular party ideology—such as in Belarus.

Finkel and Brudny turned to Vitali Silitski who cited three forms of pre-emption: tactical pre-emption, which is attacking the opposition and its infrastructure; institutional pre-emption by changing the rules of the political game to benefit the regime; and cultural pre-emption, which is manipulation of public consciousness and collective memory to spread stereotypes and myths about the opposition, the West, and democracy in general.

As I pointed out earlier in this thesis, the Lukashenka government has used a number of these tactics. By invoking historic memory and creating emotional attachments to World War II, Lukashenka created an enemy using the familiar fear of Nazism, and propagated it as the new face of the opposition.

He has used focused force against protests, arresting protesters and torturing them behind bars. He has persecuted and pushed opposition leaders and their funding sources out of Belarus. He has sabotaged attempts at a democratic electoral process by encouraging corruption in Belarus institutions. All these tactics are supported by his

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<sup>42</sup> Finkel and Brudny, “No More Colour!”, 1-14.

Russian counterpart who appears to agree with them and has implemented similar tools. Lukashenka was judicious in implementing these preemptive tactics by shrinking independent space and hindering democratic opposition efforts to win back political space through democratic means such as elections and civic activism.

Shraibman believes Russia's help in quashing protests and dissent, as well as loyal military and security forces are the reasons for Lukashenka's successful suppression of the opposition. The measures were effective and, as Silitski notes, the first wave of color revolutions was a brief "intermission" from the overall trend of reaffirming authoritarian regimes in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, to name a few. As opposition attempts to bring down autocrats were successfully quashed, Russia reasserted itself as the regional political hegemon, making strong alliances with autocrats by helping them stay in power.

Meanwhile, Putin's anti-democratic and defensive rhetoric against Western presence and influence has grown stronger as well.<sup>43</sup> As the authoritarian regimes adapt to citizen protests, despite the sizeable democracy contagion effect that scholars credit for its spread, color revolutions have found it increasingly difficult to overcome the impediments put in place by autocratic regimes.

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<sup>43</sup> Leah Gilbert, "Regulating Society After the Color Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of NGO Laws in Belarus, Russia, and Armenia," *Democratizatsiya*, 28, no. 2 (2020): 305-332.



## Chapter VIII.

### Rekindling Nationalist Unity

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2021, Belarus was one of five nations that voted against the UN resolution condemning Russia's actions. Oddly, however, in 2014 Lukashenka had offered Minsk as a location for dialogue in search of a solution to Russia's annexation of Crimea while offering support for separatists in Donbass. At the time, Russia had withdrawn its gas deals and significantly decreased economic incentives, instead turning to exports from China for several years. Lukashenka, worried about his own survival, offered Belarus as the "regional security donor."<sup>44</sup>

By 2021, Lukashenka was isolated from the international community after his fraudulent 2020 election and massive, violent crackdown on the opposition. He had apparently chosen to remain in power at all costs, and the only ally he could find was Russia. Although he reportedly continued to press Putin for improved economic benefits, as part of that deal Lukashenka had to give up control over a portion of his foreign policy. As a result, he found himself back in a client-patron dead-end with Putin. Lukashenka has today allowed Russian troops into Belarus and has become Putin's co-conspirator.

Two years into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Lukashenka continues to be tied to conditions set by Putin while also providing military, logistical, and other support to Russia. In a statement issued at a special meeting of the Permanent Council of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Slunkin and Wilson note that the

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<sup>44</sup> P. A. Slunkin, and A. Wilson, "How to Train Your Dictator: Putin's Control Over Lukashenka," March 16, 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-to-train-your-dictator-putins-control-over-lukashenka/>.

EU emphasized that the regime, “as co-aggressor, bears full responsibility for the loss of life, injuries and destruction.”<sup>45</sup>

The revived connection with Russia as a result of Belarus support for Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has rekindled some unity between the two isolated authoritarian leaders. Belarusian analysts report that Belarusians’ trust in the authorities and in state institutions increased by 10% since the start of the war. According to polls published in the Belarusian Change Tracker, in October 2021 the ratio of supporters and opponents of the authorities was approximately 38/62. In May 2022, this indicator changed to 48/52.<sup>46</sup> Opponents of the authorities tend to be highly educated men with higher incomes, who are more likely to live in Minsk. Conversely, supporters are more likely to be less educated women with lower average incomes.<sup>47</sup> Belarus has become increasingly dependent on Russia, and despite initial reticence, ultimately sided with Russia when it invaded Ukraine.

In a 2023 study on the state of democracy in Central Europe and Asia, Freedom House categorized Belarus as a “consolidated authoritarian regime” that held fraudulent elections and severely restricted civil liberties.<sup>48</sup> An emblematic example is Lukashenka’s violent suppression of peaceful protests in 2020 following that rigged reelection. According to the same Freedom House report, Lukashenka’s regime arrested, beat, and tortured tens of thousands, causing hundreds of thousands of Belarusians to

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<sup>45</sup> Slunkin and Wilson, “Train Your Dictator.”

<sup>46</sup> Pavel Slunkin, Artyom Shraibman, Philipp Bikanau, Henadz Korshunau, and Lev Levovsky. “Expert Assessments: Belarus Change Tracker,” December 2022–February 2023. <https://beroc.org/upload/medialibrary/445/4452de96f2a500c200d72d2419ae1a33.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> S. Tsikhanouskaya, “Europe Will Be Safer If Belarus Is Free,” *Economist*, 2 (April 2022).

<sup>48</sup> *Freedom House*. n.d. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-world/2022#PR>

emigrate from the country due to fear of repercussions from the regime. Along with arrests and gross human rights violations connected to events following the 2020 election, the regime has forced into exile thousands of Belarusian democratic actors, including members of civil society, media, politicians, and activists. Approximately 1,500 Belarusians remain unlawfully imprisoned today, and several have died because of abuse or under suspicious circumstances.<sup>49</sup> Lukashenka's repressive measures appear to have had the desired result: the 2020 protests were quashed, and Lukashenka's grip on power remains to this day.

What conclusions can we draw from the 2020 protests, as well as implications for Belarus regarding the future survival of the regime in the next few years? This brings me to some conclusions and thoughts for the future, which appear in the final chapter.

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<sup>49</sup> Korosteleva, Petrova and Kudlenko, *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, 169.

## Chapter IX.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I review the questions and hypotheses posed early in the thesis. From the perspective of clientelist relationships, I analyze the extent to which my research has answered the questions, and supported or disproved my hypotheses.

I identified several defining events that led Belarus and Russia to forge a client relationship. In response to my first question of pivotal events that launched the Russia-Belarus patron-client relationship, I established that reputable historians claim there is compelling evidence that Belarus existed as an independent polity although perhaps not historically known by a specific name or as a sovereign nation.

Belarus survived for centuries alongside its neighbors while demonstrating evidence of its own genealogical heritage, culture, political governance, and language. However, the First World War and ongoing conflicts thereafter complicated Belarus attempts to gain statehood. Its struggle to establish itself as an independent nation was precipitously thwarted by Bolshevik plans to bring Belarus into the Soviet Union. After eventually joining the Soviet Union, Belarus paid its dues by struggling to conform to a Soviet vision of Belarus as a member republic. In the process, it lost anthropological details of its origin, subsumed into Russia's dominant view of how the region formed and came to be. Russia, as the patron, merely acted in its own interests, which included creating for itself a layer of defense against future wars in the form of Belarus.

My first hypothesis states that the Belarus-Russia clientelist interdependent relationship appears to rely on the theory that the people of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus

are one people who share the same history, territory, and genealogy. This theory indeed exists, but I showed by examples of research, historic accounts, and analyses that it is an out-of-balance, interdependent relationship that fits the definition of clientelism. Russia practically forced Belarus to join the USSR, then benefited from Belarus in areas of defense, regional political support, and economic favors.

In return, Russia has conditioned Belarus to provide the support Russia needs. Belarus served as a layer of protection from Poland and Germany following World War I. It was the first to take on Germany when that country invaded during World War II, taking the brunt of destruction and casualties of war.

Belarus has provided an important layer of support for Russia politically and ideologically against the West throughout the era of the Soviet Union. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Belarus remained Russia's economic partner and, while not initially, it now supports Russia logistically and politically during its invasion of Ukraine.

From Belarus's perspective, the benefits are clear: it has a clearly marked territory, even allowed to secede from the Soviet Union. It kept receiving energy-sector incentives and preferential trade deals, which propped up Belarus's economy for the first decade after its independence in 1994.

Belarus has paid a high price, however. In the 1920s and 1930s, the country lost its historic, cultural, and political elite as Russia implemented dominance and control. Belarus lost more people in World War II than any other European country, according to historians, enduring near total destruction of its infrastructure and services.

At the same time, Russia has benefited from Belarus's support for its foreign policy interests in the region. Perhaps not as readily, but Lukashenka did eventually side

with Russia and lent its border to Russia for entry into Ukraine in its invasion of 2022. Belarus has paid as heavy a price, worse than Russia, for this action given that it is significantly less self-sufficient economically than its patron.

In that regard, my research and analysis proved that my second hypothesis is true: in terms of political advantage, Lukashenka and Putin have strategically used the patronship for their mutual overall benefit. However, that enduring grip on power has come at the price of non-recognition and pariah treatment by Western countries.

That affirms my third hypothesis: that the patron-client relationship has created an insular, authoritarian space in Russian and Belarus, in which the patron and client now need each other in many aspects for survival in their authoritarian bubble. In their battle to stay in control, both have ended up sanctioned and ostracized by the rest of the region and many Western leaders. Characteristic of an authoritarian ruler, however Lukashenka has remained in power for 30 years, signaling, perhaps, that for him it is a zero-sum game in the end.

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