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BELARUS UNDER LUKASHENKA

ADAPTIVE AUTHORITARIANISM

Matthew Frear

Belarus under Lukashenka

This book explores the nature of the regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, and who is often characterized as 'the last dictator in Europe'. It discusses how Lukashenka came to power, providing a survey of politics in Belarus in early post-Soviet times, examines how power became personalized under his regime, and considers how he coerced opponents, whilst maintaining good popular support. The book discusses all aspects of politics, including presidential power, the ruling elites, elections, the opposition, and civil society. The author characterizes Lukashenka's rule as 'adaptive authoritarianism', and demonstrates how the regime's avoidance of any ideology, even nationalism, permits great freedom of manoeuvre, enabling pragmatic adaptation to changing circumstances.

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Adaptive Authoritarianism

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Abbreviations

BAP	Belarusian Agrarian Party
BARC	Belarusian Association of Resource Centres
BCDTU	Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions
BIB	Belarusian Independence Bloc
BLP	Belarusian Left Party 'Just World'
BPF	Belarusian Popular Front
BPG	Belarusian Party 'The Greens'
BPL	Belarusian Party of Labour
BPP	Belarusian Patriotic Party
BPR	Belarusian People's Republic
BPW	Belarusian Party of Workers
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRYU	Belarusian Republican Youth Union
BSDH	Belarusian Social Democratic 'Hramada'
BSDP(H)	Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada)
BSDP(PA)	Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's Assembly)
BSSR	Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic
CCDF	Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces
CCP-BPF	Conservative-Christian Party – Belarusian Popular Front
CEC	Central Election Commission
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPB	Communist Party of Belarus
CPI	Consumer Price Index
CU	Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EaP	Eastern Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTUB	Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GONGO	Government organized non-governmental organization
IISEPS	Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies

IMF	International Monetary Fund
KGB	Committee for State Security (*Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*)
LDPB	Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus
MFF	Movement 'For Freedom'
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PBCD	Party 'Belarusian Christian Democracy'
PCB	Party of Communists of Belarus
PFP	Party of Freedom and Progress
RPLJ	Republican Party of Labour and Justice
SDPPA	Social Democratic Party of Popular Accord
UCP	United Civic Party
UDF	United Democratic Forces
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization

1 Introduction

The Republic of Belarus under President Aliaksandr Lukashenka has been frequently dubbed the last dictatorship in Europe and an outpost of tyranny in both the western mass media and politicians' sound bites. While these clichéd phrases may make eye-catching headlines, they are insufficient to provide a genuine understanding of the political processes that have been established in Belarus since Lukashenka was elected president of the former Soviet republic in 1994. Attempts to define the Lukashenka regime have ranged from neo-communist to neo-fascist, from sultanistic to retro-utopian, from demagogical democracy to totalitarian regime (Eke & Kuzio 2000; Goujon 2002: 43; Ioffe 2004: 101; Korosteleva 2003; Zviglyanich 1999).

These definitions have often carried with them the connotation that the regime was doomed to failure; nevertheless it has proved unexpectedly durable. Lukashenka remains the country's first – and so far only – president. When four European Union (EU) foreign ministers penned an op-ed in 2010 that condemned him as 'Lukashenka the loser' (Bildt et al. 2010), they could hardly have imagined that five years later Lukashenka would be hosting the German Chancellor and the French President at a summit in Minsk to discuss the Donbas conflict in neighbouring Ukraine. A regime that might once have been dismissed as a temporary anomaly has turned into a fixture on the political map, becoming a non-democratic hole in the heart of Europe. This book seeks to shed some light into this hole, and in doing do map the political landscape of contemporary Belarus.

A frequent theme that arises in the extant studies of Belarus concerns the apparent paradoxes of the political system in place: popular support but denial of political freedoms, economic growth without market reforms, defence of state sovereignty but attacks on Belarusian nationalism, international isolation with openness to foreign trade and travel, closer integration with Russia but assertions of Europeanness. The actions of the authorities may be glibly dismissed by some as erratic and irrational when viewed in terms of simple dichotomies. This book, however, argues that the non-democratic regime in Belarus has, in fact, followed a relatively consistent, expedient, and pragmatic course of action, by refusing to treat these dichotomies as zero-sum choices. It has drawn on all possible pathways, policies, and orientations open to it at any

given time. This study introduces the model of 'adaptive authoritarianism' as the conceptualization best suited to explaining the successful authoritarian consolidation that has taken place in Belarus. Its overriding primary aim is to maintain the Lukashenka leadership's grip on the levers of power.

This introductory chapter begins by offering the rationale for examining Belarus as a case study for a non-democratic post-Soviet regime. It then provides a brief historical background to Belarus, before laying out a chronological overview of the main political events in the country since independence. Finally, it provides an outline of the structure of the book and how it will explore the concept of adaptive authoritarianism in Belarus.

Why Belarus? The research context

Belarus is a country of nearly 9.5 million inhabitants that is approximately the same size as the island of Great Britain or the state of Kansas and located (by some measures) in the geographical centre of Europe.[1] As one of the 15 newly independent states to emerge onto the world stage with the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, over the past 25 years Belarus has arguably tended to be one the more overlooked and less understood of them. It lacks the size and power of the Russia Federation, the democratic consolidation of the Baltic States, the natural resources of Central Asia and the Caspian basin, the conflicts of the Caucasus, or the post-revolutionary attraction of Ukraine.

While the furrow of contemporary Russian (and to a lesser extent Ukrainian) politics and society has been well ploughed by academics in the West, the field of Belarusian Studies has remained rather fallow by comparison. Interest in Belarus has gradually increased since the turn of the century, however. There have now been a number of books published that are dedicated to the country's politics and Lukashenka himself in particular. These range from hagiographies in English (Parker 2007) to broadly positive studies in Russian (Medvedev 2010; Shevtsov 2005). They include a number of western academic studies (Marples 1999, 2007b; Ioffe 2004, 2014; Wilson 2011) as well as detailed insights from Belarusian analysts themselves (Feduta 2005; Karbalevich 2010).

In part, the increased interest in the West can be attributed to a growing understanding that the dual expansion of the EU and NATO in 2004 was transforming Belarus from an apparently insignificant country on Russia's western frontier to an important neighbour occupying a strategic location on the eastern border of both organizations. There has been a wide range of journal articles and book chapters addressing the perceived geopolitical choices Belarus faces between East and West (e.g. Jarábik & Rabagliati 2007; Koktysh 2003; Korosteleva 2011; Rotman & Veremeeva 2011; White et al. 2016; Yakouchyk 2016) as well as the policies pursued towards Minsk by both the EU (e.g. Guicherd 2002; Gromadzki & Veselý 2006; Ioffe 2011; Korosteleva 2016; Portela 2011) and Russia (e.g. Balmaceda 1999, 2009; Rontoyanni 2002; Danilovich 2006; Deyermond 2004; Drakokhrust &

Furman 2002; Marples 2008; Martynau 2013; Vieira 2017). In light of this coverage of foreign policy issues in the extent literature, this book will instead focus primarily on internal politics in Belarus, which has traditionally attracted less academic attention in comparison to the external dimension.

This book contributes to the scholarly thinking on domestic politics in Belarus in terms of the consolidation of contemporary non-democratic regimes. If the expectation had been that in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, newly independent states like Belarus would inexorably move towards the 'normal' western models of liberal democracy and a market economy, the evidence did not bear that out. Observers stopped asking 'How is [a country's] democratic transition going?' and instead started analysing 'What is happening politically?' (Carothers 2002: 18). The question of how the current political system in Belarus functions in practice, rather than what the political system in Belarus should become, is the issue at the heart of this study. It argues that politics in Belarus cannot be explained away as a straightforward case of developments in Russia or Ukraine writ small. The Lukashenka regime is deserving of dedicated analysis in view of its unpredicted longevity and continued ability to, if not thrive, at least muddle through effectively in the face of internal and external pressures.

In addressing these issues this book does not strive to serve as an apologia for Lukashenka, nor to argue that the system in place in Belarus is a model that others could and should try to emulate. It also seeks to avoid imposing normative assumptions about what political system should be established, taking into account criticism that research into the newly independent states can become 'needlessly partisan polemics', which are either excessively naïve or critical of developments (Rutland 2003: 135–6), as well as the risk of resorting to notions of western superiority and Russian or east European 'otherness' through 'regrettable stereotypes, clichés and caricatures' (Brown 2010: 157).

The book argues that the present regime's adaptive authoritarianism provides an example of 'continuity through change' in so far as Lukashenka has been able to maintain his hold on power by allowing the regime to change and adapt when and where expedient. The regime is not simply a stagnant, Soviet throwback. Equally, any signs of reforms that have taken place should not immediately be interpreted as signs of inexorable democratization. In turn, Lukashenka's detractors in the opposition find it difficult to develop strategies to successfully erode adaptive authoritarianism. This work does not aspire to be an extended political history of Belarus, nevertheless it is important to provide some historical context and this chapter turns to that in the following section.

From Polatsk to *Perestroika*

The history of the Belarusian lands and people is a long and contentious one, overlapping as it does with the historiographies of Russia and Poland in particular. The first history of the Belarusian lands from a Belarusian perspective did not appear until the beginning of the twentieth century (Kotljarchuk 2004: 41).

The term White Rus, the literal translation of the word Belarus, did not appear before the end of the fourteenth century. The 'White' is variously believed to be a synonym for 'free' or 'untouched', or as an indicator of territories that did not have to pay duties to the Tatars and were not under the 'Mongol yoke' in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, or alternatively to indicate territory that had to be rescued from Polish domination and returned to Russia in the eighteenth century (Vakar 1956: 2–3; Wilson 2011: 134–5). 'Rus'', meanwhile, is not derived from Russia in its modern sense, but instead had its origins in the first eastern Slav state of (Kievan) Rus'.

The history of the eastern Slavs and the roots of the contemporary Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in pre-modern Rus' era remains a subject of much debate (Plokhy 2006; Snyder 2003). The national myths for Belarus are often dated back over a millennium, to the Principality of Polatsk, a town located in northern Belarus today, which is said to have enjoyed considerable autonomy within Rus' (Wilson 2011: 4–5). By the late fourteenth century the territory of what is modern Belarus had become part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia, and Samogitia. It was the Ruthenian Slavs who made up the bulk of the population and it was their language which was the principal one used by the duchy's rulers.

Some Belarusian nationalists today would argue these Ruthenians were, in fact, proto-Belarusians speaking an early form of the Belarusian language, however this ignores the modern Ukrainian territories within the Grand Duchy and the fact that there was little uniformity in the many dialects spoken by the Ruthenian Slavs (Plokhy 2006: 111; Vakar 1956: 27–29; Wilson 2011: 36). Today the sixteenth century is often venerated as a Golden Age of Belarusian culture centred in modern Vilnius (Wilson 2011: 37–8; Zaprudnik 1993: 35). Cultural figures such as Frantsysk Skaryna were setting up printing presses and producing the first printed bibles in an eastern Slavic language. The Statutes of the Grand Duchy in the second half of the sixteenth century, an important European legal code, are held up as an example of early Belarusian.

The Kreva Act in 1385 had created a dynastic union between the Grand Duchy and neighbouring Poland, however the duchy had preserved most of its political freedoms. In 1569 the Lublin Treaty created a political union between the two polities, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita*). As a result those political freedoms the Grand Duchy had enjoyed began to be eroded. The influence of Ruthenian eastern Slavs within the duchy started to weaken as the local elites began to be Polonized. This was hastened by the Brest Church Union 30 years later, which increased pressure for inhabitants to convert to Catholicism. The process was only exacerbated as conflict swept the region in the late seventeenth century, with the Deluge and the Great Northern War between Russia and Sweden ravaging the territory of the Grand Duchy within the *Rzeczpospolita* (Vakar 1956: 62–4; Wilson 2011: 43–6).

Eventually, the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century saw the Belarusian lands fall under the control of the Russian Empire for the first time. The change from Polish rule to Russian rule resulted in an intensification

of the pressure against Belarusian cultural and political developments by the mid-nineteenth century. The Statutes of the Grand Duchy were prohibited and the Uniate Church (of which some three-quarters of Belarusians were members at the time) was abolished. At the time many of those who might today be referred to as Belarusians actually called themselves *tuteishyia* or 'locals', neither Russian nor Polish (Pershai 2008).

The anti-tsarist uprisings in 1863–64 included failed insurrections in Belarusian territories targeted at both Polish nationalism as well as Russian imperialism (Vakar 1956: 72). In the aftermath of these uprisings, the concept of some sort of Belarusian nation slowly began to develop, although agreement on what such a national movement should be based on was far from unanimous, ranging as it did from religion to language to class identity (Wilson 2011: 69–83). From 1905 newspapers and books were permitted to be published in Belarusian, and the first codified grammar of modern Belarusian was published in 1918. The first newspaper in the Belarusian language, *Nasha Niva*, began publication in 1906. In this period the nationalist movement *Adradzhenne* (Renaissance) sought to foster national self-determination and educate potential national leaders. Active supports of national emancipation were not thought to number much more than a few thousand people (Vakar 1956: 92). At this time the nationalist ideal was of little interest to the majority of ethnic and linguistic Belarusians, who were rural peasants.

The opportunity to declare the independence of the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) unexpectedly presented itself in March 1918, an 'unsolicited gift of the Russian Revolution … received from the hands of the Austro-German Occupation Army' (Vakar 1956: 103). The modern history of an independent Belarus begins with the short-lived BPR (Wilson 2011: 93–6). The republic lasted a mere ten months and was subservient to the Central Powers, alienating much of the population. The BPR's fate was sealed with the defeat of Germany in World War One and the recreation of an independent Poland. Nevertheless, this premature independence set a precedent and would later take on important symbolic significance.

The Belarusian lands were partitioned between Poland and the Soviet Union during the inter-war period. Western Belarus was granted no autonomy within Poland and authorities sought to root out signs of irredentism. Policies of Polonization and Catholicization were enforced, and the Belarusian provinces were the least developed in the country. Eastern Belarus became the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) and joined the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) established in 1922. According to a Soviet historical interpretation, it is the BSSR, rather than the BPR or the Grand Duchy, which was, in fact, the first state in Belarusian history (Kotljarchuk 2004: 43). Its territory expanded from the counties around the city of Minsk to incorporate previously Russian lands with a Belarusian population and in the 1920s the republic enjoyed a period of Belarusification. This was bought to an abrupt end by the wholesale purges and the cultural cleansing of the Stalin period.

The outbreak of World War Two saw the reunion of Eastern and Western Belarus as Soviet forces occupied Poland in 1939, doubling the size of the BSSR. Vilnius, the centre of Belarusian education and culture, was handed to Lithuania by the Soviet authorities in Moscow. This soon gave way to occupation by Germans in 1941–1944, with Nazi rule wreaking devastating consequences (Marples 1999: 16). One quarter of the pre-war population, or 2.2 million people, were killed. Up to 80 per cent of buildings and infrastructure were destroyed, with 209 out of 270 cities left in ruins. The various guerrilla groups which conducted partisan warfare from the Belarusian forests would later become an important part of the national myth and can today be invoked by both the authorities and the opposition (Goujon 2010).

With victory at the end of the Great Patriotic War, the BSSR settled into the borders that are still used to this day. The post-war years bought reconstruction, modernization, urbanization, industrialization, and improved education for the population, alongside Russification and Sovietization. In the 1980s the BSSR was viewed as a 'shop window of the (relative) benefits of the Socialist system' (Eke & Kuzio 2000: 537) with a high standard of living for the Soviet Union. It also earned the epitaph the 'Vendée of perestroika'[2] for its resistance to change. Independence was thrust on the country with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, with a population who had voted by over 80 percent in favour of a new Union Treaty in March that year and a leadership who had welcomed the August Putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev (Sahm 2001: 183). The Belavezha Accords that sealed the fate the Soviet Union and established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were signed in a dacha in the forests of western Belarus.

From Soviet socialist republic to sovereign state

This book aims to provide an analysis of political developments in contemporary Belarus, rather than simply offer a chronological description of events. As the later chapters in this book will be structured along thematic lines, this section summarizes a timeline for the emerging Belarusian polity for the reader. This introduces the necessary background context for what will analysed in more depth later in the book.

The final elections to the BSSR Supreme Soviet took place in spring 1990, but these did not signal any dramatic realignment of power. The Communist Party of Belarus (CPB) captured the vast majority of seats. The opposition forces in the Belarusian Democratic Bloc, which included the nationalist Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), won approximately a quarter of the remaining seats that were decided by a popular ballot. In June 1990 a senior member of the CPB, Viachislau Kebich, was appointed prime minister, a position he would hold for the next four years. After the August 1991 putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow, the reform-minded academic Stanislau Shushkevich was named chairman of the Supreme Soviet and acted as head of state when Belarus became independent. Both he and Kebich attended the

negotiations in Belavezha that formally ended the USSR in December 1991. The communist leadership remained in control of both the legislative branch, through their parliamentary majority, as well as the executive branch, with Kebich chairing the Council of Ministers.

After independence, there were calls to hold new democratic parliamentary elections before the end of the 12th Supreme Soviet's five-year term. Appeals to hold a referendum on the proposal in 1992 were voted down by sitting deputies. This was in spite of the fact that the BPF had succeeded in organizing a petition with nearly half a million signatures calling for such a referendum. In summer 1992, Kebich and the Council of Minsters usurped many of the prerogatives of the legislature and took control of most of the printed press and all national radio and television. In January 1994 Shushkevich was ousted as chairman of the Supreme Soviet following allegation by a parliamentary anti-corruption committee led by an upcoming young deputy, Aliaksandr Lukashenka. In March 1994, the Supreme Soviet finally ratified a new constitution for the young state. At the first presidential elections under the new system, it was Lukashenka who was unexpected elected the first president of Belarus in the second round of voting in July. In so doing he not only defeated Prime Minister Kebich, but also saw off Shushkevich and the well-known leader of the BPF, Zianon Pazniak.

Lukashenka's first term soon got off to a controversial start. By the end of 1994 several prominent newspapers published blank columns where reports on government corruption would have been printed to protest against state censorship. A nationwide referendum in 1995 supported elevating Russian to a state language alongside Belarusian and saw the flag and state symbols changed from ones that drew on the legacy of the BPR to versions that were closer to those used in the BSSR. Lukashenka's increasingly autocratic rule instigated a full-blown crisis by 1996, with threats of impeachment from the new parliament that had been elected the previous year. The country witnessed the largest protests that have taken place in the entire post-Soviet era. Eventually, a controversial referendum at the end of the year allowed Lukashenka to seize total control and strengthen his presidency at the expense of the other branches of government.

By the late 1990s Lukashenka had become a pariah in the West. EU and US ambassadors withdrew from Belarus altogether in 1998 in protest at attempts to evict them from their residences. Meanwhile, Minsk and Moscow were drawing closer together, signing treaties to form a community in 1996, a union in 1997, and finally a Union State of Russia and Belarus (USRB) in 1999. To date, the ambitions of the USRB, which included a single currency and a formal Constitution Act, have not come to fruition.

In 1999–2000 the opposition were weakened by the disappearance and presumed murder of four leading opposition figures. A series of demonstrations and protests against the authorities were organized in the autumn of 1999 and spring of 2000. Most of the opposition agreed to boycott the parliamentary elections in 2000, resulting in a House of Representatives that was completely

loyal to Lukashenka. Over time, a small opposition grouping did emerge inside the parliament, the so-called *Respublika* faction, but they did not survive as a consolidated, long-term force. The majority of the opposition put their support behind the trade union leader Uladzimir Hancharyk as their united candidate to challenge Lukashenka in the 2001 presidential election. Lukashenka was re-elected by a comfortable margin for a second term in these flawed elections.

As the integration progress for the proposed USRB stalled, the first in a number of energy disputes between Belarus and Russia erupted in February 2004. Oil and gas crises arose again in winter 2006–07. Russian energy subsidies have traditionally been vital for the Belarusian economy and their reduction can pose a serious challenge to political stability in Belarus. There have also been an increasing number of trade wars between the countries since the 2000s, in sectors such as dairy, meat products, sugar, potash, and even airline routes.

In spite of Lukashenka's amendments to the constitution following his referendum in 1996, it still contained the proviso that he could only stand for two terms. This was rectified by holding a referendum alongside the parliamentary election in October 2004. According to official results, the public supported the proposal and Lukashenka has since served a third, fourth and fifth term as president. The parliamentary elections saw the attempts by most leading opposition candidates to register denied, and none of the *Respublika* faction was re-elected.

A Congress of Democratic Forces was held in October 2005 and chose Aliaksandr Milinkevich as their united candidate to stand against Lukashenka in forthcoming elections. The authorities brought forward the date of the presidential poll to March 2006 in response to opposition unity. Lukashenka was re-elected for a third term in an alleged landslide victory. Tens of thousands took to the streets of Minsk on polling night in protest. Numbers slowly dwindled and after five nights special forces violently evicted the remaining protesters with numerous arrests.

In July 2008 a small bomb blast at an Independence Day concert attended by Lukashenka injured 50 spectators. At the time no culprit was identified. In April 2011 a nail bomb was detonated at a Minsk metro station, killing 15 people and injuring over 200. There was much speculation about who was responsible. Two culprits were arrested and allegedly confessed to both this bombing and the earlier explosion in 2008. Belarus continues to use the death penalty and both men were executed early the next year, in spite of claims that torture had been used to extract their confession.

The end of 2008 witnessed the start of a short-lived, limited liberalization of the political system. All remaining political prisoners in Belarus had been released in the run up to the parliamentary elections in October. Milinkevich's Movement 'For Freedom' (MFF) succeeded in registering with the Ministry of Justice at its fourth attempt. The opposition newspapers *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Volya* were permitted to be distributed again through the state monopoly networks. Opposition candidates still failed to win any seats in

parliament, but a small protest after the results were announced was allowed to pass off peacefully and was not broken up by the authorities. Belarus was invited to the EU's inaugural Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit in Prague in May 2009, although Lukashenka himself did not attend. Meanwhile, by the summer of 2010, Russia was launching a full-scale propaganda war against Lukashenka as relations deteriorated.

The 2010 presidential election and the brutal crackdown on protesters in its aftermath changed all that. A wide range of alternative candidates had been permitted to register to stand against Lukashenka and the campaign was relatively open. The majority were then arrested after polls closed and protesters in central Minsk were beaten and dispersed. Several hundred people were detained and dozens sent to prison. High-profile political prisoners returned to Belarusian jails. Travel bans and targeted sanctions were re-introduced by the West. Meanwhile Minsk was joining a new wave of Russia-led integration projects, with the launch of a Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia in 2010 and later a Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015.

As the authorities continued to wage a concerted campaign against the opposition, independent media, and civil society movements and NGOs in 2011, the country also faced a major financial crisis. Weak growth and macroeconomic instability accompanied an economic downturn. These events instigated a range of social, economic, and political protests throughout the year. Nevertheless, the regime weathered the storm, and did not face any serious challenges in the 2012 parliamentary election. The opposition were divided on their tactics, and the whole process also condemned as unfree and unfair by observers.

Euromaidan, the fall of President Yanukovych in Ukraine, and the annexation of Crimea by Russia were major events towards the end of Lukashenka's fourth term to which Belarus had to react. Throughout 2014 the Belarusian authorities supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but did not openly condemn Russia's intervention in the country either. Official rhetoric increasingly emphasized that a sovereign and independent Belarus is close to, but distinct from Russia. Minsk continued to pursue Eurasian integration, but also began to normalize relations with the West. Improved relations with the EU and the possibility of economic diversification became more important when a currency crisis in Russia at the end of 2014 precipitated a devaluation of the Belarusian ruble, new threats of hyperinflation, and the prospect of a decline in the standard of living.

Belarus began 2015 with all eyes on Minsk, as Lukashenka hosted the international talks that resulted in the Minsk II agreements to deal with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region. Once again, later in the year all political prisoners were released in the run up to a national election, this time the presidential poll. One opposition candidate made it onto the ballot, Tatsiana Karatkevich, the first woman to do so in Belarus. Lukashenka secured his traditional landslide victory based on official results. Perhaps as a response to the violence that had erupted in Ukraine, there were no major

calls from the opposition forces to take to the streets when polls closed, as there had been in 2006 and 2010. The West lifted almost all of their sanctions again after the release of political prisoners and the peaceful – if not free and fair – elections.

The most recent national elections at the time of writing took place in September 2016. Somewhat unexpectedly, two opposition candidates were elected to parliament for the first time since the *Respublika* faction had lost their seats in 2004. This was less of an opposition breakthrough and more of a tactical move by the authorities to allow the appearance of opposition representation. Meanwhile, it was social issues that presented the regime with its first big challenge of Lukashenka's fifth term as president. Early 2017 saw a concerted wave a protests across the country to oppose a new law against so-called 'social parasites' who claimed long-term unemployment benefits. Some larger demonstrations were harshly dispersed by the authorities, and several hundred people were detained across the country. The crackdown was not as harsh as had been seen in December 2010 however. Furthermore, plans for the 'social parasite' tax were put on hold. Looking ahead to the 2019–20 election cycle, there is no sign yet that Lukashenka would not stand again or that there is strong alternative challenger emerging.

Outline of the book

In existing scholarly works there has been a tendency to focus on national elections as the main emphasis for study, with less attention paid to the policies of the regime or the actions of the opposition in between those elections. This book will still analyse the important elections and referenda under Lukashenka from his first election in 1994 to the most recent parliamentary elections in 2016 outlined above; however, it will not pursue a purely chronological course centred on these national polls. Instead, it will build on the current literature through thematic chapters highlighting both continuity and change in how the regime and the opposition function within the Belarusian polity. In doing that this study also draws on a variety of primary sources, which have been collected both remotely and during numerous visits to Belarus over the past decade. These include documents in Russian and Belarusian disseminated by the authorities and opposition structures, as well as reports from state-controlled and independent mass media in Belarusian and Russian. This is complemented by face-to-face interviews that were held with a number of activists and experts from the country.[3]

This book consists of seven core chapters, aside from this Introduction (Chapter 1) and the Conclusion (Chapter 9). Chapter 2 defines adaptive authoritarianism in more detail as a conceptual framework for the study of Belarus as a modern non-democratic regime and for examining opposition politics under such as system. In the next two chapters, the book moves on to explain authoritarian consolidation in contemporary Belarus. Chapter 3 details the successful personalization of power in terms of institutions before

Chapter 4 looks at patron-client relations under Lukashenka. The following two chapters then outline how the authorities have ruled in practice. Chapter 5 looks at where the regime turns to for its legitimacy and how policies have been modified in order to maintain public support and adapt to the changing circumstances in the region. Chapter 6 will explain the tactics that the regime has been able to turn to in order to exert control over politics and society through varying degrees of state coercion. In the subsequent two chapters, the emphasis shifts to the opposition forces in Belarus. Chapter 7 will look at who makes up the ranks of the opposition to Lukashenka and where their support lies, while Chapter 8 will look at the activities of the opposition themselves during elections and on the streets, to analyse their strengths and weaknesses.

Finally in Chapter 9, Belarus will be shown to be an example of adaptive authoritarianism. While that may give the impression to some observers that the regime is erratic, irrational, or paradoxical, in reality it is this adaptability that has helped secure Lukashenka's position as president for almost a quarter of century. The continuity of his rule has been ensured through the ability to adapt and change as necessary, and is likely to guide the country through the upcoming 2019–20 election cycle.

Finally, a brief note on the issue of spellings and transliteration is necessary. This book uses Belarusian forms for the personal names of prominent Belarusian citizens and place names rather than Russian spellings, for example Lukashenka, *not* Lukashenko. There are competing orthographies for the Belarusian language: classical (*Tarashkevitsa*) and modern. This work uses the common, modern spellings taught today in Belarusian education institutions. The transliteration scheme used throughout this book for the Belarusian Cyrillic alphabet is a modified version of the Library of Congress system for the language, with additional accents or ligatures removed. In the case of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, the British Standard scheme is used. There has been an attempt in recent years to encourage the use of the Belarusian Latin alphabet (*latsinka*) instead of transliteration; however, for the sake of convenience and consistency it is not used in this book. The choice of any language, orthography, script, or transliteration system should not be interpreted as a political statement.

Notes

1 Polatsk in northern Belarus is one of the many locations that lays claim to being the geographical centre of Europe (Telegraf 2008).

2 Vendée being a French province that resisted the ideals of the French Revolution. The source of the description is usually attributed to the writer Ales Adamovich.

3 The majority of these interviews were conducted in Russian rather than English in agreement with the interviewees. I have opted to keep their identities anonymous in the book, due to the nature of the regime and the possibility of future crackdowns. Interview subjects are identified by their gender and position or institutional affiliation.

2 Adaptive authoritarianism

A conceptual framework

An independent Belarus emerged on the world stage after the collapse of the USSR during the so-called third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991). Arguably, this third wave had, in fact, crested by the mid-1990s, however. Rather than non-democratic rule becoming a political anachronism, it was, in fact, passing through its own phase of modernization as non-democratic regimes began to adopt democratic disguises (Brooker 2014: 6–8; Diamond 2002: 23). This book takes the case study of Belarus to examine the failure to democratize in practice, and proposes that the country is an example of adaptive authoritarianism.

The common label of 'the last dictatorship in Europe' attached to contemporary Belarus presumes that it fails to meet the standards of a democracy, but what exactly are these requirements? One commonly used framework describes modern consolidated democracies as being more than just political systems with constitutions and elections, but instead consisting of five interconnected arenas (Linz & Stepan 1996: 3–15). These are first a political society with genuine free and inclusive competition for the legitimate right to exercise control. Second, there is the rule of law with consensus over a constitution, as well as an independent judiciary. Third, a functioning state apparatus adheres to rational–legal bureaucratic norms. Fourth, a civil society enjoys freedom of association and communication. Finally, there is an economic society (although not necessarily a pure market economy) with the requisite legal and regulatory framework. Without these overlapping and mutually supportive arenas, there can be no consolidated democracy.

As this book will clearly demonstrate, the political system in Belarus under President Aliaksandr Lukashenka is severely deficient with regard to all five of these arenas. Drawing on the growing scholarly literature investigating contemporary non-democratic regimes, this chapter will outline a framework that can explain the range and diversity of political developments in Belarus under Lukashenka. Non-democratic rule can exhibit a variety of features and no one single typology can be employed to explain all aspects of non-democratic rule in Belarus today. This chapter examines the debates about forms of non-democratic regime, their claims to legitimacy, and how they rule, in order to formulate the idea of 'adaptive authoritarianism' to