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## Belarus After Communism: Where to Now?

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### Abstract

This paper examines the political development of Belarus since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Attention is devoted to the country's internal politics, along with its foreign relations. Especially scrutinized is the de-facto dictatorial rule of president Alexander Lukashenko, along with the deteriorated relations between Belarus and powerful European states including Russia. A thorough historical context is provided, which identifies political violence and demographic change as causal factors for the country's current political environment.

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***Abstract:** This paper examines the political development of Belarus since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Attention is devoted to the country's internal politics, along with its foreign relations. Especially scrutinized is the de-facto dictatorial rule of president Alexander Lukashenko, along with the deteriorated relations between Belarus and powerful European states including Russia. A thorough historical context is provided, which identifies political violence and demographic change as causal factors for the country's current political environment.*

### INTRODUCTION

Belarus offers a distinct case of post-communist development, remaining Eastern Europe's most authoritarian state to this day. The incumbent regime, steered for the past twenty years by de facto dictator Alexander Lukashenko, is arguably more centralized than the one in Moscow. From manipulated elections, to a centrally planned economy, and zealous supervision of media outlets, Lukashenko's government wields tight control over practically every facet of daily life in Belarus. This prompts scholars to search for a cause behind Belarus's staunch authoritarian regime; surely it must be more than a product of chance. One might easily deduce that simple geography is in play; a state so close to the birthplace of communism would have naturally been more influenced by the movement and thus find it more difficult to dissolve these ties over time. Yet, the country's static authoritarianism stands out further when compared, even at a glance, to the political environments in other post-Communist states also bordering Russia. Since gaining independence, the Baltic republics have been stable and democratic. Ukraine, though being continuously unstable and despite sharing strong historical bonds with Russia, has maintained vastly higher degrees of democratization than Belarus. To fully explain Belarus's static authoritarianism, a thorough historical examination becomes necessary. From such an overview it becomes evident that a combination of political violence, demographic change, and a long-standing absence of independent statehood played an equally important role in dictating the country's close alignment with post-Soviet Russia's highly centralized, authoritarian state model. As will be explored later in the essay, the state's continued emulation of Russian-propagated precedents may ironically be its main advantage as it nears a time where it may have to assert itself as an independent state in the face of Moscow's resurgent territorial assertiveness.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Belarus's autonomy since the collapse of the USSR is largely unprecedented. Like its neighbor Ukraine, the present-day state shares plenty of common historical roots with the Russian empire. Between the 9th and 13th centuries, the area was controlled by the Kievan Rus' (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003) who are widely regarded as fathers of Russian statehood. When the Mongols invaded during the 1200s and subjugated most Russians for over a century, the Belarusian region remained largely unscathed due to its westernmost situation. This distinction marks the origins of a unique regional identity and toponym (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). The prefix "bel-" means "white" in Russian and most Slavic languages, denoting a land that was free and unadulterated by asiatic influences. The suffix "-rus" of course signifies an affinity with the Russian people. Though having distanced its inhabitants from Mongol influences, Belarus's proximity to central Europe exposed it to the tumult of a European continent experiencing nearly constant upheaval and warfare. As a result, its territory would become subject to frequent changes in rule, which both influenced Belarus's culture and inhibited the possibility of autonomy.

In 1569, Belarus was annexed by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth under the Treaty of Lubin (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003), and would remain under the Commonwealth's control for over two centuries. This time period greatly enriched both Belarus's cultural diversity and distinctiveness from Russia. Traditional Russian customs intermixed with Polish and Lithuanian ways. Greek Catholicism also gained a foothold in the region (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003), although its adherents were still a minority compared to those of the Eastern Orthodox denomination. Through the lens of Russian sympathizers though, this era was considered an occupation during which Belarusians consistently yearned to be reunited with the Russian empire (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). During the 18th century, Prussia quickly rose to power in Central Europe as leaders of the German reunification. Along with an expansionist Czarist Russia, the Prussians began encroaching on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was quickly overpowered by the two military giants, and during the Partitions of 1793 and 1795, Belarus once again became part of Russia (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003).

While it had already developed considerable cultural heterogeneity during Polish-Lithuanian rule, Belarus would mostly experience static authoritarianism after the restoration of Russian control. Unlike western European countries which had enlightened monarchs or were experiencing tides of liberalism and nationalism, Russia remained firmly entrenched in a neo-feudal political arrangement. The Russian czar held absolute authority, and anyone who questioned this order through word or writing was viciously persecuted. An aristocracy presided over rural areas, keeping a watchful eye over serfs who were bound to work the farmland they were born on. Although the Russian Empire urgently attempted to acquire new technology in the 19th century, and emancipated its serf population in 1861 in an effort to foster industrialization, it nevertheless continued to lag behind other European powers in political and economic freedom. This is described by Western scholars as an inherent “backwardness,” a paradigm that would persist in Belarus and other Eastern European states even after they dissolved ties with Moscow.

Russian dominance over Belarus was briefly disrupted after World War I. Russia waged an unsuccessful campaign against Germany and Austria-Hungary and was out of the war by early 1918. The Treaty of Brest Litovsk gave a great portion of Russia’s northern European plain to the Central Powers. When Germany and Austria-Hungary agreed to an armistice with the Allies two years later, the fate of the territory came under the discretion of American, French, and British leaders. Heavily influenced by American president Woodrow Wilson, the Versailles Treaty was drafted to ensure peace within Europe. One of its prominent provisions was the establishment of nation-states in the lands forfeited by the Central Powers according to the Wilsonian notion of national determination. Thus, a Belarusian National Republic was established (Kozlowski 2014) along with the new neighbors of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

The National Republic’s independence was short-lived, however. Its citizens’ long-time ties to Russian politics, along with Vladimir Lenin’s policy of “permanent revolution,” embroiled the infant state in the Russian Revolution. Less than a year after its conception, the BNR ceased to exist after Bolshevik troops marched into Minsk on January 5th, 1919 (Kozlowski 2014). Belarus was absorbed into the Soviet Union as the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Originally, the Soviets had policies to accommodate for the diversity within the Belarusian SSR. Poles, for example, were allowed to learn their native-tongue in accredited schools (Snyder 2010). Matters changed, however, after Polish-Soviet relations continued to deteriorate and the USSR's leadership transitioned to Joseph Stalin. Stalin, in accordance with the logic of his famous quote "No man, no problem," sought to consolidate power by purging any suspected dissidents. Across the border, his Polish counterpart, Jozef Pilsudski, pursued policies that were less harsh, yet of similar sentiment. Communist parties were banned in Poland, out of fear that they would help incite another wave of Russian expansion like the one in the 1920s that had annexed Belarus and Ukraine. This atmosphere of mutual distrust between Poland and the USSR would not bode well for the Polish diaspora living in Belarus. During the Great Terror propagated by Stalin, sixty thousand Poles in Belarus were sentenced to death or imprisoned in Siberia (Snyder 2010). Even Soviet citizens in Belarus were targeted by authorities accusing them of being "Belarusian national fascists," or "Polish collaborators" (Snyder 2010). Stalin also deliberately targeted "representatives of Belarusian national culture," (Snyder 2010) such as writers, historians, and priests, in order to wipe out any distinct national identity sharing customs with the Poles and Baltic nations. Additionally, communist ideology saw nationalism and religion as obstructive to the proletariat's class consciousness; obstacles to the communist utopia Moscow was trying to establish. These Soviet purges during the 1930s that were justified in ideological terms set off a long period of atrocities in Belarus.

In 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, despite having previously collaborated with Russia in partitioning the northern European plain and signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-aggression Pact in 1939. German troops quickly captured large swaths of Soviet territory and were followed by Einsatzgruppen, or SS special task forces, sent by the Nazis with the sole task of exterminating Jewish populations. Within only the first eight weeks of the invasion, Einsatzgruppe B killed more Jews in Vilnius and Belarus than any other Einsatzgruppen (Snyder 2010). Other locals, though they were not Jewish, did not appreciate the brutal German occupation either. Many men took up arms and started resistance groups in Belarus's plentiful forests and swamps which were ideal territory for partisan warfare. Although partisan activities played a role in disrupting

the German war effort, they often provoked more brutal retaliation. Germans frequently raided villages in search of Jews and partisans without asking many questions. Their modus operandi was often based on the logic that if every house in the village was burned, all the ones harboring partisans would surely be eliminated (Snyder 2010). In all, the Nazis claimed an estimated 2.2 million victims (BBC News Europe 2015) in Belarus's territory until they were completely expelled by the Red Army in 1944.

Once the Soviets repelled the German offensive at Stalingrad and began to turn the tide of the war, they were not hesitant to respond with their own atrocities. The Red Army pushed westward with vengeance against the fascist invaders. During this time, Stalin also deported 438,700 ethnic Germans living in the Union's western fringes to Kazakhstan (Snyder 2010). The USSR's eventual victory in World War II would put a much less ethnically diverse Belarus far behind the iron curtain. Coupled with its scant experience in self-rule, Belarus's loss of ethnic and cultural diversity meant that it had minimal foundation to exist as a distinct, independent nation-state. And while the USSR had its fair share of republics representing distinct ethnicities such as Estonia, Armenia, etc., the remaining Belarusian population's strong ties to Russian culture practically made the country a Soviet administrative region more than anything else.

#### CASE ANALYSIS

When the strength of the communist system began to waver in the late 1980s, Belarusian visions of change were murky. The country's population did not favor a dissolution of the Soviet Union, let alone national democratic government heading economic marketization. In 1991, a referendum with an 83.3% turnout showed that 82.7% favored continuation of the USSR (Kozlowski 2014). However, the communist party elites had different plans. On December 8th, 1991, the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus dissolved the Soviet Union and created a community of independent states. Thus the first independent Belarusian state in almost a century was created by elite diktat.

Since Belarus's independence did not arise from a widespread public movement to achieve self-determination or liberalization, the opposition force that arose to compete with the incumbent communist party members was inherently weak. The Popular Front, which began to organize in the late 1980s was comprised mainly of cultural activists and pro-European former communist dissidents (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). Interestingly,

the Popular Front's greatest goal was not the democratization of Belarus. Its leader Zyanon Pazniak was wary of involving the general public in the country's early political developments because he felt they were too attached to Soviet nostalgia. He feared that the public's will would once again bind Belarus with Russia: a country that he viewed as dangerous and imperialistic (Kozlowski 2014). Pazniak's associates, Hieronim Kubiak and Sokrat Janowicz, shared his sentiments. They envisioned a Belarus with a national identity based on historic traditions going back to the 17th century, promoted by intellectuals and institutions, and protected from Russian meddling by a very large army (Kozlowski 2014).

The main challenge for the Popular Front in the early '90s was their lack of a geographic voter base. They averaged 15% electoral support in western cities such as Hrodno and Brest, less than 10% in eastern cities like Homel and Mohilev, and a considerable 30% in the capital city Minsk (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). Nationally, 25% of voters voted for the Popular Front in 1990, however, due to the single-member district electoral system, they were only able to secure 8% (White, Blatt and Lewis 2003) of the seats in parliament. The height of their power as minority in a parliament controlled by Stanislav Shushkevich and reformist ex-communists would last until 1993 (White, Blatt and Lewis 2003).

A presidential system was introduced in 1994, meaning the newly elected president would have power to organize the bureaucracy as head of government in addition to his diplomatic duties. Zyanon Pazniak was the candidate from the Popular Front. The former communists were split between the previous premiere Shushkevich and Vyacheslav Kebich, an old nomenklatura member who promoted a russophile agenda (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). Alexander Lukashenko was the candidate who would go on to capture most of the voters' attention. Previously a member of the parliamentary committee against corruption, he vociferously attacked the shady deals and inequality that had come alongside economic privatization (Kozlowski 2014). He won 44.8% of the popular vote in the election's first round, and then soundly defeated Kebich in a runoff as voters felt that his Russian integration plans were more coherent (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003).

Less than a year after Lukashenko's election, laws were passed to restore former Soviet symbols and establish an equal status for Russian as an official language. The national anthem and flag colors were altered. In the same year, the Popular Front was wiped out during the parliamentary elections, with all seats captured by Lukashenko's party or his russophile competitors (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003).

In 1996, Lukashenko was able to further consolidate his power. A referendum was held in November of that year, with four of the questions having been set by the president and three according to a parliamentary consensus. Voter turnout was 84% (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). Once the polls closed, Lukashenko ignored the latter questions set by the government and disregarded the legislative process. Using the 70.5% voter approval of his version of a reformed constitution as justification, he dissolved the parliament, replacing them with a docile Palace of Representatives, and also extended his five-year presidential term to seven (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). These actions were met with considerable outrage. Many parties voiced their dissatisfaction towards the new political arrangement, but were harshly sanctioned by Lukashenko's authorities. Their registrations were invalidated and many members were arrested (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). Alexander Lukashenko was then on the verge of being all but a dictator of Belarus.

The political environment in years since has been described by scholars as "Lukashism," where the president's continuous amendments "virtually amounted to the abolition of the machinery of the democratic state, with its principles of the separation of powers, political pluralism, or general national representation" (Kozlowski 2014). Political parties and social organizations are kept under watchful eye of the state. They are required to submit regular reports detailing their activities, along with having to comply with periodic renewals of their registration (Kozlowski 2014). The state media agency, "Belarus News," is known as the fourth branch of the government (Kozlowski 2014). It is the nation's most widely distributed news source, offering insight on the president's activities and information about new laws. Throughout all sections, the publication consistently presents optimistic statements by government officials. One example is foreign minister Yelena Kupchina's appraisal of Belarus's appeal to foreign investment and ambitious goals to attract more money from abroad (BELTA 2012),

which comes in direct contrast to Western news sources' assessment that "foreign investors stay away" because of over-regulation and private opportunity being "virtually non-existent" (BBC News Europe 2015). Bias by a single news source is not unexpected; such phenomena is present even in democratic societies. The more striking deficiency is in the lack of other autonomous outlets to produce perspectives contrasting those of the government. Smaller independent news agencies do exist; however, they operate under strict guidelines that give Lukashenko's regime almost arbitrary power. For example, authorities can shut down a newspaper if they receive more than two warnings from the Information Ministry in a year, even for trivial spelling and grammatical errors (Kozlowski 2014).

There also exist numerous puppet parties staffed by Lukashenko's loyalists. In the election of 2005, Serhey Haydukevich ran as a puppet-neutral under the banner of the Liberal Democratic Party (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). The fact that he won 3.5% (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003) of the vote was irrelevant, as his main duty was to speak out against Lukashenko's few opposition members and make them appear to be as extreme as possible. In the same election, opposition members were kept off election commissions and foreign observation was curtailed, prompting wide speculation that the results were altered considerably (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003).

During the 2010 election, Lukashenko's government exhibited even more draconic measures in order to assert their dominance. Belarusian citizens gathered in front of the presidential edifice and protested amidst widespread belief that election results were once again falsified. The crowd of thirty thousand was violently dispersed by riot police and six hundred individuals were arrested (The Economist 2010). Seven out of the nine (The Economist 2010) opposition candidates were apprehended by state authorities. One opposition candidate, Andrei Sannikov, was allegedly pulled over by police while traveling with his wife and beaten on the side of the road (The Economist 2010). Even peaceful activists, like online political blogger Natalia Radzina, were not exempt from brutality. She was beaten as police raided her home late at night (The Economist 2010). Although independent polls suggest most citizens believe that Lukashenko would still have been the most popular leader without faux election results (Kozlowski 2014), his regime's aggressive actions suggest that he is not content with

anything short of absolute power. Even the slightest parity in election results might give the public ideas of allegiance to another figure, and that would be too costly.

While ascending to dictator status through political reforms, a key factor legitimizing Lukashenko's continued rule and growing power was his ability to deliver economic security. Belarus's post-Soviet production collapse was more brief and had a smaller trough compared to its neighbors' (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). This can be attributed to unusually high levels of Soviet investment in the republic during the Union's final years (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003), followed by a short experience with market forces. Soon after getting elected, Lukashenko restored government controls over the economy, thus ending the period of "shock therapy" in Belarus. In the years since, his government pursued the "Belarusian model:" maintenance of state ownership over industries and strong trade with Russia (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). In the late '90s and early 2000s Russia's cheap energy and trade credits accounted for nearly a third of Belarusian GDP (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). The government made a lot of money by refining Russian petroleum and reselling it abroad (Kozłowski 2014), supported by Figure 1. This policy led to impressive growth from 2001 to 2006. GDP rose nearly 7% annually average as shown by Figure 2, while monthly wages rose from \$70 to \$270 (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003).

This policy, however, was not sustainable or secure because it was based on artificially cheap prices of a good entirely provided by another country. After 2006, the absence of extremely cheap energy and raw goods took a toll on Belarus's finances, and after several years of economic stagnation, it suffered a balance of payments crisis in 2011 because its hard currency reserves became depleted (BBC News Europe 2015). The government's subsequent attempt to reset its exchange rates and fix food prices was criticized by both Russia and Western institutions, such as the IMF. Moscow has maintained its critical view of Minsk for being reluctant to marketize its inefficient economy that Russian leaders now view as a "parasite" (Al Jazeera 2009).

Alexander Lukashenko's consistent incumbency as Belarus's president has not earned him much respect from Western nations. Unlike most other post-communist states, Belarus has yet to exhibit a pendular foreign policy (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003), but rather, has maintained authoritarian and collectivist tendencies since its

independence and remained closely tied to Russia. The country is considered part of the “European neighborhood” by the EU, in contrast to the rest of Eastern European non-members like Ukraine and Moldova, categorized under “zones of possible EU expansion.” Formal diplomacy between Minsk and the EU has remained stagnant since 1996, at the pre-PCA [Partnership and Cooperation Agreement] level (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). European leaders developed especially adverse attitudes towards Lukashenko after the way his government handled the 2005 and 2010 elections. In 2006, the EU declared a visa ban and asset freeze on prominent Belarusian individuals (Rettman 2015). Also, many European countries designated Lukashenko as a *persona non-grata* (Rettman 2015), meaning he was not welcome to enter their territory under any circumstance. During the aftermath of the 2010 elections, Germany and Poland withdrew a \$3 billion aid package they were intending to give to Belarus under the condition that Lukashenko undertake reforms (Rettman 2015). During a recent visit to Minsk in February, Angela Merkel insisted that her perception of Belarus’s government had not changed (Rettman 2015), despite Lukashenko’s efforts to mediate a solution between Russia and the EU regarding the Ukraine crisis. In all, the European community has consistently signaled their disapproval of Belarus’s poor human rights observance, which keeps the door closed to cooperation in many policy areas.

Belarus’s relationship with Russia, meanwhile, has been much more dynamic. Given the Belarusians’ reluctance to dissolve the Soviet Union, it would be natural for them to prefer pursuing closer ties with its main successor, the Russian Federation. The Russian language is the most commonly used in Belarus: 74% of the population claim their native language is Belarusian, yet only 37% use it at home (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). This likely means that a majority of the population consistently speaks Russian day-to-day. Use of Russian is especially prevalent in large cities where official business takes place, such as Brest, Homel, and Minsk (Pereltsvaig 2014). Furthermore, Alexander Lukashenko himself was first elected on the platform that he would reunite Belarus with Russia. Since Lukashenko’s election, there have been three treaties between the two countries echoing such sentiment: “Community of Russia and Belarus” signed in 1996, “Union of Russia and Belarus” negotiated between 1997 and ‘98, and “United State of Russia and Belarus” in 1999 (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). The last treaty provides for

common political institutions, currency, citizenship, defense, and foreign policy, however, it has yet to be implemented. A large reason for the fall-through of these arrangements has been Vladimir Putin's assumption of the Russian presidency beginning in 2000. Putin does not have the same personal amity with Lukashenko as Boris Yeltsin did, nor did he want to give Lukashenko a high position in the Russian government after the unification took place (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003).

Since then, the relationship between Russia and Belarus has gradually become more strained, mainly over economic matters. Mistrust began in 2001 when Lukashenko broke his promise to completely open his economy to Russian investment (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). In 2003 and 2004, negotiations failed between natural gas companies BelTransGaz and Gazprom that was supposed to allow the latter [Russian] firm more control over the delivery process of gas to Europe via Belarus (White, Blatt, and Lewis 2003). Nevertheless, Russia continued giving Lukashenko's government discounted energy and loans up until 2006, when another unresolved gas dispute prompted it to ramp up its interest rates and commodity prices (BBC News Europe 2015). This marked the end of a period of record economic growth in Belarus. Russia further used its leverage in regulating oil and gas prices to persuade Belarus to join its Eurasian Economic Community in 2010 (Kozlowski 2014). The EEC is a customs union between the two nations and Kazakhstan providing for free trade between the members all acting under one market.

In recent times, the EEC has suffered due to lower gas and oil prices, along with sanctions imposed upon Russia by the West due to its intervention Ukraine. Lukashenko has become unhappy with the way Russia's aggressive foreign policy has adversely affected the trade community. Out of protest, Belarus refused to recognize Russian control of Crimea and broke the Russian embargo of European agricultural products (Standish 2015). In addition, Lukashenko has purged pro-Russian members of his nomenklatura and passed a law declaring foreign support of any armed insurgency inside his country an act of war (Rettman 2015). These measures demonstrate that Lukashenko anticipates a Russian attempt to use irredentist claims to gain control of his country like it did in Ukraine. Furthermore, the government now mandates that education in elementary schools be taught in Belarusian (Standish 2015). Lukashenko ironically once stated that

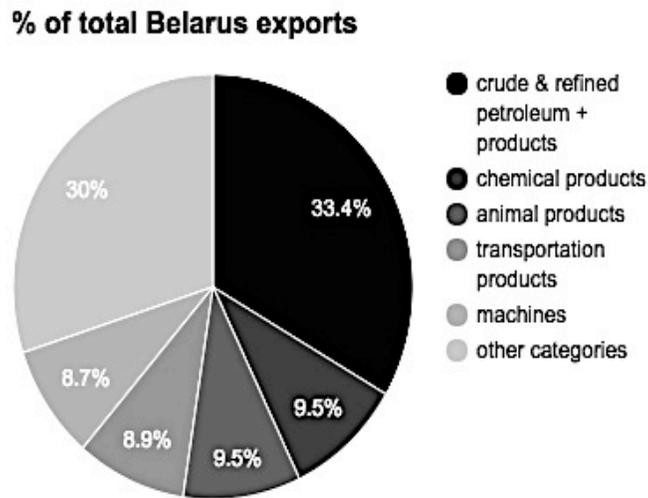
“nothing significant can be expressed in Belarusian” (Standish 2015) and passed a law to establish Russian as an official language in his country. However, times have changed. In his eyes, Russia is becoming less of an inseparable friend and more of a coercive bully. Moscow’s increasingly aggressive policies towards its near-abroad have not only soured relations with Minsk. They also reinforce a perception among Lukashenko’s government that if one has a rift with Moscow, one should better have defense capabilities to back their end of the dispute. And while Belarus may not have a military capable of overcoming a conflict with Russia, Lukashenko’s authoritarian structure maintains a level of stability that thwarts any invitation for a Russian intervention similar to the one in Ukraine.

### CONCLUSION

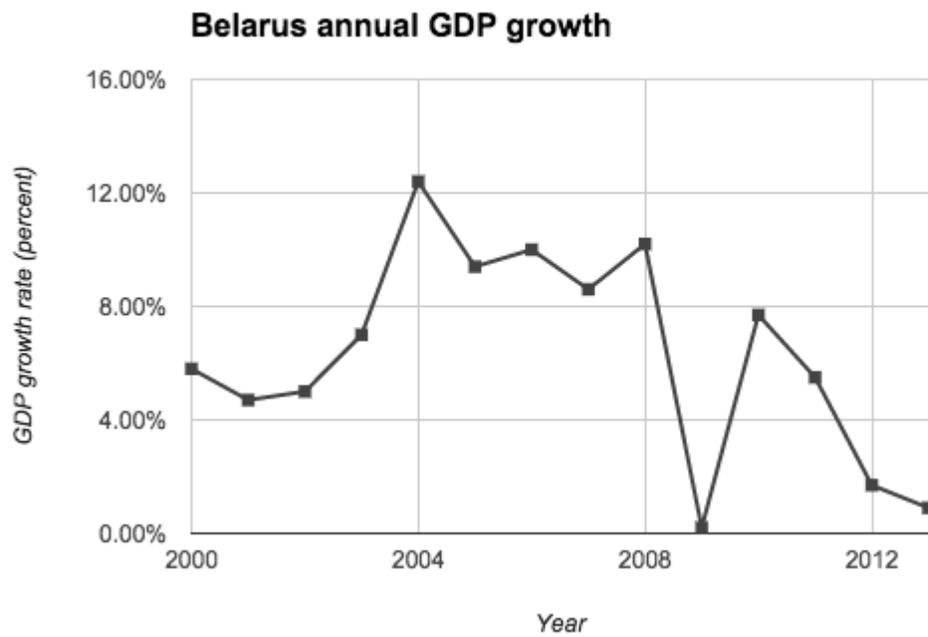
This static authoritarianism, which ironically maintains Belarus’s present-day autonomy, is a product of several factors related to time and space. Geographically, the Belarusian territory was always under the disadvantage of being paradoxically both too close and too far from the center of Russian statehood. Its distance from the Russian heartland made it vulnerable to foreign conquest by other European powers, which also provided for a distinct ethnic and cultural diversity over the years. Yet, Belarus would also be one of the first territories to be reclaimed by the Russians during their periods of resurgence. This chronic upheaval inhibited any possibility of an autonomous Belarusian territory; the land’s fate would always be in the hands of the surrounding Eastern European powers, the most powerful of which ended up being Russia. With the continuous upheaval came plenty of political violence, which ballooned to unthinkable levels in the 20th century. The atrocities committed by the Nazis and Soviets wiped out nearly all of the land’s ethnic and cultural diversity, effectively making post-war Belarus a Soviet administrative region only discernible by its dialect. When the country unexpectedly became independent in the 1990s, it understandably came to build statehood around the only prevailing principles from its troubled history: staunch rule. Although this paradigm has largely been a Russian construct, it has become the most dependable factor in preserving Belarus’s sovereignty as the elite relationships between Moscow and Minsk have become strained. As far as the common Belarusian citizens’ opinion on maintaining sovereignty goes: they have remained, or have been kept, silent.

**Appendix 1: Figures**

*Figure 1: Belarus Exports*



*Figure 2: Belarus GDP Growth*



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