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RESILIENCE OF THE MASS DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN BELARUS

БЕЛАРУСЬТАҒЫ ЖАҒПАЙ ДЕМОКРАТИЯЛЫҚ ҚОЗҒАЛЫСТЫҢ ТАБАНДЫЛЫҒЫ

УСТОЙЧИВОСТЬ МАССОВОГО ДЕМОКРАТИЧЕСКОГО ДВИЖЕНИЯ В  
БЕЛАРУСИ

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the peculiarities of the mass democracy movement in Belarus, particularly domestic and foreign mechanisms that opposition, protesters and other representatives of the Belarusian democracy movement utilize to endure under the repressive government of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. I demonstrate that by gradually shifting their resistance strategies and embracing extensive foreign political-financial support, the democracy movement in Belarus has been able to withstand substantial domestic pressure and continue to operate under harsh autocratic settings.

As this study illustrates, Belarus has become increasingly authoritarian during the presidency of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the Belarusian democracy movement has adapted and employed various resistance strategies through domestic legitimation and foreign aid through non-governmental organizations to persist in the repressive Belarusian reality. The growing discontent with ever-increasing authoritarian tendencies of the Lukashenka administration, as well as the development of the democracy movement in Belarus, ultimately culminated in largest protests of 2006, 2011 and 2020-2021. I show that the endurance of the democracy movement under Lukashenka and the longevity of the most recent 2020-2021 mass protests can be primarily attributed to three factors: (1) extensive foreign aid in the form of political legitimation, (2) substantial financial funding through foreign-sponsored NGOs and (3) the learning process of opposition and pro-democracy groups.

These findings emerge from a series of one-on-one, in-depth interviews that I conducted with two groups of participants. The first group consists of scholars specializing in Belarusian politics (2 respondents), while the second group of the interviewees comprises members of the Belarusian civil society (11 respondents) and the participants of anti-government protests. Interviews and thorough process tracing results support my proposition emphasizing the role

of motivation, internal dynamics and resistance strategies by the Belarusian democracy movement on its survival and long-term endurance.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Nondemocratic regimes constitute an important part of contemporary political reality. It is a common occurrence for authoritarian rulers to hold on to power for many years or even decades, with some ruling their respective countries with an iron fist until their demise. Yet, not all nondemocratic leaders are immune to forced removal from office. Recent history is ripe with instances in which autocratic regimes falter due to domestic uprisings and mass protests, initiated by non-state challengers. While some such mass democracy movements are able to resist and topple nondemocratic regime, other mass democracy movements and protests are less fortunate and struggle to gain momentum. This highlights an interesting puzzle: how can we explain the variation in the endurance and resilience of the mass democracy movements in repressive states?

Therefore, the research question motivating this thesis is "*To what extent and why are mass democracy movements able to endure under repressive nondemocratic regimes?*" This study explores the peculiarities of the mass democracy movement in the Republic of Belarus. It particularly aims to explain the endurance of mass democracy movement in Belarus with the broader aim of examining how the combination of various domestic and external factors affect the outcome of the confrontation between the nondemocratic regime and the protesters. Furthermore, this research aims to demonstrate the importance of foreign political-financial support and public attitudes towards democracy promotion in the endurance of the mass democracy movements on the one hand, and the survival of the autocratic regime on the other.

In this study, I examine the case of Belarus, which constitutes an interesting research puzzle due to the strong endurance of the country's home-grown mass democracy movement. First, although Belarus is widely considered a nondemocratic regime, it has experienced several mass democracy protests throughout its existence as a sovereign state. Second, there is a variation in the endurance of mass democracy protests over time. For example, while the 2006

and 2011 protests were ultimately short in duration, the recent 2020-2021 protests arguably presented a significant challenge to President Lukashenka's regime. The rapidly changing situation and political-economic struggle in Belarus substantially affects not only the European politics, but also the global state of affairs as a whole. In this sense, the research of the Belarusian case has now become more relevant than ever.

I argue that members of the Belarusian democracy movement have learned to face and challenge the regime over the years, utilizing different political strategies and tactics. I particularly look into domestic democracy promotion efforts and foreign political-financial support dimensions. I also argue that understanding the unique case of Belarus provides a much clearer explanation of the regime survival and mass democracy movement endurance as a whole. Ever since his rise to power in 1994, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has managed to consolidate an almost undisputed power. He has been largely described as the ruthless autocrat and titled “Europe’s last dictator” (Markus 2010, 118), particularly for his hardline tactics in dealing with dissent of opposition groups and violent crackdown of the mass protests against his rule. Belarus under Lukashenka has also been described as a police state, with the increased role of the security apparatus in ensuring the regime’s survival and coercive capacity (Way 2020, 19). During his early presidency, Belarus went from a relatively free state to a soft authoritarianism, which was followed by hard authoritarianism in his later years as a head of state. Despite these trends, Lukashenka has not been immune to challenges from below, with the most recent 2020-2021 protests being arguably the most challenging to Lukashenka’s autocratic rule (Way 2020, 17). These protests were unique, as many people turned against Lukashenka than in previous protests. Some hundreds of thousands of protesters were reported to have taken to the streets. With the availability of new mass media resources and mobile apps, particularly Telegram, the younger generation was able to better mobilize in groups (Herasimenka 2020). Another key part of Belarusian society, workers employed by state

factories, well-protected in the 1990s-2000s and politically passive throughout the years, joined the ranks of dissenters albeit in fewer numbers. The economic stagnation and failure has become a vital concern for the workers. Nonetheless, despite their initial strikes at the factories, fear of the unknown (the new regime) has constrained the workers from actively taking part in the protests (Buzgalin & Kolganov 2021).

The 2020-2021 protests started from the rejection of the existing economic and socio-political system in Belarus by the middle class. As protesters have a strong domestic democracy promotion narrative, they continue to receive significant political financial support from the West (Buzgalin & Kolganov 2021, 5). Throughout the years, Western financial support to the Belarusian opposition and civil society has proved to be instrumental in the endurance and resilience of the Belarusian democracy movement, with the resistance and protest movements being in large part funded through the NGOs by the EU members (most notably Poland and Lithuania) and the US. Similarly, with abundant foreign support, some of the prominent opposition leaders like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya have managed to escape into exile to Lithuania and coordinate the democracy movement from abroad. As of now, even more dissidents are operating in exile, making the ultimate “decapitation” of the mass protest movements by the government not entirely possible. In a similar vein, never before have Lukashenka’s approval ratings been as low as following his use of extremely brute force of the 2020-2021 protests (Mudrov 2021, 7-8). Lukashenka suffered a significant political cost, losing the formerly present leverage between the EU and Russia, now being heavily dependent on the latter’s support to survive.

Furthermore, this study addresses hard authoritarian rule, which essentially dedicates its efforts to coerce and repress the protest movements as opposed to soft authoritarian regimes that prefer soft persuasive tactics over use of force or violence. Furthermore, the research examines how the democracy movement in Belarus has managed to endure under the

Lukashenka regime, notorious for its violent repressive strategies in addressing the concerns of the Belarusian public. The study assesses how the democracy movement in Belarus, despite being highly disadvantaged, manifested itself in three large anti-government protests of 2006, 2011 and 2020-2021, presenting a substantial challenge to Lukashenka's rule.

The thesis comprises three main parts. First, the literature review presents the scholarly view on the mass democracy movement in Belarus under President Alyaksandr Lukashenka as well as the phenomena of autocratic and democracy promotion within the framework of foreign support. Since his rise to power in 1994, President Lukashenka has managed to consolidate power and authority. Belarus under Lukashenka has been described as a police state, with the increased role of the security apparatus in ensuring the regime's survival and coercive capacity. During his early presidency, Belarus went from a relatively free state to a soft authoritarianism, which was followed by hard authoritarianism in his later years as a head of state. As such, I demonstrate the analysis of the literature on both the early years of Lukashenka's presidency, examining the process of power consolidation, democracy movement development as well the latest works on recent largest protests in the history of contemporary Belarus. The major gap in the literature, however, is that while attributing a high role to foreign benefactors to both sides of the conflict (i.e. President Lukashenka and the democracy movement), the scholarship sees the Belarusian civil society as weak and largely incapable of implementing resistance strategies on its own, therefore leaving the internal dynamics and strategy shifts of the democracy movement largely unaccounted for. I argue that strategic choices and tactics made by the Belarusian civil society have as much importance as the extensive foreign political-financial support in the survival and endurance of the Belarusian democracy movement.

The theoretical framework is presented as a second main part following the literature review. First, drawing evidence from the works on Belarusian democracy movement in support of the argument that the ruling government of President Lukashenka in Belarus constitutes a

repressive hard authoritarian regime, I argue that the regime that Lukashenka has established in Belarus is increasingly reliant on coercive strategies in dealing with dissent or opposition, due to fears of being overthrown, especially so following successful Color revolutions in other Post-Soviet states that removed similar authoritarian leaders. The concepts of soft and hard authoritarianism are explained and expanded further in the theoretical chapter. Second, the study also derives the theoretical framework of close linkages to the West, the role of foreign political-financial support and domestic democracy promotion efforts in the duration, complexity and outcome of the confrontation between democracy movements and nondemocratic regimes.

Finally, the empirical chapters proceed with the results of a thorough process tracing and in-depth interviews with scholars, Belarusian civil society members and the participants of anti-government protests on the democracy movement in Belarus. These chapters introduce the methodological aspects of the study and presents the final results of the research. The results of the study help to analyze the extent to which and why the democracy movement in Belarus has been able to endure under Lukashenka and apply the results to a broader phenomenon of democratic resistance and survival.

## **Chapter 2. Literature review: Domestic and foreign factors of authoritarian survival and democratic resilience**

To understand the ambiguous profile of survival and endurance of the Belarusian democracy movement, three major strands of literature need to be taken into account, namely the scholarship on (1) *authoritarian survival*, (2) *foreign political-financial support* (authoritarian promotion and diffusion, democratization and democracy promotion), as well as (3) *strategies of democratic resistance*. In addition to domestic strategies of authoritarian survival, and to counter extensive Western political-financial support to pro-democracy factions in Belarus, the Kremlin has provided President Alyaksandr Lukashenka with vast financial resources and diplomatic backing. Over the years, however, the Belarusian democracy movement has learned to persist violent repression from the Lukashenka regime due to shifting resistance strategies. This chapter reviews the existing state of the literature on these key issues.

### **Authoritarian Survival**

The recent history is ripe with instances when the autocratic regimes falter as a result of domestic uprisings and mass protests, initiated by both ordinary people and non-state challengers. While some such mass democracy movements and protests are able to withstand and resist a nondemocratic regime and, in some cases, force its leadership out of office, some other mass democracy movements and protests are not as fortunate and struggle to gain momentum.

The case of Belarus constitutes such a puzzle, given a strong long-term endurance of the mass democracy movement in the country. Ever since his rise to power in 1994, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has managed to consolidate an almost undisputed power. He has been largely described as the ruthless autocrat and titled “Europe’s last dictator” (Markus 2010, 118),

particularly for his hardline tactics in dealing with dissent of opposition groups and violent crackdown of the mass protests against his rule. Belarus under Lukashenka has also been described as a police state, with the increased role of the security apparatus in ensuring the regime's survival and coercive capacity. During his early presidency, Belarus went from a relatively free state to a soft authoritarianism, which was followed in his later years as a head of state by hard authoritarianism (Schatz 2009, 206), with the regime becoming highly repressive and nondemocratic.

The existing literature presents explicit evidence for the shift from soft to hard authoritarian and repressive nature of the Lukashenka government and highlights a few most likely explanations why he was able to survive and consolidate power in Belarus. In particular, Lukashenka's policy of preemption ensured his long reign and kept him almost invincible throughout his presidency. During the first years of his rule, Lukashenka established a direct personal control over most of the state apparatus. He strengthened the presidential power by successfully passing the new constitution, that created a new puppet legislative assembly and the Constitutional Court (Silitski 2005, 88), thus turning Belarus into a "super-presidential" state (Korosteleva 2012). Second, he introduced strict censorship of media, actively imposing the "information blockade on the opposition activities through the manipulation of the public opinion (Silitski 2005, 86). As such, he was in control of the general information flow in the country. The Belarussian regime began to manipulate the public opinion through the state-controlled media outlets, television and printed propaganda, portraying the above-mentioned revolution in the extremely negative light. Among other arguments, the regime stated that the similar revolution in Belarus would only lead to the same political instability and the economic disaster as the revolution-thorn states have experienced. As such, the Belarussian government issued warning texts and television messages, calling citizens to avoid "being fooled by foreign



propaganda” and to abstain from any illegal protests and meetings, threatening with the use of force against “illegal demonstrators” (Korosteleva 2009, Frear 2018).

Third, Lukashenka vastly utilized such techniques as blackmail of parliamentarians and the covert killings of the opposition leaders, leaving the opposition movements with no strong leader to challenge his rule and thus unable to gain momentum and public support (ibid, 87-90), (Usov 2008). Fourth, Lukashenka is an important strategic asset for Russia in the borders of NATO states and thus his regime enjoys an extensive political, military and economic support by the Kremlin (Silitski 2005, Markus 2010).

In the early 2000s, the Color Revolutions that rapidly spread among the Post-Soviet states have sparked an immense interest of the scholars on authoritarianism and democratization, whereas the autocrats in the neighboring states of Belarus, Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan as well as their numerous authoritarian counterparts have experienced a considerable shock and started to feel vulnerable themselves. The leaders of these regimes hastily began to examine the successes and failures of the less fortunate autocrats in order to avoid the similar fate. The Lukashenka regime started to feel particularly threatened by the “revolutionary spillover”. The uprisings succeeded in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2000, 2003, 2004-2005, 2005, respectively, removing local autocrats out of office. The recent scholarship has been divided over the exact explanations of the regimes’ inability to survive mass democracy protests. The first group of scholars argue that the ultimate defeat of the autocrats during the color revolutions was a product of the indecision of the regime leadership to utilize violent crackdown tactics towards protesters (McFaul 2005, 13-15).

The second group of scholars assert that the regime-specific factors played a significant role in the regime collapse. As such, the ruling political parties in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine were not as strongly institutionalized as in the more consolidated nondemocratic regimes (Way 2008). All three regimes, failing short of the major organizational and economic resources were

particularly prone to the defection of pro-regime elites and higher levels of mobilization in the opposition ranks (Way 2008, 66). In comparison, the ruling political parties in other Post-Soviet nondemocratic regimes such as Belarus were heavily institutionalized with a strong coercive apparatus and had a firm control over the economic resources (ibid, 66).

The third group of scholars argue that the international community's efforts to promote democracy and utilization of the "electoral model of democratization" in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine had a decisive role in strengthening their civil societies (Bunce & Wolchik 2006, 12-14). Such international political-financial support from the Western democracies, particularly the US and the EU, ensured the effective mobilization of the opposition under the march for democratic reforms and fair elections. Yet, it is also suggested that with the complete absence of domestic democracy-promotion efforts, international influence and support is of little to no value (ibid, 15). Accordingly, less developed civil societies with less experienced oppositions and less favorable attitudes towards the West are less likely to defeat the autocratic regime and achieve democratic transition (Bunce & Wolchik 2006, 16).

Among others, protest movements pose a significant challenge to the reigning autocrat. As such, authoritarian leaders typically tend to respond in the most brutal ways to cling on to power, if they deem it necessary. Freedom of speech is restricted, emergency laws are enacted to prevent opposition groups from gatherings, protests are dispersed and the participants are persecuted and tortured in prisons. Throughout Lukashenka's presidency, numerous attempts have been made by opposition groups to challenge his autocratic reign. The mass protests of 2006, 2011 and 2020-2021 are some of the most prominent showdowns of public discontent with his rule and demand for democratic reforms.

In March 2006, the controversial presidential election was held in Belarus. Two years prior, Lukashenka introduced amendments to the nation's constitution removing term-limits for presidency in order to run for a third consecutive term. With Lukashenka ruling the country

with an iron fist, the winner of the election appeared predetermined. Yet, Lukashenka was aware of the danger that the color revolutions in other Post-Soviet republics could pose to his regime and result in “revolution spillover”. In fact, Belarus at the time was in many senses similar to those republics. As such, the opposition and youth movements, in particular, were extremely mobilized and organized frequent rallies against the regime. Similarly, the protesters received the backing calls from the international community. Nevertheless, in just a week, as the clashes between the police and protesters took place, the Belarusian authorities managed to suppress the uprisings, detaining many prominent leaders of the protests such as Alyaksandr Kozulin (Markus 2010, 118). In this sense, while initially gaining momentum, the protests failed to turn into a full-scale revolution for several reasons. Markus (2010, 118-132) mentions five most significant factors that led to the ultimate demise of the protests. Among others, in contrast to the Post-Soviet republics where the color revolutions succeeded, the extent of political repression was much higher in Belarus. The leaders of the protest movements started to “disappear”, with credible sources testifying their murder by government death squads (ibid, 124). Similarly, the members of the NGOs and any contenders publicly speaking out in favor of the opposition movements found themselves under arrest.

Second is the obstruction of independent media’s activities. Popular independent newspapers like *Narodnaya Volya*, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* were refused publishing and distribution, with their licenses being suspended. Similarly, *Belapan* and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* media outlets were forced to leave their offices. The Internet users’ homes were raided under the suspicion of spreading mocking cartoons about Lukashenka and several other journalists were detained (ibid. 127).

Third, despite the opposition’s attempt to establish a unified front under a single leadership, it was not as cohesive. While the opposition groups had similar objectives of Lukashenka’s resignation and free and fair elections, they were ultimately divided, as they

could not choose one candidate who would best represent their interests in the elections. Similarly, while youth opposition groups were organized, the threat of expulsion from school was actively utilized by the authorities, which significantly reduced the number of youth members in the opposition ranks (Markus 2010, 128).

Fourth, democracy and opposition movements lacked much needed material support. While Lukashenka controlled all the government revenues, foreign financial assistance to the opposition groups was very limited and further decreased over time. Foreign grants were channeled through NGOs and were limited to be closely working in support of media freedom and political transparency. As such, the opposition's limited funding stood no chance against the vast resources employed by the Lukashenka regime. Similarly, whereas the foreign support would have been decisive in the survival of the mass democracy protests, domestic material support was of no less importance. As opposed to Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine and Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan, the opposition in Belarus had no domestic contributors and oligarchs in support of them, due to the poor performance of national economy. The Belarusian opposition also lacked the support of the political elite, as there were virtually no independent elite members (*ibid*, 130).

Last but not least, despite his low approval ratings, Lukashenka still maintained a sizeable portion of public support, particularly from the rural population and older people, who were nostalgic of the Soviet-era leadership. It was estimated that around 80% of the population was reliant on state-sponsored salary (Korosteleva 2006, 336). The members of the police force and state security apparatus were well-paid directly by the regime, as opposed to municipal treasuries in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, polls suggested that the Belarusian public disapproved of any form of violent change of the regime, and was also in support of the Russian policies implemented by the Lukashenka government (Markus 2010, 132). In this sense, not enough Belarusians were mobilized to make a change in their country. It is also

believed by some scholars that the already established dominant position of Lukashenka contributed to his success (Way 2008, 57-58). Lukashenka has been in power for more than a decade and thus has had enough time to consolidate power for himself and for his ruling class. As such, by the 2006 anti-government protests in Belarus, any opposition attempt was typically suppressed and oftentimes in the most brutal ways. The readiness of Lukashenka's regime to such a turn of events could also be evident by his pre-emptive actions aimed at preventing the likelihood of revolutionary success of the opposition (Silitski 2005). Given the regime's durability for more than a decade, it managed to successfully implement preemption strategies in natural settings and was able to impose a variety of institutional, societal and ideological tools and tactics to ensure its survival. As far as the institutional approach is concerned, President Lukashenka made use of extensive constitutional reforms and amendments to expand his executive and legislative powers making Belarus a "super-presidential" state (Korosteleva 2012).

The most recent protests in Belarus were significantly different from all previous mass protests, including those of 2006 and 2011, when the regime was able to easily repress the demonstrators. Out of the three largest mass protests in Belarus, the 2020-2021 protests were arguably the most challenging to Lukashenka's autocratic rule (Buzgalin & Kulganov 2021, Mudrov 2021, Way 2020, 17). First, following the elections, that were internationally recognized as fraudulent, Lukashenka's international legitimacy, especially his image in the eyes of the West has significantly deteriorated. Prior to the protests, he was able to bounce in between the West and Russia, particularly keeping close cultural and political ties with Russia, whereas simultaneously promising domestic democratic changes to the West. Nonetheless, as of now, his position is much worse, as with all the Western sanctions aimed at his regime and his close associates, Lukashenka has no choice but to turn back for help to Russia (Waller 2020, Tolstrup 2015, Ambrosio 2016). Second, the scope of the recent protests much overwhelmed

that of those previous opposition protests, with some sources indicating more than 200 thousand demonstrators going out to the streets. Never before had there been such a large level of political mobilization in Belarus. These protests were unique, as a lot more people turned against Lukashenka. With the availability of new mass media resources and mobile apps, particularly Telegram, the younger generation was able to better mobilize in groups (Herasimenka 2020).

In a similar vein, never before have Lukashenka's approval ratings been as low as following his use of extremely brute force of the 2020-2021 protests (Mudrov 2021, 7-8). Sullivan (2019, 643) suggests that when a nondemocratic government resorts to the use of brute force and outright repressive measures, such coercive actions tend to further mobilize the masses, whereby the social movements are formed from exacerbated anti-government sentiments. Drawing from the example of Kyrgyzstan's two nondemocratic leaders Akayev and Bakiyev, Sullivan finds that the use of brute force against the participants of mass protests significantly deteriorates public perception of an autocrat, whereas those nondemocratic leaders that decide in favor of avoiding violent clashes with the protesters tend to score higher in public approval polls. In this sense, the use of brute force in Belarus aggravated the masses, who showed little signs of backing down at the initial stages of the protests. As such, Lukashenka suffered a significant political cost, losing the formerly present leverage between the EU and Russia, now being heavily dependent on the latter's support to survive.

Ultimately, the eruption of mass protests of 2006, 2011 and 2020-2021 have demonstrated the survivability and endurance of the Belarusian democracy movement throughout the years of repression, whereas the latest 2020-2021 protests provide a clear indication of the ability of the Belarusian civil society to mobilize in huge and unprecedented numbers all under the repressive nondemocratic government of President Lukashenka.

## **Foreign Political-Financial Support**

### **Democracy Promotion: The West as a major promoter of democracy**

The notions of democratic diffusion and democracy promotion have been subjects to different interpretations. One of the earliest and most common interpretations describes diffusion as “the process by which institutions, practices, behaviors, or norms are transmitted between individuals and/or between social systems” (Welsh 1984, 3; Starr 1991, 359). The proponents of the democratic diffusion or the democratic domino theory have argued that the democratic transition in one country is likely to trigger and influence a similar transition in neighboring states (Starr 1991, 357; Goldring & Chestnut Greitens 2019, 320). The empirical studies by Leeson & Dean (2009, 546) and O’Loughlin et al. (2010, 545) further present strong autocorrelation between spatial and temporal aspects of democratic diffusion. Yet, the proponents still caution against accepting their findings as universal in explaining the growth and development of democracy, pushing for the study of both foreign and domestic factors of the spread of democracy.

One of the possible explanations of the growing number of democratic transitions and their further development proposed by the scholars is the concept of democracy promotion. Describing distinct advantages of the democratic form of government, Dahl (1999) asserts that democracy plays a significant role in staving off the tyrannical reign of ruthless autocrats, while also ensuring fundamental human rights and personal liberties of ordinary citizens of the state as well as their choice of legislation and governance. McFaul (2004, 148) further suggests that the promotion of democracy has become a widely accepted norm within the contemporary international system.

Non-governmental organizations (NGO) have played an increasing role in the democracy promotion efforts of the Western states (Herrold 2015). Extensive theoretical elaborations and empirical analyses have found that the establishment of formal civil society

organizations assists successful democratic transitions through the mobilization of vast number of opposition groups and undermining the legitimacy of the autocratic ruler (Ketola 2011, 787; de Tocqueville 2003; Diamond 1997, Putnam 1993; Bernhard 1993). Prior to democratic transitions, NGOs serve as organizational structures aimed at the mobilization of the society to present a united front against the ruler as well as to promote government accountability and the transparency of state institutions. NGOs further apply significant pressure to the ruling regime to leave authoritarian practices and pursue democratic reforms in the following stage of democratic consolidation (Putnam 2000). Moreover, as part of a broader concept of civil society, NGOs also serve the interests of ordinary citizens by bringing their social, economic and political concerns and suggestions to light as well as embracing the role of a watchdog over the state activities, keeping public records of power abuse and corruption by the state.

While the democratization theorists have insisted on the role of NGOs as the drivers of democratic transitions, the bulk of scholarship on civil society organizations suggests that NGOs within the so-called “liberalized authoritarian regimes” are adopted by local government to help their interests and hence do not possess enough capacity to implement significant political reforms and transitions as well as to mobilize and unite domestic political movements (Heydemann 2007; Carothers 2002; Albrecht 2005; Soliman 2011; Brumberg 2002). According to Carothers (2002, 9) an increasing number of liberalizing authoritarian regimes have rather floated within a “political gray zone”, than experiencing any real political transitions. He suggests that out of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, most regimes have neither truly liberalized, nor did they transform back to their previous forms of autocracy (ibid, 13-15). Such states have been referred to as “liberalized autocracies” by Brumberg (2002, 55) due to the mix of selective government-sponsored persecution strategies, strictly managed political pluralism as well as the tightly controlled elective procedures. In liberalized autocracies, as Brumberg argues, NGOs have rather been more ponderable and



permitted to operate, with the governments' aim of making them contribute to the regimes' interests and proliferation of the similar regimes and practices.

The literature has derived four major pathways through which NGOs operate to rather reinforce the liberalized authoritarian regime, than present a challenge to the ruling elite's political legitimacy. First, the presence of a variety of NGOs in the nation's civil society sector assists the regime by creating an illusion of progress towards political liberalization and the embracement of the democratic values, thus bolstering the regime's image in the eyes of the international observers (Albrecht 2005). Second, according to Brumberg (2002) and Lust-Okar (2004), larger NGO sector provides additional extension to the "divide and rule" strategy of the regime into larger portions of society, thus reaching far beyond the circle of close political elites and oligarchs. Within this model, a guise of competitiveness arising due to a larger number of organizations diminishes the prospects of the united front against the autocrat. Third, the presence of NGOs provides alternative avenues for opposition to get rid of pent-up concerns and worries, while also leaving regime's power consolidation largely unaltered. Last but not least, the due presence of NGOs allows ruling regimes in liberalized autocracies to effectively regulate, control and overlook the civil society at large. As such, by state registration and passing activity reports, NGOs become actively involved in the civil society development and hence effectively embedded in the bureaucratic order of the state. This in turn offers the state a means to regulate and control most civil society activities by providing constant supervision of public mood and attitudes, and therefore diminishing the likelihood of any real challenge to the ruling regime (Wiktorowitz 2000, 43).

An increasing number of scholars have examined the role of the European Union (EU) and the United States as the major promoters of democratic values abroad as part of a broader democracy promotion concept (Bosse 2012, Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011; Pinder 1997; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008). There is a general agreement on the close link between the

capacity of the EU states for the promotion of democracy and the motivations it has provided to the formerly autocratic states in both the Eastern and Central European continent. Out of many states of the region, Belarus stands out as a vivid example of authoritarian resistance against democracy promotion efforts from the West. The general unwillingness of the Lukashenka regime to effectively cooperate with the EU counterparts, disunited opposition factions, poor development of transparent political institutions and unbalanced Belarusian civil society have played an extensive role in the decreasing hopes for democratization. Despite the challenges of spreading democratic values in Belarus, the European Union has taken multiple strategies of initiating democratization in the country. First, during the early years of Lukashenka's presidency, the growing authoritarian tendencies in Belarus saw the EU largely protest against such developments through the negative conditionality and policy of isolation, namely by freezing enormous intergovernmental diplomatic and financial contacts (Bosse 2012, 373). Unwilling to prolong the rising tensions, both sides agreed to compromise, with Belarus having remained as isolated nonetheless. Second, due to the unsuccessful nature of the negative conditionality policy, the EU initiated a "step-by-step" approach. The intended objective of this policy was to gradually remove the obstacles to the long-term cooperation by working closely with the Lukashenka regime and provide a broader assistance. Despite initial hopes of democratization through normalization, the step-by-step strategy proved to be largely ineffective due to its inability to incentivize the Belarusian government to introduce democratic reforms.

In 2004, the European Union established the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), to which Belarus was admitted with the promise of free and fair elections. Although, due to the tensions around the authenticity of the following Belarusian elections, the EU-Belarus partnership stalled. To ease tensions, the EU leaders initiated a new two-tailed strategy to address the problem of democracy in Belarus (Yakouchyk 2015, 204). First, the EU utilized

the “*sticks and carrots*” approach, that promised extensive political-financial aid in exchange for relevant political reforms towards democratization. Second, the EU initiated vast changes in its policies regarding political and monetary help to the civil society organizations of Belarus, by allocating large funds to the pro-democracy NGOs, that played a critical role in the development of the Belarusian democracy movement under President Lukashenka.

According to Rouda (2005, 81), despite enormous pressure from the ruling regime, more than 2000 NGOs were officially registered in Belarus as of 2004, of which just over 200 were international public associations. Within that quantity, nearly 500 NGOs were also included as active members of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic Non-Governmental Organizations (APDNGO). Vanderhill (2014, 270) suggests regarding foreign NGOs, that both the United States and the European Union have implemented multiple programs of supporting civil society in Belarus, including the Belarusian democracy movement through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), US Agency for International Development (USAID). As such, NED has engaged in actively supporting the Belarusian civil society and opposition groups via NGO financing, such as the monitoring of human rights abuse in the country and the provision of training and education for anti-government activists, whereas USAID was involved in financing NGOs that overtly tasked with democracy promotion in Belarus and public services (ibid, 270).

Similar to their American counterparts, the Polish authorities have provided enormous funds towards the democracy promotion in Belarus over the past decade (Pospieszna 2010, 3). The multiplicity of factors can explain the motives behind Poland’s inclination towards supporting democratic initiatives in Belarus. As such, due the shared border, political-cultural connections with Belarus as well as the security interests, it is one of Poland’s main political goals to provide assistance to the Belarusian democracy movement. In 2006, Poland launched the foreign aid program called “Polish aid” with two primary objectives, namely the provision

of developmental support and efforts to facilitate the build-up of strong democratic institutions in the near abroad. The Polish Ministry of Foreign affairs has thus provided an increasing amount of direct financial assistance pro-democracy NGOs operating in Belarus, most notably Freedom and Democracy Foundation (FDF), which deals with assisting the victims of governmental repression in Belarus and East European Democratic Center (EEDC), which supports media freedom and journalism without borders in the country.

In fact, overwhelming support from Western powers, particularly from the US and Poland significantly assisted the Belarusian democracy movement. Extensive funding and political legitimation allowed the movement to effectively resist the Lukashenka regime. Given the instrumental role of the linkages with the West and foreign support to the endurance of the Belarusian civil society represented by opposition and civil society, the extent to which the movement would survive without such extensive multilateral assistance is utterly dubious.

### **Authoritarian Promotion: Russia as a major promoter of authoritarianism**

An increasing number of scholars has focused on external or foreign aspects of authoritarian survival and endurance over the past decade, particularly the tools that foreign state actors otherwise known as “black knights” utilize to take advantage of asymmetric conflicts, most commonly between the government and its challengers, to promote their autocratic interests and countering democracy abroad. More specifically, the Russian Federation has been largely seen as one of the major promoters of authoritarianism, increasingly interested in diffusing autocratic ideology and practices, as well as to counter democracy promotion efforts by liberal democracies of the West (Vanderhill 2013, 6; Silitski 2010, Bader et al. 2010, Ambrosio 2009, Kuchins 2006, von Soest 2015).

The collapse of neighboring authoritarian regimes in Georgia, Ukraine and the Kyrgyz Republic as a result of Color revolutions triggered a highly negative reaction in the Kremlin,

with some of its politicians considering the revolutions as the West's evil plot to surround the country with hostile anti-Russian puppet states and to eventually undermine the statehood and influence of Russia, or as one of their commentators suggested, "The day before yesterday: Belgrade. Yesterday: Tbilisi. Today: Kiev. Tomorrow: Moscow (Ambrosio 2007, 237; Bader et al. 2010, 94-96). In this sense, the official Russian position with regards to color revolutions in the neighboring countries has been known as the "orange virus" or the "orange plague" (Ambrosio 2007, 237-238). Such a wordplay and statewide anti-revolution framing has allowed Russia to link the foundational interests of the ruling regime with the strategic interests of the state and to officially take all necessary measures both domestic and foreign to stave off any such regime change in the country.

Various authors argue that Russia's growing authoritarian tendencies under President Vladimir Putin, along with its vast capabilities and motives to actively influence political systems near its borders, enables it to promote authoritarian values with little to no obstacles, particularly to the neighboring states. As such, Ambrosio (2007, 232) provides three major pathways that the Russian government utilizes to ensure authoritarian resistance and to counter democratic diffusion, namely insulation, bolstering and subversion. First, he argues that domestically Moscow strictly opposed the activities of all foreign sponsored non-governmental organizations (NGOs), attributing to them the primary role in the orchestration of color revolutions (ibid, 238). By adopting anti-NGO legislation and rejecting foreign models of democratic understanding on the highest state level, the Russian government severely limited the capabilities of foreign organizations to operate within the country, thus protecting the strategic interests of the ruling authoritarian regime, while pretending to account for the national security concerns.

Second, the fears of the "domino effect" of the democratic diffusion, have led Moscow to re-assess its policies on how to stave off foreign influence near its borders. As such, one of

the key attributes of the Russian attempts to counter the spread of democracy is the Kremlin's active support to similarly minded autocratic regimes in the near abroad. With the fall of autocrats in Georgia and Ukraine, Belarus has become Russia's only authoritarian ally along its European borders and serves as a major buffer zone between itself and NATO/EU (Zulys 2010, 164). Consequently, Russia has provided extensive support to the Lukashenka government in various forms, most often in the form of direct financial aid and political legitimization of the regime on the international arena (Ambrosio 2007, 241; von Soest 2015, 631). Despite fierce Western criticism of the ruling regime in Belarus for human rights violations and power abuse, Moscow has not backed down its overt diplomatic cover to Lukashenka, preventing Minsk from severe isolation. Over the years, President Vladimir Putin has held regular meetings with Lukashenka and has bestowed his Belarusian counterpart with much needed political legitimacy. For instance, following the Belarusian parliamentary elections of 2000 and presidential elections of 2001, Putin awarded Lukashenka with "For Merit to the Fatherland", one of the highest Russian state orders, showing his overt political support to the Lukashenka regime and passing his congratulations to Lukashenka in what he called was a "convincing victory", despite universal dismay of the European observers, who believed the elections to be fraudulent. Similarly, in 2005, following the meeting of Condoleezza Rice, then-US Secretary of State, with the prominent leaders of the Belarusian democracy movement with the aim of convincing them to join their efforts in countering the ruling Belarusian regime, Lukashenka was invited to meet with Putin in an attempt of displaying his utmost support in public. More recently, the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections were declared flawed by the US and the EU, Russia among a few states who recognized Lukashenka as a winner and a legitimate leader of Belarus. As such, Russian diplomatic support to the Belarusian regime has been largely consistent since Lukashenka's earliest power consolidation efforts and throughout his presidency. According to Zulys (2010,

164), Vieira (2017, 45) and Ambrosio (2007, 242) such an extensive support to the Lukashenka regime can be particularly linked to a close strategic cooperation in the form of the “Union State” between Russia and Belarus based on the idea of the united confederation with integrated political and economic systems, which has become quite popular in both Russia and Belarus. The added popularity of Putin’s personality in Belarus along with his willingness to cooperate with the Belarusian leader emphasizes the importance of the Lukashenka regime to Russian strategic interests and authoritarian promotion efforts.

Third, Ambrosio (2007, 245) argues that within the authoritarian diffusion theory, if the democratic transition near its borders succeeds, an authoritarian regime automatically views it as a symbolic threat that instills the fear of a likely regime change within itself. The threat of regime change was not the only concern of Moscow near its borders. As such, in the Kremlin’s views, the successful 2004 and 2014 democratic revolutions in Ukraine serve as some of the most outstanding symbols of the Russian foreign policy failure and a reminder of the Soviet collapse under heavy domestic and foreign pressures, or as put by President Putin, “the single greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (ibid, 245).

As a consequence of the Orange and Euromaidan revolutions, the relationship between Russia and Ukraine stagnated and experienced further decline. Prior to the 2004 revolution, then-Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma had been growing largely authoritarian, consolidating his power in the state institutions and pushing his country closer to Russia. Yet despite not being restricted by the term limits set by the Ukrainian constitution and the Constitutional Court’s ruling allowing Kuchma to seek the presidency once more, Kuchma decided in favor of leaving the office, forcing the Kremlin to look for alternatives to endorse and finally stopping at Viktor Yanukovich, Kuchma’s political and ideological successor. Russia has invested huge financial resources and sought to provide substantial political-diplomatic support to the pro-Russian Yanukovich campaign (Kuzio 2005, 495), while also

attempting to undermine the opposition presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko, who was seen as largely pro-Western, being endorsed by both the US and EU. Following the defeat of Yanukovych at the onset of Orange Revolution, Moscow sought to delegitimize the uprising, with some Russian politicians publicly condemning it as unconstitutional and undemocratic (Saari 2014, 57). For instance, in 2005, Putin's United Russia party, that dominates the Russian political system, established direct cooperation through formal treaties with Yanukovych's Party of Regions, bolstering the latter's position among his Eastern-Ukrainian support base. Furthermore, the same year Moscow took steps to economically diminish the political prospects of Viktor Yushchenko, by refusing to provide natural gas supplies to Ukraine at a discounted price, thus forcing Kyiv to pay five times more than before, causing a massive diplomatic crisis. While the conflict was eventually resolved through negotiations with the intercession of the EU, the largest consumer of Russian natural gas, the incident illustrates the readiness of the Kremlin to use the extreme economic and diplomatic leverages to assert its influence and values in the neighboring states.

Russia's subversion attempts aimed at securing victory for Yanukovych and undermining Yushchenko's candidacy have not been seen entirely legal and fair, however. As such, when Viktor Yushchenko was poisoned with dioxin nervous agent, the growing evidence pointed to the idea that the Russian government and the Kuchma administration were behind the attack (Karatnycky 2005, 37; Kuzio 2005, 498). As a consequence, Yushchenko was not able to campaign for at least a month, due to the severe illness and scars caused by the poisoning.

Likewise, the television, common Internet space, and other networks have further assisted Russia in facilitating the diffusion and promotion of authoritarian ideas and practices (Vanderhill 2012, 5; Silitski 2006, 5-7). The concept of "linkage and leverage" proposed by Way and Levitsky (2007, 51) closely correlates with networks' extreme ability to spread



authoritarianism, suggesting that the pathways of autocratic diffusion can be explained via the proximity of political-organizational, socio-economic, cultural, economic and communication links. Not only direct political-financial aid, but the international and intergovernmental organizations have been widely used by authoritarian regimes to spread their values and policies. According to Aris (2008) and Ambrosio (2008), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which Russia is a permanent member and one of the largest contributors, serves as one of the key instruments in Russia's authoritarian diffusion attempts to the member states from Central Asia. Similarly, the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan was instrumental in providing with the Kremlin with further economic and diplomatic tools to exert influence over the neighboring regimes (Vieira 2016, 47-48). The membership in such organizations facilitates the trade and economic cooperation between authoritarian regimes as part of a broader autocratic survival strategy (Tansey et al. 2016, 4-8).

Not all scholars, however, agree with the decisive role of the Russian authoritarian promotion efforts. Way (2015, 691) argues that despite Russian support for authoritarianism in neighboring countries, its efforts have been largely restricted due to the faded democratic premises in the former Soviet republics. He suggests that while the aggressive authoritarian policies of great powers such as Russia and China have increased over the past decade, the democratization process is far-forth from being threatened by autocracy promotion. Similarly, Gilley (2003, 21-23) posits that authoritarian states may have restrictions in achieving successful domestic institutionalization that may limit their capabilities to exert influence and promote their values abroad. Levitsky and Way (2010, 35) argue that when the authoritarian government abuses power within domestic settings and abroad, it triggers the negative reaction from the Western democracies, limiting the scope of the effects of the authoritarian promotion.

Consequently, despite the variation of opinions in the extent of the effects of authoritarian promotion in countering democratic values, the vast majority of scholarship tends to appropriate an increasing role to the Russian efforts of spreading authoritarian concepts and practices to the neighboring regimes.

### **Strategies of democratic resistance**

Extensive foreign support to the nondemocratic regime and repressive measures implemented by the ruling autocrat may force pro-democracy and opposition factions to search for the ways of effective resistance. The case of the Belarusian democracy movement is no exception. Throughout the years the Belarusian democracy movement represented by the opposition factions and civil society members has managed to survive and resist passive-aggressive forms of state repression. Belarusian civil society has become highly politicized due to both the expulsion of anti-government factions from the political arena and by the improved realization by NGOs of constant readiness to withstand governmental sanctions under the repressive autocratic regime of President Lukashenka Rouda (2005, 83). Years of violent repression have led to the strategy changes by the opposition and protesters.

There have been several avenues of strategy shifts by the Belarusian democracy movement. First, in 2011, when the first public demonstrations erupted in Minsk's central square known as "*ploshcha*", the protesters resorted to the tactic that the previous protests of 2006 in Belarus had not seen – coined by Navumau (2019, 288) as "*Silent Actions*" strategy. This strategy is characterized by the use of calculated silence and by the absence of active political slogans. The majority of *Silent Actions* participants did not seek any radical changes such as the overthrow of President Lukashenka or other dramatic socio-political procedures, as opposed to the leaders of the Belarusian opposition parties. As such, unlike the 2006 protests, the *silent actions* demonstrators opted for small-scale tactics, while also pursuing the concept

of “informed citizenry” and dismissing the consensual nature of the Belarusian politics, normally supported by the opposition factions (ibid, 288-292).

Second, despite initial failures to achieve the higher participation of the population in the anti-government protests, the Belarusian democracy movement utilized the “*snowball effect*” strategy to fill the streets. For instance, the 2011 protests saw a very limited number of demonstrators over the first few days, whereas upon assigning pre-arranged times of weekly and semi-weekly “solidarity” protests in support of the democracy movement, have helped to acquire much needed numbers. Despite the attempts to mobilize more people, however, the protests did not achieve their initial political goals. Such a refusal to actively participate in protests by the majority of general population could also be explained by the repressive nature of the Lukashenka regime. Instead, not many people were ready to openly shout anti-government slogans, still remembering the notorious violence initiated by President Lukashenka’s security apparatus just five years earlier during the 2006 protests (de Vogel 2022, 13). In contrast, the 2020-2021 protests saw many participants adjusting the time and location of gatherings differently for each day of protests, with the aim of deceiving the authorities about the frequency and physical sites for the protests.

Third, the use of social media apps has revolutionized the nature and structure of protests. Telegram Messenger created by Pavel Durov, a Russian born Kittitian-French program developer, was instrumental in providing the population with access to the information about protests (Wijermars & Lokot 2022, 126; Robertson 2022, 147). Members of the democracy movement and protests leaders have managed to ensure proper communication via Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and proxy servers in Telegram, despite the government’s attempts to block the Internet, social media channels were also utilized to deceive the security forces by spreading false locations for gatherings and demonstrations. All the scrutiny and delay in the arrival of the security forces to the actual protest location, provided the protest

leaders with time advantage, i.e. to voice their anti-government demands at the absence of security officers.

### **Chapter 3. Theory and Hypotheses**

The contemporary political order of the world as a heterogeneous structure brings up a multiplicity of issues to address. Just as much nations and their cultures differ, there are underlying distinctions between various political systems present in the world. As such, while the distinction between democratic forms of government and nondemocratic regimes appears to be quite obvious at the first glance, more categorical variations rise up to the surface. This chapter first conceptualizes a hard-authoritarian regime in the context of the Lukashenka's rule in Belarus and then proposes a theoretical framework suggesting that extensive foreign political-financial support assists the endurance of both sides of the asymmetric conflict, namely the ruling autocrat and a pro-democracy movement.

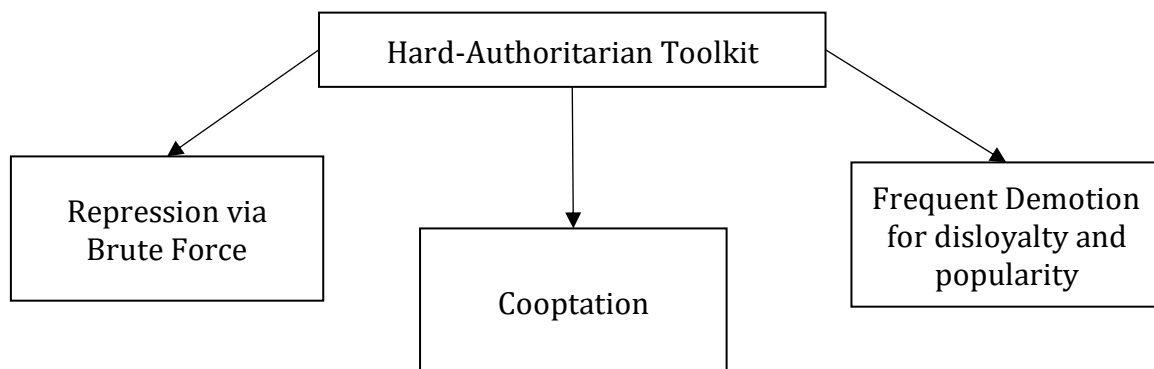
#### **Conceptualization of a Hard-Authoritarian Regime**

Distinguishing what states can be classified as nondemocratic regimes is often more difficult due to the intertwined categories of classification and debates. However, one would not be wrong to suggest that nondemocratic regimes tend to vary in the degree of freedom it allows for its citizens and institutions, the strategies and tactics they use in keeping their respective publics under control, media censorship and the use of brutal force (Schatz and Matlseva 2012).

Winkler (1984, 482) defines hard authoritarian regime as a “technocratic rule under one-man dictatorship”, which utilizes tightly controlled electoral process to coopt local elites and unite them under the umbrella of overall obedience to the regime. Hard authoritarian government vastly relies on brute force and security apparatus to secure the existing political

system. Under this form of government, any political dissent expressed in public is highly discouraged and often persecuted. Additionally, the ruler frequently demotes anyone who have shown slight signs of disobedience or start to gain popularity among the elites and a populace (ibid, 485). The flow chart (Figure 1) below shows three major pillars of hard authoritarian rule:

**Figure 1: Three pillars of Hard-Authoritarian Rule**



In contrast, soft authoritarian tactics are based upon means of persuasion, such as control of the flow of information and active propaganda. According to Schatz (2009, 206), a successful soft authoritarian tool kit consists of five core mechanisms:

1. possession of a committed support base;
2. soft autocrat is capable of mobilizing additional groups via material gain and blackmail;
3. occasional harassment of opposition with limited levels of coercion;
4. soft autocrat is able to maintain effective control over the flow of information;
5. discursive preemption.

As such, the capability of an authoritarian leader to gain loyal support groups from amongst the general population, while also maintaining tight control over the exchange of information and keeping opposition suppressed firmly establishes the ruler as a soft autocrat.

Nevertheless, often soft autocrats start to transition to hard authoritarian rule as the opposition against their rule starts to grow. Hard autocrats tend to utilize identical tools,

although increased proportions. As such, the case of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka of Belarus, demonstrates such a shift from persuasion to coercion. Lukashenka was popular in mid-to-late 1990s and was widely characterized as a symbol of democratic change (McMahon 1997). He managed to successfully mobilize his support base, that in turn served his interests in crediting him with initial economic success and socio-political stability, maintaining balance between Russia and the West. Furthermore, President Lukashenka showed readiness to promise material gains to his closest subordinates, political elites and security officials throughout his presidency. Such financial incentives and state posts appointments have served a good purpose of keeping his elites and security apparatus loyal to him during three major protests of 2006, 2011 and 2020-2021. He also vastly used blackmail technique to get the support of those who were hesitant and pull opposing voices away. On top of that, the Lukashenka regime was able to achieve a certain level of persuasion via the harassment and intimidation of opposition members, often providing jailtimes for political opponents and rationed degree of coercive force in his initial years as President and early 2000s. Finally, Lukashenka has successfully run the media in Belarus and had an operational control of the narrative that the public was supposed to receive and follow. The regime's propaganda machine ensured the government-approved messages to be delivered to the masses and was successful in preventing the masses from mobilizing in 2006 and 2011 protests.

Over the years, Lukashenka's policies started to become harsher in terms of coercion and brute force. The scale of violence has become most clear following the latest 2020-2021 mass anti-government protests, with Lukashenka ordering his security apparatus to shoot at protesters to disperse the masses. The recent protests have been reportedly the deadliest in terms of human casualties in the history of the contemporary Belarus, with hundreds of people reportedly being tortured in Belarusian jails.

With more opposition to his rule, and fearing being overthrown, Lukashenka shifted to brute force and demonstrated that his unwillingness to step down as the head of state, despite losing significant portions of his domestic support base. Feeling the danger of being overrun by the masses, the ruling Belarusian regime sought to appeal to the increased Russian political, economic and security aid in times of mass protests. Multiple studies have highlighted the significance of foreign aid and intervention in both peaceful and violent settings, such as civil wars and humanitarian crisis (Stewart 2009, Sullivan 2019). As such, Lukashenka's good ties with the Kremlin and uninterrupted political-financial support have served as one of the core reasons of the regime's survival (Hall 2017). On the other hand, the increased political-financial support, speaking platform and political harbor provided to the Belarusian opposition leaders by the Western powers (Ash 2015), has contributed to the prolonged endurance and complexity of mass protests as much as the increased domestic efforts for democracy promotion during the latest protests. Furthermore, the widespread use of social media platforms and availability of information on the outskirts of the Internet, mobilized the youth members of society to take part in anti-government rallies – a very rare occurrence in previous protests.

### **Foreign support as a determining factor**

Foreign support can provide substantial assistance to both sides in the asymmetric conflict between the ruling autocrat and the pro-democracy movement (Ambrosio 2017; Bellin 2004; McFaul 2004). The extent and duration of political-financial aid can heavily reflect on authoritarian persistence and the endurance of pro-democracy groups. Nondemocratic rulers receive foreign support from powerful and similarly-minded authoritarian patrons in various forms, that could help them sustain and consolidate their rule. There are three major categories of foreign aid that need to be defined in this regard, namely diplomatic cover, financial aid and coercive support (Yom 2016, Baissa and Cammett 2022). Autocratic resilience and regime

stability may be further reinforced by cooptation and repression in the form purge of dissidents. Depending on the extent, volume and longevity of such external aid, foreign state actors can help a nondemocratic regime to bolster its political legitimacy and acceptance of the existing regime by general population and to opposition groups and pro-democracy masses from mobilizing forces against the ruling autocrat.

First, diplomatic harbor to the nondemocratic regime from a powerful foreign patron signals that the client autocrat will be supported by a geopolitical hegemon in case of any threats to the regime stability via both direct and indirect support, including prompt military intervention. As a result of diplomatic backing, incumbent autocrats may become emboldened to freely utilize repressive tactics with little to no consequences, hence deterring any potential mobilization attempts by a pro-democracy movement (Ambrosio 2017). Inability of opposition factions to unite against the ruler under heavy repression further solidifies the power and authority of the regime, undermining the endurance of any forms of dissent. Under normal circumstances, diplomatic cover is overtly expressed through official channels of communication, legislation and decrees.

Second, coercive support by a powerful foreign state actor entails direct impact on the stability of the autocratic client state by enhancing the state security apparatus, tasked with repression of the population in nondemocratic regimes. Various forms of coercive support such as the collaboration of intelligence services, direct military aid, presence of military personnel and military bases as well as supply of arms and joint military exercises strengthen the repressive capacity of the regime. In turn, the presence of allied foreign troops allows for redeploying security forces to protect regime's domestic levers of power and ensures readiness of the client state to timely suppress any protests and demonstrations that could threaten the political system in place.



Third, financial aid bolsters the economic capacity of the client state, providing the ruling autocrat with additional monetary resources to enhance institutional apparatus and provide socio-economic benefits to ordinary citizens, thus increasing overall satisfaction with the government and undermining prospects of any large-scale opposition. Likewise, a surplus of economic levers of control, provides the regime with more financial confidence to sustain and increase salaries for security officials, who in turn become economically incentivized to preserve the regime by further repressing the dissidents. The vast majority of foreign financial aid is supplied via economic subsidies, long-term loans with extremely low interest rates, technical support and direct cash grants.

In a similar vein, extensive support from foreign democracy promoters in the form of diplomatic, political and financial aid assist the survival and endurance of pro-democracy movements (Diamond 1992, Finkel et al. 2007). Traditionally close linkages of pro-democracy movements in authoritarian states with Western liberal democracies due to shared democratic values and principles further contribute to the outright support of democracy promoters to the opposition factions (Levitsky & Way 2010). In particular, such help to foreign civil society members, media, civic unions, opposition parties and organizations can come via either direct political legitimation and funding or indirect routes of fiscal assistance through NGOs. McFaul (2004) and Putnam (2000) argue for the important role of foreign support in civil society' efforts to facilitate democratization. The authors also highlight the role of NGOs in democracy promotion, suggesting that NGOs serve as organizational structures aimed at the mobilization of the society to present a united front against the ruler as well as to promote government accountability and the transparency of state institutions, while also applying NGOs significant pressure to the ruling regime to leave authoritarian practices and pursue democratic reforms in the following stage of democratic consolidation (Putnam 2000).

Receiving vast financial assistance from powerful democracies interested in the proliferation of democratic values and practices, pro-democracy groups under authoritarian rulers utilize the finding to organize anti-government rallies, promote the principles of free and fair elections to a larger populace, educate citizens of their fundamental rights and help provide the needs of dissidents and their families who fell under the regime's sanctions.

First, financial assistance in the form of grants, social development programs and sustenance of the activities of civil society members and organizations reduces the dependence of ordinary citizens on nondemocratic government's funding and a further promise of additional fiscal support by liberal democracies in exchange for democratic reforms incentivizes the masses to mobilize against the ruling autocrat in the path towards liberalization. Such a change in public attitudes substantially weakens the legitimacy of an autocrat, pushing for further concessions in the form of political reforms and lifting of government sanctions on pro-democracy individuals and organizations. Likewise, financing independent media via NGOs helps the spread of reliable information free of government propaganda, further supporting the cause of the pro-democracy movement (Putnam 2000, Diamond 1997).

Second, foreign funding helps a pro-democracy movement to educate the civil society about fundamental human rights and benefits of political liberalization. The exposure to the Western understanding of democratic values and open flow of information provides the opportunity for further recruitment of new members to pro-democracy groups. Similarly, the rising number of followers allows the pro-democracy movement to organize mass nationwide rallies against the government with the wide public backing.

Third, foreign political-diplomatic support may also come in the form of the delegitimization of an autocrat in favor of opposition leaders and personal sanctions on regime leaders. Diplomatic recognition of opposition groups bolsters both the international status and

domestic support for pro-democracy groups. Likewise, political asylum provided by foreign promoters of democracy to political dissidents, allows opposition leaders to mobilize masses and organize rallies from exile, which could sustain the leadership structure of the opposition and hence substantially improve the coordination and endurance of the pro-democracy movement. In this sense, foreign political-financial support largely contributes to the survival and endurance of the mass democracy movement.

### **Hypotheses:**

In this section of the chapter, building on my theoretical framework, I highlight the two hypotheses based on the extensive literature review, providing definitions on key theoretical concepts used in this study. The literature provides ample evidence in support of the repressive authoritarian nature of the ruling Belarusian regime under the leadership of President Lukashenka. Furthermore, as previously outlined in the literature review chapter, foreign political legitimation and extensive financial aid from powerful patrons is crucial for the survival and long endurance and survival of both authoritarian leaders of smaller states and civil society members represented by activists and protesters. Therefore, the first hypotheses presented in this study is aimed at testing whether political-financial support from powerful foreign patrons serves as a key factor behind the survival and lengthy endurance of mass democracy movement in Belarus as highlighted in the theoretical framework. The second hypothesis explores the internal dynamics of the Belarusian democracy movement.

*Hypothesis 1: Close linkages to the West and extensive foreign political-financial support to opposition groups leads to the survival and endurance of mass democracy movements under repressive nondemocratic regimes.*

*Hypothesis 2: Learning and changing resistance strategies leads to the endurance of mass democracy movements and anti-government protests.*

To conclude, in this chapter I introduced the theoretical framework of this study. I particularly argued that the Belarusian regime has transformed from a soft authoritarian form of nondemocratic rule to a repressive hard authoritarian regime, with the increased levels of coercion and brute force following the recent mass protests. I also claimed that both sides of the conflict have greatly benefited from foreign political-financial support, with the Lukashenka regime receiving extensive diplomatic backing, security aid and economic support from neighboring Russia, and the opposition leaders being offered political harbor and financial support through NGOs and private donations. Finally, I assert that foreign political-financial support, coupled with domestic strategy changes plays a substantial role in predicting the endurance and complexity of confrontation between a nondemocratic regime and protesters.

#### **Chapter 4. Research Design**

In this chapter, I elaborate on the methodology utilized to test the two hypotheses proposed in this research. I explain the particular qualitative methods employed, along with the challenges and ethical considerations during the data collection process. As was revealed earlier, the objective of this research is to account for the endurance of the Belarusian democracy movement under the repressive Lukashenka regime. Nonetheless, it is of great importance to emphasize that the topic of political dissent and criticism of the government is quite sensitive in the Belarusian context. The views that might contradict the official state narrative are considered a threat by the Lukashenka regime and therefore, acquiring information and collecting data on this topic constitutes a challenge. In light of these unique peculiarities of the Belarusian reality, I employed the methodology consistent with the risks and difficulties involved.

### **Case selection**

This study draws upon the case of Belarus. Being located at the crossroads of liberal-democratic Europe and Russia with its authoritarian client states, as well as being the last stronghold of hard autocratic rule in Eastern Europe, Belarus is considered a pivotal geopolitical objective for foreign policy interests of great powers. In particular, the case of Belarus demonstrates how powerful foreign state actors on both sides of the democracy-autocracy spectrum promote their values and practices abroad. Understanding the unique case of Belarus allows to uncover exact mechanisms and channels through which great powers support political factions that best represent their foreign policy interests in the conflict between the incumbent and opposition. The study of Belarus contributes to the existing scholarship by exploring a broader phenomenon of foreign support and providing empirical evidence to the importance of foreign diplomatic cover and external financial aid in determining the outcome of an asymmetric confrontation of the repressive government and pro-democracy groups.

Second, this case also constitutes a puzzle with regards to the endurance and survival of mass democracy movements. As such, despite years of brutal repression and political consolidation by the Lukashenka government, the pro-democracy movement in Belarus has managed to actively resist the regime's efforts to diminish prospect of democracy, enduring under harsh authoritarian settings. Despite not being able to achieve substantial political success such as the removal of an autocrat from office and democratic transition as the movements in neighboring states accomplished by Color Revolutions, the case of the democracy movement in Belarus stands out among other cases of democratic resistance, as the movement has shown significant improvements in mobilization of masses and protest coordination over the years in contrast with civil societies in Russia and Central Asia. Closer examination of the Belarusian case further assists in understanding the factors fostering regime survival under large international political-economic pressure as well as necessary in ensuring

the long-term endurance of the democracy movement. In this sense, studying the case of Belarus can also provide grounds for predicting the outcome of the broader conflict between the regime and its challengers, based on domestic political motivations, changes in policies and strategies, as well as external intervention in the domestic political struggle of a client state.

### **Methodology**

In addressing my research question, I particularly utilized a mixed-method qualitative approach, namely the case study of Belarus, the process tracing technique and in-depth interviews with scholars on Belarus and the members of the Belarusian civil society.

A single case study of Belarus was chosen due to being most suited in achieving one of the major objectives of this research, namely to comprehend longitudinal dynamics and establish causal mechanisms (Gerring 2004, 350). In this study, comprehending the development and endurance of the mass democracy movement in Belarus is demonstrated taking into account the movement's historical development along with the description of causal mechanisms explaining the relationship between both foreign and domestic factors on the one hand and endurance of the movement on the other.

Second, due to the significance of a historical perspective in the survival of both the Lukashenka regime and development of a home-grown democracy movement, the study made use of the process tracing technique in order to trace the trends and changes of policies and strategies by the Lukashenka government on the one hand, and the change of tactics and learning process by protesters on the other. According to George and Bennett (2005, 207), process tracing can be defined "the method that attempts to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable". This particular characteristic of the process tracing technique can be considered its vital advantage, as it allows for a better identification of crucial causal mechanisms explaining the relationship between causes and

effects. In this sense, process tracing is better suited to test the specific hypotheses on the importance of foreign support and domestic strategy changes proposed by this study. This study reconstructs the chain of events corresponding to provision of extensive support to the regime and pro-democracy groups by powerful state actors and learning process by opposition and demonstrators. For this purpose, the study also analyzed the secondary sources, such as official government documents and speeches, media and content analysis (social media accounts of activists and protesters), datasets on foreign funding in Belarus, as well as policy memos and scholarly articles.

Third, the study utilized the in-depth interviews as part of a qualitative approach to the subject matter. The in-depth interviews have shown to be effective in making use of the attributes of language and knowledge construction via the cooperation between the researcher and the interviewee to expound the meanings humans attribute to their personal experiences and social intercommunion (Yeo et al. 2014, 140). Furthermore, personal experiences and stories assist the research in detailed exploration of the key incentives, motivations and agency of individuals as well as the development and evolution of personal attitudes over time (Maynes et al. 2008, 29-33). The interviews are a valuable part of this project and all the obtained information from these interviews increase the overall understanding of the political situation in the Republic of Belarus and shed light on the resilience and endurance of the mass democracy movement in the country. In this sense, this study's aim of comprehending the personal narratives on the Belarusian democracy movement coupled with the substantial interest in the detailed socio-political context of Belarus and its civil society drove to the use of in-depth interviewing method.

I conducted a series of one-on-one, in-depth interviews with two groups of participants. Taking into account the difficulty of conducting social science research in contemporary Belarus due to the strict censorship and limitations set by the Belarusian authorities, along with

the logistical difficulties of conducting in-person interviews as well as the health precautions in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were decided to be conducted in online settings. The first group consisted of scholars specializing in Belarusian politics - all residing outside of the Republic of Belarus in order to account for security and safety concerns given harsh authoritarian settings. The second group of the interviewees comprised the members of the Belarusian civil society, residing both within and outside of Belarus.

The selection of candidates was based on the three main factors, namely the grasp and knowledge of the contemporary Belarusian political, social and economic peculiarities, membership of the Belarusian civil society, such as citizenship of the Republic of Belarus and active involvement in public life, as well as activity on social media. The recruitment of participants took place in a few modes depending on the group of participants. First, to recruit scholars and academics specializing on Belarus, I contacted their personal and corporate email addresses which are publicly available on the official websites of their respective institutions. Second, members of the Belarusian civil society were contacted via private messages to their social media accounts, namely using Twitter and Facebook. While most of participants from amongst the members of the Belarusian civil society were residents of Minsk, the capital of Belarus, the study also recruited several participants from larger cities of Hrodna (Grodno) and Mogilev, that also saw a large number of protesters taking to the streets during the recent 2020-2021 protests in Belarus. The interviews were conducted between February 9, 2022 and March 31, 2022.

The sampling of the participants from amongst the members of the Belarusian civil society was purposefully designated to include those individuals who have openly expressed either their participation in protests to public knowledge or their general opposition to the Lukashenka government and support of the Belarusian democracy movement. While the interview sample is skewed towards the pro-democracy portion of the Belarusian civil society,



the research question specifically examines personal narratives of opposition members and protesters to draw a better picture of their survival and endurance under the Lukashenka regime. Further participant recruitment was conducted via the snowball sampling technique, i.e. the participants were asked if they know anyone else from amongst their circle or community, who would be willing to participate in the interviews or could provide valuable knowledge to the topic of discussion. The snowball sampling was launched with me approaching several Belarusian activists on social media, namely Twitter and Facebook.

After establishing direct contact and introducing myself as a graduate student at Nazarbayev University and explaining the aim and purpose of my study, I emphasized the confidentiality of the interviews and described all the ethical considerations taken in conducting my research. Despite providing all the necessary information, I was only able to receive a response from several activists on social media. This in part is due to the sensitivity of the topic of this research, as not many activists residing in Belarus were willing and open to share their personal narratives and socio-political experiences for research purposes. As I was told later by some of my respondents, many activists and members of the Belarusian civil society feared that this research could be part of an operation of government sponsored agents and operatives trying to contact and meet with activists with the aim of detainment and torture.<sup>1</sup> Taking safety concerns of the participants into account, the respondents were given the option to have their cameras turned off during the interview or receive interview questions in a Microsoft Word format beforehand via email/messenger and send the answer back the same way via email.

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<sup>1</sup> Initially, some of the respondents expressed their concerns over the authenticity of the interviews:

*Protest Participant:* Last year, one man contacted me through my Instagram account and told me he saw my videos from protests. He said he was looking for information about his brother who was detained during the protests. The messages were too strange to be true and the information he provided made no sense, so I got very suspicious. I was later told by two of my friends that the same man contacted them and demanded personal information. We concluded that he was working for the government and I blocked him immediately.

Given the sensitivity of the topic and difficulty of reaching out to the Belarusian civil society members, the sample size was initially planned to amount 10 people. However, by the end of the study I was able to interview 13 people in total, of which 2 were participating scholars specializing in the Belarusian politics, whereas 11 were Belarusian civil society members, including 1 local protest leader and 6 protest participants/activists, with the rest considering themselves ordinary Belarusian citizens and/or members of the Belarusian democracy movement. The participants were contacted in one of the two ways: via email or via messengers with encrypted messaging (i.e. WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal).<sup>2</sup> All interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams using a secure Virtual Private Network (Nord VPN) for additional safety and privacy purposes on the mutually agreed date and time. Personal invitations were sent out to the participants a week prior to the meeting and were sent out again the day before the meeting. Participants were asked about their view on the mass democracy movement in Belarus, the recent anti-government protests, human rights in the country as well as the future prospects of democracy in Belarus.<sup>3</sup> The responses were used to assess the hypotheses regarding the importance of the foreign political-financial support and public attitudes towards democracy promotion in the endurance of the mass democracy movements on the one hand, and the survival of the autocratic regime on the other. Participants were broadly informed of the point of the study at the first point of contact. Participants were also briefed for a second time right before the start of the interview.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Both foreign and domestic politics is a sensitive topic in Belarus. In this regard, ethical considerations in any social science research in the country require careful attention. Due to the need of obtaining sincere and quality information from the interviewees, one of the priority

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<sup>2</sup> Invitation scripts can be found in *Appendix A*.

<sup>3</sup> Interview questions can be found in *Appendix B*.

tasks of the in-depth interviews was to ensure the respondents of the complete confidentiality. As such, this study does not contain any real names, nor does it include any other personally identifiable information. Participants were requested to provide information about their age with the aim of understanding how answers to the interview questions differed across age groups. To avoid exposing minors to any potential risks connected to the topic of discussion, participants were requested to verbally confirm if their age exceeded 18 years prior to both the interviews and during their participation recent 2020-2021 protests. The data obtained during the interviews does not include any personal referral and is instead provided in the form of overall aggregated results to preserve confidentiality, with the notable exception of participant quotes, reflecting their personal narratives with regards to the interview questions. Following the individual approach, the participants were provided with the written informed consent form, indicating voluntary nature of their participation in the study and assurances of confidentiality.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Such ethical considerations are vital to any research dealing with sensitive topics, particularly politics of Belarus, given the overall atmosphere of fear of persecution among the Belarusian civil society members, their encounters with security officials and further political sanctions. Nevertheless, out of 13 interviewees, despite initially expressing their concerns over the risks associated with the topic, no participant requested to exclude their answers to the interview questions from the study during the later stage. This could be both an indication of their sense of insecurity in general and at the same time reflect their openness to contribute to the understanding of the socio-political context of their country by the outer international circle.

### **Limitations**

While the literature provides substantial evidence regarding the contribution of in-depth interviews in discovering personal narratives and individual contexts, the sampling procedure

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<sup>4</sup> Informed consent form can be found in *Appendix C*.

<sup>5</sup> Oral consent script can be found in *Appendix D*.

for the interviews in this particular study has several limitations. First, the sampling of the participants from amongst the members of the Belarusian civil society was purposefully designated to include those individuals who have openly expressed either their participation in protests to public knowledge or their general opposition to the Lukashenka government and support of the Belarusian democracy movement. As such, the interview sample is skewed towards the pro-democracy portion of the Belarusian civil society, while not accounting for the factions supporting the regime. Second, further participant recruitment was conducted via the snowball sampling technique, i.e. the participants were asked if they know anyone else from amongst their circle or community, who would be willing to participate in the interviews or could provide valuable knowledge to the topic of discussion. The limitation that comes with snowball sampling is that it cannot guarantee the representativeness of the sample of various Belarusian civil society groups and thus, cannot provide true distribution. Nonetheless, since the research question specifically examines personal narratives of opposition members and protesters to draw a better picture of their survival and endurance under the Lukashenka regime, the participation of other groups was not in the primary interest of the study.

In a similar vein, despite providing a closer examination of longitudinal dynamics and establishing causal mechanisms, a single case study approach comes with the disadvantages of its own. For instance, a single case study may not possess as much theory-development potential as a comparative analysis of several similar cases can have (George & Bennett 2005). Such an issue is particularly relevant for this research, as it may limit to the overall theory-testing potential of the study based on a single case of Belarus. Despite providing a detailed in-depth analysis of the democracy movement in Belarus, a single case study method may lead to a limited generalizability of the findings across similar cases.

In addition, while the process tracing technique utilized by this study has substantial advantages in identifying causal pathways and mechanisms in explaining the dependent

variable, i.e. endurance, it may not provide a full account of intervening variables that may also potentially explain the long-term resilience of the democracy movement in Belarus. Likewise, process tracing cannot offer guarantees of providing an adequate explanation of the processes, rather it can only add a limited level of confidence to the hypotheses proposed by this research. As such, the evidence presented may provide a skewed picture of the causal pathways, potentially weakening the chain of mechanisms and links between the variables.

## **Chapter 5. Data Analysis**

This chapter presents the findings of the data analysis from the in-depth interviews. I demonstrate the overall patterns and differences across the respondents. In the following section dedicated to the in-depth interviews, I present the results of the analysis of 13 interviews (2 scholars, 1 local protest leader, 6 protest participants/activists, 4 ordinary Belarusian citizens) in detail. The findings from the interviews show that extensive foreign political legitimation and financial support are crucial for the survival and endurance of opponents on both sides of the spectrum, namely the Belarusian democracy movement represented by the protesters and members of the Belarusian civil society on the one hand, and the repressive nondemocratic regime led by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on the other. The results also demonstrate the increasing role of gradually shifting resistance strategies by the Belarusian democracy movement and protesters on the endurance of their anti-government activities and survival under the ruthless authoritarian leadership. These findings stand in support of my arguments that foreign political-financial aid and changing resistance strategies substantially affect the survival and endurance of the Belarusian mass democracy movement.

### **In-depth interviews**

This research involves a series of in-depth interviews with members of the Belarusian civil society and scholars specializing on Belarusian politics. Given the overall difficulty of

conducting most social science research in Belarus due to the strict government censorship and limitations set by the local authorities, especially so since the highly contested 2020 presidential elections and mass protests, logistical, financial and timing difficulties of conducting in-person interviews, along with careful health precautions in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the interviews were entirely conducted in online settings via Microsoft Teams. In sum, a total of 13 respondents were interviewed, of whom 2 were scholars, 1 local protest leader, 6 protest participants, with the rest identifying themselves as members of the Belarusian democracy movements and ordinary Belarusian citizens. While most of the respondents from the ordinary Belarusian civil society members were residents of the capital area, Minsk, I managed to recruit several participants from larger cities of Hrodna (Grodno) and Mogilev via the snowball sampling. Despite some initial hesitation due to safety concerns and fears of the Lukashenka government sending in spies to infiltrate protester ranks, none of the respondents requested their answer to be withdrawn from the study by the end of the data collection process. As such, a grand total of 13 interviews were coded accordingly and assessed in detail.

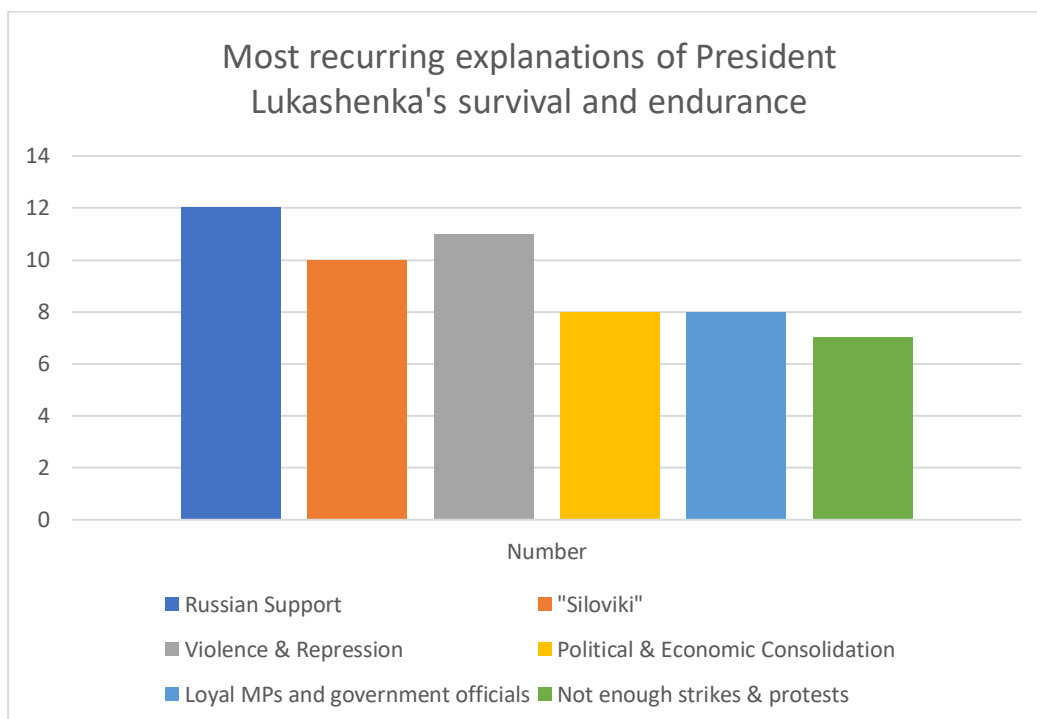
### **Lukashenka's hard authoritarian toolkit for maintaining power**

The results of the interviews also demonstrate interesting findings with regards to the differences of opinion among respondents on the survival and endurance tools of the ruling Lukashenka regime. The interviews revealed six major explanations of the authoritarian endurance in Belarus. The table (Table 1) below illustrates the number of people among respondent groups reflecting on factors affecting Lukashenka's rule.

**Table 1. Opinion poll on factors contributing to Lukashenka’s rule (N=13)**

Codes	Russian support	“Siloviki”	Violence & Repression	Political & Economic Consolidation	Loyal MPs and government officials	Not enough strikes & protests
<b>Scholars</b>	2	2	2	2	2	2
<b>PL</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1
<b>PPs</b>	6	6	6	3	2	4
<b>CSMs</b>	3	1	2	2	3	0
<b>Total (Unique):</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>

As illustrated in the chart below (Figure 2), the most recurring explanations among respondents are Russian support (12 instances), Violence and Repression (11 instances) and “*Siloviki*”<sup>6</sup> (10 instances).

**Figure 2. Proposed explanations of President Lukashenka's survival and endurance**

<sup>6</sup> “*Siloviki*” is Russian for “men of force”. This term is particularly used by Belarusians to refer to politicians who entered politics via a career in state’s security and military apparatus. The term is also used to refer to security officers and police force loyal to the regime.

With the exception of one respondent from amongst the Belarusian civil society members (CSM), all other interviewees suggested that Lukashenka's rule is/was directly dependent on the political and economic support from the Russian Federation. The reasoning behind the perceived Russian backing of the Lukashenka regime is similar across the respondent groups, with most suggesting that Belarus and Russia share close political ties, with Belarus being considered reliable allies by the Russians as part of the greater Union State established in the late 1990s. Similarly, some of the respondents perceive the Russian government as the ultimate supporter of neighboring nondemocratic regimes. To quote some of the respondents in this regard:

*Interviewer:* Many mass democracy protests in other former Soviet republics led to the overthrow of the respective governments, whereas President Lukashenka managed to stay in power. Why was it different for Belarus? How has Lukashenka withstood multiple protests and remained in power?

*Scholar:* Well, there are several important factors contributing to his rule and dominance in the Belarusian politics. First and foremost, he has received extensive political backing and financial aid from the Kremlin. Russia has no interest in the similar authoritarian regime right at its footsteps being overthrown by another Color Revolution. Just as the last protests erupted, President Putin promised more than one billion dollars in assistance to Minsk and deployed security forces to help Lukashenka crash the protesters and secure the capital.

*Protest Leader (PL):* I would say most recently it has been personal support from Putin, who supplies material aid to the Lukashenka's regime and is there whenever he needs Russia's help. When Europe turned him down after the rigged elections, Lukashenka traded the country's independence to his own survival. He wouldn't have lasted in 2020 if it wasn't for Putin.

*Protest Participant (PP):* Russia is the enemy of democratic values. Whenever Lukashenka asks for assistance, the officials in Kremlin rush to help him and save him no matter the costs. I mean, look at your country (Kazakhstan), when your president asked for help in January, Russia had his back. The will of the Belarusians to decide their own destiny was crashed in the same way last year.

As can be seen from the table, the respondents tend to overwhelmingly agree on the substantial role of the Russian political and economic backing on the survival



and endurance of the Lukashenka government. Although, it appears that not everyone finds the Russian support as the crucial factor of the Belarusian regime's survival. For instance, one respondent believed that it was rather for domestic factors such as repression and economic consolidation that Lukashenka managed to utilize to retain control in the country:

*Civil Society Member (CSM):* Some people say it's Russia that helps Lukashenka keep the country under control. Instead, I think that his consolidation of the country's resources and persecution of people over the years have helped him keep the office. Government mechanisms of control over the economy are all in his hands and he punishes people who disagree with him. He imprisons and tortures those who go against him.

*Interviewer:* Do you know anyone in particular from your circle who was imprisoned or tortured?

*CSM:* Yes, my relative was arrested in 2020 for participation in protests and we saw many signs of beating on his body in the form of multiple hematomas and a broken tooth. He said that security officials ordered him to unlock his phone, so that they can see his Telegram chats, but when he refused, they beat him even harder, inflicting concussion of the brain. He suffers from health problems to this day.

Such reports of detainment and torture by the Lukashenka's security forces signify the overall atmosphere of fear and insecurity among the members of the Belarusian civil society, which can serve as a tool to discourage people from further opposing the ruling regime. To achieve this psychological effect, Lukashenka is reported to have used the overwhelming force of the so-called "*siloviki*" or the security apparatus, including *KGB*<sup>7</sup> and the police force during his presidency and particularly amid mass protests and anti-government demonstrations:

*PP:* *Siloviki*, who are Lukashenka's ruthless police are responsible for the inhumane violence and torture of peaceful protesters. They are paid well and thus *Batka*<sup>8</sup> expects them to obey him in full, which they do. Hundreds of people came out of prisons with many physical traumas.

*PL:* When we took to the streets in Minsk, *siloviki* surrounded the government buildings and shot at us, the peaceful protesters, with live ammunition, tear gas and stun grenades. We had no guns, nor did we

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<sup>7</sup> *KGB* or *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* ("State Security Committee") is an official abbreviation of the primary state security organization in Belarus, which is directly responsible to the President of Belarus.

<sup>8</sup> *Batka* ("Father") is a colloquial term used by Belarusians to describe President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

present any danger to them specifically. Having witnessed the inhumane violence from the police, the masses mobilized further. Yet, to be fair, there were people who backed down due to visual disturbances and fears for their families as well.

*Scholar:* Alyaksandr Lukashenka is notorious for his resort to extraordinary violence and repression. He has been using the security apparatus or what they call *siloviki* in Belarus to force his rule. His political opponents would be frequently detained or disappear in broad daylight to never return. In fact, many opposition leaders such as Viktor Gonchar and Yury Zakharenko have been murdered via secret targeted assassinations, whereas many others, including Sergei Tsikhanousky have been imprisoned with false charges.

The interviews also show that *siloviki* are not the only interest group loyal to President Lukashenka. The elites, members of the National Assembly of Belarus, ministers, mayors and other government officials have largely remained steadfast in their allegiance and support to Lukashenka, which in turn provided favorable conditions for further political consolidation:

*Scholar:* The elites in Belarus are united under Lukashenka's leadership and have been reluctant to switch sides, even as the protests erupted. Lukashenka has gathered his entourage based more on their utmost loyalty to his personality, rather than their merits and qualifications. While some Belarusian diplomats and ambassadors have relinquished their support for the regime over the years, most government officials choose to stand with Lukashenka. Having the control over the bureaucrats, he managed to mitigate the risks of the rise of alternatives power factions, that could threaten his rule.

*PL:* During his reign, Lukashenka has consolidated all political institutions and sources of power for his personalized rule and his elites. He amended the Constitution and laws to seize all the levers of pressure on his oligarchs, who help him plunder the state treasury. He dictates and it becomes the law – that is the true definition of dictatorship.

*CSM:* Apart from surrounding himself with loyal accomplices, Lukashenka exercises firm control over the puppet parliament and the Constitutional Court. This way, everyone is afraid to go against him, because he has all the power concentrated in his hands. Not only that, but since his vision of politics and economy is so old, older generation of people who grew up in the Soviet Union and miss “mighty old days”, still support him.

Another domestic dimension of Lukashenka's hold to power is closely connected to strikes and protests. Just over half of the respondents believed that worker strikes and mass

protests have not lasted long enough to force Lukashenka out of office. To quote a few responses in this regard:

*Scholar 1:* The recent protests saw partial support by the working class in the industry sector of Belarus, who rallied against the brutal violence of the Lukashenka regime and pushed for better economic opportunities. However, the worker strikes fizzled out rather too quickly to have a critical economic pressure and impact on Lukashenka's rule. Likewise, the strikes didn't really have a clear organizational structure or long-term planning and were practically leaderless.

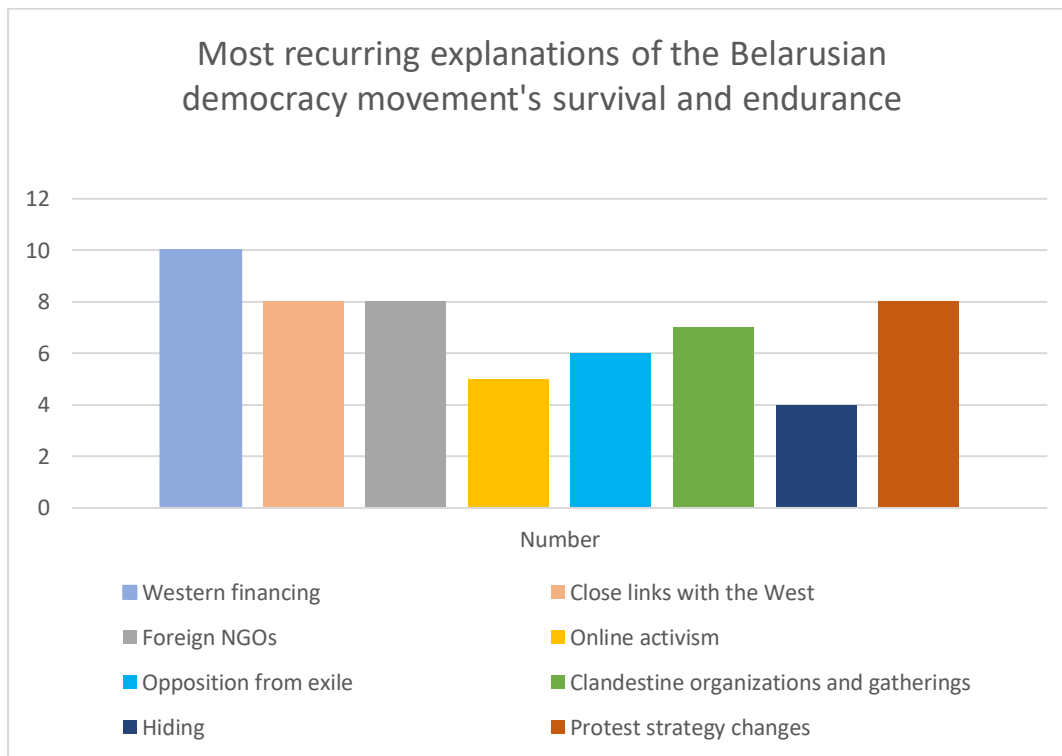
*Scholar 2:* Lukashenka had to face several mass demonstrations during his iron fist rule. While, the previous protests in the early 2000s were quite modest in terms of the participants and lacked longevity, the recent mass protests showed to be extremely challenging to the ruling regime. Lukashenka learned that he that can no longer rely on mere brute violence on the streets, but has to incentivize people to work for him or at least not to go against him. As such, he instructed workers of state companies, civil servants and youth to return to their respective workplaces and educational institutions, promising higher salaries, while also threatening with dismissal and expulsion.

*PP:* Last year's protests lacked centralized leadership, when most of higher-ranking opposition leaders were detained. As a consequence, we were not able to coordinate with other protesters in a proper fashion. Plus, many people started to become disappointed after seeing almost no results from their participation in protests and just went on with their lives. This in turn damaged the progress of mass protests in pressuring *Batka* to resign. Have the protests been long enough, we may have been able to see him step down and flee to Russia.

### **Survival and endurance of the mass democracy movement in Belarus**

The interview analysis also revealed interesting details regarding the Belarusian mass democracy movement's fierce resistance to the Lukashenka regime. The chart (Figure 3) below demonstrates the most recurring explanations of the survival and endurance of the democracy movement under repressive settings:

**Figure 3. Proposed explanations of the Belarusian democracy movement's resilience**



As can be seen from the chart (Figure 3), the most recurring explanations among respondents are Western financing (10 instances), Close links with the West (8 instances), Foreign NGOs (8 instances) and Protest strategy changes (8 instances). With the exception of two respondents from amongst the Belarusian civil society members (CSM) and one protest participant (PP), all other interviewees agreed that the Belarusian democracy movement represented by opposition, protesters and civil society members/organizations have received some form of Western financial aid over the years, which helped to finance anti-government activities. To demonstrate the point, the following are excerpts from the interviewees that admitted the role of Western financing, particularly through NGOs, in the long-term activities of the democracy movement:

*Interviewer:* There have been reports that the extensive support from the West, the EU and the US to be precise, contributes to the endurance of the Belarusian democracy movement and protests. Do you agree with this idea?

*PL:* Well, the government puts it, as if we are foreign spies and enemies of the people, trying to conquer the country for America. It is not true. The

truth is that the Western states only provide us with the material base to withstand Lukashenka's violence. We have many people who lost their jobs because of their civil position and *NGOs* have helped them find new jobs to sustain their families. *Batka* is Putin's puppet and gets whatever support he needs from him, so we also accept any kind of help from anyone willing to help us, to help the people of Belarus.

*PP1*: I would say it's partly true. As any demonstration campaign or a protest, we need a financial base. The only ones willing to help us are those in the West, those who respect democratic values and oppose mass violence against innocent civilians. However, even if we accept the monetary help, we don't do it for our own benefit. We do it for the freedom of the people of Belarus, who deserve a better leader.

*PP2*: It's a lie that Americans pay us to protest. It is our conscious choice. We are fed up with Lukashenka's lies and tyranny. We want a democratic Belarus, and for that to happen we need to show our disobedience. Obviously, when they force us out of our jobs, we need money to provide for our families and have no choice but to accept any possible help.

*Scholar*: Official position of the US and EU government regarding Belarus is centered around the idea of active democracy promotion. In fact, many Western-sponsored *NGOs* have operated in Belarus for decades to help the civil society on both socio-economic and political levels. Some of the prominent examples of *NGOs* with political aims are the "Tell the Truth Civil Campaign" and the "Movement for Freedom". The US foreign agencies, including USAID have provided massive financial incentives for the opposition to continue their resistance. Perhaps millions of dollars. Although, to be fair, a decent number of *NGOs* were forced to suspend their activities due to tremendous pressure on the civil society sector by the state's *anti-NGO* laws.

Hence, one can assume that Western financing aimed at promoting democracy also targeted social and economic needs of the Belarusian people, vastly contributing to the survival of the individual Belarusian civil society members, who sought to oppose President Lukashenka. On the other hand, forced shutdown of *NGOs* by legislative and structural means may indicate the Belarusian government's perception of foreign-sponsored *NGOs* as a threat to the existing political system in the country and could be viewed as part of the preemption and countering democracy strategies.

Unlike the previous protests of 2006 and 2011, the most recent 2020-2021 protests saw a substantial increase in the use of Internet and social media to rally and mobilize the masses,

while also helping the pro-democracy protesters to deceive and evade security officials. The interviews reveal that despite government's attempts to slow down mobile communications and block the Internet connection in the country, the protesters managed to maintain constant communication using Virtual Private Networks (VPN). Telegram was the most universal virtual messenger app of choice for the majority of protest participants from this study's sample. In addition, due to Telegram's additional functionality, the protesters were able to connect through Proxy Servers, which allowed them to circumvent government's blocking of the official Telegram app, and to communicate with other protest participants with little to no difficulties. Others have found ways to find and download modified versions of the app and evade mobile operator restrictions. To quote some of the respondents in this regard:

*PP1:* When I first took part in 2011 protests, the people didn't know about mobile Internet as much and we didn't really use social media apps like we do now. We only used those old Nokia, Motorola keyboard phones that were as strong as a brick (*\*laughs\**). But these protests were different for us. Thanks to the technological development, everyone had a cellphone and the internet. We would use them to better communicate with one another, and coordinate our actions together.

*PL:* During the 2020 protests, as one of the protest coordinators, my objective was to ensure my group's communication during the event and we are at home to plan our next rally. We'd been using Telegram for a while back then, so we decided to stick to it. We tried to use WhatsApp, but it lacked the functionality of Telegram and was often blocked. Plus, Telegrams has secret chats that get deleted instantly, so we could be safer in case we get detained. Telegram channels helped us monitor the movement of *siloviki*. So, when somebody saw them approaching the place of our gathering, they would send pictures and videos to confirm. Thus, we had some time to wrap up our things and change locations.

*PP2:* I couldn't listen to the state TV propaganda, so I mostly monitored social media and online media outlets. Telegram helped us to stay informed about the real news about the protests. There were plenty of Telegram channels that posted real time updates. This, in particular, was beneficial to us, because could

*PP3:* People were often called to participate in protests via Telegram channels. Protest organizers assigned dozens of destinations for gathering, so that the *KGB* would be forced to split forces and have difficulty with detaining the protesters.

*CSM*: One night when the government blocked the Internet, my friend sent me a proxy server for Telegram via a mobile message, so I was able to connect and followed several channels that reported on protests to stay notified.

Thus, while signifying general distrust of the respondents with state news, suggesting it as “propaganda”, the interview results also demonstrate the change in mobilization strategy, namely the use of social media as a new means to gather masses to the streets and to evade mass arrests by the security forces. Likewise, another change in mobilization strategy is the creation of clandestine organizations and hiding. For example, four protest participants and one civil society member confirmed their involvement in at least one pro-democracy clandestine group’s activities. Most of those participants also reported their frequent participation in gatherings, with some suggesting monthly and quarterly meetings. The choice of secret gatherings in lieu of open protests by civil society members illustrates the overall atmosphere of fear and may also indicate to a certain level of effectiveness of violent government crackdown of protests in discouraging the population from engaging in public dissent against the regime. The following excerpts emphasize this issue:

*PP1*: We saw what Lukashenka did to the peaceful protesters. The entire world saw that. We would like to live in free and democratic Belarus, but not everyone is ready to put their lives at stake. Instead of meeting publicly and taking to the streets, we discuss the issues at our “office”, if we can call it one. That’s all we can really do now.

*PP2*: My former organization fell under government sanctions in 2020 following the protests. So, my colleagues and I decided to still operate against the prohibition of the regime. We run several websites that advocate human rights and call for free and democratic Belarus.

*PP3*: We took to the streets – it didn’t help. We wanted Lukashenka out, but Russia got his back. We protested against violence, but received even more of it as a response. The morale of protesters fell after seeing no results and many of us went back to our homes empty-handed.

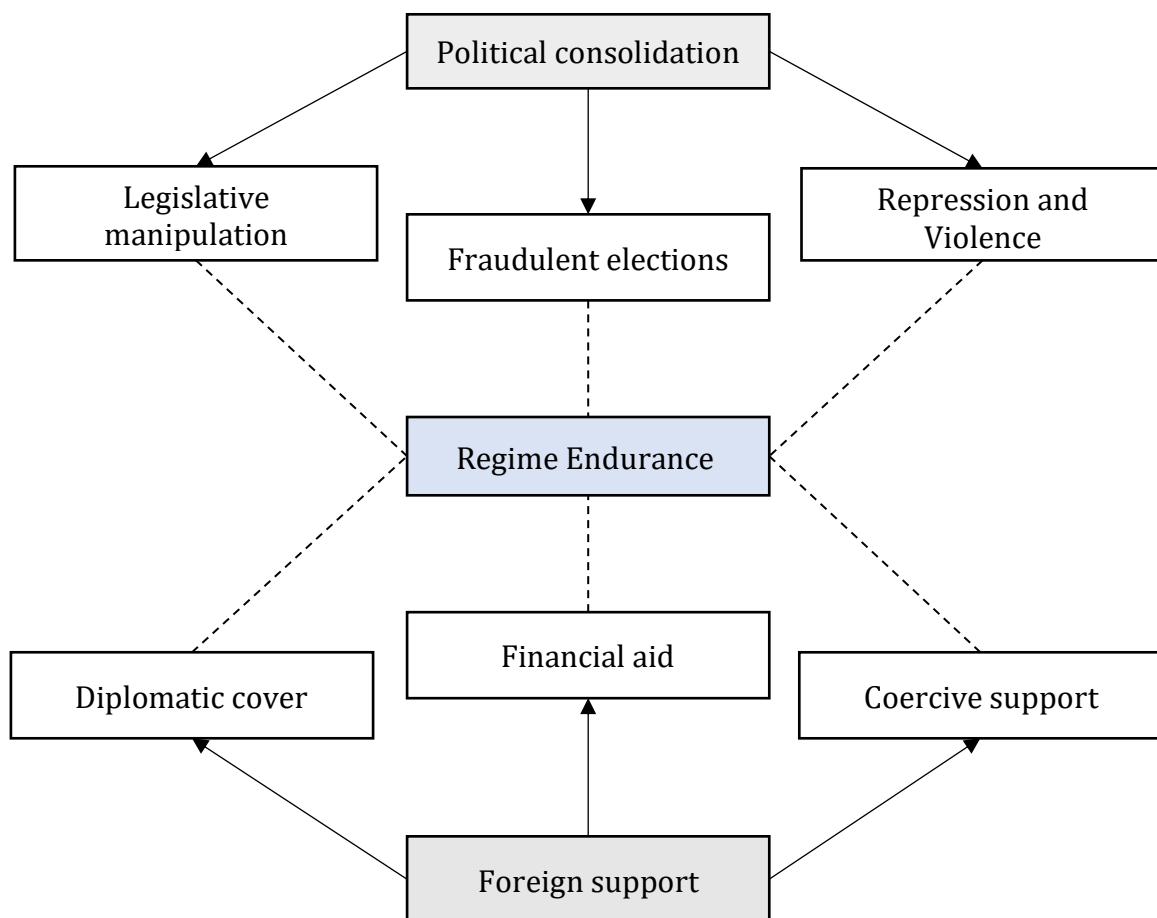
Overall, the in-depth interviews provide insider information from the Belarusian democracy movement and civil society members, which is of significant value to the research question of this thesis. The interviews found various explanations to the survival and endurance

of both the Lukashenka regime and the pro-democracy groups, particularly vast foreign political backing, fiscal support, close linkages and learning.

### Process tracing

This section of the data analysis chapter examines the causal pathways and processes to the regime survival and democracy movement endurance. In particular, using the process tracing technique, I demonstrate how government repression and consolidation, autocracy promotion, democracy promotion and opposition strategy shifts have progressed over time, using two models (Figures 4 and 5) to describe major events that unfolded in response to political process within the country and abroad.

**Figure 4. Causal pathways to regime endurance**





*Regime endurance: Political consolidation & Russian support*

Following the 1995 and 1996 Belarusian Constitutional referenda expanding political powers vested in the presidential office, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule has become largely unlimited. The changes introduced to the Constitution allowed for extraordinary executive and legislative powers to the head of state, putting an end to the democratization process initiated following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Until early 2000s, Lukashenka saw little challenge to his rule, successfully persuading and removing political opponents from their political offices. The start of the new millennium brought multiple Color Revolutions in Post-Soviet states, removing local autocrats from power and establishing the rule of pro-democracy factions. While revolutions succeeded in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, the Belarusian regime did not face any substantial political changes. Fearing democratic diffusion and seeing the dangers posed to the regime by Color Revolutions in neighboring states, the Lukashenka government vastly employed coercive tools to diminish prospects of democracy in Belarus. Particularly, largest protests of 2006 and 2011 following fraudulent elections were brutally crushed by the government security forces, with hundreds of people detained and dozens reported killed. The scale of violence had never been as large by the time of the crackdown. Furthermore, having seen foreign diplomatic backing of protesters and opposition factions amid mass protests, and being informed of massive foreign financial assistance to the democracy movement in Belarus, the Lukashenka regime further pushed for legislative measures to counter democracy promotion efforts by Western governments. For example, the regime adopted new amendments to the Law on Public Associations in late 2005, which severely limited foreign financing and the protections of civil society rights, causing more than a hundred of NGOs to shut down over the next two-year period. Likewise, following Western diplomatic backing of opposition leaders, such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and extensive financing of the democracy movement via NGOs, the Belarusian government immediately

imposed new legal restrictions on the activities of NGOs, effectively disbanding such pro-democracy civil society organizations as European Youth Parliament, Human Constanta human rights association, Belarusian PEN Center and Youth Labor Rights groups. As such, foreign democracy promotion efforts, particularly at the height of mass protests of 2006, 2011 and 2020-2021 coupled with fears of democracy spillover from neighboring states, drove the Lukashenka government to further consolidate power via violent crackdown of mass protests, interfering with the activities of pro-democracy NGOs even more actively. Extensive consolidation efforts proved to be effective, as all three largest protests failed to topple the regime and hence, the Lukashenka government endured.

In a similar vein, Russian interference on behalf of President Lukashenka has been pivotal in the regime's long-term endurance, as Moscow and Minsk both share the same fear of democratic diffusion within and near their borders. Following democratic transitions in neighboring Ukraine and Georgia, the Kremlin vowed to stop the spread of Color Revolutions, presenting them as dangers to the country's innate values. Amid mass protests of 2006, 2011 and 2020-2021, the Russian government countered international observers' claims of fraudulent elections by providing Alyaksandr Lukashenka with formal recognition as a re-elected president. As part of the diplomatic cover efforts to boost the incumbent Belarusian regime's legitimacy on the international arena, Russia frequently held inter-governmental meetings, with President Vladimir Putin inviting Lukashenka to official talks between heads of states. Similarly, following the Belarusian parliamentary elections of 2000 and presidential elections of 2001, Putin awarded Lukashenka with "For Merit to the Fatherland", one of the highest Russian state orders, showing his overt political support to the Lukashenka regime and passing his congratulations to Lukashenka in what he called was a "convincing victory", despite universal dismay of the European observers, who believed the elections to be fraudulent.

Furthermore, the Russian military enjoys an exclusive opportunity of dislocation within the Belarusian territory as per the agreements between Moscow and Minsk. The period of anti-government demonstrations of 2006, 2011 and most particularly 2020-2021 saw a dramatic increase in the number of active-duty Russian troops operating in Belarus. While the implementation of joint military exercises has been used as the official government rhetoric to explain the sudden flow of Russian military personnel, there remains much room for speculation of the true purposes of such troop maneuvering. More recently, on August 27, 2020, President Putin warned Western states from intervening in the domestic political affairs of Belarus and expressed his readiness to send in military personnel and police force to Belarus to clash the protests if necessary (Herasimenka 2020). This further confirms the provision of active coercive support to the Belarusian regime by the Kremlin.

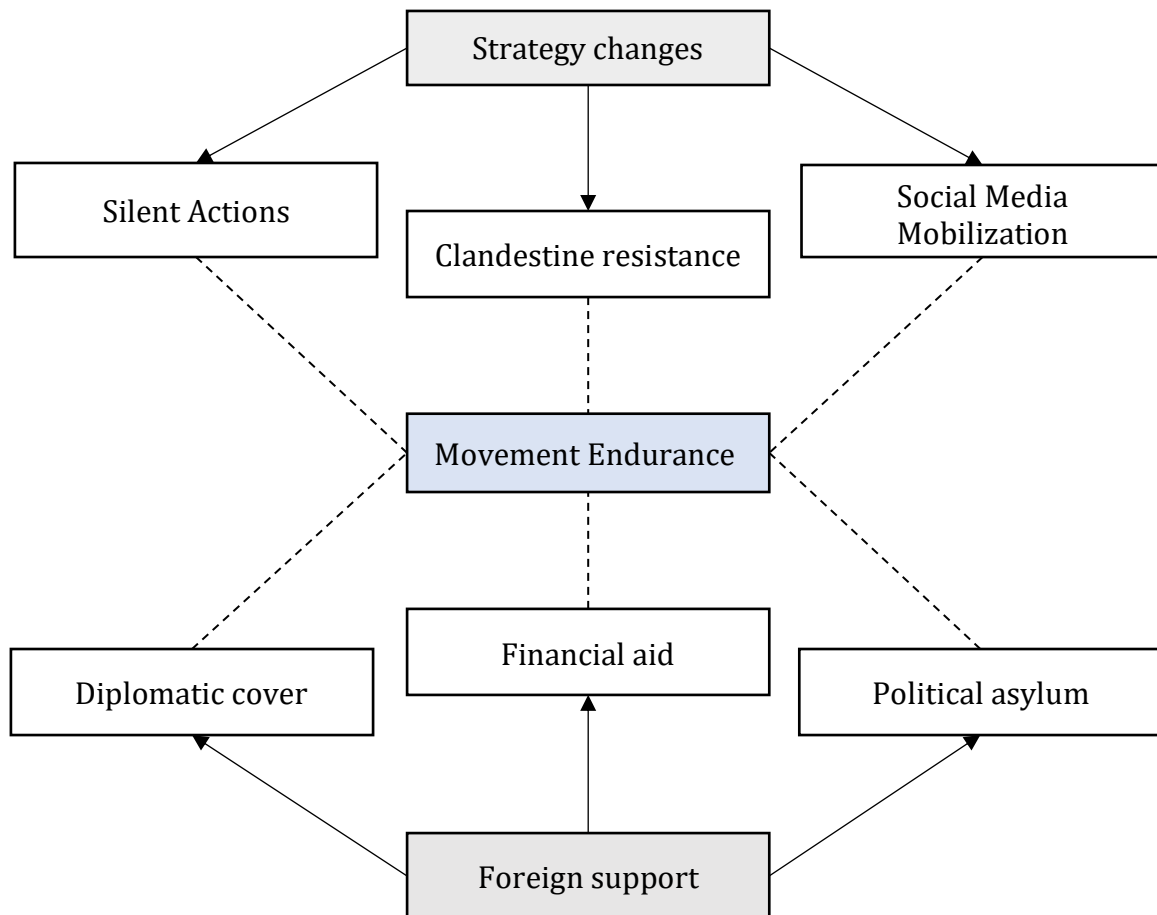
Later, on September 14, 2020, President Putin promised to allocate a 1.5 billion US dollars of financial loan to help the Belarusian government, which has fallen under serious Western economic sanctions. The accessibility of Russian loans decreased the dependence of the Belarusian government on Western investments and solidified mutual ties with Moscow. In this sense, the timeline of events shows several occasions of Russian provision of diplomatic backing and financial support to the Lukashenka regime. This evidence goes in line with the theoretical elaborations of this study on the crucial role of great power political-financial support to the endurance of the ruling regime.

*Democracy movement endurance: Strategy changes & Western support*

Initially enjoying substantial public support from the Belarusian public in reforming the country's political system, President Lukashenka has faced opposition to his rule as he started the authoritarian build-up via fraudulent elections, anti-NGO legislation, co-optation and political repression. As such, after the results of fraudulent elections were announced in

2006, 2010 and 2020, members of the Belarusian democracy movement took to the streets to protest.

**Figure 5. Causal pathways to the democracy movement endurance**



First, on March 19, 2006, the Central Election Commission of Belarus announced the re-election of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to a third term. Later that evening, somewhere between five to ten thousand people led by main opposition leaders Alyaksandr Kozulin and Alyaksandr Milinkievich went out to the main square of Minsk, shouting pro-democracy slogans, to protest against the results of the election they considered rigged. These claims were actively supported by the United States and the European Union that called for new fair elections. Leaders of Western liberal democracies, however, did not hasten to recognize opposition leaders as winners. Despite initially threatening to crack down the large-scale

protests with brute violence, the Lukashenka regime instead opted to pursue the subtle means of persuasion. As such, the government announced the defeat of the “foreign-imposed coup attempt” or a “Jeans Revolution” in the hopes of manipulating the masses to return to their homes. Nevertheless, many cases of violent clashes were reported by independent media outlets and Alyaksandr Kozulin was imprisoned on felony charges. As a result of losing coordination and effective leadership, the 2006 mass protests were largely defeated.

In contrast, the 2011 protests employed different strategies. Remembering the violent crackdown of peaceful demonstrations by the regime five years earlier, the protesters pursued a non-verbal method of challenging the government, introducing no political slogans. Members of the democracy movement had learned that police force only detained those who shouted anti-government remarks and hence, opted to clapping hands as part of the “*silent actions*” strategy instead to express their solidarity with those aspiring to see substantial democratic reforms. As a consequence, the use of the silent actions tactic has brought even less detainments by the authorities. Similarly, these protests were the first in line to benefit from social media mobilization (i.e. *Vkontakte*) throughout entire Belarus as opposed to previous protests that vastly used traditional media sources for recruitment. Despite the ultimate failure of the demonstrators to achieve their main political objective, such improvements in mobilization strategies weakened the coercive advantages of the government forces, in turn facilitating the opposition’s resolve to protest, while also leading to a fewer number of arrests.

Third, the 2020-2021 mass pro-democracy protests were the largest in terms of the number of participants in the history of contemporary Belarus. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary Belarusians took to the streets to protest against the Lukashenka regime. The unprecedented speed and rate of mobilization can be attributed to several strategic choices developed by the democracy movement, namely to the coordination of protests via social media (i.e. *Telegram Messenger*), online activism and mobilization, as well as clandestine

movements. With the availability of new mass media resources and mobile apps, particularly Telegram, the younger generation was able to better mobilize in groups. Similarly, having observed higher casualties of protesting in the streets, the democracy movement transitioned to convincing hearts and minds online, ensuring an increased level of personal safety to ordinary citizens hoping to join the ranks of the mass democracy movement. Indiscriminate repression and violence against peaceful protesters as well as anti-NGO legislation targeting active civil society organizations in turn has also pushed the protesters to operate within separate cells of clandestine organizations, allowing for the relative safety of covert activities against the regime. With that being said, the causal model does well in explaining the proposed hypothesis on the pivotal role of learning and strategy shifts by the mass democracy movement on its long-term endurance.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion of the findings**

This chapter discusses the findings of process tracing and in-depth interviews from the data analysis chapter. As highlighted in the theoretical chapter, liberal democracies in the West provide extensive political legitimization and financial aid to the pro-democracy movement both in the asymmetric conflict against the ruling autocrat (McFaul 2004; Bellin 2004; Ambrosio 2017). I will particularly demonstrate how and why foreign political-financial support in the form of diplomatic harbor, financial support and from powerful patrons contributes to the survival and endurance of the Belarusian democracy movement.

### *Diplomatic cover*

On August 9, 2020, the Belarusian citizens took to the polls to elect the new President of the country. However, much to the disappointment of international observers and opposition leaders, the entire election campaign and results turned out to be unfair and not free. Just like all previous elections starting from Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rise to power in 1994, the

elections were rigged. The Central Election Committee of Belarus declared the incumbent Lukashenka as the new President reporting that 81% of voter support to his candidacy. The results outraged the civil society and masses took to the streets. Mass protests further ignited violent crackdown by the government security apparatus. In turn, violent handling of peaceful protests, instilled wider dissatisfaction of the population. Unlike the previous protests of 2006 and 2011, the demonstrations were larger in scope and scale, with estimates ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousand participants. Similarly, while the previous protests only covered parts of the country, the 2020-2021 protests drew nationwide support from almost all social categories, including older generations and workers of state industrial sector. The larger scope and duration of protests were ostensibly challenging for Lukashenka to handle. Nevertheless, having unconditional support of his loyal elites and receiving substantial diplomatic cover and financial aid from the Kremlin, Lukashenka managed to evade the fate of other autocrats who fell as a result of Color revolutions.

While the Lukashenka regime was largely subsidized by the Russian government, the pro-democracy movement and opposition leaders were embraced by Western democracies and provided diplomatic harbor. As outlined earlier by Levitsky & Way (2010) traditionally close linkages of pro-democracy movements in authoritarian states with Western liberal democracies due to shared democratic values and principles contributed to the outright support of the EU and the US to the opposition factions in Belarus. Along with including Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his elite in the economic sanctions list, Western governments issued a diplomatic recognition to the opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the President-elect of Belarus as well as the recognition of the Belarusian Coordination Council led by her, as an interim representative body of the Belarusian people in September 2020. Following the announcement of election results, Tsikhanouskaya fled to the neighboring Lithuania in fears of political persecution by the Lukashenka regime, which in turn granted her a safe passage and a

temporary harbor. Similarly, the government of Poland provided a political asylum for Tsikhanouskaya and other opposition leaders with formal residence in its capital Warsaw. Valery Tsepka, another pro-democracy leader and a close associate of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, was also granted diplomatic harbor in Poland.

In line with the theoretical elaborations of Diamond (1997) and Putnam (2000), this diplomatic support in the form of the provision of political asylum helped to preserve the top leadership structure of opposition factions intact and allowed the leaders of the Belarusian democracy to operate and coordinate further protests from exile with little direct obstacles. Additionally, while Western democracies previously pursued easing tensions and normalization with President Lukashenka with further hopes for democratic reforms and free and fair elections in the foreseeable future, most recently the EU and the US cut ties with the autocrat of Belarus entirely. As such, the refusal to recognize the presidency of Alyaksandr Lukashenka was unprecedentedly common among Western states and entailed serious diplomatic consequences to Belarusian regime in the form of further political and economic isolation, thus bolstering the legitimacy of the pro-democracy leadership.

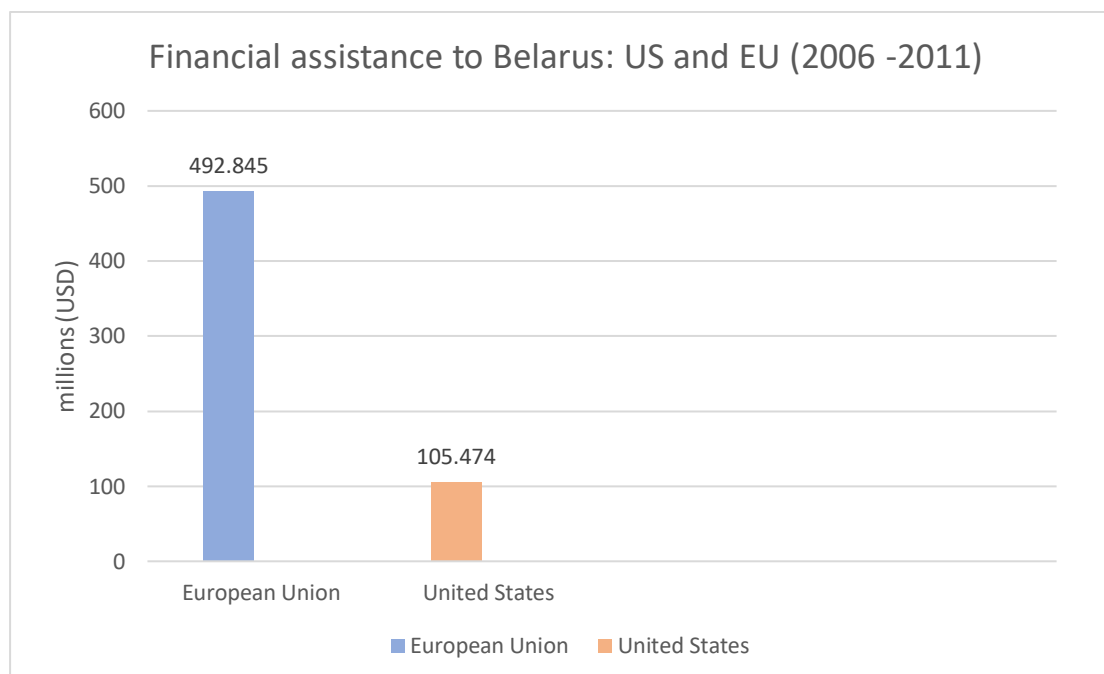
#### *Financial support*

According to de Tocqueville (2003) and Putnam (2000), foreign support plays an important role in civil society' efforts to facilitate democratization. On top of that, foreign-sponsored NGOs serve as organizational structures aimed at the mobilization of the society to present a united front against the ruler as well as to promote government accountability and the transparency of state institutions. The analysis of interviews and open source information provide details with regards to the wider socio-economic assistance of foreign NGOs to the individual society members and vulnerable categories in Belarus. The results show that the United States and the European Union member states are among the major financial contributors to the endurance of the Belarusian democracy movement. Based on the findings



from EuropeAid and OECD <sup>9</sup>, the diagram (Figure 4) below provides the comparative data on donor assistance for Belarus from the European Union and the United States:

**Figure 4. Financial Assistance to Belarus from the US and the EU**



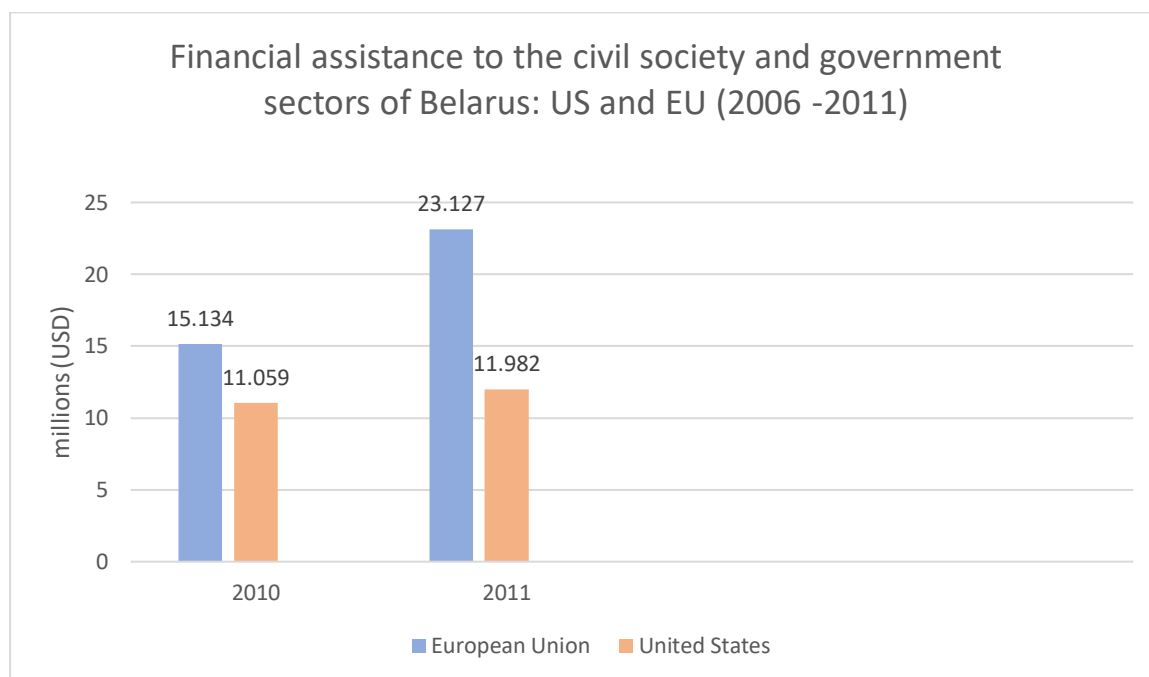
Between 2011 and 2016, the United States and the European Union, have notably allocated about 597 million US dollars in total, or 105 million US dollars and 492 million US dollars, respectively. Most of the funds were allocated to social infrastructure as well as multi-sector services. The civil society, government and media were among the most financed areas. The diagram (Figure 5) below illustrates the amount of financial aid spent on the development of civil society, freedom of media and democracy promotion in Belarus:

<sup>9</sup> The calculations are derived from the statistical dataset supplied by the Directorate-General for Development and Cooperation of the European Commission (EuropeAid) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for Belarus

<http://stats.oecd.org>

<http://development.donoratlas.eu/Global-Trends.aspx>

**Figure 5. Financial Assistance to the civil society and government sectors of Belarus from the US and the EU**



Much of this financial assistance from the US was carried out via a variety of social and economic programs for supporting civil society in Belarus, including the pro-democracy movement in Belarus. Prior to the limitation of their activities fiscal aid was also distributed via through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

First, NED actively supported the Belarusian civil society and opposition groups via NGOs, by monitoring of human rights abuse in the country and the providing training and education for anti-government activists. USAID, on the other hand, was involved in financing NGOs that overtly tasked with democracy promotion in Belarus and public services. The NGOs also have dealt with improving public access to Western sources of information, alternative to those of the Belarusian government. For instance, *Stupeni*, (i.e. “ladders”, “stages”), local people’s club sponsored by USAID was involved in discussing local issues, both socio-economic and political. Likewise, USAID assisted to enhance the organizational shortcoming of the Belarusian civil society by providing necessary funding to facilitate the activities of the

Belarusian Organization of Working Women (BOWW). By bolstering the political activism and social relief programs

In addition to providing extensive funding to sustain ordinary Belarusian civil society sector, USAID also actively support the political opposition groups to the Lukashenka regime. For instance, the USAID-sponsored International Republican Institute (IRI) was responsible for creating activist initiatives aimed at facilitating the participation of opposition parties in Belarusian politics and strengthening the positions among the ordinary population. Among others, in the period between 2001 and 2002, the USAID provided IRI with necessary funds to train opposition leaders to build stronger coalitions, improve interparty communications and enhance structural shortcomings of the political parties.

EU members have also been involved in sustaining the activities of the Belarusian democracy movement. For instance, the list of NGOs supported by the Government of Poland includes Prince Konstanty Ostrogski Foundation (PKOF), that helps the marginalized society groups as a result of Lukashenka's purges and Center for International Relations Foundation (CIRF), which assists in improving the Belarusian civil society's access to the Western sources of information. Therefore, given the convincing findings from the data analysis, the hypotheses that the mass democracy movement in Belarus was able to survive and endure due to foreign political-financial aid can be considered confirmed.

#### *Learning and Strategy change*

The Belarusian democracy movement learned from the shortcomings and failures of the previous mass demonstrations of 2006 and 2011. First, pro-democracy activists have gradually shifted their recruitment and opposition strategy from conquering hearts and minds in the streets to convincing people online (i.e. *online activism*). Online activism has helped to hide the traces of anti-government activity of individual civil society members and entailed fewer arrests by the government security forces on the streets, while still supporting the

recruitment to the clandestine resistance organizations. This further indicates that pro-democracy in Belarus learned the ineffectiveness of street protests in driving Lukashenka out of office and therefore looked for alternative avenues of expressing dissent.

Second, as shown in the interviews, weak coordination between protesters during protests of 2006 and 2011 due to the limited access to the Internet and mobile services constituted one of the major problems. In contrast, a wider availability of Internet resources, social media apps and messengers allowed for a larger exposure of the general public, and particularly the youth, to the updates on protest movements. The up-to-date information contributed to the timely response and rapid mobilization of protesters at demonstration sites. Particularly, pro-democracy groups made effective use of Telegram to coordinate their actions in Minsk, Hrodna (Grodno) and Mogilev. This further goes in line with Herasimenka et al. (2020) and Wijermars and Lokot's (2021) arguments on the increased role of social media in the contemporary democratic resistance. In this sense, it can be also concluded that learning and strategy changes have contributed to the continued resilience of the Belarusian pro-democracy groups.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the survival and endurance of the Belarusian mass democracy movement under the repressive Lukashenka regime via the prism of foreign political-financial support and democratic resistance strategies. The literature on foreign support comprises two major schools. The first school argues that foreign autocratic state actors otherwise known as "*black knights*" provide similar-minded authoritarian regimes with extensive political legitimization, economic and military support to assist in asymmetric conflicts between the autocrat and its challengers, to promote their autocratic interests and counter democratization processes. Ambrosio (2007) provides major pathways that "*black knights*" pursue to ensure

authoritarian resistance and counter democratic diffusion within their borders and abroad, i.e. insulation, bolstering and subversion. First, autocrats ban the activities of foreign-sponsored non-governmental organizations (NGOs), attributing to them the primary role in the democratic revolution as well as delegitimizing any democratization attempts. Second, fearing the diffusion of democracy, “*black knights*” provide extensive support to autocratic governments in the form of direct financial aid, military support and political legitimation of the regime on the international level. Similarly, von Soest (2015) argues that an extensive political support, security cooperation and monetary aid from powerful authoritarian patrons assist the resilience of other autocrats. On the other hand, the second school argues that liberal democracies of the West provide vast financial and political resources to the civil societies and pro-democracy movements in authoritarian states. McFaul (2004) examines the democracy promotion phenomenon and suggests that the United States and the European Union serve as the largest financial contributors to the pro-democracy opposition factions abroad. Likewise, Vanderhill (2014) argues that both the US and the EU have implemented multiple programs of supporting civil society in Belarus, including the Belarusian democracy movement through NGOs, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Furthermore, this study addresses the major gap in the literature. More specifically, while attributing a high role to foreign benefactors of President Lukashenka and the democracy movement, the scholarship envisions the Belarusian civil society as weak and largely incapable of implementing resistance strategies on its own, therefore leaving the internal dynamics and strategy shifts of the Belarusian democracy movement largely unaccounted for. In contrast, I posit that strategic choices and tactics made by the Belarusian civil society have as much importance as the extensive foreign political-financial support in the survival and endurance of the pro-democracy movement in Belarus.

Aligning the findings of the existing scholarship on contribution of foreign aid in the resilience of pro-democracy movements with the detailed analysis of Belarusian civil society's internal dynamics, this research was able to demonstrate the complexity of factors affecting the outcome of the confrontation between the ruling autocrat and the pro-democracy movement. In particular, using the process tracing technique and in-depth interviews, I illustrate the importance of foreign political legitimation and vast financial-logistical support in the democracy movement's ability to resist the repressive authoritarian regime. Likewise, the results of the interviews with the Belarusian civil society members reveal a substantial impact of the evolution of resistance strategies on overall resilience of the pro-democracy movement in Belarus.

Building on the theoretical framework of importance of political-financial aid from powerful foreign patrons in the survival of both sides of the civil conflict (i.e. the autocrat and pro-democracy opposition), the study further demonstrates that political legitimation and diplomatic cover by similar-minded powerful authoritarian regimes strengthens the autocrat's grip to power, while also bolstering elite's loyalty to the ruler. In a similar vein, this research shows that pro-democracy groups largely benefit from the patronage and political-financial assistance from liberal democracies of the West, which in turn ensures their long-term endurance.

Lastly, this study has further implications for future research on the resilience of mass democracy movements under repressive nondemocratic regime. While this research mostly focused on a smaller sample of respondents from amongst the Belarusian civil society due to timing and logistical constraints, future studies may instead conduct large number samples, to better account for different personal narratives across different age groups, economic and social status, education level, urban/rural residence and the so-called "*silent majority*" Belarusians, who rarely take part in surveys in light of the strict governmental censorship in the country.

Likewise, since this study is largely representative of relatively younger pro-democratic portions of the population, future studies would highly benefit from the closer examination of the effects of young generation's exposure to Western media and education on internal political dynamics, such as their perception of the Lukashenka regime and prospects of democracy as a whole.

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## APPENDIX A

### EMAIL (MESSAGE) FOR INTERVIEWS

Hello,

My name is Miras Orazbek. I am conducting one-on-one online interviews about mass democracy movement in the Republic of Belarus as part of research for my Master's thesis at Nazarbayev University School of Sciences and Humanities, Master of Arts in Political Science and International Relations graduate program in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan.

I located your name by visiting the website of/by/via \_\_\_\_\_.

With this email/message, I would like to invite you to the one-on-one interview that will take about 60 minutes on a mutually agreed time and date. The interview will ask you questions about the mass democracy movement and recent protests in Belarus. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable and you can decide to stop at any time with no consequences. Your participation in this study is voluntary. All the personal information and the information obtained during the interview will be kept confidential. The interview will be held online via Microsoft Teams and will not be recorded. You will have the option to have your camera turned off during the interview. Alternatively, if you want to participate, but do not wish to have an online interview, the interview questions can be sent out to you via email in a Microsoft Word format and you will be able to provide your answers in a typed format and email them back to me.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [miras.orazbek@nu.edu.kz](mailto:miras.orazbek@nu.edu.kz) or Dr. Matthew Millard, my Thesis Adviser, at [matthew.millard@nu.edu.kz](mailto:matthew.millard@nu.edu.kz).

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee at [resethics@nu.edu.kz](mailto:resethics@nu.edu.kz).

Best regards,

Miras Orazbek.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your general impression of the ongoing mass democracy protests in the Republic of Belarus?
2. In your point of view, why is Lukashenka still in power today? Do you believe that the opposition movement to Lukashenka's rule has committed any (major or minor) mistakes?
3. In your opinion, do you envision that the mass protests will eventually force President Lukashenka to leave office?
4. In your opinion, what are the incentives behind the Belarusian people's take to the streets?
5. Do you find the ongoing 2020-2021 mass democracy protests in Belarus substantially different from the previous protests of 2006 and 2011? How and why?
6. The recent protests have shown to be much larger in scope and duration. Do you think the opposition and protesters have learned to survive and endure from previous protests? In your opinion, what factors have contributed to a larger scope and a longer duration of the protests?
7. The urban youth appears to be very much involved in the mass protests in Belarus. Why do you think this is the case? In your opinion, what are the incentives for urban youths to take part in the protests?
8. What do you think of the role of education, exposure to Western democratic norms/values, and social media as factors in terms of explaining ordinary people's participation in the mass protests in Belarus?
9. In your point of view, is there any possibility that opposition and protesters will ever be able to force President Lukashenka out of office? If yes, how could that happen?

10. With President Lukashenka still in office, do you think that the opposition and protesters have made mistakes when dealing with the regime in their anti-government efforts?
11. Many mass democracy protests in other former Soviet republics led to the overthrow of the respective governments, whereas President Lukashenka managed to stay in power. In your opinion, why was it different for Belarus?
12. One of the prominent hypotheses in the scholarly literature suggests that foreign political-financial support affects the balance of power and the outcome of the confrontation between the regime and its challengers. Do you think this model can be applied to Belarus?
13. There have been reports that the extensive support from the West (EU/US) contributes to the endurance of the Belarusian protests. Do you agree with this idea?
14. Some scholars suggests that significant Russian political, economic and military support for the ruling Belarusian regime contributes to the latter's survival. Do you think President Lukashenka will still remain in office, if such support from Russia ceased once and for all?
15. What do you think of the future of Belarus-EU/US and Belarus-Russia relations?
16. Can President Lukashenka ever normalize the relations with the West? What would it cost?
17. Is democracy possible in Belarus? If yes, what would such a democratic transition require?
18. Do you have any additional follow-up comments to our discussion?



## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Introduction.** You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “*Mass democracy movement in Belarus*”.

**Procedures.** This study explores the peculiarities of the mass democracy movement in Belarus and aims to explain the variation in the endurance of mass democracy movements in Belarus with the broader aim of examining how the combination of various domestic and external factors affect the outcome of the confrontation between the nondemocratic regime and the protesters. The study requires one-on-one online interviews with scholars specializing in Belarusian politics. The interviews will be held in the Q&A (Question and Answer) format with the additional time for the follow-up comments. All interviews will be held online via Microsoft Teams using a secure Virtual Private Network (Nord VPN) for safety and privacy purposes on the mutually agreed date and time. Personal invitations will be sent out to the participants a week prior to the meeting and will be sent again the day before the meeting. You can leave the interview at any moment. You will have the option to have your camera turned off during the interview. Alternatively, if you want to participate, but do not wish to have an online interview, the interview questions can be sent out to you via email in a Microsoft Word format and you will be able to provide your answers in a typed format and email them back to me.

The expected duration of the study: *November 2021 – April 2022*.

This interview will take approximately *60 minutes* to complete.

**Confidentiality & Privacy.** Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

While the interviewer will take written notes during the interview, please note that the interviews themselves will NOT be recorded under any circumstances. All the data from written notes will be transferred to the Microsoft Word format. The data will be stored in a digital encrypted format on a computer device without Internet access. All the encrypted files will be duly protected with secure passwords. The written paper notes will undergo shredding and destroyed, as soon as they are transferred to a computer device. Only the Principal Investigator will have access to the interview data.

**Risks.** The study entails certain risks to the participants, such as mental-emotional stress and anxiety. Rest assured, all information obtained during the interviews will be kept confidential.

**Benefits.** The study of the mass democracy movement in Belarus will contribute to the existing research by examining how the combination of various domestic and external factors affect the outcome of the confrontation between the nondemocratic regime and the protesters. The interviews will increase the overall understanding of the political situation in Belarus and shed light on the resilience and endurance of the mass democracy movement in the country.

**Compensation.** No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study. After the completion of the study a respective thesis draft

with the results will be submitted to the School. Upon the approval of the School and the successful thesis defense, the results will be shared with the participants.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study.** Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and if agreement to participation is given, it can be withdrawn at any time without prejudice. If you choose the email format of the interview, you will be asked to tentatively confirm your participation in the study before the interview questions are sent to you via email. Your decision to answer questions by responding via email indicates that you have given your informed consent.

**Points of Contact.** It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, or a research related injury is received, the Principal Investigator, *Mr. Miras Orazbek* at *miras.orazbek@nu.edu.kz* or *Dr. Matthew Millard*, my Thesis adviser at *matthew.millard@nu.edu.kz* should be contacted. Any other questions or concerns may be addressed to the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, *reethics@nu.edu.kz*.

## APPENDIX D

### ORAL CONSENT SCRIPT

#### **Mass democracy movement in Belarus**

**Researcher:** *Miras Orazbek*

#### **Introduction:**

Hello. My name is Miras Orazbek. I am conducting one-on-one online interviews about the mass democracy movement in Belarus. I am conducting this as part of research for my Master's thesis at Nazarbayev University's School of Sciences and Humanities, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Master of Arts in Political Science and International Relations graduate program.

I located/found your name by visiting the official websites of/by/via \_\_\_\_\_.

#### **Study procedures:**

I invite you to a one-on-one online interview that will take about 60 minutes. The interview will ask you questions about the mass democracy movement and recent protests in the Republic of Belarus. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable and you can decide to stop at any time with no consequences. Your participation in this study is voluntary. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy. While the interviewer will take written notes during the interview, please note that the interviews themselves will NOT be recorded under any circumstances. All the data from written notes will be transferred to the Microsoft Word format. The data will be stored in a digital encrypted format on a computer device without Internet access. All the encrypted files will be duly protected with secure passwords. The written paper notes will undergo shredding, as soon as they are transferred to a computer device. Only the Principal Investigator will have access to the interview data. Alternatively, if you want to participate, but do not wish to have an online interview, the interview questions can be sent out to you via email in a Microsoft Word format and you will be able to provide your answers in a typed format and email them back to me.

#### **Risks:**

The study entails minimal risks to the participants, such as mental-emotional stress and anxiety. Rest assured, all information obtained during the interviews will be kept confidential.

#### **Benefits:**

It is unlikely that there will be direct benefits to you, however, by better understanding the mass democracy movement in Belarus, researchers may be able to assess how the combination of various domestic and external factors affect the outcome of the confrontation between the nondemocratic regime and the protesters. The interviews will increase the overall understanding of the political situation in Belarus and shed light on the resilience and endurance of the mass democracy movement in the country.

I will keep the information you tell me during the interview strictly confidential. Information I put in my report that could identify you will not be published or shared beyond the research team unless we have your permission. Any data from this research which will be shared or published will be the combined data of all participants. That means it will be reported for the whole group not for individual persons.

**Voluntary participation:**

- Your participation in this study is voluntary.
- You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the questionnaire for whatever reason.
- If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.
- If you decide to stop, we will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point.
- If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to.
- If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can email *Mr. Miras Orazbek* at *miras.orazbek@nu.edu.kz*, or *Dr. Matthew Millard*, my Thesis adviser at *matthew.millard@nu.edu.kz*.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee  
E-mail: *resethics@nu.edu.kz*

At this point, I would like to ask you if you consent to participate in this interview. Please feel free to ask any additional questions.