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**The Election Trap: The Cycle of Post-electoral Repression and Opposition Fragmentation  
in Lukashenko's Belarus**

Konstantin Ash  
University of California – San Diego  
9500 Gilman Dr. #0521  
La Jolla, CA 92093  
[kash@ucsd.edu](mailto:kash@ucsd.edu)  
Forthcoming in *Democratization*.

## **Abstract**

Recent work on competitive authoritarianism has not explored the full consequences of electoral participation for opposition movements. While prominent work argues that the government must employ a mix of side-payments and repression to fragment opposition to its rule, Belarus' history since the ascension of President Alexander Lukashenko in 1994 shows that the opposition has been repressed after most parliamentary and presidential elections without any substantial co-optation. I argue that electoral contestation and subsequent post-electoral repression have led to the Belarusian opposition's fragmented state. This state is grounded in competition for foreign aid, which creates a need among Belarusian opposition leaders to demonstrate their ability to mobilize support through campaigns. Invariably, successful opposition leaders emerge as the principal challengers to the regime, leading to their arrest or exile. Repression then fosters division within anti-government movements and restarts the cycle for new aid-seeking parties and leaders. A quantitative test establishes that repression concentrates in post-electoral periods and a qualitative assessment shows that opposition fragmentation stems from the arrest or exile of opposition leaders. The empirical findings provide contrasting evidence to work on co-optation in autocracies while suggesting an adverse effect of foreign democracy assistance around the world.

Keywords: Belarus, elections, repression, protests, authoritarianism

On the night of December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010, thousands of opposition protesters gathered in the central square of the Belarusian capital, Minsk. They were incredulous that the official results of that day's presidential election showed incumbent president Alexander Lukashenko was reelected to a fourth term with almost 80% of the vote. Soon, riot police closed in and arrested hundreds, including seven of the nine presidential candidates that ran against President Lukashenko.<sup>1</sup> The seven opposition presidential candidates were charged and jailed in connection with the protests.<sup>2</sup> Despite a reputedly rigged election and mass protests, the Belarusian government had effectively marginalized its opposition through mass arrests and targeted apprehensions of opposition candidates. Opposition coordination, already tenuous, broke down completely after the 2010 election. The striking feature of this subsequent lack of coordination was that largely the same course of events had played out in the aftermath of the 2006 presidential election, a 2004 referendum to eliminate presidential term limits and several earlier presidential and parliamentary elections. In fact, while many opposition leaders were arrested after elections had taken place, these same leaders had already replaced or separated from other parties whose leaders had been incarcerated or forced into exile after previous post-electoral repression. This culminated in a marked increase in opposition presidential candidates; from one in 2001 to nine in 2010, with no repeat anti-regime challengers.

While the nature of electoral fraud in Belarus is striking, I focus on the opposition fragmentation that has taken place in tandem with this fraud, asking why the Belarusian opposition has become weaker and more fragmented since Lukashenko's ascent to power? To answer this question, I connect two empirical regularities: a systematic pattern of opposition repression that reaches its apex immediately following elections and post-electoral fragmentation

due to the jailing and exile of opposition leaders. These regularities show that participation in elections is directly related to the subsequent jailing and exile of opposition leaders, which leads to the ultimate fragmentation of their movements.

This argument goes against two established assumptions in the competitive authoritarianism literature: that electoral participation leads to a mix of concessions and repression from the government, becoming a net positive for opposition groups and that motives for electoral participation in autocracies are largely identical to those in democracies. I argue that rather than contesting elections out of office-seeking incentives opposition parties stage campaigns because foreign funding is directed to successful groups within the opposition. In the days following elections, opposition leaders organize protests around the apparent fraud that occurs on election day. Protests also attract regime attention and allow the government to target its arrests toward opposition leaders that appear best suited to lead a united opposition. No opposition parties receive legislative representation or side-payments as a result of the elections. Instead, after the repression period, opposition leaders face internal leadership challenges that lead to fragmentation as marginalized leaders become simultaneously detached from group activities and popular among the general opposition. When new leaders gain hold of either existing movements or splinter groups, they aim to broaden their appeal and again use electoral campaigns to boost foreign funds and publicity. These strategies again attract government repression, restarting the cycle with more groups and proving a net negative to the opposition.

To analyze the aforementioned processes, I focus on how Belarus relates to broader scholarly work on electoral authoritarianism. First, I look at past work on elections in autocratic states and the behavior of the political opposition in the face of electoral fraud and focus on how

Belarus relates to this line of research. Then, I describe the role of protest and political opposition in Belarusian society after the first election of President Lukashenko. I argue that opposition movements contest elections for more than electoral gains, integrating the role of non-electoral support into current narratives on challenging the government on its own terms. After the narrative, I present quantitative evidence from an original data-set on Belarusian protests that shows a pattern of post-electoral repression followed by qualitative evidence of opposition fragmentation after post-electoral repression. Finally, I make prescriptions to both researchers and policy-makers on how the findings can provide a way forward.

### **Prior Work**

#### ***Electoral Opposition in Autocracies***

Since most elections after the ascension of President Lukashenko have been condemned as fraudulent, it is not immediately clear if elections are relevant in Belarusian political culture. For instance, Belarus is classified as a 'consolidated authoritarian regime' by Freedom House's Nations in Transit rankings.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, such a classification should not prevent Belarus from being classified as a competitive authoritarian regime, as competition and consolidation are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts. Recent work on competitive authoritarianism has underscored that competitive autocracies are regimes that possess any nominally democratic institutions. These institutions need not be indicative of more democratic government, but merely of a specific type of authoritarianism.<sup>4</sup> This recent line of scholarship is founded on exploring how variation in authoritarian regimes shapes policies, democratic transitions<sup>5</sup> and regime durability.<sup>6</sup> Magaloni's<sup>7</sup> seminal work on the the Party of the Institutional Revolution's (PRI) rule in Mexico focused on the role of contested elections in keeping the PRI in power for over 70

years. The PRI used elections as a way of establishing legitimacy among the electorate, controlling against defections from within the party and maintaining a patronage mechanism that reenforced popular support. The political opposition played a key role in these elections, as having opponents that lost contested elections to the PRI solidified its dominance in the minds of the electorate.

More recent work has expanded on the role of opposition parties in competitive authoritarian regimes. In some systems, like Egypt's under Mubarak, all elected representatives were able to tap into a vast network of patronage,<sup>8</sup> with some opposition groups even receiving material support from the government to contest elections.<sup>9</sup> This form of co-optation increased ties between autocrats and some parts of the opposition, not only pacifying that segment of the opposition, but also preventing the formation of a united front that could demand greater concessions or foster the regime's overthrow.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, co-optation could also come from the top as insurance against a loss of popularity, as seen in contemporary Russia. Quickly emerging as a hegemonic party system, the Russian regime created two complacent parties, Motherland and then, A Just Russia, as splinters from the hegemonic core of United Russia on opposite sides of the political spectrum.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, there are still a number of issues these works leave unresolved. Most prominently, it is unclear why opposition groups that incur or are vulnerable to repression, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Mubarak's Egypt or Yabloko in Russia, contest elections despite receiving few material benefits.

Work on responses to electoral fraud shows that uncertainty in both the decision to contest elections and to carry out fraud that creates variation in outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Magaloni<sup>13</sup> refines much of this framework by drawing on Weingast's model. The revision conditions the

government's ability to carry out electoral fraud and to fragment the opposition on side payments to some opposition groups. Nevertheless, the Belarusian case seems to call both the model's generalizability into question as Belarus' opposition has become increasingly fragmented with each election without being substantially co-opted. Moreover, concentration of power in the presidency and the lack of a hegemonic party effectively marginalizes the legislature and undermines potential uses of elections for patronage or co-optation. Not only does this show that the assumed mechanism for opposition fragmentation by autocrats is not used in Belarus, but calls into question why the opposition would participate in any elections, given the lack of benefits, much less do so repeatedly after incurring post-electoral repression.

### ***Opposition Weakness in Belarus***

Scholars of former Soviet countries, including Belarus, have not looked at elections after the fall of communism as determinants of opposition behavior. Instead, three factors associated with the ruling regime are generally used to explain weakness of the opposition: the use of Belarus' Soviet past as a driving ideology, the regime's robust social benefits structure and the strength of the coercive apparatus. However, none of these explanations appear to be sufficient in explaining the persistently fragmented state of the opposition. The ideology perspective focuses on the brand of Soviet revivalism that serves as a driving ideology for Lukashenko's presidency. After his election in 1994, Lukashenko reinstated Soviet state symbols, including the Soviet-era flag and national anthem while suppressing Belarusian language education and culture.<sup>14</sup> Marples<sup>15</sup> argues that Lukashenko draws legitimacy by lionizing perceived positive features of Soviet rule in Belarus, such as economic stability and victory in the Second World War and by organizing a personality cult around his humble origins, reputation for fighting corruption and



the economic stability since his election. The most striking feature of this ideology is that all citizens can identify with it (in contrast the Belarusian and Polish identities of opposition groups), which contributes to the regime's popularity.<sup>16</sup>

While ideology may seem like a compelling explanation for the regime's domination, it is flawed in its convenience. The historical and cultural features that are emphasized by the regime tie together several alternating and diffuse components without either making them a part of daily life or the principal justification for the regime's existence. In addition to deficiencies in the ideology explanation, even factors underlying ideology, such as economic stability, are not sufficient explanations for opposition weakness. While growth began as an important part of the regime's platform, continued intractability of the opposition in spite of of the Global Recession and two separate inflationary crises casts doubt on its overall effect.<sup>17</sup>

Even though economic gains have not been consistent throughout Lukashenko's tenure, the country's large social welfare system and state industrial subsidization have been a constant presence. Thus, it is appealing to postulate that the combination of a strong social safety net and security provided by employment in state industries would make the majority of the population supportive of the regime.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, as seen, most notably, during the original collapse of communism, a social safety net and attempts at full employment by the state are not sufficient to deter political opposition, much less all political opposition. Moreover, the economic sacrifices made to sustain such a system can foster even more dissent.

Finally, the strength of Belarus' Soviet-style repressive apparatus also falls short in explaining opposition weakness. Repression-based arguments generally focus on the lack of civil society development and restrictions on independent media and NGO activity.<sup>19</sup> Way<sup>20</sup> argues

that Belarus' government establishes a firm grasp over its citizens by imposing its rule over all of its territory. This scope is drawn from control over an extensive repressive apparatus that includes the local police, state security agencies and, reportedly, thousands of informants.<sup>21</sup> However, while the state's repressive apparatus can be credited with restrictions on media freedom or NGO membership and even preventing some individuals from participating in protests, it is not absolute. Repression may represent a strong push against mobilization, but protests outside of the period following elections often proceed unencumbered, and opposition groups carry out electoral campaigns without crippling harassment from the security forces – allowing for the emergence of a strong opposition.

Thus, existing work on Belarus is missing an explanation for why Belarus' political opposition remains so weak. Together with broader work of competitive authoritarianism, this exposes a substantial gap. Scholars that focus on post-communist states do not recognize the role of competitive elections as mechanisms for opposition fragmentation, while scholars of competitive autocracies recognize the role of elections, but have not developed an explanation for their importance in Belarus. In the following sections, I outline a theory that can explain both of these shortcomings through an in-depth examination of Belarusian opposition politics.

### **Elections during Lukashenko's Presidency**

A pattern of post-electoral repression and opposition fragmentation can be gleamed from looking at Belarus' history since Lukashenko took office in 1994. I review this history in the first sub-section, and then present a theory and testable predictions for explaining why, given these circumstances, opposition groups have become more fragmented in the next two sub-sections.

### *Electoral History of Belarus since 1994*

While Belarus gained independence from the Soviet Union in August of 1991, a new constitution was not written and presidential elections did not take place until 1994. The 1994 election featured former Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Stanislav Shushkevich, Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich, leader of the nationalist Belarusian Popular Front, Zyanon Pozniak, and a Supreme Soviet deputy named Alexander Lukashenko, known for his bombastic stance against corruption. Lukashenko was quick to capture voter support by tapping into dissatisfaction with the leadership's handling of the economy. While Shushkevich and Kebich persistently attacked one other, Lukashenko gained public support, winning the most votes in the first round and overwhelmingly defeating Kebich in the run-off.<sup>22</sup>

In the months after the election, Lukashenko's administration clashed repeatedly with deputies in the Supreme Soviet. On two instances, in 1995 and again in 1996, Lukashenko bypassed their decision-making power in favor of referenda. The 1996 constitutional dispute was particularly bitter and Zyanon Pozniak and other opposition deputies initiated impeachment hearings against Lukashenko. The quarrel between the President and Supreme Soviet was settled in a referendum on constitutional amendments proposed by both sides. While the Supreme Soviet's amendments would have established a parliamentary system, Lukashenko's changes reduced the size of the Supreme Soviet, gave the president authority to dissolve the Assembly at will and provided for rule by decree. President Lukashenko's proposals passed by an overwhelming margin. Pozniak lost his seat in the Supreme Soviet and the BPF staged multiple demonstrations against the changes, resulting in numerous arrests.<sup>23</sup>

After the protests, Pozniak, facing criminal charges and multiple threats on his life,

decided to emigrate to the United States. In the aftermath of his departure, the Belarusian Popular Front, a vanguard for Belarusian language rights and history, split into two competing factions: the Christian Conservative Party of the BPF, led by Pozniak and the Partija-BPF. While these parties retained similar platforms, Pozniak's faction was less inclined to cooperate with other opposition groups.<sup>24</sup> The passage of the 1996 constitutional changes also allowed Lukashenko to remain in power for two additional years beyond his original five year term. Despite the split in the BPF, the opposition managed to organize around one presidential candidate for the 2001 election: moderate union leader and former member of parliament, Vladimir Goncharik. Goncharik's campaign was not overtly suppressed, but Lukashenko benefited from overwhelmingly positive media coverage and a stark financial advantage.<sup>25</sup> The election, considered fraudulent by most international observers, returned Lukashenko to power for five more years with approximately 75% of the official vote to Goncharik's 15%.<sup>26 27</sup> Goncharik left his position at the Federation of Trade Unions at the end of 2001 in favor of a position outside of Belarus.<sup>28</sup>

The opposition's 2001 unity was short-lived as divisions led to the emergence of two informal blocs of opposition parties to contest the 2004 parliamentary elections: the Coalition Five Plus and the Democratic Centrist Coalition. After restrictions on the opposition's ability to organize throughout the campaign, none of the opposition candidates contesting the election won seats. As with the 2000 parliamentary election, most seats went to independent candidates who supported the President's agenda. The parliamentary elections of 2004 were accompanied by a referendum on eliminating term limits for the presidency, which passed overwhelmingly.<sup>29</sup> The success of the referendum, much like in 1996, led to considerable street protests against

President Lukashenko and mass arrests of the participants.<sup>30</sup>

The Color Revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan generated great anticipation for the 2006 presidential elections among the opposition. However, the two opposition coalitions failed to decide on a single candidate: the Coalition Five Plus chose Alexander Milinkevich and the DCC selected Alexander Kazulin. While the two candidates cooperated in their opposition of Lukashenko, their presence divided opposition forces in the run-up to the vote.<sup>31</sup> On election day, Lukashenko officially received almost 85% of the vote compared to about six percent for Milinkevich and just over two percent for Kazulin. Once again, international monitors declared the election to be fraudulent and thousands of protesters poured into Minsk's central square after the results were announced.<sup>32</sup> Days of subsequent protests culminated with the arrests of Alexander Kazulin and Alexander Milinkevich. Kazulin was sentenced to a lengthy jail term. Milinkevich escaped a similar fate, but was repeatedly detained under charges ranging from taking part in an unsanctioned rally to drug trafficking in the months that followed.<sup>33</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2006 presidential election, even more divisions emerged among opposition groups as imprisoned opposition leaders Milinkevich and Kazulin found it difficult to preserve unity in their ranks. Kazulin's Social Democratic Party dissociated itself on a policy dimension by taking a more pro-European stance under the leadership of Nikolai Statkevich.<sup>34</sup> These divisions manifested during the 2008 parliamentary election campaign when youth movements and the human rights group Charter-97 boycotted the election while the BPF and supporters of Alexander Milinkevich presented platforms that contradicted many of the other opposition groups. Once again, no opposition candidates won seats.<sup>35</sup>

By 2009, the opposition dissolved into numerous camps, marginalizing Alexander

Kazulin, who was freed that same year, and Alexander Milinkevich. A total of nine opposition candidates contested the 2010 presidential election: human rights activist Vladimir Neklaev, Charter-97 leader Andrei Sannikov, United Civic Party's Yaroslav Ramanchuk, economist Viktor Tyareschenko, the leader of a third BPF splinter Aleksei Mikhailevich, leader of the Social Democratic Party Nikolai Statkevich, businessman Dmitriy Us, Partija-BPF candidate Grigoriy Kostushev and Christian Democratic Party leader Vitaly Rumashevskiy. In addition, both Milinkevich and Pozniak considered campaigning, but ended up advocating an outright boycott of the election. While campaigning took place without official restrictions, President Lukashenko continued to enjoy favorable media coverage and officially received almost 80% of the vote. Sannikov was the leading vote-getter among the opposition candidates, but none of the nine officially received more than 2.5% of the vote. Seven of the nine candidates were then detained in the wake of post-election protests.<sup>36 37</sup> Of those detained, Andrei Sannikov was jailed for five years,<sup>38</sup> Statkevich and Us received similar sentences,<sup>39</sup> Neklaev was placed under house arrest, Mikhailevich sought and ultimately received asylum from the Czech Republic and Rumashevskiy was handed a two-year suspended sentence.<sup>40</sup> In the wake of the 2010 elections, ad hoc flash mobs organized through social networking websites replaced more organized forms of protest and organized 'silent protests' in the summer of 2011.<sup>41</sup> Opposition unity again faltered during the 2012 parliamentary elections. Some groups boycotted the elections altogether while others ran concurrent campaigns, leaving some districts with multiple opposition candidates. As in the previous three parliamentary elections, a divided opposition failed to win any seats.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Why Contest Fraudulent Elections?***

The preceding section reveals a pattern of interaction between the Belarusian opposition

and government. Specifically, despite a lack of material incentives for electoral participation and a constant threat of post-electoral repression, the opposition becomes more divided with each passing election and continues to participate in subsequent contests. This does not follow the pattern seen in many other countries where opposition fragmentation and incentives to contest elections stem from side-payments to some opposition groups. In fact, overall participation seems entirely unpalatable as the structure of Belarus' political institutions after 1996 underscores a lack of opportunities for the opposition to influence the political system. Concentration of power in the presidency and single-member district legislative elections make the maintenance of stable political parties more challenging. Even these barriers prove immaterial as attaining office<sup>43</sup> for the opposition is historically difficult: opposition members consistently fail to win seats in national elections and have won as little as six of more than twenty thousand possible seats in local elections.<sup>44</sup> Despite these barriers, the opposition has continued to stage vigorous campaigns, even as each cycle of post-electoral repression has made opposition parties weaker and more divided. As there is little institutional benefit of contesting elections, there must be other, less direct, gains for campaigning to justify any opposition effort. Before explaining opposition fragmentation in Belarus, I elaborate on the sources of these benefits. Since explaining opposition participating is not the focus of this paper, this section amounts to elaborating on an assumption that the Belarusian opposition has extra-electoral motives that drive its participation. Nevertheless, there is still considerable evidence to support this assertion.

Any benefits from electoral participation are enhanced by the regime's apparent tolerance of opposition campaigning. While opposition candidates still face hassling and repression from

the government, they simultaneously gain an opportunity to present their message to the public. Presidential candidates each receive two hours of airtime on state television; in direct contrast to an otherwise complete lack of airtime for the opposition on state media outlets.<sup>45</sup> Even President Lukashenko has intervened to facilitate opposition campaign meetings; in one instance, ordering authorities to permit opposition leaders to hold a congress in Minsk after no venue was forthcoming.<sup>46</sup> In addition to reaching common citizens, opposition movements can also use campaigns to bring awareness of and attract existing opposition supporters to a new movement. The latter process is not without danger as it leaves opposition groups insulated and concerned with competing with one another over both support from their base and funding from abroad.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of foreign support is underscored by the fragmented nature of the opposition, which leaves individual movements short on financial support. Moreover, the periods that follow elections produce windfalls for candidates or groups that distinguish themselves during the preceding campaigns: over 100 million euros in aid was promised to key opposition groups after the 2010 presidential election.<sup>48 49</sup> Increased financial support from foreign donors is crucial, as it presents leaders with opportunities for foreign travel, meetings with Western leaders and other benefits that are normally afforded to office-holders.<sup>50</sup> Other sources of potential funding, such as members of the Belarusian diaspora and neighboring Russia are less forthcoming. The Russian government openly supports Belarus' ruling regime, and while an average of \$1 billion in remittances flow into Belarus annually, these are generally spent to support family members rather than political endeavors.<sup>51</sup> Thus, I posit that the availability of Western aid produces alternative incentives for staging campaigns that mirror the office-seeking aspirations among democratic politicians.



Given the ease with which candidates can register for elections and the benefits that foreign support brings to opposition groups and leaders, I believe that extra-electoral financial incentives are strongest in influencing opposition leaders and motivating campaigns in the face of repression. Foreign aid-seeking politicians still have an incentive to contest elections, but don't have as much of an interest in winning office, as in demonstrating their strength among opposition supporters for foreign donors. When campaigns culminate in fraud-ridden elections, the opposition mobilizes to protest the perceived injustice, but is swiftly repressed with the most prominent leaders either being jailed or marginalized as a result of their increased visibility in the broad anti-government movement. When leaders are either jailed or forced into exile, their ability to lead is undermined, but not entirely compromised. This intermediate status sows the seeds of division and ultimately leads to the fragmentation of their movements between groups of loyal supporters and followers of rival domestic contenders. Fragmented groups have a greater incentive to proselytize information about their movements through electoral campaigns as they are under even greater pressure to show their relevance to foreign donors. This restarts the cycle with a greater number of opposition groups and leaders.

### ***Hypotheses***

Explaining how contesting elections leads to opposition fragmentation is contingent on several empirical regularities: 1) government repression of opposition leaders should be more likely in the period of time that immediately follows elections, 2) the higher likelihood of repression should not be a result of a bias toward more collective action by the opposition in response to electoral fraud, and 3) jailing or exile of opposition group leaders should lead to fragmentation within their movements. Not only are the first two assertions necessary to show

that there are detrimental outcomes for opposition groups in periods after elections, but that the pre-electoral period allows for relatively peaceful gatherings that are not interrupted by the government and permit an opposition campaign. On the same note, the third regularity not only shows the negative consequences of repression of opposition leaders, but that there is a constant flow of new leaders into electoral campaigns that have not experienced repression and are eager to demonstrate their viability to Western donors. To support the first two assertions, I use a quantitative test that models the selection effects of protests and their impact on repression. Then, I look at three cases of fragmentation within opposition groups to show how repression translates into fragmentation.

**Table 1: Presidential Candidates and Post-Election Outcome in Belarus 1994-2010**

Opposition Candidate	Vote Share	Post-Election Outcome
<b>1994 Election</b>		
Vyacheslav Kebich	17.1 (14.2)	Member of National Assembly
Zyanon Pozniak	13.1	Sought asylum in the US in 1996
Stanislav Shushkevich	10.1	Opposition Party Leader
<b>2001 Election</b>		
Vladimir Goncharik	16.0	Moved abroad
Sergei Gaidukevich	2.5	Remained party leader
<b>2006 Election</b>		
Alexander Milinkevich	6.2	Arrested, jailed repeatedly
Sergei Gaidukevich	3.5	Remained party leader
Alexander Kazulin	2.3	Arrested, jailed for 2 years
<b>2010 Election</b>		
Andrey Sannikov	2.4	Arrested, jailed
Yaroslav Ramanchuk	2.0	Lost leadership position in opposition
Grigoriy Kostushev	2.0	Arrested
Vladimir Neklaev	1.8	Arrested, placed under house arrest
Viktor Tyareschenko	1.2	Condemned other opposition candidates
Vitaly Rumashevskiy	1.1	Arrested, given suspended sentence
Nikolai Statkevich	1.1	Arrested, Jailed
Aleksei Mikhalevich	1.0	Arrested, received asylum in the Czech Republic
Dmitriy Us	0.4	Arrested, Jailed

## Quantitative Study of Protest and Repression in Belarus

### *Main Variables and Definitions*

A pattern of selective repression can be gleaned from the post-electoral outcomes for opposition presidential candidates since 1994 (see table 1). However, these few historical cases cannot elucidate a pattern of post-electoral repression across post-Soviet Belarus' history. For a more precise analysis, I devise a quantitative study of protests and protest repression during the tenure of President Lukashenko. I look at protests because they represent a surprisingly regular public challenge (given the nature of the Belarusian regime) to government authority. While there are other ways for individuals to manifest opposition to a government, a public display of disaffection with the incumbent leadership is a particularly strong signal of a group's mobilizational power to both the public at-large and to the regime itself. Due to the nature of this challenge, every protest represents an opportunity for the Belarusian leadership to repress opposition movements with mass arrests. This makes protests extremely useful signals of strength for the opposition when they are not repressed and strong signals of government strength when they are. There is also an instrumental reason for using protests: compared to other forms of political dissent, protests and subsequent arrests are inherently more measurable due to their public nature. The variation in when the government actually utilizes this capability is the unit of my quantitative analysis. Protests are defined as observed activities directed against a government,<sup>52</sup> clarified as observed gatherings of two or more individuals with a message against government policies or the government itself. It follows that opposition groups are defined as two or more individuals that communicate messages against government policies or the regime itself.<sup>53</sup> Given the focus on protests, I limit my analysis of repression to repression of ongoing

political protests, operationalized by the number of individuals arrested during a protest. Within the context of these measures, I expect that the number of arrests during protests is higher in the period of time following an election and that this relationship is unchanged if the opposition stages more protests around the time of elections.

To capture this effect, I create an original data-set of protests in Belarus after President Lukashenko's inauguration in July of 1994 to the end of 2011 by manually coding wire and news service archives available from LexisNexis.<sup>54</sup> Protests are coded on the daily level with information on the number of participants, number of arrests, topic, main organizing group (when available) and location. A total of 309 protest days are observed.<sup>55</sup> Since the data coverage is daily, the main independent variable of interest is the number of days that have passed since the previous presidential or parliamentary election.<sup>56</sup>

### *Statistical Model*

Since the number of arrests during a given protest is a form of count data, their errors concentrate unimodally at low values, making the assumption of normally distributed errors in ordinal least squares regressions inappropriate. While it is tempting to use a log-transformation of the dependent variable to fit the assumption of normality, an OLS model with such a transformation is biased and highly unstable. Instead, the Poisson distribution is most appropriate for explaining variation in event count errors. However, a primary issue with model selection for count data is the assumption that the mean and variance of the maximum likelihood estimator in the Poisson model are equal, known as equidispersion.<sup>57</sup> Since the data on number of arrests after a protest is composed of over 50% zero counts and has a variance that exceeds the mean by a factor of 200, overdispersion in arrest data is likely. A negative binomial regression model, a

maximum likelihood estimator that relaxes the assumption of equidispersion, is thus more appropriate.<sup>58</sup>

Even if fewer days after an election significantly predicts an increase in the incidence rate of arrests after protests, the finding is subject to selection bias. A higher number of post-election arrests could be a manifestation of more frequent protests in the times that immediately follow elections as fraud represents a focal point for protest that lowers the cost for collective action for individuals across a country.<sup>59</sup> The effect of elections is not unique as a myriad of factors can lower the costs of collective action that impede protests in repressive autocracies.<sup>60</sup> This potential selection effect must be accounted for to have an unbiased estimator. However, much like the case of applying OLS models to count data, the selection correction proposed by Heckman<sup>61</sup> is only appropriate for data with normally distributed errors. To account for sample selection bias in count data, Greene<sup>62</sup> and Terza<sup>63</sup> develop a modified full information maximum likelihood (FIML) model, which I employ in this study. The technique begins with a probit model conducted on the full sample of a dichotomous selection variable, which determines whether the count variable is observed. The coefficients from the dependent variables from the first stage are factored into the joint conditional probability density function (PDF) of the likelihood function of the second stage negative binomial selection model, in order to account for the impact that selection has on the values of the observed dependent variable. In the case of my model, the parameter values that predict the incidence of protest inform the second-stage observed variable: number of arrests during a protest.<sup>64</sup>

Selection models require that one variable that is a predictor of the first stage selection variable is excluded from the second stage of the analysis. By employing this instrumental

variable, the uncorrelated error term from the first stage transfers to the second stage, assuring that the error term in the second stage is not affected by the effect of selection as it would be in the ordinary model. The instrument must meet the exclusion restriction: it must correlate with the selection variable, but be uncorrelated with the error terms of the second stage of the model. It follows that any variable that theoretically does not predict a significant change in the number of arrests, while predicting protest would make for a good instrument. I employ unofficial holidays as the instrument. These are four days that are significant in Belarusian history and are not recognized by the government: Freedom Day, commemorating the creation of the Belarusian republic in 1918; Union Day, on the anniversary of the Union Treaty between Russia and Belarus, the anniversary of the Chernobyl Disaster, and a Day of Remembrance for victims of World War II, on the date of the Nazi invasion in 1941. While these days bear significance for the opposition in a way that should increase the likelihood of protest, they are of no consequence to the government and should not produce an unusually high or low quantity of arrests. I test for the validity of the instrument in two ways. First, I analyze the correlation between unofficial holidays and the error of the negative binomial model with unofficial holidays excluded. The correlation coefficient between the two measures is -0.0002. To confirm this lack of correlation, I include unofficial holidays as a co-variate for predicting the errors of the first model. Unofficial holidays are insignificant in both multivariate and bivariate specifications. From these results, I surmise that unofficial holidays are a valid instrument.

### ***Other Independent Variables***

In addition to my main independent variable of interest, I include a set of control variables in both the first and second stages of analysis. The time since a presidential election is

included to capture a repression effect that only manifests after presidential elections. Controls for annual inflation,<sup>65</sup> GDP growth and unemployment rates should account for the impact of economic indicators on both protest and repression. Inflation and unemployment data was obtained from the IMF<sup>66</sup>, and GDP growth data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators. Holidays that are recognized by the government can also serve as focal points for protest and repression. Data on official holidays was obtained from the Earth Calendar. Election Day is included as a separate control as it may both diminish the risk of repression as the last official campaign day and increase it as election results are revealed.

Two control variables are specific to the second stage of the model. Protests outside of Minsk may both attract less attention and be susceptible to more arrests, while protests by economic groups, such as industrial workers or market vendors, may have more moderate demands and would be less likely to face repression. Both of these measures were derived from the manual coding of the protest data. The number of participants in a given protest is also specific to the second stage and is used as an exposure variable,<sup>67</sup> which defines the maximum potential incidence rate of an event count. In this case, holding the natural log of total protesters constant sets an upper limit on the number of arrests that a government could make. Finally, since the dependent variable in first stage of the model is a continuous daily indicator of protest incidence, it is subject to temporal dependence. To account for temporal dependence, I employ Carter and Signorino's<sup>68</sup> method for correcting temporal dependence in dichotomous outcome models by generating cubic polynomials of a trend variable of non-protest days.<sup>69</sup>

Table 2: Negative Binomial Regression of Number of Arrests during Protests

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Days Since Last Election	0.999** (0.000)	0.999*	0.999** (0.000)	0.999** (0.000)		
Days Since Last Presidential Election		0.999** (0.000)		1.000 (0.000)		
Days Since Last Election (Logged)					0.757* (0.084)	0.758* (0.091)
Days Since Last Presidential Election (Logged)						0.997 (0.113)
Unemployment Rate (Annual)			0.613* (0.134)	0.610* (0.130)	0.629* (0.124)	0.629* (0.125)
Log of Inflation Rate (Annual)			0.635** (0.107)	0.628** (0.110)	0.563*** (0.086)	0.562*** (0.088)
Economic Growth Rate (Annual)			0.929 (0.042)	0.931 (0.041)	0.924 (0.042)	0.924 (0.042)
Protest Outside of Minsk			4.748*** (1.621)	4.643*** (1.550)	4.865*** (1.725)	4.855*** (1.701)
Protest Carried Out by Economic Group			0.062*** (0.032)	0.062*** (0.032)	0.072*** (0.039)	0.072*** (0.039)
Official Holidays			0.128*** (0.076)	0.129*** (0.077)	0.140** (0.084)	0.140** (0.084)
Election Day			0.011*** (0.007)	0.011*** (0.007)	0.004*** (0.003)	0.004*** (0.004)
Constant	0.125*** (0.024)	0.185*** (0.043)	2.155 (1.459)	2.146 (1.444)	8.118** (6.325)	8.194* (7.039)
Alpha	6.998*** (0.633)	6.866*** (0.620)	5.316*** (0.518)	5.317*** (0.518)	5.414*** (0.525)	5.414*** (0.525)
Number of Observations	309	309	309	309	309	309

Note: Fixed exposure parameter with coefficient held constant at one included in each model. Robust Standard Errors used for all models. Incidence Rate Ratios presented in lieu of coefficients. \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

## Results

Table 2 presents findings from the single-stage negative binomial regression model without a correction for sample selection. As expected, as more time passes since an election, the rate of arrests during protests decreases. The effect is consistent when adding a temporal variable for days since presidential elections and using a log transformation of the two days since election measures. The control variables also largely align with expectations as the rate of arrests is smaller in Minsk and when protests are organized by an economic group. Higher unemployment and inflation rates also lead to more government repression. The alpha coefficient – the dividend



Table 3: Negative Binomial Regression for Number of Arrests with Sample Selection Correction for Protest

	(1)		(2)	
	First Stage Probit	FIML Negative Binomial	First Stage Probit	FIML Negative Binomial
Days Since Last Election	-0.000*	0.998***	-0.000	0.999**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Days Since Last Presidential Election			-0.315	0.999***
			(0.508)	(0.000)
Unemployment Rate (Annual)	-0.001	0.261***	0.002	0.424***
	(0.037)	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.050)
Log of Inflation Rate (Annual)	0.107**	0.906	0.100**	0.435***
	(0.036)	(0.059)	(0.037)	(0.051)
Economic Growth Rate (Annual)	0.041***	1.146***	0.040***	0.031***
	(0.009)	(0.019)	(0.009)	(0.258)
Official Holidays	0.279	0.015***	0.274*	0.060***
	(0.148)	(0.283)	(0.148)	(0.223)
Unofficial Holidays	1.545***		1.521***	
	(0.162)		(0.164)	
Election Day	1.431***	0.001***	1.452***	0.011***
	(0.346)	(1.258)	(0.366)	(1.394)
Protest Outside of Minsk (Dummy)		6.972***		7.584***
		(0.157)		(0.124)
Protest Carried Out by Economic Group		0.037***		0.031***
		(0.306)		(0.258)
Constant	-2.523**	0.067***	-2.198***	0.305***
	(0.159)	(0.276)	(0.158)	(0.210)
Alpha		2.523***		2.376***
		(0.077)		(0.081)
$\rho$	0.111**		0.306***	
	(0.035)		(0.033)	
Number of Observations	6374	309	6374	309

Note: Carter and Signorino (2010) correction applied to first stage, fixed exposure parameter included in second stage. Robust standard errors used for all models. Incidence Rate Ratios presented for Negative Binomial Regressions. \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

of the mean and variance of the error – is significantly above one, validating the use of a negative binomial specification. Nevertheless, until the selection effect imposed by the act of protesting is accounted for, these results are only preliminary signs of support for the first hypothesis.

Table 3 displays results from the selection models. The first stage probit results show that while fewer days passing since an election had the expected positive effect on protest, neither it nor fewer days passing since a presidential election were consistently significant. As expected, economic measures such as economic growth and inflation, and election days and unofficial holidays increased the likelihood of protests. The strength of unofficial holidays in predicting more opposition protest demonstrates its relevance as an instrument. In the second stage, the

negative effect of time passing since the previous election and time passing since the previous presidential election on the incidence rate of arrests is substantially strengthened from the one-stage model. Otherwise, the controls showed few changes. Taken together, the results from both stages of the selection model show strong support for a pattern of post-electoral repression. The incidence rate of arrests following protests surged in the wake of elections and then tapered in the periods that preceded elections. This effect was strengthened by directly modeling the decision to protest by the opposition. The significance of the time since presidential election in the full model suggests that post-electoral repression is most fervent after presidential elections.

### **Post-Repression Fragmentation**

Now that the pattern for post-electoral repression has been verified, it is necessary to connect repression to the opposition fragmentation that follows elections. When opposition leaders are arrested or forced into exile, their popularity among the international and domestic opposition communities may increase, but their absence from the day-to-day activities of the movement undercuts their ability to deter challenges to their leadership. These challengers are generally motivated by the same ambitions for visibility among international donors that established leaders have already attained. Three of the most prominent examples are described in this section. In the first case, Zyanon Pozniak's exile made him an international symbol for the nascent repression by the Lukashenko government. Nevertheless, Pozniak's absence, his detachment from the day-to-day affairs of the movement and generally erratic behavior led to grumbling among members of the BPF. His dissenters argued that the party leader should be based in Belarus.<sup>70</sup> Ultimately this perception led to Pozniak's ouster at a party congress in 1999 by more moderate elements led by Vintsuk Vyachorko. Pozniak's removal drove him and his

most fervent supporters to separate and to create the Conservative Christian Party – BPF.<sup>71</sup>

The second case follows protests after the 2004 referendum, which allowed President Lukashenko to stand for another term. Leader of the Belarus Social Democratic Party (National Hramada<sup>72</sup>) Nikolai Statkevich was charged and sentenced to prison time for organizing the protests. In the run-up to his imprisonment, Statkevich was challenged by a rival faction within the BSDP (NH) that included Alexander Kozulin, who attempted to expel Statkevich as a result of his pending imprisonment.<sup>73</sup> The attempt ultimately failed, with international backers and the party's regional committees remaining committed to Statkevich. However, the challenge allowed Kozulin to organize some members of the former BDSP (NH), to form a separate party under the name Belarus Social Democratic Party (Hramada) and to helm a separate campaign for the presidency in the next election.<sup>74</sup> While Statkevich was released in 2007, a time when Kozulin was imprisoned, the two Social Democratic parties never reunited.

Finally, Alexander Milinkevich led a coalition of opposition parties during both the 2004 and the 2006 elections under the banner of Coalition Five Plus.<sup>75</sup> After the 2006 election, Milinkevich emerged as the leader of the post-election protests, attracting support from student activists, but was repeatedly detained by the Lukashenko regime for short periods of time in the months that followed. Milinkevich's legal troubles led him to spend more time abroad, seeking financial support for his opposition coalition. Other coalition members began to criticize Milinkevich for being absent from many coalition meetings to take trips abroad.<sup>76</sup> Ultimately, Milinkevich was removed as leader by the Coalition Plus Five coalition at a congress in 2007, resisting a co-chairmanship position to form his own movement, 'For Freedom!' as a way of salvaging his status within the youth movement.<sup>77</sup>

Each leaders' experience demonstrates a pattern where each was at the height of his popularity among opposition supporters after leading post-election protests. However, the physical repression they incurred after those protests prevented their active participation within their movements, fostering divisions between rank-and-file group members and the leaders' most intense supporters. These divisions ended in the fragmentation of their respective movements and their political marginalization in the face of a growing number of successor movements. Each of these successors then staged their own separate electoral campaigns, strongly suggesting that the incentive for campaigning in elections indirectly fuels opposition fragmentation by increasing the benefits for separation from existing political groups. The demand for candidates is met by numerous willing opposition politicians who are willing to challenge prominent, but either detained or exiled, leaders.

### **Role of the Government**

Up to now, I have focused on how the motivations of Belarusian opposition politicians perpetuate a cycle of repression and fragmentation, without looking at the perspective of the government. Most importantly, the pattern of post-electoral repression, combined with a lull in anti-opposition suppression and even some signals of acquiescence before an election, strongly suggests that the Belarusian government uses elections to either foment, or at the very least, exacerbate opposition fragmentation. However, current empirical results cannot distinguish between numerous government strategies. The intentional strategy would see the government staging fraudulent elections to foster opposition participation. Campaigns would reveal which opposition leaders pose the greatest threat and lead to those leaders' arrest and imprisonment once protests begin – fomenting in-fighting within the opposition. A second strategy has the

government taking a reactive posture. While the government stages fraudulent elections, it does so irrespective of the opposition. When post-electoral protests erupt, the government suppresses them because of the inordinate threat of mobilization threat post-election protests pose. A myriad of other potential explanations are plausible, but since it is unlikely that regime officials would be willing to discuss government strategy a definitive answer remains elusive.

Nevertheless, circumstantial evidence points to some government encouragement of campaigning. Registration procedures for both presidential and parliamentary elections seem to incentivize candidacy from all comers. No party affiliation is necessary for either presidential or parliamentary campaigns.<sup>78</sup> The regime reserves the right to disqualify candidates for income or signature irregularities, but there have been few disqualifications since 2004.<sup>79</sup> Taken together with the opportunity to speak on Belarusian state media afforded to all presidential candidates, these indicate some government desire for opposition candidates to both enter and contest elections. At the same time, the presence of only officials strongly connected with the incumbent government on the electoral commission<sup>80</sup> ensures that the opposition cannot gain an electoral foothold. Moreover, there is some evidence that the government encourages more candidates to enter the presidential field. For instance, the two 2010 presidential candidates that were not arrested: Yaroslav Ramanchuk and Viktor Tyareshchenko, condemned the protesters as having instigated the government's response, and Ramanchuk claimed to have regularly met with Lukashenko. Ramanchuk was expelled from the UCP shortly thereafter.<sup>81</sup> Though there is no clear link between either of the candidates and the government, their presence and other evidence suggests that the Belarussian government encourages electoral competition to expose stronger opposition leaders and assure their marginalization.

## Conclusion

The results from my study raise doubts about the effectiveness of contesting elections in some competitive autocracies for opposition movements, especially in terms of receiving post-electoral benefits or representation. Through a rigorous statistical design, I demonstrate that protests by the Belarusian opposition are disproportionately more likely to face repression immediately after elections. Then, through qualitative evidence, I show that this form of repression is most likely to lead to splintering of opposition groups. Both of these factors are likely to compound and weaken the opposition, creating more factions and increasing incentives for competition among opposition movements, leading to even more fervent contestation of electoral campaigns as a way of demonstrating value to potential supporters. Moreover, the process of post-electoral repression allows the government to suppress the opposition without providing side-payments or ceding any authority to opposition groups, contradicting a supposition of past research that participation brings about benefits for at least some of the opposition.

The case of Belarus illustrates that governments can employ post-electoral repression as an alternative to providing representation or influence over governance when competition for foreign funding is great enough to serve as an alternate incentive for contesting elections. For scholars of the subject, this implies that, under some circumstances, the electoral opposition to a government can become caught in a trap of fragmentation and inefficacy as a result of pursuing an apparently effective strategy. Moreover, the adverse effects of foreign funding highlight a negative consequence of foreign support to opposition movements, stemming directly from the assumption that electoral competition can only benefit opponents to autocratic governments.

Just as elections can bolster opposition forces, they can provide the government valuable information about opposition leaders, who can be targeted and marginalized. Worse yet, unwinnable elections, like those in Belarus, can deprive the opposition of legitimacy, making opposition forces appear inept among the general electorate and creating counter-productive avenues of competition for foreign funding rather than holding office. Once fragmented, unity becomes even more difficult to accomplish, with fewer potential unifying candidates, as candidates either cannot or choose not to contest repeat elections and build their brand due to the costs associated with repression. For this reason, policy-makers, especially those that focus on democracy promotion in competitive autocracies, should reconsider the value of advocating and funding electoral participation for a nascent opposition to an autocratic government. When an opposition force lacks the capacity to challenge a government, participating in elections could be harmful by eliminating capable leaders and exacerbating factional divisions, while proving unlikely to wrest any authority from the government. Taken together, the dynamics of competition between the Belarusian government and its opposition reveal patterns that are generalizable to other fragmented opposition movements and present a cautionary tale to policy-makers around the world.

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- 42 *RIA Novosti*, “No Seats for Belarus Opposition.”
- 43 Individual politicians in functioning representative democracies are assumed, to some extent, to draw their motivation for candidacy out of a desire to reap the rewards afforded by an elected position (Mueller and Strom 1999).
- 44 *European Exchange*, “Local Elections in Belarus.”
- 45 *Interfax*, “Candidates get airtime.”
- 46 *Interfax*, “Lukashenko orders help.”
- 47 Rabagliati, “Belarus Opposition in Survival Mode.”
- 48 Sibierski, “Donors Pledge Aid for Belarus Opposition.”
- 49 Money often flows to NGOs that are set up by political movements to get around restrictions on supporting foreign political parties in either the EU or the US.
- 50 For instance, after the 2006 presidential elections, Alexander Milinkevich made frequent trips to the West and was awarded the Sakharov Prize from the EU.
- 51 “Гастарбайтеры из Беларуси \$1 млрд.”

- 52 Francisco, "Coercion and Protest," 5.
- 53 Participants in observed protests range from political parties (i.e. the Belarusian Popular Front), labor unions, youth movements (i.e. Zubr) or spontaneous gatherings of individuals not clearly affiliated with any organization.
- 54 The articles used as sources for the project were found using the following search in LexisNexis Academic Search (for all news articles): "Belarus AND protest OR repression OR arrest OR demonstration OR gathering." A full accounting of the participants, topics and sources for each protest is available at this anonymous file hosting site: <https://anonfiles.com/file/0bbb758ed8ec6dbccdf9b919fd3f3449>
- 55 Summary statistics, coding details and data for replication, including citations for articles used to obtain information about each protest will be made available on the author's website.
- 56 A total of nine elections (some with multiple rounds) took place between July 1994 and December 2011: the 1994 presidential election (2 rounds), the 1995 parliamentary election/referendum (4 rounds), the 1996 referendum, the 2000/2001 parliamentary election (4 rounds), the 2001, 2006 and 2010 presidential elections and the 2004 and 2008 parliamentary elections. Local elections are excluded as they are unlikely to lead to either large protests by national leaders (who don't participate) or their arrests and are not highly visible to the donor community.
- 57 Cameron and Trivedi, *Microeconomics: Theory and Methods*, 665.
- 58 Hilbe, *Negative Binomial Regression*, 185.
- 59 Tucker, "Enough!" 539.
- 60 Kuran, "Now out of Never," 17-25.
- 61 Heckman, "Sample Selection Bias."
- 62 Greene, "FIML Estimator for Count Data."
- 63 Terza, "Count Models with Endogenous Switching."
- 64 All estimations of sample selection models were conducted in LIMDEP 8.0.
- 65 Annual inflation rate is log transformed to reduce the impact of extreme values during periods of hyperinflation.
- 66 IMF, *International Financial Statistics*.
- 67 Exposure variables are derived by adding the natural log of the maximum incidence count to the model. The variable is then held constant in the regression. See Hilbe, *Negative Binomial Regression*, 240.
- 68 Carter and Signorino, "Modeling Time Dependency," 282.
- 69 Using Beck, Katz and Tucker's, "Taking Time Seriously," method with three cubic splines produced no substantive difference in results.
- 70 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, "Split in Belarus Opposition."
- 71 Korosteleva, "Emergence of a Party System."
- 72 Assembly.
- 73 Markus, "Belarus."
- 74 EFDS, "Social Democratic Landscape in Belarus."
- 75 Marples, "Color Revolutions: Belarus," 357.
- 76 *BelGazeta*, "Belarus Opposition Split."
- 77 Racz, "Self-Dividing Opposition"
- 78 Padgol and Marples, "2010 Belarus Election," 4.
- 79 Liakhovich, "The Parliamentary Election."
- 80 Padgol and Marples, "2010 Belarus Election," 5.
- 81 Budkevich, "Romanchuk Resigns."