Deer in Headlights: Incompetence and Weak Authoritarianism after the Cold War

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Scholars of political regimes have mostly ignored authoritarian skill.[1] Skill is difficult to identify ex-ante, not easy to predict, and its impact can be hard to isolate from other structural and contingent factors. This article identifies some strategies for overcoming these obstacles and explores the sources and impact of incompetence—the absence of skill—on autocrats' ability to stay in power and concentrate political control. I focus on one type of incompetence—what I call deer in headlights—that emerges out of disorientation and the persistence of older regime practices in the face of rapid political change. Such inability was one important but largely unrecognized source of political contestation in the former Soviet Union and other parts of the developing world in the early 1990s. The rapid change in the international environment that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War created novel demands that existing autocrats often did not know how to deal with—even when they had the structural resources to survive. The result was greater contestation and more incumbent turnover than would have existed otherwise.

Given the empirical challenges of analyzing political skill, this article focuses on the single case of Belarus in the early 1990s. Detailed process tracing allows us to examine the precise character and sources of leadership response to new environments; how incompetence can shape regime trajectories; and how leadership may evolve in response to changing circumstances. At the start of the 1990s Belarus was characterized by a notable gap between authorities' significant resource advantages over the opposition on the one hand and their lack of understanding about how to use these advantages to maintain power on the other. Although Belarusian incumbents in 1990–1994 possessed sufficient political and economic resources to cope with opposition, they did not initially know how to take advantage of these resources in a new context that demanded at least nominal adherence to multiparty elections. In 1990 and 1991,

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1. Notable exceptions include Robert H. Jackson and Carl Gustav Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley, 1982); Henry Bienen and Nicolas van de Walle, *Of Time and Political Power: Leadership Duration in the Modern World* (Stanford, 1991); Vitali Silitski, "Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus," *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 4 (October 2005): 83–97; Mark R. Beissinger, "Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (June 2007): 259–76; Valerie L. Bunce and Sharon J. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (New York, 2011).

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inexperience with open political competition caused a conservative majority in the legislature to make key but probably unnecessary concessions to a small nationalist minority. Subsequently, surviving Soviet-era assumptions about the sources of political power encouraged Prime Minister Viachaslau Kebich to make critical and avoidable errors that directly led to his defeat in 1994 at the hands of Aliaksandar Lukashenka, a political outsider. Lukashenka, in turn, was able to establish stable authoritarian rule in part by learning from his predecessors' mistakes.

Outside Belarus, disorientation in the face of a new post–Cold War international environment may explain why a number of regimes in Africa and the former Soviet Union witnessed a surge in political contestation in the early 1990s followed by a retrenchment to greater authoritarianism. More recently, transitions in the Middle East were shaped in part by the incompetence of long-entrenched autocrats who unexpectedly had to cope with new challenges created by the sudden emergence of large-scale protest.

Studying Political Skill

I define political skill as leaders' capacity to act in ways that maximize their political interests given existing constraints and opportunities.[2] Skill encompasses the set of talents (such as public-speaking ability or aptitude for backroom negotiation), attributes (such as risk-aversion or risk-tolerance, adaptability), and know-how (such as how to run a campaign, how to suppress protest) that help determine whether leaders can survive and achieve their goals in a given structural context. The skills required to succeed will be different in different systems.[3] For example, while "loyalty was the most indispensable quality needed" to rise in many Arab monarchies before the 1990s, risk-taking and political entrepreneurship were critical in Russia in the early 1990s.[4]

Demonstrating the impact of political skill presents a number of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical challenges. First, skill is often hard to differentiate from political outcomes.[5] It may be tempting to assume that *successful* autocrats must also be *smart* ones. Yet, incompetent leaders may successfully implement policies or maintain power due to luck or other factors unrelated to their leadership, while skilled leaders may fall due to constraints outside their control. Clearly, then, any discussion of political

2. For a similar definition, see David S. Bell, Erwin C. Hargrove, and Kevin Theakston, "Skill in Context: A Comparison of Politicians," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (September 1999): 529.

3. Bienen and van de Walle, *Of Time and Political Power,* 7.

4. Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger, "'Waiting for Godot': Regime Change without Democratization in the Middle East," *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique* 25, no. 4 (October 2004): 378.

5. Bienen and van de Walle note that it is hard "to isolate leaders' skills and to determine how important these have been for a leader's ability to maintain himself in power." See Bienen and van de Walle, *Of Time and Political Power,* 5.

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skill needs to distinguish the particular talents, attributes, or knowledge at play from ultimate political outcomes.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is to assess the impact of skill relative to other structural and contingent factors. Indeed, major treatments of leadership skill—such as classic analyses of the American presidency—leave out systematic discussion of structural constraints that might account for the apparent skill or incompetence of particular presidents.[6] To demonstrate skill, scholars need to show that key decisions were not simply an outgrowth of structural conditions. For example, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk might be considered to have been incompetent in 1992 for appointing a prime minister (Leonid Kuchma) who subsequently used this position to oust Kravchuk from the presidency. Yet, closer analysis shows that Kravchuk's support of his future nemesis had less to do with incompetence and more to do with the structure of political and economic power at the time: this appointment was forced on him by a powerful directors' lobby in the legislature.[7] Analysis of political skill needs to place structural factors front and center to ensure preexisting constraints and/or opportunities do not account for political outcomes or behavior. Alternative behavior must be plausible given the context.

At the same time, it is important to distinguish skill from luck. Skills, as conceived here, reflect preexisting and identifiable talents/weaknesses, attributes, know-how or lack thereof. The difference between good/bad luck and skill/incompetence is the difference between losing a marathon because you slipped on a patch of motor oil or because you lacked training and perseverance. It is the difference between getting rich because you won the lottery or because you created a successful business. As I argue below, Lukashenka's sudden rise was not simply a fluke but grew out of mistakes that were rooted in the persistence of outdated Soviet-era know-how about how to gain and keep power.

In sum, to better understand the impact political skill has on outcomes, scholars need to identify the set of talents, attributes, and know-how independently of political outcomes and show that actors plausibly could have acted differently given existing constraints and opportunities. Scholars must offer evidence that different sets of leadership skills would have appreciably altered political outcomes in the given structural context. While such difficulties have led some scholars to throw up their hands and measure skill only indirectly, these problems—I hope to show below—can in fact be addressed through theoretically sensitive case study analysis.[8]

6. For example, Fred Greenstein's comparative study of presidential leadership from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama offers no systematic treatment of the radically different economic, international, and political constraints that have confronted different presidents since 1933. See Fred Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama* (Princeton, 2009).

7. See Vladimir Litvin, *Ukraina: Politika, Politiki, Vlast' na fone politicheskogo portreta L. Kravchuka* (Kiev, 1997), 280.

8. See Bienen and van de Walle, *Of Time and Political Power.*

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Incompetence and Regime Development after the Cold War

In regime studies, discussions of agency and skill reached their peak in the 1980s and early 1990s with the literature on transitions to democracy.[9] Much more recently, work on the "color revolutions" has focused on the ways in which opposition tactics and strategies for ousting dictators spread across eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[10] At the same time, Vitali Silitski shows how the color revolutions motivated remaining autocrats to develop a new set of strategies to put down potential movements before they gained strength.[11] While the color revolutions literature draws attention to the diffusion of effective political skills, this article focuses on the sources and impact of incompetence. Leaders are considered incompetent when their actions or inactions—rooted in identifiable and preexisting talents/weaknesses, attributes or knowledge—threaten their political interests.

One particular type of incompetence—deer in headlights—results from disorientation and the persistence of outdated leadership norms in the face of rapid political change. Rapid political and institutional change facilitates incompetence by making it harder for leaders to figure out what the actual constraints and opportunities are at any given moment.[12] High uncertainty encourages actors to rely more exclusively on cognitive heuristics that contribute to systematic errors in judgment.[13] In the fog of transition, leaders may over- or underestimate constraints on action or miss extant opportunities to gain or maintain power. In addition, gaining power within new institutional arrangements often requires fundamentally different skills than those demanded under the old regime. For example, while the late Brezhnev era selected for leaders who were highly obedient and risk averse, the post-Soviet 1990s selected for politicians who took risks and could speak in front of large crowds.[14] Leaders with the capacity to excel in one system may falter in another.

The end of the Cold War caught many autocrats off guard, contribut-

9. Guillermo A. O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, 1986); Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies* (Berkeley, 1990).

10. See, for example, Silitski, "Preempting Democracy"; Beissinger, "Structure and Example"; Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders.*

11. Silitski, "Preempting Democracy." See also Beissinger, "Structure and Example"; Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders;* Karrie Koesel, Valerie Bunce, and Sharon Wolchik, "Stopping the Diffusion of Popular Challenges to Authoritarian Rule" (paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Conference, Seattle, 1–4 September 2011).

12. This idea is broadly similar to O'Donnell and Schmitter's argument that the interests of actors will be uncertain during periods of transition. See O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule.*

13. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science* 185 (1974): 1124–31; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Toronto, 2011). For a cogent application of these theories to political transition, see Kurt Weyland, "The Diffusion of Revolution: '1848' in Europe and Latin America," *International Organization* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 391–423.

14. The phenomena described here are similar to what Arthur Stinchcomb referred to in another context as a "liability of newness," which causes disproportionate failure early

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ing to an increase in political incompetence throughout the developing world. The elimination of U.S. and Soviet support for dictatorships in eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa meant that leaders became more vulnerable to western democratizing pressure.[15] At the same time, with the demise of the Soviet Union, U.S. and European powers increasingly made foreign assistance contingent on respect for human rights and the introduction of multiparty elections.[16] As a result, autocrats throughout Africa and eastern Europe adapted formal democratic institutions and multiparty elections—even where domestic civil society was weak. Of course, the introduction of multiparty elections did not by itself translate into full-scale democratization. And the external pressure applied by the United States and Europe was often inconsistent and ineffective.[17] Thus, numerous countries in the post–Cold War era conducted regular multicandidate elections but at the same time engaged in serious violations of civil liberties that effectively precluded fully democratic political competition.[18]

Yet the introduction of even quasi-democratic institutions often demanded fundamentally new knowledge and skills from autocrats seeking to remain in power. In an international environment that suddenly required at least nominal adherence to democratic procedures, incumbents now had to tolerate—and also control—myriad actors (parties, media, judges, civil society) and arenas of contestation (elections, legislatures, courts) that often did not exist before the transition to multiparty rule.

In particular, we can identify several types of mistakes that promoted greater political competition than dictated by the structural conditions. First, rapid institutional change created uncertainty regarding how strictly western democratic conditionality would be applied. In eastern Europe as well as sub-Saharan Africa, it was often assumed that large amounts of aid would be given for good behavior—resulting in "anticipatory" political reform in the expectation "that aid would be distributed primarily to countries that appeared to be moving toward democracy."[19] Autocrats had

in an organization's lifespan. See Arthur Stinchcombe, "Social Structure and Organizations," in James G. March, ed., *Handbook of Organizations* (Chicago, 1965), 142–93.

15. See Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, 1999).

16. Thomas Callaghy, "Africa and the World Economy: Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place," in John W. Harbeson and Donald S. Rothchild, eds., *Africa in World Politics* (Boulder, Colo., 1991).

17. Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 55–56; Letitia Lawson, "External Democracy Promotion in Africa: Another False Start?" *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 37, no. 1 (1999): 1–30; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York, 2010).

18. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 51–65; Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, Colo., 2006); Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism.*

19. Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1997), 182–83; Levitsky and Way *Competitive Authoritarianism.*

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little way of knowing just how strictly, persistently, and consistently sanctions would be applied in response to violations of democratic norms.[20]

Simultaneously, the suddenness of the transition often meant that those in power during the transition had few of the basic talents—such as the ability to engage in open debate or perform well on television—that can be critical to success in a more open and dynamic political setting. This was especially true in the former Soviet Union, where experience with Soviet-era façade elections and strict party hierarchy did not provide politicians with the experience necessary to cope with a fluid political environment or even rudimentary political opposition. As argued below, Belarusian communist legislators frequently made major concessions to the opposition in 1990–1991 despite their legislative majority, in part because they lacked the inclination or knowledge of how to function on television, engage in open-ended parliamentary debate, or speak to protesters.

Deer in headlights also contributed in subtler ways to poor use of existing resource advantages. In particular, many post-Soviet incumbents had little sense of how to take advantage of their dominant control over domestic media. Thus Kebich in Belarus and Kravchuk in Ukraine maintained dominant partisan control over electronic mass media in 1994 yet had relatively little understanding of how to use it to manipulate public opinion.[21] While authorities had power "over all the main instruments of rule, . . . they couldn't do anything with them."[22] In the absence of an understanding of how to use these resources, overwhelming structural advantages were by themselves insufficient for autocrats to consolidate control.

The novelty of multiparty politics also contributed to misconceptions about the balance of power between opposition and incumbent. The absence of any electoral track record made the assessment of incumbent strength subject to a variety of contingent circumstances and external influences. Here, it is helpful to recall the work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahnemen, who argue that perceptions of probability often hinge on the ease with which individuals can come up with examples. Dramatic and vivid events—such as a car crash on the side of a road—encourage actors to overestimate the probability of such outcomes.[23] Along these lines, dramatic and successful opposition challenges in nearby countries have sometimes created powerful "demonstration effects" that convinced incumbents that opposition victory was inevitable in their own country even

20. "It was in the initial period of uncertainty, when donors appeared to be most serious about tying aid to democracy that the most dramatic regime transitions occurred." Lawson, "External Democracy Promotion," 5.

21. In particular, a widespread assumption persisted from the Soviet era that simple saturation of exposure on television was sufficient to control public opinion. See Ellen Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia* (Oxford, 1999), 27–28.

22. Gleb Pavlovskii quoted in Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven, 2005), 39.

23. Tversky and Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty"; Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*. They refer to this as the "availability heuristic."

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when incumbents retained massive advantages.[24] As we shall see below, the combination of the shock of the failed Soviet coup in August 1991 and the stunningly successful independence movements in the neighboring Baltic republics convinced Belarusian leaders to make key concessions to the opposition that were not warranted by the opposition's actual popularity or mobilizational capacity.

In other cases where examples of opposition success have been less salient, inexperience with multiparty elections has sometimes encouraged leaders to *underestimate* the opposition's strength and overestimate incumbents' capacity to engineer electoral victory. In such cases, leaders may be inclined to believe their sycophantic followers or think that the overwhelming victories in past façade elections are predictive of success in genuinely competitive contests. Here, elections in fact presented greater threats to incumbent power than autocrats appreciated. As a result, in the initial stages of transition, some leaders readily agreed to elections that were more open and free than they needed to be given existing external constraints.[25] Overconfidence may encourage leaders to give in to even modest international pressures and open themselves up to electoral competition that could plausibly have been delayed or undermined by greater fraud.[26]

For example, in Zambia, the site of one of Africa's first post–Cold War transitions, President Kenneth Kaunda's overwhelming confidence in his ability to win competitive elections (together with mounting protests in 1990) helped convince him to end single party rule in 1991 even in the absence of serious international pressure—a move that resulted in Kaunda's stunning defeat.[27] Given domestic pressure and the post–Cold War international environment, it is hard to imagine that Kaunda could have avoided multiparty elections altogether. Nevertheless, overconfidence

24. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, 1991), 100–106; Beissinger, "Structure and Example," 263. For an extensive discussion of how cognitive heuristics affect diffusion, see Weyland, "Diffusion of Revolution." Also see Vsevold Gunitskiy, "From Shocks to Waves: Hegemonic Transitions and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2011).

25. Jorge Dominguez has written of "spectacular leadership errors" by leaders in Chile and the Philippines in which "rulers confident that they had substantial public support called a national election, which they promptly lost." See Jorge I. Dominguez, "The Secrets of Castro's Staying Power," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 99. I should stress that I am *not* arguing that such mistakes were the primary reason for transitions in these countries. Rather, overconfidence likely contributed to the timing and speed of transitions in these countries.

26. Thus, the argument here is that both fatalism about the opposition's success, on the one hand, and extreme overconfidence in an incumbent victory, on the other, was likely to lead to democratic concessions in the post–Cold War international context. By contrast, situations in which incumbents do not believe that opposition victory is inevitable but still think opponents have a good chance of winning would seem to discourage democratic concessions.

27. See John M. Mwanakatwe, *End of the Kaunda Era* (Lusaka, 1994), 260; Julius Omozuanvbo Ihonvbere, *Economic Crisis, Civil Society, and Democratization: The Case of Zambia* (Trenton, N.J., 1996), 100.

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likely encouraged him to hold elections sooner and to conduct them with less fraud and abuse than he would have if he had better understood the real threat posed by the opposition. Indeed, having learned his lesson the hard way, Kaunda reportedly advised President Daniel arap Moi in nearby Kenya to resist political liberalization and crack down hard on the opposition.[28]

Of course, incompetence *alone* is unlikely to generate autocratic turnover.[29] In each of the examples cited above, autocrats were beset by a number of problems—including economic downturn and unpopularity. Nevertheless, in most of these cases, incumbents continued to possess overwhelming financial, administrative, and media advantages that made survival plausible.[30] For these incumbents, incompetence acted as a powerful catalyzing force that seriously exacerbated regime weaknesses and neutralized key regime strengths. Thus, as I argue below, such incompetence was often a necessary, but not sufficient, ingredient for regime failure.

At the same time, autocrats can learn from mistakes made in the initial stages of transition—particularly where structural factors favor authoritarian rule.[31] Recently, authoritarian learning has been highlighted in the literature on color revolutions that shows how autocrats in Belarus, Russia, and other post-Soviet countries adopted new and more effective strategies in response to autocratic breakdowns in Georgia and Ukraine.[32] And in the African context, Michael Bratton and Daniel Posner found that in second elections, nondemocratic "incumbents reinforced and refined their control of electoral processes," resulting in fewer free elections over the course of the 1990s.[33]

Where structural conditions favored authoritarian rule, autocrats or their successors adapted relatively quickly to lessons learned from past

28. See Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa,* 181.

29. As most students of the color revolutions argue, for example, structural weaknesses—in addition to demonstration effects—were key to authoritarian failure in the early 2000s. Beissinger, "Structure and Example"; Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders.*

30. On Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and Zambia, see Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism,* chaps. 5 and 6.

31. Learning is defined here as a change in beliefs about causal relationships in the light of experience. See Covadonga Meseguer, "Policy Learning, Policy Diffusion, and the Making of a New Order," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* no. 598 (March 2005): 67–82. For discussion of learning in the context of regime change, see Nancy Bermeo, "Democracy and the Lessons of Dictatorship," *Comparative Politics* 24, no. 3 (April 1992): 273–91.

32. See Silitski, "Preempting Democracy"; Beissinger, "Structure and Example," 269; Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders.*

33. Michael Bratton and Daniel Posner, "A First Look at Second Elections in Africa, with Illustrations from Zambia," in Richard A. Joseph, ed., *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa* (Boulder, Colo., 1999), 387. Similarly, Richard Joseph has argued that "while the 1990–91 period could be described as 'stunning' because of the way long-entrenched regimes were swept away, since 1992 the struggle has become more evenly matched as African leaders constantly devise new ways to submit without succumbing." Richard Joseph, "Democratization in Africa after 1989: Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives," *Comparative Politics* 29, no. 3 (April 1997): 376.

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mistakes—resulting in subsequent regime stability.[34] First, over the course of the 1990s, leaders "learned that they did not have to democratize in order to retain . . . financial flows."[35] Thus, Kuchma in Ukraine and Boris El'tsin in Russia continued to receive significant aid despite major democratic violations.[36] Next, leaders became much more sophisticated in their understanding of how to manipulate public opinion. By the late 1990s autocrats in Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere relied on "political technologists" who combined sophisticated polling techniques and the use of "black PR" to undermine the image of the opposition.[37]

Finally, the success of outside challengers such as Lukashenka in Belarus heightened awareness of the need to preempt challenges early on. After Lukashenka came to power in 1994 he responded much more aggressively to potential challenges within the legislature than had Kebich before him.[38] Similarly, Kuchma, who had gained power first as prime minister, was highly sensitive to the challenges posed by his appointees. Thus, over time leaders or their successors became more adept at utilizing existing resources to secure political control.[39]

But, if rapid changes wrought by the end of the Cold War bred so much disorientation and confusion, how do we explain the fact that so many leaders obviously *did* succeed in the new conditions? In fact, emerging opposition leaders often possessed significant talents for open competition despite their lack of experience in open democratic systems. And certainly leaders like Lukashenka and El'tsin were better equipped than Kebich to compete. Unfortunately, it is probably impossible for political scientists to come up with a theory that would accurately predict innate

34. Of course, the opposition may also learn from past mistakes. In a context where structural conditions favor authoritarianism, however, such learning is likely to be insufficient to maintain robust political competition.

35. Richard Joseph, "Overview: The Reconfiguration of Power in Late Twentieth-Century Africa," in Joseph, ed., *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa,* 61. Often "elections that fell far short of 'free and fair' were systematically accepted by international donors." Lawson, "External Democracy Promotion," 6.

36. Ukraine continued to be one of the highest per capita recipients of U.S. assistance in 2000 following highly fraudulent presidential elections in 1999. In Russia following Boris El'tsin's violent crackdown on the legislature in 1993, U.S. aid increased from $1.5 billion in 1993 to $1.9 billion in 1994. See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Fact Sheets, "Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance" for various countries at www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/ (last accessed 6 June 2012).

37. Wilson, *Virtual Politics,* 49–72. "Black PR" refers to the distribution of damaging and mostly false information and rumors about the opposition. For example, the victory of pro-governmental forces in the 1999 parliamentary elections in Russia is widely credited to the government's targeted and well-orchestrated negative campaign against supporters of the opposition Fatherland-All Russia party. See Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: The Russian Elections of 1999 and 2000* (Washington, D.C., 2003); Henry E. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State* (New York, 2005), 223.

38. See Silitski, "Preempting Democracy."

39. "Just as the Soviet economic elite was at first threatened by free prices and privatization, the Soviet political elite has learned how to use and manipulate elections to maintain political power." Michael McFaul and Nikolai Petrov, "What the Elections Tell Us," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 3 (July 2004): 28.

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political skill on an individual level. Skill is likely rooted in personal history and a variety of psychological variables mostly beyond the purview of political science. Indeed, Bienen and van de Walle note how difficult it can be to identify skill in political leaders before they come to power.[40]

Nevertheless, the case studies do yield at least one initial hypothesis: the political skills that were required to get leaders into power may reveal how likely they are to cope with different rules of the game in the future. In the face of rapid change, deer in headlights should be especially severe for those who rose to power under the preexisting rules of advancement. Leaders' demonstrated capacity to navigate the older norms of closed and consolidated authoritarianism may not serve them well in a more fluid and open environment. By contrast, leaders who emerged under the new circumstances as a result of their ability to cope with or lead opposition forces have already demonstrated their capacity to negotiate the new rules of the game. This partly distinguishes leaders like El'tsin, who rose to power on the back of opposition support in highly contested legislative and presidential elections in 1990/1991, from leaders like Kebich, who was appointed head of the Council of Ministers in early 1990 by the party leadership and did not face a contested national election until 1994.[41] Moreover, within many republics, the initial leadership (for example, Semion Grossu in Moldova, Vladimir Scherbitskyi in Ukraine) demonstrated much higher levels of disorientation than their successors who rose to power under the new rules of the game (Mircea Snegur, Kravchuk).

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that this is primarily a voluntarist argument. In contrast to structural approaches that view actors as constrained by largely immovable organizational and economic endowments, this article points to the impact of individual perceptions and choice, which are highly dynamic and open to rapid change. Thus, preexisting history and the survival of older regime norms influence but do not automatically predetermine future choices and behavior.

In sum, disorientation in the context of rapid institutional change strengthened political competition after the Cold War in a variety of ways. Given the weakness of democratic prerequisites in many cases, however, leaders were subsequently able to learn from past mistakes and impose more centralized and stable authoritarian rule. To identify the independent causal impact of incompetence relative to other structural and contingent factors, the rest of this article focuses on the case of Belarus. I first explore the structural constraints on authoritarianism and political skill among top Belarusian leaders in 1990–91. We then see how rapid insti-

40. They note that leaders such as Daniel arap Moi in Kenya and Leonid Brezhnev in the Soviet Union were vastly underestimated before they came to power. Bienen and van de Walle, *Of Time and Political Power,* 6.

41. It is true that in Central Asia, many leaders—Saparmurat Niiazov, Islam Karimov, Nursultan Nazarbaev—survived despite having risen under the old system. Yet, in these cases, international democratizing pressure was weaker and the political institutions changed to a much less significant degree than in republics closer to the European border. As a result, disorientation was likely less severe.

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tutional change generated a series of avoidable errors that contributed to an initial weakening of Belarusian authoritarian power after the Cold War. Lukashenka, in turn, garnered important lessons from the failure of early incumbents and quickly imposed more stable and centralized authoritarian rule.

Deer in Headlights and Failed Authoritarianism in Belarus, 1990–1994

Structural conditions were favorable to authoritarian stability in Belarus in the early 1990s. First, as a result of weaker ties with western Europe and the United States, Belarus faced far less intense pressure to democratize than did regimes in central Europe.[42] In particular, Belarus in the early 1990s was never offered the prospect of European Union membership—a fact that considerably reduced the costs of authoritarian governance.[43] Thus, government officials reported to observers in 1994 "that they [felt] no pressure from Western democracies . . . to make any progress on democratization."[44] Next, disproportionate state control over the economy gave incumbents resources to suppress opposition that their counterparts in most neighboring republics lacked.[45] Finally, and perhaps most critically, the incumbent's hold on power was facilitated by a weak opposition and civil society. Belarus in the post-Stalin era witnessed almost no dissident activity and, in the Gorbachev period, opposition was weaker than in neighboring republics.[46] Thus, Mark Beissinger demonstrates in

42. Jeffrey Kopstein and David A. Reilly, "Geographic Diffusion and the Transformation of the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 53, no. 1 (October 2000): 1–37; Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, chap. 5.

43. Milada Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage and Integration after Communism* (Oxford, 2005); Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, chap. 5.

44. International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), *Pre-Election Technical Assessment of the Parliamentary Elections in Belarus* (Washington, D.C., 1994), 20.

45. Scholars have long argued that state control over the economy facilitates autocratic control. See M. Steven Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics* (New York., 2005); Kelly M. McMann, *Autonomy and Democracy: Hybrid Regimes in Russia and Kyrgyzstan* (New York, 2006); Kenneth F. Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 2007). In Belarus in 1994 just 15 percent of the gross domestic product was produced by the private sector—compared to 40 percent in Ukraine, 50 percent in Russia, and 55 percent in Estonia in that same year. Estimates from European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, "Structural and Institutional Change Indicators, Private Sector Share in GDP (in per cent)," at www.ebrd.com/pages/research/economics/data/macro.shtml#ti (last accessed 6 June 2012).

46. According to Liudmilla Alexeyeva and Valery Chalidze's comprehensive examination of mass unrest in the USSR from 1953 to 1983, "the only political demonstration known in Byelorussia" occurred in Minsk in 1970 when a group of students openly protested the killing of a high school student. Liudmilla Alexeyeva and Valery Chalidze, "Mass Unrest in the USSR" (Report No. 19, Office of Net Assessment of the Department of Defense, August 1985), 129. For the Gorbachev period, see, for example, Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (New York, 2002), 254. To an important extent, this was due to the relative weakness of an anti-Soviet national identity that was used to mobilize against incumbent regimes in neighboring republics. As of the late 1980s, "the Belarusian national idea was represented by a group of well-meaning intellectuals unconnected with the vast majority of Belarusians, unable to coopt a single

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his comprehensive study of late-Soviet protest activity that Belarusian nationalists "failed in their efforts to generate the kind of sustained massive mobilization around secessionist frames characteristic of the Baltics, Transcaucasus, Moldova, and Ukraine."[47] The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) garnered just 8 percent of seats in the first parliamentary elections of 1990 and no seats in the 1995 parliamentary elections.[48]

Despite these structural advantages, the Belarusian leadership was distinctly unprepared for the onset of the transition. Relative to their counterparts in some other post-Soviet republics, the Belarusian political elite was deeply embedded in the norms of late Soviet authoritarianism. "Belarus's political landscape remained stable to the point of immobility."[49] In part because the opposition was so weak, the Belarusian Communist Party did not witness the emergence of a powerful pro-reform wing in 1989–1991 as occurred in the Baltics, Moldova, and Ukraine. The executive branch included no one capable of coping with opposition in a multiparty setting. Indeed, Prime Minister Kebich was one of the few executives in the region who did not gain power because of his ability to deal with challenges from below.[50] Instead, Kebich came to power as part of the republic's economic *nomenklatura.* A member of the Minsk City Industrial faction that gradually took control of Belarus in the 1980s, Kebich rose from being in charge of a large metal works plant in Minsk to heading Belarusian Gosplan and then becoming deputy prime minister in 1985.[51] In early 1990, he was chosen by the Belarusian Communist Party leadership to be head of the Council of Ministers after the existing officeholder had fallen ill.[52] By the early 1990s, Kebich was the only executive in the former Soviet Union who

member of the ruling elite." Andrei Savchenko, "Belarus: A Perpetual Borderland" (unpublished manuscript, 2008), 212.

47. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization,* 254. One partial exception were the significant anticommunist strikes in April 1991 that fizzled after demands to call an emergency session of the Supreme Soviet were not met. See RFE/RL Newsline, 11, 24, 29 April 1991.

48. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 26 January 1991, 2.

49. Alexander Lukashuk, "Yesterday as Tomorrow: Why It Works in Belarus," *East European Constitutional Review* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1998), at www1.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol7num3/special/belarus.html (last accessed 6 June 2012). Of course, the opposition also lacked extensive experience with competitive politics. Yet in contrast to members of the government—almost all of whom had been appointed prior to the introduction of competitive elections—opposition figures were self-selected by their political abilities. They had gained prominence because of their abilities to speak in public, mobilize support, and organize demonstrations.

50. In Ukraine, Kravchuk was chosen to replace the departing Vladimir Ivashko as head of the legislature because of his perceived success in debating Ukrainian nationalists. Bohdan Krawchenko, "Ukraine: The Politics of Independence," in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras, eds., *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993), 77. In Moldova, Snegur was able to hold onto the chairmanship of parliament in 1990 by making a deal with the Moldovan Popular Front. And in Russia, El'tsin of course gained power on the basis of popular antipathy to the communist system.

51. Michael Urban, *An Algebra of Soviet Power: Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic, 1966–86* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), 122.

52. For a detailed description of the intra-elite dynamics that apparently led to Kebich's selection, see Viacheslav Kebich, *Iskushenie vlast'iu: Iz zhizni premier-ministra* (Minsk, 2008), 44–50.

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had never run in a nationwide election. "No one [associated with Kebich] had any kind of experience with elections under the new conditions."[53] Unaccustomed to the dynamic character of open politics, Kebich was "a creature [*vospitanik*] of the old nomenklatura system . . . used to playing by strict rules."[54] As one minister in the Kebich government recalled, Kebich was "spoiled by power. He never had to work hard to gain it and did not know how it was gotten in a competitive system."[55]

Certainly, ties to the old elite gave post-Soviet politicians in the 1990s important resource advantages—networks of ties, patronage resources, and access to critical administrative resources that leaders throughout the region utilized effectively to maintain power.[56] Nevertheless, top officials in Belarus and other post-Soviet countries were initially forced to adapt to political dynamics in the early 1990s that were radically at odds with the rules of political advancement in the late Soviet era. More than other authoritarian regimes of the Cold War era, the late Soviet system insulated high officials from open contestation or dynamic uncertainty.[57] By the 1950s, virtually no organized opposition existed in the Soviet Union and officials rarely had to cope with open protest.[58] The Soviet system of the mid-1980s was highly stable, "strictly hierarchical," and devoid of open political competition.[59] Although pre-1990 studies of late Soviet politics often emphasized the personalized character of Brezhnev era rule, the system—in comparison to the chaos of the 1990s—appears far more regularized and even impersonal.[60] Thus, Soviet-era career trajectories were strongly shaped by hierarchical principles that with some exceptions "required a steady progression through . . . stages, from level to level."[61] As Kebich himself recalls, this hierarchy "was very rarely violated."[62] Leaders

53. Aleksandr I. Feduta, *Lukashenko: Politicheskaia biografiia* (Moscow, 2005), 128.

54. Ibid., 166.

55. Andrei Sannikau, former official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, Minsk, 3 July 2004.

56. Olga Kryshtanovskaya and Stephen White, "From Soviet Nomenklatura to Russian Elite," *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 5 (July 1996): 711–33; Ol'ga Kryshtanovskaia, *Anatomiia rossiiskoi elity* (Moscow, 2005).

57. Thus, in contrast to some other authoritarian single-party states in Africa or Latin America, the Communist Party did not face even nominal political competition from other parties and officials did not compete openly for party nomination.

58. Between 1953 and 1983, there were only 45 nonstate mass actions (including riots at sports events) of a thousand or more participants. Louise I. Shelley, *Policing Soviet Society: The Evolution of State Control* (New York, 1996), 181–82.

59. Kryshtanovskaya and White, "From Soviet Nomenklatura," 714.

60. For studies emphasizing the personalistic character of late communist rule, see, for example, Kenneth Jowitt's discussion of communist neotraditionalism. Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley, 1992). Also Jan Pakulski, "Bureaucracy and the Soviet System," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 3–24; Urban, *An Algebra of Soviet Power.*

61. Kryshtanovskaya and White, "From Soviet Nomenklatura," 714. Michael Urban's monumental study of elite circulation in Belarus from 1966 to 1986 documents some important exceptions to the hierarchical system of career advancement. Urban, *An Algebra of Soviet Power,* 32–34. Nevertheless, his study shows "considerable . . . similarity" between actual career trajectories and the "hierarchy based on the formal rank positions" (35).

62. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 43.

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were restricted in promoting officials "from a pool of talent not of [their] own choosing, since the norms of the Soviet system were such that no one could mount several rungs of the ladder in one leap."[63]

Experience in this system fostered particular political skills in the top elite. In general, it favored passivity and a willingness to obey central directives among top leaders. Top officials were often masters of bureaucratic intrigue but frequently lacked certain talents—the ability to engage in free and open debate, speak on television, or deal with large crowds—that would become essential in the transition environment. Finally, socialization in the old regime transmitted a particular know-how about how to gain and keep power. The hierarchical character of the system generated specific expectations that only certain types of individuals (especially top-level members of the nomenklatura) were capable of taking power—a fact that led the leadership to underestimate a range of outsiders who in fact presented serious electoral threats.

Partly as a result of inexperience with competitive politics and the survival of nomenklatura norms, the early 1990s in Belarus was marked by a notable gap between authorities' significant resource advantages over the opposition and their lack of understanding about how to use these advantages to maintain power. This gap manifested itself in incumbent responses to opposition challenges throughout the early 1990s. First, in 1990–1991, disorientation in the face of radical changes in Moscow caused the republic's leadership to make key concessions to a relatively weak opposition. Next, in 1993–1994, inexperience encouraged Kebich to call elections when he did not have to and to stand by as Lukashenka seized key opportunities to challenge incumbent power. In turn, Lukashenka was able to establish stable authoritarian rule in part by learning from Kebich's mistakes and abandoning key nomenklatura practices.

Incompetence and Weak Authoritarianism, 1990–1991

Disorientation was particularly evident in 1990–91. The leaders were relatively passive in the face of changes imposed on them by Moscow and possessed a dearth of the talent to cope with even modest political opposition. As a result, in 1990–1991 the nationalist Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) was able to gain a level of influence out of proportion with its apparent popular support.

Founded in late 1988, the BPF was led by Zianon Pazniak, an academic who had become famous for publishing an article exposing mass graves in Kurapaty. The commitment of its activists and their willingness to take risks for their beliefs brought the party significant attention. Neverthe-

63. Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford, 1996), 162. Further, until the mid-1980s, the system was characterized by a high degree of stability in personnel—often referred to as "trust in cadres." Thus by the late 1970s, turnovers among republican-level party leaders decreased by half in comparison to the Khrushchev era. Robert E. Blackwell Jr., "Cadres Policy in the Brezhnev Era," *Problems of Communism* 28, no. 2 (1979): 33–35. Officials became "practically unremovable." Jowitt, *New World Disorder,* 142–43. "Having received high rank, an official hung on to it until his very death." Kryshtanovskaia, *Anatomiia,* 178.

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less, the party possessed extremely limited popular support. In the March 1990 parliamentary elections, the BPF gained only 8 percent of seats in the legislature and joined a "democratic" legislative coalition consisting of roughly 20–30 percent of the deputies.[64] Although Mikhail Gorbachev had revoked the Communist Party's formal "leading role" in early 1990, an estimated 65–80 percent of the deputies were still either members of the party or of its allies.[65] The communists also retained enormous resources at their disposal.[66]

Yet, Communist Party influence in 1990–1991 was surprisingly weak. Following the 1990 parliamentary elections, a relatively small contingent of anti-party forces was able to push through the election of Stanislau Shushkevich, a former professor of physics without strong ties to the party establishment, to the post of first vice-chair of parliament. Shushkevich was able to frequently take the de facto lead in parliament—spearheading a resolution condemning Soviet attacks on Lithuania in January 1991 and heading a government delegation to negotiate with strikers in April 1991.[67] The party, despite its nominal control of a majority of deputies, was left largely on the sidelines.[68] By contrast, the BPF, with a small contingent of deputies, had significant influence.[69]

The weakness of the incumbent communists can partly be attributed to their lack of experience with open political competition. In the 1990 legislative elections, for example, the party frequently ran multiple candidates in the same districts.[70] Those who subsequently made it into parliament did not know how to take advantage of their majority position. "The reason why such a small minority of democrats was so successful at imposing its agenda was that the communists in parliament had essentially been chosen by the party for their passivity and willingness to obey central directives . . . they were afraid to speak up and had no idea how to pass a law."[71] The top leadership was also completely unprepared to deal

64. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 26 January 1991, 2. This author gives figures of 170 from the Communists (49 percent); "Soiuz" (Union) faction 30 (9 percent); Industrialialists 35 (10 percent); Agrarians 40 (12 percent); BPF 27 (8 percent). At the same time, partisan allegiances at the time were often undefined and uncertain. Ivan Gerasiuk estimates about a hundred "democratic" deputies—a figure that is often cited in discussions of the period. Gerasiuk, *Agoniia nomenklatury* (Minsk, 1991), 41. Many of these deputies were members of multiple and ideologically conflicting factions.

65. In 1988, Gorbachev drastically reduced the party's formal power over the economy and made parliament the highest government institution. See Brown, *Gorbachev Factor.*

66. Through mid-1991, most deputies and government officials were party members and the party had cells distributed throughout the country.

67. TASS, 18 January 1991; *Narodnaia hazeta,* 19 January 1991, 1; *Narodnaia hazeta,* 10 April 1991, 1.

68. For example, an effort by communist leader Anatol Malafeeu to introduce martial law in the early summer of 1991 went nowhere. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 8 June 1991, 1.

69. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 65, 168.

70. Central Committee archives of the Belarusian Communist Party, Kalendarnyi plan podgotovki nar. deputatov kommunitov k sessii VR BSSR dlia organizatsiii prakticheskoi rabot. Dekret Ts K KPB V. Tikhinia—7–24 91.

71. Aliaksandar Dabravolski, deputy USSR Congress of People's Deputies; deputy Belarusian parliament 13th convocation, Vice Chairman United Civil Party, interview, Minsk, 21 June 2004. Also see, Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 65.

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with mass politics. Leaders "had a panicked fear of talking to crowds" and therefore were often inclined to rely on non-party leaders in the legislature, such as Shushkevich, to cope with mobilizational challenges.[72]

Simultaneously, in stark contrast to the communist incumbents, who often divided their time between the legislature and other jobs in industry and the state bureaucracy, the opposition was dominated by the intelligentsia who devoted all of their time to politics and legislative activities. As a result, they were able to assert disproportionate influence; party leaders were often passive or ineffective. One party official complained that "as historically critical decisions are made in the Supreme Soviet, the first Secretary of the Party [Anatol Malafeeu] maintains a proud silence."[73]

The impact of sudden political change became starkly evident in late August 1991. The failed Soviet coup fundamentally shook the leadership in Belarus and ushered in a four-month period in which an otherwise conservative leadership supported increasingly radical measures to destroy the Soviet system.[74] Images of crowds tearing down the statue of Soviet secret police founder Feliks Dzerzhinskii in Moscow terrified many Belarusian communists who assumed that they would soon be put on trial. "Trembling with fear, party leaders closed down the party."[75] Government leaders exited the party en masse, and the party ceased to exist as a political force. Longtime supporters of the Soviet Union sought greater separation from Russia. Suddenly, Mikalai Dzemiantsei, the conservative head of parliament, began speaking in Belarusian before being forced to resign within days of the coup. Kebich called on deputies to support independence because "a functional center [did] not exist" and the Belarusian Soviet Republic was officially renamed the "Republic of Belarus."[76] One opposition deputy gushed, "in three days, we did what would otherwise have taken ten years."[77]

The radical changes taking place outside Belarus generated a widespread expectation that the nationalist leader Pazniak would seize power, replacing Dzemiantsei as chair of parliament—a remarkable belief given the small size and base of the BPF.[78] Public opinion polling was undevel-

72. Gerasiuk, *Agoniia nomenklatury,* 53; Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 65–66, 93.

73. Quote from party activist at a Minsk party meeting in January 1991. "Kriticheskiie zamechanie i predlozhenii vyskazanikh kommunista v khode otchete vyborov v Minskoi gorodskoi partiinoi organizatsii," 9 Ianv. 91 #00076, Central Committee archives of the Belarusian Communist Party. Longtime party officials faced severe difficulties maintaining order at parliamentary sessions. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 66, 100.

74. Party leaders, according to Kebich, acted as though "someone had deprived them of consciousness and paralyzed their will." Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 140. During the coup itself, key ministers in the government—Kebich and Minister of Interior Vladimir Egorov—chose to remain at their dachas—apparently unsure whether the coup would succeed. See Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 135–36.

75. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 32; see also *Narodnaia hazeta,* 28 August 1991, 1.

76. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 27 August 1991, 1, 3.

77. Ibid. Another opposition activist noted, "we obtained freedom without ever getting a chance to fight for it." Quoted in Grigory Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 8 (December 2003): 1257.

78. Pavel Kazlauski, minister of defense under Kebich, interview, Minsk, 23 June 2004; Leanid Kozik, chairman, Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, deputy Belarusian parliament 12th and 13th convocations, interview, Minsk, 8 July 2004. Kebich, *Iskushenie,*

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oped at this point, and many believed that the trend sweeping the Baltics would also sweep Belarus. Events in Moscow created a "fantastic fear" among otherwise conservative deputies, convincing them to throw their support behind Shushkevich—despite his lack of ties to the communist establishment—as a way of preventing Pazniak from taking control.[79] As a result, despite Belarus's otherwise conservative history and lack of strong opposition movement, a noncommunist succeeded in taking power during a critical period in Belarusian history. In December, Shushkevich—together with Presidents El'tsin and Kravchuk—signed the Belovezhskaia Accord that ended the Soviet Union.

This period of "extraordinary politics" did not last long, however. As "fear subsided" over time, the conservative majority quickly adapted to the new conditions and began reasserting control.[80] Faced with an increasingly cohesive pro-Kebich "Belarus" faction in the legislature, Shushkevich quickly lost effective control over domestic policies in the government and legislature. While formally the head of state, Shushkevich had virtually no mechanisms to monitor or control the government, and in 1992 there was a "gradual concentration of all power in the hands of Kebich."[81]

In sum, the combination of rapid change in nearby republics and incumbents' inexperience with open legislative politics contributed to the opposition's disproportionate influence in 1990 and 1991. With a majority in the legislature, however, the conservative forces under Kebich were able to quickly adapt and reassert control following the shock of August 1991. This experience taught Kebich that the nationalists in Belarus did not present a very serious threat. At the same time, the persistence of older assumptions about the sources of political power blinded the prime minister to other challenges.

Failed Authoritarianism under Kebich and the Rise of Lukashenka

Having taken de facto control over the government, Kebich faced important challenges in the early 1990s. Most significantly, the country confronted a severe economic downturn that would have put a strain on any government.[82] Yet, economic decline alone cannot explain Kebich's down-

103. According to Kazlauski, "Pazniak was very powerful. If he had not been such a fool, he could have taken charge." Kazlauski, interview, Minsk, 23 June 2004.

79. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 19 September 1991, 1. Quote from *Narodnaia hazeta,* 5–7 February 1994, 2.

80. Liavon Barshcheuskii, deputy Belarusian parliament 12th convocation, BPF leader, interview, Minsk, 30 June 2004.

81. Foreign Broadcast Information Service–Soviet Union, 4 December 1992, 35. Stanislau Shushkevich, head of Belarusian parliament 12th convocation, interview, Minsk, 23 June 2004. According to Kebich, the "real levers of power over the economy were with the prime minister. . . . The Supreme Soviet did not even have its own automobiles. Such dependence on me was exceptionally unpleasant for [Shushkevich]." Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 228, 188. At the same time, Shushkevich did continue to have influence in international relations as the official representative of Belarus who met with El'tsin as well as President Bill Clinton when he visited Belarus in early 1994.

82. According to World Bank numbers, the Belarusian economy declined by 19 percent between 1990 and 1993. Economic performance is a widely cited and important factor shaping regime stability. See, for example, Huntington, *Third Wave,* 50–58.

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fall in 1994. Executives in Armenia and Russia survived the early 1990s in the face of far more severe economic crises.[83] Indeed, in the early 1990s Kebich had successfully sidelined virtually all major challengers. The most serious threat to the existing power structure came in early 1992 when the BPF organized a petition campaign to hold a referendum on early parliamentary elections as allowed by law. Although the BPF was able to collect more than ten times the number of required signatures, the government and parliament simply refused to allow the referendum to go forward.[84] By late January 1994, Kebich had eliminated most major threats to his power by replacing the head of parliament, the police (MVD), and the KGB with his loyal supporters.[85] Thus, in stark contrast to his counterparts in Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine in the early 1990s, Kebich had seemingly uncontested control over all major state and government institutions.

In addition. although Kebich was certainly less autocratic than his successor, the regime was characterized by notable levels of electoral manipulation, a highly biased state radio and television, and harassment of independent media.[86] In fact, the basic institutional structures of authoritarian rule were in place: most media (including all publishing houses and television) were state owned; and the KGB had infiltrated key state and societal structures.[87] Finally, like Gennadii Ziuganov and Ruslan Khasbulatov in Russia in the early and mid-1990s, the best known and most serious opposition figures in Belarus—Pazniak and Shushkevich—would have had difficulty gaining majority popular support. Given the absence of available alternatives, the regime plausibly could have retained power.

Yet, a variety of factors undermined Kebich's ability to maintain power. First, in stark contrast to 1989–1991, political trajectories in nearby republics arguably encouraged a certain degree of complacency in 1992–1994. Throughout the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), exnomenklatura officials retained or regained power in 1992 and 1993. As of early 1994, not a single old regime official in the CIS had lost power

83. Armenia's president Levon Ter Petrosian survived in power in the face of an economic decline of 63 percent from 1991 to 1993; while El'tsin clung to power in the face of a downturn of 50 percent from 1991 to 1996.

84. IFES, *Pre-Election Technical Assessment,* 28–29; Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 251–57.

85. Vladimir Egorov, *Zvezdy i terni Vladimira Egorova* (Minsk, 2003); Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 364–69.

86. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 157. In his memoirs, Kebich expresses opposition to the violent suppression of protesters and repression of key cultural figures during the Soviet period. Kebich, Iskushenie, 219, 276. But he is unapologetic about his support for greater controls over the media: "During the transition, the government needs propaganda support. If the Bolsheviks had not shut down the opposition press in 1917, they would not have been able to hold onto power." Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 416. He expresses regret that in 1994 he did not use the "administrative resources as they function [Belarus today], in Russia and other countries." Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 20. He reports that he supported the aims of the failed coup in 1991 but notes that he was unsure whether the organizers were sufficiently prepared to pull it off successfully. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 134–35. For examples of democratic abuse under Kebich, see Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism,* chap. 5.

87. In 1993, 66 percent of periodicals in Belarus were controlled by the government or government-controlled entities. Savchenko, "Belarus," 241. Vladimir Alekseevich Reznikau, KGB official, interview, Minsk, 13 July 2004; *Narodnaia hazeta,* 14 September 1991, 3.

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in a popular election.[88] The combination of the government's inexperience with open political competition and the survival of older assumptions about the sources of political power weakened its capacity to monopolize political control. Unaware of the extent of his own unpopularity, Kebich pushed for the creation of presidential rule, confident that he could use his privileged access to state administrative resources to defeat any opponent. Simultaneously, widespread elite assumptions about who was "presidential material" encouraged the government to underestimate the threat posed by Lukashenka.

The great irony of Kebich's loss in 1994 is that it resulted from new presidential elections that he had himself decided to institute in the absence of any outside pressure.[89] Kebich led efforts to eliminate parliamentary rule and created the presidency in 1994 on the assumption that he would very likely win.[90] Had Kebich realized that he would face serious challenges getting elected, he would have likely preserved the existing parliamentary system and remained in power for longer.[91] In order to understand the political challenges confronting Kebich in 1994, we need to examine the sources of his overconfidence.

The informational asymmetries that led to Kebich's downfall can be directly traced to his inexperience with electoral competition and his embeddedness in older Soviet leadership norms. Perhaps most significantly, lack of familiarity with basic tools of democratic contestation, such as public opinion polling, contributed to Kebich's vast overestimation of his popular support—a mistake that was also made by other autocrats in the early 1990s (such as President Kaunda in Zambia in 1991) who opened themselves to electoral competition assuming they would win. Unfamiliarity with polling encouraged Kebich to overestimate his own support and discount polls in early 1994 suggesting he would lose.[92] According to a social scientist who worked directly with Kebich during the 1994 presidential campaign, "Many [in the leadership] did not believe in public opinion polling. They would say things like 'What can the opinions of a thousand

88. Kravchuk in Ukraine subsequently lost power on exactly the same day—10 July 1994—as Kebich. In Azerbaijan, President Ayaz Mutalibov lost power in a military coup in 1992.

89. According to a 1994 IFES report, "government officials . . . admitted that they [felt] no pressure from Western democracies to hold early elections." IFES, *Pre-Election Technical Assessment,* 20.

90. According to existing laws, elections were not supposed to take place until 1995. Kebich put tremendous effort into assuring that the legislature passed a new constitution instituting presidential rule in the spring of 1994. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 16 March 1994, 1. For example, one government advisor reports that Kebich even brought to Minsk several Belarusian legislators elected in 1990 who had since taken Russian citizenship in order to get them to vote for the presidential constitution. Siarhei Leushunou constitutional expert active in preparation of 1994 constitution in parliament, interview, Minsk, 24 June 2004. Kebich states in his memoirs that, while he was not "absolutely sure" of his victory, he "believed [he] would win." Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 408, 8.

91. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 77.

92. David Rotman, director of the Belarusian State University Centre for Sociological and Political Research and pollster for the Kebich presidential campaign, interview, Minsk, 17 June 2004.

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or so people tell us about the whole country?'"[93] In turn, Kebich assumed he could win on the basis of his "many years of work in the party organs, in Gosplan and government as well as personal contacts with many foreign leaders."[94] Kebich "thought that he was at the peak of his popularity and was sure that if presidential elections were held that he would be the main contender. . . . No one doubts that if Kebich had had trustworthy information" he never would have created the presidency.[95]

The government also does not appear to have taken Lukashenka seriously as a contender until late in the campaign—a fact that seems partly rooted in Lukashenka's lack of high-level executive experience.[96] Lukashenka began his political career in 1990 when he was elected as a parliamentary deputy from the rural district of Shklov in Mogilev province in eastern Belarus. Since 1987, he had been the head of a small state farm. In parliament in the early 1990s, Lukashenka was primarily known for his frequent support of opposition measures, erratic behavior, and ability to expound on almost any topic.[97] Until early 1994 few considered Lukashenka a viable candidate for the presidency in part because he lacked a

93. Ibid. As Mechyslau Hryb, a Kebich ally and head of parliament, noted, "at that point, we paid little attention to polls. We had no experience and were not used to such things." Mechyslau Hryb, interview, Minsk, 24 June 2004. Polls were often seen as simply a propaganda tool used by competing sides to convince the public that their side would win. Indeed, some of Kebich's own people may have provided false numbers suggesting stronger than actual support for the prime minister—a fact that further encouraged Kebich's overconfidence. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 11–12; Rotman, interview, Minsk, 17 June 2004.

94. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 404.

95. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 71, 119–20. Following Lukashenka's victory, Kebich complained that the sociologists had failed to gauge the "real mood of people." Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 11.

96. This may be partly attributable to the fact that Kebich had, in fact, run against (and defeated) Lukashenka in elections to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies in 1989. Thus, for Kebich, the results of the 1994 election were "unexpected" and something he had "not imagined even in [his] nightmares." Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 432, 428. After Lukashenka was elected in June 1994, Kebich's supporters "were obviously completely shocked; for them Lukashenka was just some clown, who was never a threat." Vaclau Areshka, social scientist and activist in the Shushkevich presidential campaign, interview, Minsk, 6 July 2004. See also Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 149–51. Kebich insists that he took Lukashenka seriously—in part because of his previous experience battling Lukashenka in 1989. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 410. But from his memoirs, it is not clear when in 1994 he began to see Lukashenka as a serious threat (just before the election as most observers suggest or earlier). Kebich's claim is contradicted both by the actions of his campaign and by Kebich's own expressions of surprise at Lukashenka's victory.

97. At times Lukashenka openly aligned himself with the BPF—attending several leadership meetings and even suggesting that he take a leadership role in the party. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 50; Vincuk Viachorka, chairman BPF, interview, Minsk, 29 June 2004. In an ironically prescient article published in May 1991, Lukashenka called for more rapid economic reform and warned of the emergence of a new "Belarusian dictatorship." At the same time, Lukashenka often sided with the Belarusian Communist Party on specific policy questions. As one deputy noted at the time, "I don't get Lukashenka. In the morning he is with the communists, but in the evening he is with the BPF. Which side is he on?" Quoted in Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 51, 53–54. Considered by many to be a demagogue and populist, Lukashenka refused to align himself strongly with any group and was known primarily for speaking on a wide variety of topics. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 52.

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high-ranking position in the government or nomenklatura.[98] Many in the leadership could not imagine that "someone so low down could become a serious contender for the presidency."[99] In the context of Brezhnevian norms that had put tremendous stock in seniority and in which "no one could mount several rungs of the ladder in one leap," Lukashenka's sudden rise from head of a small state farm to the country's presidency seemed outside the realm of possibility to many.[100] As Kebich himself noted, it had been "simply impossible to jump from 'pauper to prince' [*popast' iz griazi v kniazi*]" under the old system.[101]

Such an underestimation of Lukashenka's threat seems to have led Kebich and his allies to inadvertently facilitate Lukashenka's rise. Lukashenka's entrance onto the national stage in Belarus dates specifically to his appointment as head of an anticorruption commission on 4 June 1993.[102] Lukashenka was widely viewed as a wild card at the time, but Kebich and his allies who controlled the parliamentary majority did absolutely nothing to prevent his appointment.[103] Instead, many in the leadership appear to have underestimated Lukashenka and to have approached the commission in purely technocratic terms as a mechanism to document real sources of corruption. As an associate of Kebich's explained, "we never took the commission seriously. . . . None of us thought an untrained former head of a farm could understand all of the intricacies of government finance. . . . We were always being audited all the time in any case." Another prominent Kebich ally claims that Lukashenka's appointment was perceived "as a kind of joke" and occurred after several Kebich allies turned the position down.[104]

The failure to understand how the corruption commission could be used for political purposes may at least partly be traced to the leadership's embeddedness in late Soviet technocratic nomenklatura norms. Opposition politicians, who had risen to prominence in the era of open politics, recognized that the commission could be a major vehicle to the presidency, but many pro-government leaders, who had gained power under the old system, "had no clue that the commission might be

98. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 64. "No one expected that such a 'nobody' without any government experience coming out of nowhere could ever win such an important election." Mikhail Pliskov, independent analyst and former activist in Shushkevich's presidential campaign, interview, Minsk, 25 June 2004; Andrei Vardamacki, director of NOVAK: Research into Market and Public Opinion, interview, Minsk, 6 July 2004.

99. Siarhei Antonchyk, deputy Belarusian parliament 12th convocation, member of BPF, and leader of strikes in April 1991, interview, Minsk, 3 July 2004.

100. Brown, *Gorbachev Factor,* 162.

101 Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 42.

102. The commission was created at the behest of Shushkevich, Zenon Pazniak, and Antonchyk from the BPF. After Kebich ally Mikhail Marinich turned down the position, Shushkevich proposed that Lukashenka head the commission. Shushkevich, interview, Minsk, 23 June 2004.

103. Shushkevich, interview, Minsk, 23 June 2004; Hyrb, interview, Minsk, 24 June 2004.

104. Former Kebich associate, interview, Belarus, July 2004; Hryb, interview, Minsk, 24 June 2004.

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important."[105] Indeed, many failed to see that the commission might be used to politically discredit the government regardless of whether any actual malfeasance was uncovered.

Lukashenka understood the importance of the commission and took full advantage of this opportunity to make a name for himself. The commission spent months interviewing officials and brought in a number of investigators from the MVD and the KGB.[106] Then on 14 December 1993, Lukashenka gave a widely anticipated three-hour report in front of parliament summarizing the results of the investigation that was broadcast live on national radio.[107] The speech transformed Lukashenka's political career.[108] Lukashenka's public support rose from 0.3 percent in 1993 just before his appointment as head of the commission (when few had heard of him) to 42 percent in early 1994 at the start of the presidential campaign.[109]

Even after the speech, leaders in the government still did not accept Lukashenka as a serious threat—focusing instead on Shushkevich as well as Pazniak because they resembled the opposition in the neighboring Baltic republics.[110] Kebich let pass several opportunities to weaken or disqualify Lukashenka. The government allowed Lukashenka to use state-controlled offices in the center of Minsk free of charge until just weeks before the election when Lukashenka's prospects became more obvious.[111] Most critically, Kebich allies were "so confident in [Kebich's] future victory" that they made little effort to ensure that the constitutional age limit for those running for president was 40 or older (the minimum age in many democracies)—a provision that would have disqualified Lukashenka, who was 39 years old at the time.[112]

Kebich's overconfidence in his own chances of victory was encouraged by a failure to appreciate the weakness of his control over local officials tasked with implementing his campaign. While *formally,* heads of regional

105. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 91; Anatol Liabedzka, deputy Belarusian parliament 12th and 13th convocations, advisor to Lukashenka's presidential campaign in 1994, and current member of the opposition, interview, Minsk, 12 July 2004.

106. According to several KGB sources, the head of the agency at the time fed Lukashenka material aimed at undermining Kebich's reputation. Reznikau, interview, Minsk, 13 July 2004; Siarhei Aniska, KGB official in Kontrrazvedki 1994–1995, interview, Minsk, 14 July 2004.

107. Lukashenka failed to uncover any new corruption and no prosecutions emanated from a final report. Instead, the speech made broad accusations of corruption and focused on actions—such as ministers driving foreign cars—that made officials look bad but were hardly illegal. The absence of specific allegations of illegal activity brought an initial sigh of relief among government leaders and parliamentarians. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 99.

108. "Lukashenka gave a speech that identified the 'jack-asses' who steal and are responsible for why the population lives so badly. The speech was discussed by everyone everywhere. . . . Now, everyone knew him . . . as the unstoppable fighter for justice against the entire power structure." Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 103, 113.

109. Savchenko, "Belarus," 248.

110. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 417. Thus, Kebich's campaign never engaged in the kind of strong negative campaign against Lukashenka that Kebich directed against Pazniak. Vardamacki, interview, Minsk, 6 July 2004.

111. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 15–17.

112. Ibid., 121–22; Pavel G. Sheremet and Svetlana Kalinkina, *Sluchainyi prezident* (St. Petersburg, 2004), 22.

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governments until 1994 were chosen by popularly elected regional committees and could not be fired by the prime minister, there was a widespread *informal* practice of vetting potential heads with the prime minister before appointment.[113] Given regional governments' financial dependence on government allocations, it was broadly assumed that Kebich's opposition could kill an appointment and that regional leaders would thus support Kebich's campaign. Indeed, a large majority of local and regional officials and enterprise managers signed on to Kebich's campaign and the head of the electoral commission was a Kebich loyalist.[114] Kebich was assured that "the majority of local executives [were] on [his] side."[115]

Yet, as my research indicates, the informal system of control was in fact quite weak and dependent on the voluntary cooperation of lower-level officials.[116] Officials were driven almost entirely by short-term career objectives, and this led many to either sit on their hands during the election or give support to multiple sides. A great many local officials officially signed up as representatives of the Kebich campaign, but they often failed to support Kebich in practice.[117] Such quiet insubordination was made possible by the fact that Kebich had not developed mechanisms to monitor officials and punish those who disobeyed orders. As a result, Kebich was like a pilot sitting at the controls of a downed airplane—pressing buttons and pushing levers that were no longer attached to anything.[118]

Despite apparently having the full weight of the state behind him, Kebich reaped a stunningly low 17 percent of the vote in the first round compared to 45 percent for Lukashenka—a result that Kebich says he had "not imagined even in [his] nightmares."[119] Weak support for Kebich turned into large-scale open defection in the run-up to the second

113. Svetlana Gol'dade, head of the Executive Committee of the City of Gomel' 1990–1994, interview, Gomel', 9 July 2004; Kozik, interview, Minsk, 8 July 2004.

114. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 7–9 May 1994, 2 and 12 May 1994, 1. Given Kebich's degree of influence over the state, one commentator suggested that the only way to have a fair election would be for the head of parliament to run for president because "then government workers would have to decide which government leader to obey." *Narodnaia hazeta,* 18 May 1994, 1.

115. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 10.

116. For example, an anti-Kebich mayor in one large city was able to resist Kebich's efforts to fire her in early 1994 simply by refusing to resign in the face of pressure from the Council of Ministers. Gol'dade, interview, Gomel', 9 July 2004.

117. Valery Fadzeyeu, interview, Council of Ministers advisor on local government issues until 1994, on constitutional court 1994–1996, interview, Minsk, 2 June 2004. For example, the deputy mayor of Gomel' recalled that pro-Kebich leaflets dropped off at the city council were never distributed because of widespread support for Shushkevich. Aliaksandar Karnienka, former USSR deputy, former deputy mayor of Gomel', interview, Minsk, 30 June 2004. Another former local official from Mogilev reported that many from his region would "go to [the capital] and report to Kebich 'we support you 100 percent'—but then fail to do the most basic activities to support his candidacy." Uladzimir Navasiad, deputy in Palata predstavitelei, deputy Belarusian parliament 13th convocation, interview, Minsk, 8 July 2004. In his memoirs, Kebich complains of "betrayal" by the state apparatus and asserts that his campaign "did not lift a finger" to get him elected. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 18, 14.

118. As Silitski notes, "incumbents had not yet learned the finer points of manipulation and rigging." Silitski, "Preempting Democracy," 86.

119. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 428.

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round. There was "panic as in an earthquake" among Kebich officials, and Lukashenka noted that suddenly everyone was extremely cooperative.[120] By the time of Lukashenka's stunning 80 percent victory in the second round, most elites had thrown their support behind the new president.

In sum, inexperience with competitive national elections combined with the survival of older assumptions about political power bred extraordinary overconfidence in Belarus's top elite that their candidate could easily win presidential elections even in the midst of an economic downturn. Through a series of easily avoidable actions, the incumbent exposed himself to a competitive election that could have been delayed. Kebich also gave key political opportunities to a hitherto marginal political actor. Lukashenka's rise to prominence was eminently avoidable. Had Kebich opposed the appointment of Lukashenka to the anticorruption commission, the former state farm head would have likely remained virtually unknown to the broader public.[121] Had the pro-Kebich forces that dominated parliament insisted on establishing 40 as the minimum age for the president, Lukashenka would have been disqualified from running. As a result of these mistakes, Kebich promoted the rise of a politician who presented a uniquely serious threat to incumbent power. In contrast to Shushkevich and Kebich, Lukashenka could not be held responsible for the economic downturn in Belarus. And in contrast to BPF leader Pazniak, Lukashenka was not associated with a marginalized nationalist ideology. Lukashenka's own innate political abilities—his public speaking skills and populist instincts—were obviously important to his political success.[122] Yet, these skills would likely have gone unnoticed had Kebich and his entourage not given him such a major political opportunity. Indeed, it seems fairly plausible that Kebich could have pulled off an election victory if his main opponents had been Shushkevich or Pazniak—just as the relatively unpopular El'tsin in Russia in 1996 and Kuchma in Ukraine in 1999 had orchestrated election victories by facing opponents who were unacceptable to large sections of the population.

Consolidation of Closed Authoritarianism under Lukashenka

> The end of anarchy has arrived
>
> —Aliaksandar Lukashenka, *Narodnaia hazeta,* 7 October 1994

Following his overwhelming victory in presidential elections in July 1994, Lukashenka, benefitting from the lessons of Kebich's failure, rapidly consolidated authoritarian control. He eliminated the free media, harassed

120. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 30 June 1994, 1.

121. In contrast to the other major candidates, Lukashenka had virtually no organization that could help him get the word out. Sheremet and Kalinkina, *Sluchainyi prezident,* 32. He therefore might easily have remained a marginal figure.

122. For invaluable descriptions of Lukashenka's speaking style and political instincts, see Sheremet and Kalinkina, *Sluchainyi prezident,* 18; Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 44, 45, 52, 94, 99.

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the opposition, and severely weakened parliament. On the one hand, this rapid consolidation of authoritarian rule can be traced to the fact that key authoritarian institutions were already in place when Lukashenka came to power—including an overwhelmingly state-controlled media, state-controlled economy, and a vast security apparatus. "Provisions for competitive political activity . . . had no institutional foundation."[123] Simultaneously, the nationalist opposition remained weak.

Yet, as explored above, the presence of structural factors favoring authoritarianism does not automatically translate into authoritarian stability. As Mark Blyth notes, "structures do not come with an instruction sheet."[124] Lukashenka had to discover how to operate the authoritarian state he had seized. The important lessons he learned from Kebich's failures helped him to consolidate control in 1994–1996.[125] First, Lukashenka reduced problems in central control by strengthening the formal levers of power and replacing significant numbers of officials with loyalists. After coming to power in 1994, Lukashenka rapidly established formal—rather than simply informal—presidential control over local and regional governments.[126] He also weakened the prime minister's office and created the "Presidential Control Service" to combat corruption and monitor local government performance.[127] He sent representatives of the Presidential Control Services to audit local governments and enterprises.[128]

Although Lukashenka is best known for trying to reinstitute Soviet style power, he was perceived by the existing Soviet-era Belarusian elite as a distinctly anti-system figure. In their view, he violated Brezhnevian "nomenklatura norms" by "jumping the line" from the lowest rung of the nomenklatura ladder to president of the country.[129] Lukashenka "did not know the rules of the game and did not want to know them."[130] While bringing on several members of the old elite, Lukashenka quickly abolished the system of "trust in cadres" that had reigned under Kebich through 1993 and replaced massive numbers of personnel over the course of the 1990s.[131] Under the old system, officials were only replaced in cases of "serious misconduct" and new hires were made with critical regard to seniority.[132] Now, officials could be let go simply for "not pleasing the of-

123. Savchenko, "Belarus," 279.

124. Mark Blyth, "Structures Do Not Come with an Instruction Sheet: Interests, Ideas, and Progress in Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 4 (December 2003): 695–706.

125. See Sheremet and Kalinkina, *Sluchainyi prezident;* Feduta, *Lukashenko.*

126. Interfax, 27 September 1994; Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 207–8.

127. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 4 August 1994, 1.

128. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 21 October 1994, 1.

129. Pavel Daneika, deputy Belarusian parliament 13th convocation, interview, Minsk, 6 July 2004; Rotman, interview, Minsk, 17 June 2004.

130. Sheremet and Kalinkina, *Sluchainyi prezident,* 37.

131. In November and December 1994, he personally traveled to numerous locales to supervise the replacement of local representatives. *Narodnaia hazeta,* 29 November 1994, 1; 30 November 1994, 1; 2 December 1994, 1; 10–12 December 1994, 1; 14 December 1994, 1. Lukashenka also replaced many in the Cabinet of Ministers and Ministry of Defense. See *Narodnaia hazeta,* 31 August 1994, 2.

132. Kebich, *Iskushenie,* 338.

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ficial above him" and "new hires emerged from no one knew where."[133] These moves were widely perceived as an effort to replace the existing nomenklatura system with much more personalized (and centralized) control.[134] Together with changes in the law, such measures helped to increase Lukashenka's control in critical areas. Thus, "literally within a year and a half" Lukashenka had created a strictly controlled electoral system in which everyone "in the regions understood that they must do what the center tells them."[135] Indeed, Lukashenka demonstrated consistent ability to engage in massive fraud in elections in 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010.

Lukashenka also relied extensively on preemption.[136] His own experience in seizing power gave him an acute awareness of the need to quash challenges early. Lukashenka "knew that the same people who betrayed Kebich in his time were just as ready to betray Lukashenka if he were to show any weakness—even in small things."[137] In turn, the vast system of surveillance allowed Lukashenka to identify potential threats early on and he regularly jailed politicians—such as Mikhail Marinich—whom he felt to be a potential threat. Partly as a result, Lukashenka was able to quash all emerging challenges through the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This in-depth investigation of Belarusian politics in the early 1990s demonstrates the ways in which deer in headlights—leadership incompetence resulting from rapid political change—heightened political competition after the Cold War. Sudden changes that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union created new demands that existing autocrats often did not know how to deal with—even when they had the structural resources to survive. The result was greater contestation than would have existed otherwise. In 1990 and 1991, a conservative majority in the Belarusian legislature—chosen by the party for their willingness to obey central directives—made arguably unnecessary concessions to a minority opposition. By 1993 and 1994, Prime Minister Kebich had eliminated almost all political rivals—confronting a far less contested terrain than his neighbors in Moldova, Russia, or Ukraine. Yet, Kebich's continued adherence to Soviet-era leadership norms, wholly inappropriate to the new conditions, generated key lapses of judgment that directly contributed to Kebich's defeat at the hands of a political outsider. In turn, Lukashenka was able to impose more stable authoritarian rule by learning from Kebich's mistakes and abandoning key Soviet-era leadership practices.

While this study has focused on only one case, similar dynamics likely

133. Ibid., 339; see also Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 258. Lukashenka also made a practice of firing high-level ministers—sometimes directly on television. Officials with strong personal ties to the president—including Victor Sheiman—were appointed to key positions in the security and state apparatus. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 273.

134. "Earlier there were set procedures for everything. But now [under Lukashenka] that was all destroyed." Daneika, interview, Minsk, 6 July 2004.

135. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 309.

136. Silitski, "Preempting Democracy."

137. Feduta, *Lukashenko,* 497.

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took place in a range of other post-Soviet countries after the Cold War where structural factors favored authoritarianism. As in Belarus in the early 1990s, disorientation in the face of rapid institutional changes appear to have facilitated early political contestation. Where countries lacked democratic prerequisites, however, leaders (or their successors) were subsequently able to adapt to the changed environment and institute more successful authoritarian rule. In Russia, leaders initially had difficulty controlling elections but gradually created more effective authoritarian states and learned how to manipulate public opinion.[138] Further, all countries in Central Asia witnessed at least a small increase in political freedom in the early 1990s, according to Freedom House, followed by retrenchment—a pattern that might be explained by initial elite disorientation following the collapse of the USSR.[139] Much farther afield in Africa, new international demands that autocrats hold multiparty elections generated disorientation and greater freedom than dictated by structural conditions. Indeed, as noted above, President Kaunda in Zambia, like Kebich, suffered from overconfidence in the early 1990s that contributed to his decision to hold relatively free and competitive presidential elections. At the same time, in Zambia and other parts of Africa, initially open elections became less free over the course of the 1990s in part because autocrats or their successors learned how to better manipulate and control the electoral process.[140]

This argument suggests the need to modify our understanding of post–Cold War transitions. Many have attributed the surge of democratic political competition in the early 1990s to the triumph of a "democratic spirit" and renewed civil society.[141] Yet my account suggests that increased political openness was in some cases driven as much if not more by the incompetence of authoritarian leaders as by the strength of pro-democratic forces. In turn, the much discussed democratic "reverse wave" may reflect, not a shift in political values, but rather the successful adjustment by autocrats to post–Cold War constraints on authoritarian rule.[142]

Finally, deer in headlights likely accounts for autocratic behavior in other historical periods of sudden change. For example, the seemingly irrational behavior of Russian Tsar Nicholas II in early 1917 may have been a function of disorientation in that period of rapid change.[143] Much more recently, the apparently incompetent actions of Middle Eastern autocrats following the sudden expansion of mass protest in early 2011

138. McFaul and Petrov, "What the Elections Tell Us," 28; Wilson, *Virtual Politics*. While, as argued above, El'tsin was certainly more skilled at coping with open politics than Kebich, he still faced qualitatively new challenges that contributed to key mistakes early on. See Lucan Way, "The Evolution of Authoritarian Organization in Russia under Yeltsin and Putin" (The Helen Kellogg Institute, Working Paper #352, December 2008).

139. See Freedom House scores 1991–2000 at www.freedomhouse.org/reports (accessed September 2008; no longer accessible).

140. Bratton and Posner, "A First Look."

141. See, most notably, Larry Diamond, *Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies throughout the World* (New York, 2008).

142. Larry Diamond, "The Democratic Rollback: The Resurgence of the Predatory State," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 2 (March–April 2008): 36–48.

143. I thank Mark D. Steinberg for suggesting this parallel.

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provides a similar illustration of this phenomenon. Much like autocrats in sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, leaders in Egypt, Libya, and other countries had relatively little experience coping with large-scale opposition mobilization by mainstream elements in society. For example, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's decision in late February 2011 to invite foreign journalists to Tripoli—where they quickly found evidence of opposition activity—suggests the ineptitude of a leader who had rarely been forced to respond to serious opposition. Similarly, long insulation from public criticism may explain certain actions of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak—withdrawing police from the streets when protests were still relatively small, addressing the protesters as a "father . . . to his sons and daughters"—that likely stoked rather than dampened protest activity.[144] Certainly, deer in headlights does not doom autocrats to overthrow; yet, it has often provided critical—but hitherto unrecognized—openings for opposition in otherwise inhospitable structural contexts.

144. For full text of speech on 10 February 2011, see "Egypt Unrest: Full Text of Hosni Murbarak's Speech, at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12427091 (last accessed 6 June 2012).

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