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The role of historically shaped mentality in the persistence of the Belarusian political system

Abstract

In 2024, it was 30 years since Alexander Lukashenko came to power. Today, the Belarusian political system is classified as consolidated authoritarianism. The aim of this article is to explore whether the mentality of Belarusians is a factor supporting the persistence of the authoritarian political system in this country. The paper is based mainly on a survey of the political mentality of Belarusians conducted in 2023 as part of a project by the National Centre for Research and Development (Poland), as well as on historical analysis. We have come to the conclusion that the mental models are an important factor in persisting the Belarusian political system, but to some extent. The mental models were (in our view) especially crucial to the direction the country took in the 1990s. Later, the dictator's power and his increasingly powerful external protector – Russia – did not allow political change in Belarus, despite generational and mental changes. Today, Belarus is completely subordinated to Moscow. There will be no change to the political system in Belarus without making systemic changes in Russia first. In the current geopolitical situation in Belarus, cultural factors (mental models) are becoming less important as factors contributing to the regime's persistence.

Keywords: Belarus, political system, culture, mental models. Russia

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Rola historycznie ukształtowanej mentalności w trwaniu białoruskiego systemu politycznego

Streszczenie

W 2024 r. minęło 30 lat od dojścia do władzy Aleksandra Łukaszenki. Obecnie białoruski system polityczny klasyfikowany jest jako skonsolidowany autorytaryzm. Celem artykułu jest zbadanie, czy mentalność Białorusinów jest czynnikiem sprzyjającym utrzymywaniu się autorytarnego systemu politycznego w tym kraju. Artykuł opiera się głównie na badaniu mentalności politycznej Białorusinów przeprowadzonym w 2023 r. w ramach projektu Narodowego Centrum Badań i Rozwoju (Polska), a także na analizie historycznej. W trakcie analiz doszliśmy do wniosku, że historycznie ukształtowane modele mentalne są w istocie ważnym czynnikiem wpływającym na utrzymywanie się białoruskiego systemu politycznego, ale tylko do pewnego stopnia. Modele mentalne miały (naszym zdaniem) szczególne znaczenie dla kierunku, w jakim kraj ten podążał w latach 90. Później władza dyktatora i jego coraz potężniejszy zewnętrzny protektor – Rosja – nie pozwoliły na zmiany polityczne na Białorusi, pomimo zmian pokoleniowych i mentalnych. Obecnie Białoruś jest całkowicie podporządkowana Moskwie. Nie ma obecnie żadnych perspektyw na zmiany w systemie politycznym Białorusi bez uprzednich zmian systemowych w Rosji. W obecnej sytuacji geopolitycznej Białorusi modele mentalne tracą na znaczeniu jako czynniki przyczyniające się do utrzymania się reżimu.

Słowa kluczowe: Białoruś, system polityczny, kultura, modele mentalne. Rosja.

Introduction

The evolving trajectories of political system are influenced by a multitude of factors. In this article we focused one of them: the mentality of society, which is historically shaped by cultural influences. The view that culture exerts a significant influence on political structures and processes (Lane, Ersson 2016) is a pervasive one within the humanities and social sciences. The values, attitudes and perceptions of the world that are dominant in a society have been shown to influence the shape of countries' political and economic systems (Harrison, Huntington eds., 2000). The mentality that historically grows out of culture can be encapsulated in so-called mental models, which are defined as subjective images of the world created by people to interpret reality (Jonson-Laird, Byrne 1993). A seminal aspect of Douglas Cecil North's conceptual framework pertains to the notion that human decision-making is not primarily driven by rationality. Instead, North emphasises the significance of mental models and institutions (external mechanisms that individuals create based on mental models in order to function

in society and shape the environment) (Denzau, North 1994: 4). Consequently, the notion of objective rationality is deemed to be uncharacteristic of human beings; instead, their thought processes are theorised as a combination of rational and irrational beliefs, which are influenced by individual and social experiences drawn from social life and culture (North 2005). In addressing the mechanisms of institutional formation, North underscored the pivotal role of mentality and ideology, accentuating the interconnection between mental models and the historical and cultural context (North 1994a: 364). The argument is posited that culture is pivotal to comprehending the influence of the past on the present and future. The diversity of cultures, in turn, is predicated on a diversity of perceptions and belief systems (North 1994b: 381). These, in turn, underpin the political and economic systems of states. The basis for the creation of institutions – both formal and informal norms of human behaviour – is mental models. The informal institutions, which are characterised by their longevity, have been shown to extend over hundreds of years (Williamson 2000), and have the capacity to exert influence on political developments.

However, culture and mentality are not the sole factors influencing the formation of a political system. The shape of the political system may be the result of deliberate actions by political and economic elites to preserve an institutional arrangement that is a source of significant redistributive benefits for them (Heydemann 2008: 27). Moreover, states do not exist in isolation, but rather in an international environment in which actors exert a constant influence on each other (Morgenthau, Thompson, Clinton 2006). This influence need not be symmetrical. For instance, a more powerful state may seek to exert its influence over the political landscape of its neighbours. This dynamic is particularly evident in the concept of the 'sphere of influence', wherein the dominant state utilizes its geographic proximity as a strategic buffer, delineating its territory from those of more significant geopolitical actors or their respective spheres of influence. Military considerations assume paramount importance in this context (Waltz 2001). In order to ensure the sustainability and stability of a military alliance with a state within its sphere of influence, a large player will seek to significantly influence the politics and economy of a smaller one. The relationship between Belarus and Russia serves as a prime example of this asymmetric dynamic. History is replete with examples of conjunctural alliances between states with different political systems. Nevertheless, the permanence of such pacts is

typically ephemeral. In order to ensure the permanence of its sphere of influence, a state leader must strive to assimilate the political systems of the countries within it with their own. This is axiologically and practically necessary.

Following its declaration of independence in 1990 and subsequent years of democratic governance, Belarus experienced an authoritarian shift (1994–1996) in its political system, leading to the establishment of the dictatorship of President Lukashenko. Today, Belarus is classified as a consolidated authoritarian regime (Democracy Index 2023). The aim of this study is to examine the political mentality of Belarusians which, in our opinion, could have a major impact on the persistence of the contemporary political system of this country. The paper is based on a study of the political mentality of Belarusians carried out in 2023 as part of a project by the National Centre for Research and Development (Poland). In addition to this, historical analysis has been used to examine Lukashenko's rise to power and Russia's role in the creation and persistence of the Belarusian political system.

The political mentality of Belarusians

The elements of political mentality that have been distinguished by the authors are as follows: 1) locus of control – internal or external (active or passive behaviour; independence vs. fate), 2) individualistic vs. collectivistic thinking, 3) relations to power (power distance, understood as the degree of acceptance of the inequality between society and power, which is responsible for the perception of the centralisation-decentralisation dilemma), 4) particularism vs. universalism (determines the perception of the role played by personal ties in official relations, 5) social trust. The characteristics of the mental variables have been divided into the following categories: those that are conducive to the functioning of society in a democratic system, those that are desirable from the point of view of democracy (pro democratic) and those that are desirable from the point of view of authoritarian power (pro authoritarian).

It should be stressed that the mental variables presented in the following analysis do not show some homogeneous characteristic of Belarusian society. Rather, they show what can be expected. In this respect, societies are diverse and divided, often very clearly and sharply. Belarus is no exception.

Table 1. Characteristics of the political mentality of Belarusians.

Mental variables	Pro democratic	Pro authoritarian
Locus of of control (1)	40.8% believe they have a say in their own destiny (internal locus of control inside).	37.2% believe the opposite (external locus of control) – permission to be passive.
Individualism vs. collectivism (2)	50.0% represent typically individualistic values.	33.0% represent typically collectivist values.
Attitude to power (power distance) (3)	19.9% do not accept the distance to authority.	62.4% accept the distance between society and authority and are willing to submit to its decisions, even though they disagree with them.
Particularism vs. universalism (personal ties vs. universal principles.) (4)	34.4% disagree with the statement that personal, informal connections are more important than official rules and regulations.	44.3% say that personal, informal connections are more important than official rules and regulations.
Social trust (5)	29.4% say that most people can be trusted.	48.9% are of the opinion that most people cannot be trusted.

Source: CATI survey carried out as part of the NCBR project. For full description of the research sample and research methods, see: A. Pieczewski, A. Sidarava, 2025, *The Clash of Civilisations? Religion as a Major Component of Cultural Differentiation on the Example of Belarus and Poland*, “Comparative Economic Research. Central and Eastern Europe”, vol. 28 (4) 2025, pp. 69–91. DOI: 10.18778/1508-2008.28.29

The first mental variable pertains to a fundamental psychological parameter, namely the locus of control, which is defined as the extent to which an individual believes they have the ability to influence their own circumstances. This concept can fluctuate between two polar opposites: the first being the belief that an individual has complete autonomy over their fate, and the second being the conviction that external factors have no influence on the individual. The locus of control is of paramount importance. It has been demonstrated that this parameter exerts a significant influence on various domains, including the level of engagement in political life, the sense of responsibility towards oneself and the state, the entrepreneurial spirit, and the propensity for innovation. In instances where the 'locus of control' is internalised, individuals tend to aspire to decision-

making, advocating for more democratic political systems, personal freedom and freedom of expression, as well as respect for private property and economic freedom. In the case of Belarusians, 40% of respondents ascribe control 'within' and almost as many 'external'.

The second mental variable refers to the individuals' mindset (individualism vs. collectivism). Individualism refers to the degree to which people feel independent, while collectivism refers to the degree to which people feel interdependent on other members of society. In individualistic societies, individual choices are generally accepted and social expectations are strong, whereas in collectivistic societies, individuals' choices are more constrained by social expectations and the need to conform. Societies with a predominantly 'individualist mindset' tend to value and pursue freedom and democracy, while collectivist societies are more likely to embrace authoritarian systems of government. In a survey of Belarusians, 50% expressed agreement with the statement 'Life is first and foremost about realising one's goals', while 33.0% expressed disagreement. Western societies are characterised by a higher level of individualism, while as one moves eastwards towards Asia, the level of collectivist thinking increases, and authoritarian systems prevail.

The third variable, 'relation to power' (distance to power), determines the extent to which members of society accept the inequalities that separate them from those in possession of some kind of formal power. This phenomenon is observable in social relations across various levels, including but not limited to student–teacher, employee–boss, and citizen–official/politician interactions. Societies exhibiting elevated levels of 'power distance' demonstrate a heightened propensity to embrace authoritarian governance. Furthermore, such a societal structure is perceived as being natural by the populace. Conversely, as the 'distance to power' diminishes, support for authoritarianism wanes, and demands for democratisation of political life escalate. Consequently, the democratic system is regarded as the prevailing norm. The majority of Belarusians (62.4%) accept the distance that separates them from individuals in positions of authority and are willing to submit to their decisions, even though they do not agree with them. A mere 19.9% of Belarusians do not accept these inequalities. This greater distance to authority is more characteristic of societies with a predominance of collectivist thinking and a greater external locus of control (Hofstede Insights 2023). Belarus seem to confirm these correlations.

The fourth variable (particularism vs. universalism) determines the perception of the role played by personal ties in official relations. In practice, when interpersonal contacts are socially valued more, it has been demonstrated that there is a reduction in the transparency of the whole system,

and cronyism, nepotism and corruption are everyday practices. Particularism is a hallmark of authoritarian systems of power, where the authorities are beyond social control. In contrast, universal (impersonal) relations are characterised by the primacy of procedures and substantive issues. This second type of relationship is more desirable from the point of view of economic and state efficiency. Universalism is more conducive to and characteristic of democratic systems of government, where the authorities are under social control. A significant proportion of Belarusians (44.3%) assert that personal interactions hold greater significance than formal regulations within their country. Conversely, a smaller percentage of respondents expressed a contrasting viewpoint, with 34.4% of respondents indicating a preference for official rules over personal contacts. It is further noteworthy that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Belarusian lands experienced significant influence from Russian political culture, a period during which the aforementioned behaviours were the norm.

The fifth variable under consideration is that of social trust. When public trust is low, it is the case that people do not trust politicians and the government, and in turn the government does not trust the people. In such a system, control is socially required and accepted, and transaction costs are high at every level of functioning – markets, organisations, the political system. This variable also reflects economic behaviour, and among other things, influences how business is conducted in a country. When people trust each other, the transaction costs of operating on the market are lower. In comparison with the level of social trust achieved in Western countries, Belarus fares very badly (almost half the population declare a lack of trust in people). Social trust can develop under certain institutional conditions: power under public control, a transparent and efficient justice system, and long periods of stability, extensive experience with private ownership and the market economy. This has been lacking in the history of the country. The historical predominance of authoritarianism, frequently characterised by its oppressive and arbitrary nature, pervasive corruption, and nepotism in administration and across various sectors of society, has further compounded these challenges.

A comparison of Belarus with Western Europe, or even culturally similar Poland, reveals significant disparities in the shaping of the five mental variables. The locus of control in Western societies is more internally-focused, whereas in Belarusians it is externally-oriented. In Western societies, individualistic thinking is predominant and the sense of distance to authority is minimal, while in Belarus, a significant proportion of the population adopts a collectivistic mindset, resulting in a pronounced distance to authority. Particularism is observed to prevail over universalism,

and social trust is found to be significantly lower in comparison to Western societies (Hofstede Insights 2023, World Values Survey 2023). Consequently, it may be posited that Belarusian society is more susceptible to accepting centralist or authoritarian rule in comparison to Western societies. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, this characterisation of Belarusian society is not homogeneous. The research findings indicate that Belarusian society is divided. A significant proportion of the population exhibits the mental characteristics necessary for functioning within a democratic political system, while an equally significant proportion manifests characteristics reminiscent of 'homo sovieticus' – a person passively subordinate to authority, uncritically obedient (Davies 1998, Heller 1989).

The present situation is such that there is an absence of reliable surveys that can provide accurate data on the level of support for the Lukashenko regime. (It should be noted that the focus of our surveys is on mental models, rather than on support for the current authority.) Undoubtedly, a proportion of the population does in fact accept and support the regime; however, it is also evident that an increasing number of Belarusians are not in agreement and would prefer to live in a democratic system. This has been demonstrated by social protests after every presidential election and the especially large social protests (which were brutally suppressed by Lukashenko) that followed the 2020 presidential elections. The Belarusian example demonstrates that mentality is evolving, albeit slowly, and that this evolution is changing people's values, political views and demands (Inglehart 2018).

Beyond historically shaped mentality

The establishment of the independent Republic of Belarus in August 1991 was a consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Free media and independent political parties emerged, yet power remained in the hands of the former Russian-oriented communist elite. The opposition sought greater state independence from Russia, closer alignment with the West and free market-oriented reforms; however, it did not manage to gain enough political power to successfully implement its goals. The opposition's inability to garner sufficient political clout to realise its objectives was attributed to three key factors: the weakness of the opposition, the absence of experience, and the pervasive Sovietization of society (Foligowski 1999).

As time passed, the Belarusian scene polarised around the question of the country's future direction. The old nomenklatura consolidated its forces, and in March 1993, it began efforts to establish a closer relationship

with Russia. This had a constant influence on events, and much was done to prevent the unification of Belarusian society around the national idea. The Sovietisation and Russification of the Belarusian people resulted in a decline in national sentiment (Marples 1999, Rudling 2014). It is noteworthy that the majority of Belarusians spoke Russian at the time, and this has remained consistent to the present. In March 1994, a new constitution was adopted, replacing the 1978 constitution that had been in effect until then. The political system established by the new constitution can be characterised as presidential, a model that Belarus opted for in a manner consistent with the preferences of most post-Soviet republics. This approach stood in contrast to the parliamentarism that prevailed in countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The absence of state and democratic traditions appeared to favour the adoption of a system characterised by strong individual power. Notwithstanding, the period 1991–1994 is designated the parliamentary (or democratic) period in the contemporary history of Belarus (Foligowski 1999: 127–137).

After a period of turbulence caused by the dissolution of the USSR, Moscow began to return to its imperial plans (which encountered a favourable reception amongst Belarusian post-communists), in which Belarus belonged to its close sphere of influence. In order to implement these designs, a strong centre of power (with truly tsarist rights) was required to redirect Belarus, which had been undergoing a period of drift, back towards the East (Szybieka 2002, 435–445). In 1994, a series of free presidential elections took place, with the second round being won by Alexander Lukashenko, a post-communist who represented a pro-Russian direction (Foligowski 1999, 137–159). Lukashenko started built an executive power that followed the pattern of the old communist apparatus, basing power on force and fear. The repression apparatus was expanded, attempts were made to subjugate the trade unions and gain control of the media, and there was a rise in political repression.

From the president's inauguration until November 1996, there was open conflict between Lukashenko and the parliament, with disputes over the president's full power and the tension between democracy and authoritarianism. Russia was Lukashenko's ally in the fight against parliament, while Belarusian society was divided between supporters of democracy, parliament and independence, and supporters of a strong-arm rule and unification with Russia. Concurrently, the president sought to consolidate his position by implementing policies that were perceived to favour his regime. In 1995, a referendum was held in which the electorate voted in favour of the Russian language being granted equal status with Belarusian, the adoption of new national symbols, and economic integration with the Russian Federation. The president was granted the power to dissolve par-

liament, a power which he exercised immediately. However, the newly established parliament in 1995 did not submit to the emerging dictatorship.

A critical juncture was reached in 1996 when, under the guise of a purported referendum, Lukashenka imposed a new constitution that bestowed upon the president uncontested authority. This was followed by the dissolution of the parliament, thus giving rise to the abrogation of the democratic principle of the separation of powers. Consequently, the president has since been able to govern by decree, thus typifying Belarus as a country of so-called consolidated authoritarianism (Frear, 2019). The influence of the Russian Federation on events in Belarus was pronounced. In essence, Belarus has become a pawn in the political games of various interest groups within Russia. Regardless of the vision, Belarus was in Russia's sphere of influence (Szybieka 2002: 491).

The president has strengthened ties with Moscow, as evidenced by the establishment of a customs union with the Russian Federation in February 1995, followed by the Union of Belarus and Russia in April 1997. (Szybieka 2002: 454–465; Eberhardt 2008: 37–66). Lukashenko consistently and successfully consolidated his power and fought the political opposition. In 2004, a referendum abolished the term of office of the president of Belarus and Lukashenko won every subsequent presidential election. In 2020, the Central Election Commission officially declared Alexander Lukashenko the winner of the presidential election for the sixth time. As with previous elections, this was accompanied by social protests – this time on a massive scale.

In addition to cultural factors (Sovietisation, weak national identity – Russification of society), it is important to note that the economic situation (1991–1994) had a significant impact on the sentiments and political choices of the Belarusian people. Initially, independence brought about negligible changes in Belarusian economic system (centrally planned socialist economy), as the post-communist authorities, also known as "pragmatists", were reluctant to implement radical reforms, preferring to adhere to Soviet economic principles. The collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated the dissolution of old ties within the Union and engendered significant economic turbulence. In response to these challenges, beginning in late 1991, the authorities were compelled to adopt a series of economic changes, including the granting of state companies the autonomy to manage their own production, the creation of conditions conducive to foreign investment, the introduction of partially free prices in 1992, the allowance of partial privatisation in 1993, and the permission for commercial banks to commence operations. By 1994, the presence of commercial banks, private enterprises, and retail outlets had become a notable feature of

the economy. The establishment of private farms was observed, albeit with the absence of conducive conditions for their development. Indeed, private enterprise under state supervision continued to be stifled, and the onset of transformations was accompanied by abuses of power and corruption, signifying a transition from Belarusian socialism to oligarchic and usury capitalism. Concurrently, a substantial segment of society experienced rapid pauperization. By the conclusion of 1993, the crisis had commenced. Inflation soared beyond 400%, rapidly eroding the savings of the populace. Real wages experienced a precipitous decline (where real wages in 1990 equalled 100%, they stood at a mere 32% in 1994), and the government was compelled to implement a rationing system for essential foodstuffs in January 1993. The GDP contracted by 31% in 1993. The initial government of independent Belarus, instead of implementing more radical economic reforms, opted for a strategy of waiting for reunification with Russia to revitalise the economy. Belarus received Russian loans and its debts were cancelled, but this only served to perpetuate the government's passive attitude, which hindered the implementation of radical reforms. Consequently, this approach rendered Belarus even more economically dependent on Russia. The adherence to Soviet economic principles resulted in a significant lag in the implementation of reforms compared to Russia. For instance, in 1994, only 5% of state property was privatised (Szybieka 2002: 446–449).

In 1993–1994, Belarusian society was already experiencing significant economic hardship and social unrest, leading to the perception that market reforms were a contributing factor to the prevailing economic crisis. This atmosphere of desperation played a pivotal role in Lukashenko's electoral victory in the 1994 presidential election. During his presidency, Lukashenko articulated his ambition to assume absolute authority, citing the necessity of addressing the prevailing economic challenges as his primary motivation. This conviction was shared by a significant proportion of the president's inner circle and the broader populace, who placed their faith in stringent rationing and the centralisation of the economy as the key to addressing the prevailing economic challenges. The nation's aspirations were focused on a strong leader who would eradicate oligarchic capitalism, along with the pervasive corruption and poverty that characterised the socio-economic landscape. Lukashenko demonstrated a keen sense of the prevailing public sentiment, adeptly leveraging propaganda to serve his political agenda. In this regard, rather than undertaking the role of an economic reformer, the president effectively assumed the role of the governor of the national economy (Marples 2007).

At the turn of 1996, the Belarusian economy underwent a specific shift and the economic system emerged that can be described as “market socialism” or “state capitalism,” in which the state apparatus – the super monopoly – uses elements of the market economy (Szybieka 2002: 465–474). Over a long period, the Belarusian authorities carried out reforms aimed at improving the economy (reforming the public sector, stimulating private business, and gradually reducing the refinancing rate). However, concomitantly, the Belarusian leadership did not implement the requisite structural reforms to enhance the economy's efficiency and competitiveness. Furthermore, the Belarusian authorities consistently emphasised that market reforms are perceived as unfavourable and would not be pursued to their conclusion. Consequently, the model persisted in being characterised by the pervasiveness of an inefficient public sector and the pronounced directive management of the economy, largely driven by political and ideological factors. This economic model is compatible with and reinforces the political system, enabling the government to exercise tight control over the economy, thereby fortifying the regime and ensuring its longevity (Acemoglu, Robinson 2012: 73–83).

In the context of Belarus, the nation's capacity to adopt and implement market reforms has been hindered by its reliance on financial assistance from Russia, which is contingent on political concessions. The Belarusian economy has been characterised by a top-down approach to change, driven by the directives of the leadership and influenced by political and ideological factors, rather than being guided by principles of efficiency and expediency. Consequently, the nation has yet to achieve a comprehensive success in its economic transformation. The positive outcomes observed were largely transient in nature (Pieczewski, Sidarava 2024).

The continued functioning of the Lukashenko regime is predicated on its ability to rely on Moscow for economic support, which has been a crucial factor in maintaining its operational capacity. This support has taken various forms, including discounted oil and gas prices, and has served to fuel the Belarusian system, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. The Belarusian economy has benefitted from this assistance not only for domestic consumption but also through the processing of oil in its refineries and subsequent export of fuel at global market prices. At the inception of Lukashenko's rule, Belarus exchanged its industrial products for gas from Russia (Poczobut 2013: 163–165). The energy dependence of Belarus on Russia is almost absolute, and Belarus's reliance on its external protector extends beyond energy. Russia is a major economic and trade partner for Belarus, as evidenced by the 1995 Customs Union agreement. Nevertheless, this proved to be an inadequate measure, and consequently,

a treaty was signed on 2 April 1997, establishing a closer union between the two countries. Since 1993, Belarus has also been bound by a military alliance with Russia under the Tashkent Agreement, and its air defence is integrated with Russia's (Eberhardt 2008; Astapenia 2016). The present analysis suggests that the future of the Lukashenko regime (or his successor) is assured as long as a similar political system exists in Moscow. In view of the war in Ukraine, Putin's alliance with Belarus holds great strategic and symbolic significance for Russia, and it therefore does not appear that Moscow will let Minsk out of its grip. In the geopolitical context, therefore, which is determined by Russian imperialism, mental factors are clearly losing their importance, and Moscow is now the main guarantor of the Lukashenko regime's persistence.

Conclusions

The contemporary political system in Belarus is upheld by several factors. In this article, we focused on the culturally rooted political mentality of the society as an important factor upholding the authoritarian political system in Belarus. The results of the study of mental variables of Belarusians specific to the formation of political behaviour differ significantly from the results observed in Western Europe and even in culturally closer Poland. The locus of control in Western societies is more inward-focused, while in Belarusians it is outward-focused. In Western societies, individualistic thinking is prevalent and the sense of distance to authority is low, while in Belarus, a significant proportion of the population thinks collectivistically and the distance to authority is high. Particularism prevails over universalism, and social trust is considerably lower compared to Western societies. While some have argued that Belarusian society may be more likely than Western societies to consider it natural and acceptable to centralise or authoritatively rule, the present observation does not support this hypothesis. The mental models of Belarusians are arguably significant in maintaining Lukashenko's regime but not only. The mass social protests that followed the 2020 presidential elections, which were brutally suppressed by the dictator, demonstrate that Belarusians are divided on political issues and do not form a homogeneous characterisation.

The analysis indicates that apart from mental models of Belarusians, specific activities of Lukashenko and the geopolitical environment play a pivotal role in persistence the Belarusian political system. While mental models appear to have exerted a more significant influence during the early 1990s, when Belarusians retained the capacity to elect their leaders,

then the influence of specific activities of Lukashenko later became more important. First and foremost, it should be emphasised that the Belarusian political and a unique economic system have been shaped by Alexander Lukashenko and continues thanks to his dictatorial rule. Then the geopolitics has become predominant in the current era and the overwhelming influence of Moscow has rendered the Belarusian political system highly resistant to change. Russia strategically included Belarus within its sphere of influence, seeking to maintain its influence over the country. Under Lukashenko's leadership, Belarus has cultivated a close relationship with the Russian Federation, receiving substantial support from Russia both for his regime and for the Belarusian economy. The present political systems of Russia and Belarus are axiologically compatible, exhibiting a high degree of integration. This has led to the assertion that modern Belarus is simply an extension of Russia, with any alteration to the political system being unlikely without a concomitant change in Moscow, despite the desire for change among some Belarusians. In the current geopolitical situation of Belarus, cultural factors (mental models) are becoming less important as factors contributing to the regime's persistence.

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