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**THE EXTENT TO WHICH LEADERSHIP TRAITS MIGHT  
SHAPE FOREIGN POLICY OUTCOMES: THE CASE OF  
BELARUS-RUSSIA INTEGRATION**

**IRAKLI ETSADASHVILI**

**134**

**EXPERT OPINION**





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## Introduction

Poliheuristic theory is significant and interesting for us because it considers the differences between the foreign policy decisions of democratic and non-democratic leaders. Furthermore, it even differentiates the forms of non-democratic regimes and their foreign policy patterns of behavior (Kinne 2005). In this regard, Belarus is an interesting and fruitful example for the supplementation of poliheuristic theory, especially its part about decision-making in personalist autocracies, like in Lukashenko's Belarus, where the combination of the leader's strive to stay in power and his personal preferences are directly reflected in foreign policy decisions. It seems that Lukashenko is turning away from his own idea of integration with the "elder brother" (as he often calls Russia), more precisely – from its political paragraphs which include the creation of supranational units. In turn, Russia becomes more demanding about the conditions of the resurrection of the Union State but its demands coincide with Lukashenko's red lines and, as a result, the situation turns into a deep crisis. It is interesting to track down the alteration in Lukashenko's position towards deep integration with Russia and the creation of supranational institutions in the Union State from the 1990s until nowadays. It is an interesting case for three reasons: first – it is a perfect example of a non-compensatory two-stage decision-making process proposed by poliheuristic theory, second – it is a perfect case of foreign policy decision-making in a non-democratic environment (personalist autocracy, in this case) and third – Lukashenko's case has its own unique features which differentiates him from other examples of decision-making by non-democratic regimes. This paper will try to define Lukashenko's, as personalist autocrat, options, choices and decision-making processes in the 1990s (when he was a main ideologist of deeper integration and the creation of strong supranational institutions with Russia) and nowadays when the creation of any kind of supranational units with Russia turned into a red line. Based on the examination of Lukashenko's case, the following text will try to answer the main question – to what extent does a non-democratic regime and its features and specifics shape foreign policy outcomes?

According to Mintz and Geva (1997), poliheuristic theory provides us with a two-stage decision-making process. During the first stage, decision-makers eliminate certain alternatives from the choice set on the basis of one (or a few) critical dimension which usually and in our case, too, is

a political dimension. What this means is that if the option represents a threat to a leader's popularity, legitimacy, his regime and/or his political power, it is eliminated during the first stage. During the second stage of the decision-making, options are also considered on the basis of other dimensions (economic, strategic, military) and the one which minimizes risks and guarantees rewards is chosen from among the remaining alternatives.

Despite the development in the formation of the poliheuristic theory of foreign policy analysis, there is little attention paid to its part concerning the foreign policy decisions made by non-democratic leaders. We can list Sathasivam (2003), James and Zhang (2005) and Kinne (2005). Especially essential for us is Kinne's (2005) finding (and cases) that autocratic leaders are highly concerned with domestic constraints which may include a single party, military groups or, as in the case of Lukashenko, a leader's personality.

### **Integrational Processes during the 1990s**

"The statehood of Belarus is not a small coin but it is not an icon either." This statement was a part of Lukashenko's first election campaign.<sup>1</sup> His program also included the initiation and development of the processes of the unification of post-Soviet states<sup>2</sup> and soon after his election as the first president of the independent Belarus in 1994, he established close relations with the president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, and started to fulfill his promises. Lukashenko, alongside with Yeltsin, was the main architect of the Union State. The first integration steps were the signing of the Customs Union in 1995, then the creation of the Community of Russia and Belarus in 1996 which was the predecessor and foundation for the creation of the Union State in 1999. However, it is noticeable that during the aforementioned integrational processes in the 1990s, Lukashenko was more active than his Russian counterpart. More specifically, during the negotiations over the nature of the Union State, the Belarusian side insisted on the creation of supranational institutions – parliament and executive power (Union's Supreme Council). This practically meant the creation of a completely new state. Yeltsin, in turn, was not ready to take such a radical decision and asked the Belarusian side to put aside the signing of the Union State's Charter for a "nationwide discussion of its provisions."<sup>3</sup>

It is an interesting case for a poliheuristic foreign policy analysis. Why did Lukashenko decide to insist on the creation of supranational institutions with Russia, which was much stronger economically and militarily and, therefore, despite the Union State's provisions which emphasized the role of equality between member states, when it would not be unexpected that small Belarus would be absorbed by the "elder brother?" Even if we consider that both states had abided by the principle of equality, it would mean that Belarus (whose population was approximately 10 times lesser than Russia's) would have a much smaller representation in the common parliament. It seems that Lukashenko's decision does not follow the principles of poliheuristic theory's first stage decision-making because it created a threat to his own political power and his regime (Brule 2008). However, we should view his decision from the other side. During the 1990s, a vast majority of Belarusians and Russians still had Soviet nostalgia and against the background of a weak Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Union State of Belarus and Russia was the chance for the resurrection of the Soviet Union in some form. Also, considering Yeltsin's fast-growing unpopularity – an opinion poll taken on December 8, 1999, 23 days before his resignation, shows that 89% of Russia's population was distrustful of him.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Yeltsin's image was strongly connected with a turbulent process of privatization, the economic difficulties of the 1990s, corruption and the signing of the Belavezha Accords which put an end to the Soviet Union. On the other hand, before and after his election, Lukashenko claimed that he was the only one in the Belarusian parliament who voted against the Belavezha Accords. This and his overall pro-Soviet and anti-corruption rhetoric distinguished him from Yeltsin whose name was tied to such unpopular policies and decisions.

In conclusion, we can say that, according to the poliheuristic theory, at the first stage of decision-making Lukashenko did not consider the integration (even political) with late 1990s Russia as a threat to his own political survival and his regime because of the aging and highly unpopular Yeltsin. Moreover, the decision to defect from closer integration with Russia would have been perceived by the population as a non-fulfillment of one of his main pre-election promises. It would have been a highly unpopular decision and would have caused serious losses in popularity for the first-term Lukashenko who, by that time, was already demonstrating non-democratic tendencies but still had not concentrated all of the power in his hands and was still facing an institutionalized opposition. His personality

and image as a high-level politician nostalgic for the Soviet Union, still using the Soviet rhetoric of “friendship and brotherhood,” made him unique among other post-Soviet leaders. So, the option of defection from integrational processes was eliminated at the first stage. He proceeded to the second stage of decision-making when leaders choose from among the remaining options by either using utility-maximizing or lexicographic principles along a more diverse set of dimensions, including economic, military and diplomatic (James, Zhang 2005). At that stage, Lukashenko followed the utility-maximizing principle and, as a result, made a decision of active, deeper integration with the “elder brother.” His decision not to reform the Belarusian economy from the Soviet model cause it to remain heavily dependent on low (intra-Russian) prices on oil and gas and firmly tied Belarusian export and import with Russian markets. Therefore, closer economic integration with Russia was vital for the Belarusian economy which was confirmed during the 1995 referendum when 83% of the population supported the idea of economic integration with Russia.<sup>5</sup>

### **Late 2010s Attempts to Revive the Union State**

Despite some attempts at restructuring during Putin’s first term, neither Lukashenko nor Putin showed enough interest in the loose Union State and focused their attention on other integrational projects which had an economic nature – Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Eurasian Customs Union (EACU). Nevertheless, from 2018, the Russian rhetoric with Belarus changed towards the necessity of even deeper integration and the Union State was a good platform for these kinds of demands. However, after so many years, Lukashenko’s position towards any kind of integration with Russia, aside from the economic one, changed. The period of 2018-2019 was full of tense negotiations over the reanimation and reformation of the Union State, bargaining over oil prices and worrying statements from Lukashenko which included: “We are at the front. If we do not withstand in the next years, we will have to become part of some other state or they will wipe their feet on us. Or they will unleash a war in Belarus, like in Ukraine.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, 31 “road maps” were developed and although they have not been revealed, Lukashenko stated that the 31<sup>st</sup> one considers the creation of supranational units, something which is totally unacceptable for him. The other ones are mainly concentrated on economic, military and diplomatic issues.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that Lukashenko tries to focus on the economic factors of integration while frankly declaring that the creation of

supranational units is unacceptable for him. Furthermore, he completely understands that Russia's intentions are much more demanding and far-reaching than ever before.

The beginning of 2020 was marked by the failure of the Belarusian and Russian sides to agree on oil prices for the new year. As a result, Russia cut off its oil supplies to Belarus from January 1 but renewed them on January 4. In turn, Belarus introduced an environmental tax on oil transit through its territory on January 10.<sup>8</sup> As the Russian grip becomes stronger and there is less and less room for the maneuver left for Lukashenko, he tries to find common topics with Western states. In 2019, he visited the EU for the first time since 2016 and a number of US and EU top-level politicians visited Belarus during 2018-2019 (Aaron Wess Mitchell, David Hale, John Bolton and Mike Pompeo's visit was announced in 2020) and all of them emphasized the importance of Belarus' sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence.

Why did Lukashenko change his opinion about political integration with Russia? Poliheuristic theory will be useful for explaining and answering this question but first of all – what are his current options for action? He can accept a Russian blueprint of integration (which includes the creation of supranational units), he can defect from any kind of integrational negotiations with Russia and he can try to stretch the negotiations, simultaneously negotiating with Western states to relieve Russian pressure. According to poliheuristic theory, during the first stage of decision-making, leaders eliminate those options which represent a threat to their political survival (Mintz 2005). During the evaluation of Lukashenko's alternatives, the paper will rely on Mintz's (2004) 12-point list of possible political losses. First of all, we should notice that Putin's Russia is different from Yeltsin's Russia, it is much more consolidated and centralized, with a more popular and autocratic leader. In the case of integration by the Russian scenario, Lukashenko, a long-standing personalist autocrat who has been the president of the independent Belarus since 1994 and the main decision-maker since the power consolidation processes in mid-to-late 1990s, will have to share his authority with supranational institutions. This decision will result in severe damage to his image and status as a superior leader and the main decision-maker. As a result, political integration with Putin's Russia is perceived by Lukashenko as a serious threat to his political power, his regime and his legitimacy as a leader. These political losses overlap the economic benefits of the discussed policy, specifically – low prices



on oil and gas, cheap loans and the Russian markets open for Belarusian goods – all of which other integrational organizations (EAEU, EACU) fail to provide and all of which Belarus enjoyed during the 2000s. Furthermore, the idea of closer integration with Russia does not have any significant public support and Lukashenko himself uses this argument, stating that “98% of Belarusians will vote against unification with Russia because new generations have grown up and the old ones understood that we can live and cooperate in a completely different form.”<sup>9</sup> While it is difficult to say where he got these numbers, he is completely right in terms of the new-old generations and the new understanding of interaction with Russia. Sociology shows that the 50% of Belarusians are in favor of an independent Belarus while 36% support the idea of an equal union with Russia (this includes the formation of supranational institutions). Compared to 2003’s data, the idea of an independent Belarus has a growing tendency (by 15%) while the idea of a union with Russia has a declining tendency (by 13%).<sup>10</sup> As we can see, integration with Russia (by the Russian scenario) creates nearly all of the political losses listed by Mintz (2004). Furthermore, Lukashenko’s decision-making follows Kinne’s (2005) principles of foreign policy decision-making in personalist autocracies where leaders care about their status among their peers (military, regional actors, domestic public) - which represents the first stage of analysis - and if a decision contains a threat to their status, political power or regime, it is immediately eliminated without the consideration of its economic, military or strategic benefits or losses.

## **Conclusion**

Lukashenko’s case is a good supplement to the literature on poliheuristic foreign policy decision-making and decision-making in autocratic regimes. The issue of decision-making in autocratic regimes is largely underdeveloped and so this paper can serve as a contribution to the literature by showing how an autocratic leadership affects and shapes its state’s foreign policy decisions and outcomes. Compared to the examples made by Kinne (2005), Lukashenko’s case has some similarities with all of them while also having its own uniqueness. In Kinne’s cases of Saddam (personalist autocracy), Musharraf (military autocracy) and Gorbachev (single-party autocracy) and Sathasivam’s (2003) example of Pakistan, the main sources of threat to the existing regimes were domestic actors – the domestic public (Saddam), military (Musharraf), the ruling party

(Gorbachev) and the domestic public (Pakistan). However, in the case of Lukashenko, his highly centralized regime, the complete absence of an opposition and the politically inert Belarusian society, the main source of threat to the existing regime is not a domestic one but an external one. Anti-integration protests in Belarus in December 2019 gathered a small amount of people and if we add the absence of an institutionalized opposition, we can make the decision that in the case of integration with Russia by the Russian scenario – Lukashenko’s regime will suffer political losses not from the domestic public (as in the case of another personalist autocrat – Saddam Hussein), but from the results of integration – the creation of supranational institutions – to which Lukashenko and his political elite will have to delegate some part of their authority. As a result, we have an interesting and paradoxical situation when an autocratic leader, who came into power and gained his popularity mainly by pro-integrational position, now became the main guarantor of the state’s sovereignty.

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