

## Our Little Castro in Belarus

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By Konstantin Sonin

The political life of Cuban leader Fidel Castro goes on and on, thwarting all attempts to draw up a final summary of his reign. Over the course of Castro's 50 years in power, Cubans' standard of living has remained practically unchanged — even as living conditions have improved by leaps and bounds in most other countries. Among the many questions I'd like to pose: How was Castro able to maintain control of a small and militarily weak country using the energy of far stronger world powers?

A comprehensive history of Fidel would undoubtedly help us understand the behavior of Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko, who has recently taken a series of steps to spite Russia's current leadership.

It's a historical fact that Cuba benefited greatly from the friendship and material support of the Soviet Union from the beginning of the 1960s to the late 1980s. But it is worth remembering that Fidel's rule began with a friendship of an entirely different sort. Having seized power following the overthrow of the Batista regime, the newfound Cuban prime minister set out on a long visit to the United States in an effort to shore up relations there. It didn't work out, of course. To draw support from the revolutionary poor while simultaneously defending American special interests at the U.S. government's behest was a balancing act too difficult for even Castro. Understandably fearing that the United States would interfere in the island's internal power struggles, Fidel threw himself into the arms of its Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union.

The story of the dramatic confrontation that occurred between the two warring superpowers during the Cuban Missile Crisis is a familiar one: Moscow placed nuclear-tipped rockets in Cuba; the Americans responded by threatening to blockade the island and inspect incoming vessels. Moscow withdrew the rockets and, in exchange, Washington agreed to withdraw its bases from Turkey and Italy and guarantee the safety of the Cuban government. Was it a draw? Yes, unless you count the person who won big at someone else's expense.

It's unclear what Moscow gained from all those years of supporting socialist Cuba. Fidel got the ability to consolidate and retain power despite shoddy domestic policies and brash foreign policies. (His country, one of the major economic failures of the 20th century, actually served as a source of "ideas" for others.)

The history of Fidel is not just an isolated case. The 20th century knew many other local "tsars" and socialist leaders who built up their own power and took handouts from all sides. For Russia, the lessons can be applied to Lukashenko. Support for an authoritarian, undemocratically elected leader might bring short-term gains, but it eventually turns a big country into a smaller country's hostage. Attempts by big countries to use economic levers to pressure little Castros lead to lower standards of living and strengthen the authoritarian leaders' power. If Lukashenko had to answer to voters, or if his power were restricted by an opposition-led parliament, he would have far fewer opportunities to manipulate us through his foreign policy.

In general, we don't spend enough time studying the United States' mistakes in Latin America over the past two centuries. We ought to hit the history books.

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