

Belarusian Political Parties: Organizational Structures and Practices

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Introduction

In Belarus, a state where elections are an “administrative formality,” political parties are largely irrelevant (Freedom House 2014). They have no representation in the Belarusian parliament, and no say in political processes. Because of its “authoritarian exceptionalism,” Belarus has been excluded from many large-N studies of party and electoral systems (e.g., Birch 2005, Clark & Wittrock 2005).

Even so, there is no dearth of parties in Belarus. Fifteen parties are currently registered with the Belarusian Ministry of Justice, reporting a combined 98,000 members (Kulakevich 2015). The actual number of parties is even higher, as at least four opposition parties have been repeatedly denied registration and thus function illegally.

The authoritarian context accounts for the most salient cleavage in Belarusian politics – namely, attitude toward the Lukashenka regime. While the pro-opposition parties are consistently harassed by the state, the pro-regime parties enjoy some degree of patronage. Left-right ideological differences, on the other hand, do not clearly demarcate parties. While the pro-regime parties tend to lean left, following the Belarusian president, the pro-opposition parties span the entire ideological spectrum.

In this chapter, we review the characteristics of the Belarusian party system, with a view to explaining how the restrictive political context within which parties operate affects their organizational structure. We examine the legal framework governing party development, and discuss variation in structure across the pro-regime and pro-opposition parties.

We conclude that Belarusian parties do not neatly fall into the ideal categories or types that have been developed in political science literature (Duverger 1954, Gunther and Diamond 2003, Katz and Mair 1994, Neumann 1956, Wolinetz 2002). To comply with national laws, political parties in Belarus have acquired on paper a hierarchical structure corresponding to the

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administrative division of the state. Most parties also convene caucuses to elect party leadership. This is where their similarity with Duverger's (1954) mass party model ends.

Belarusian parties have remained under-institutionalized since the country gained independence in 1991. The lack of electoral prospects has thinned the base of prospective members; regional offices exist only to fulfill legal requirements; internal party decision-making lacks transparency; and as much as one-third of party leaders have led their parties for at least as long as incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka has governed the country (1994 to the present). Pro-opposition parties compete to a limited extent - if not for votes, then at least for foreign funding. Pro-regime parties lack incentives to invest in organizational infrastructure altogether. Such parties seem to exist solely to staff electoral commissions and then disappear as soon as the votes have been counted.

Over two decades of authoritarian rule have undermined pro-opposition and pro-regime parties alike. In fact, parties may be growing increasingly irrelevant in Belarusian politics. Without meaningful elections, the line between a political party and other organizational forms is becoming increasingly blurred. The rise of pro-government association *Belaya Rus*, as well as the parallel emergence of pro-opposition campaigns such as Tell the Truth, suggest that *movements* may be more adapted to Belarus's political realities than to its parties.

The Formation of the First Belarusian Parties

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus, like most post-Communist countries, adopted a hands-off approach towards the regulation of political parties. Existing restrictions were dismantled, and the Communist party was banned. In June 1990, the Supreme Soviet adopted Resolution No. 222-XII "On the Registration of Public Associations in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic," which established a threshold of 100 members for founding a political party. The provision prohibited the creation of public associations aimed at changing the constitutional system, violating national integrity and security, violating constitutional rights of citizens, and inciting national, racial, or religious conflict.³ Amended in 1991, 1992, and 1993, the Temporary provision regulated the establishment of political parties and movements until 1994 (Feduta et al. 2003).

³ On the basis of the resolution from October 1990, the Council of Ministers issued Resolution No. 255 "On establishment of the Temporary provision on the order of organizing and activities of citizen's public associations."

The laissez-faire approach contributed to a rapid growth in the number of parties. In 1994, the Belarusian political landscape included 24 registered parties, including the Party of Beer Lovers (*Partja Amatarau Piva*) (Feduta et al. 2003).

On October 5, 1994, Belarus adopted the Law on Political Parties, which remains the primary legislation regulating political parties today. The law raised the minimum number of members necessary for registration of a party from 100 to 500, and increased the registration fee from 10 to 50 basic units.⁴ In 1999, Presidential Decree No. 2 “On Activities of Political Parties, Trade Unions, other Social Action Organizations” further raised the minimum membership necessary for registration from 500 to 1,000. The decree also established a Republican commission for registering public associations. The registration fee was lowered in 2011 to 20 basic units.

These requirements have contributed to the decline in the number of parties. If at the beginning of 1999, 41 parties were registered in total and 27 parties actively participated in politics, only five parties met the registration requirements before the deadline established by the 1999 decree. While the deadline was subsequently extended, only eighteen parties were registered in Belarus by the end of 1999 (Korasteleva 2005: 52).

Since 2000, the Belarusian Ministry of Justice has registered no new political parties. The number of existing registered parties froze at 15 following liquidation decisions by the Supreme Court in 2004 and in 2007 (see **Figure 1**).

This is not due to a lack of interest but rather to the high rejection rate of new parties by the Ministry of Justice. In April 2015, the Belarusian Supreme Court considered a complaint for the seventh failed registration attempt by the Belarusian Communist Party of Workers (*Belaruskaya Kamunistychnaja Partyja Pracownych*). The unregistered Party of Freedom and Progress (*Partya Svobody i Prahresa*) had been refused registration five times as of April 2015. The Young Front (*Malady Front*) was refused registration seven times - it was accused of attempting to create a legal framework for committing unlawful acts. The Belarusian Christian Democracy (*Belaruskaya Hrysianskaya Demakratya*) was denied registration as a political party four times, and as a public association - ten times.

⁴ As of January 1, 2015 one basic unit was equal to 180,000 Belarusian rubles (about 12 USD).

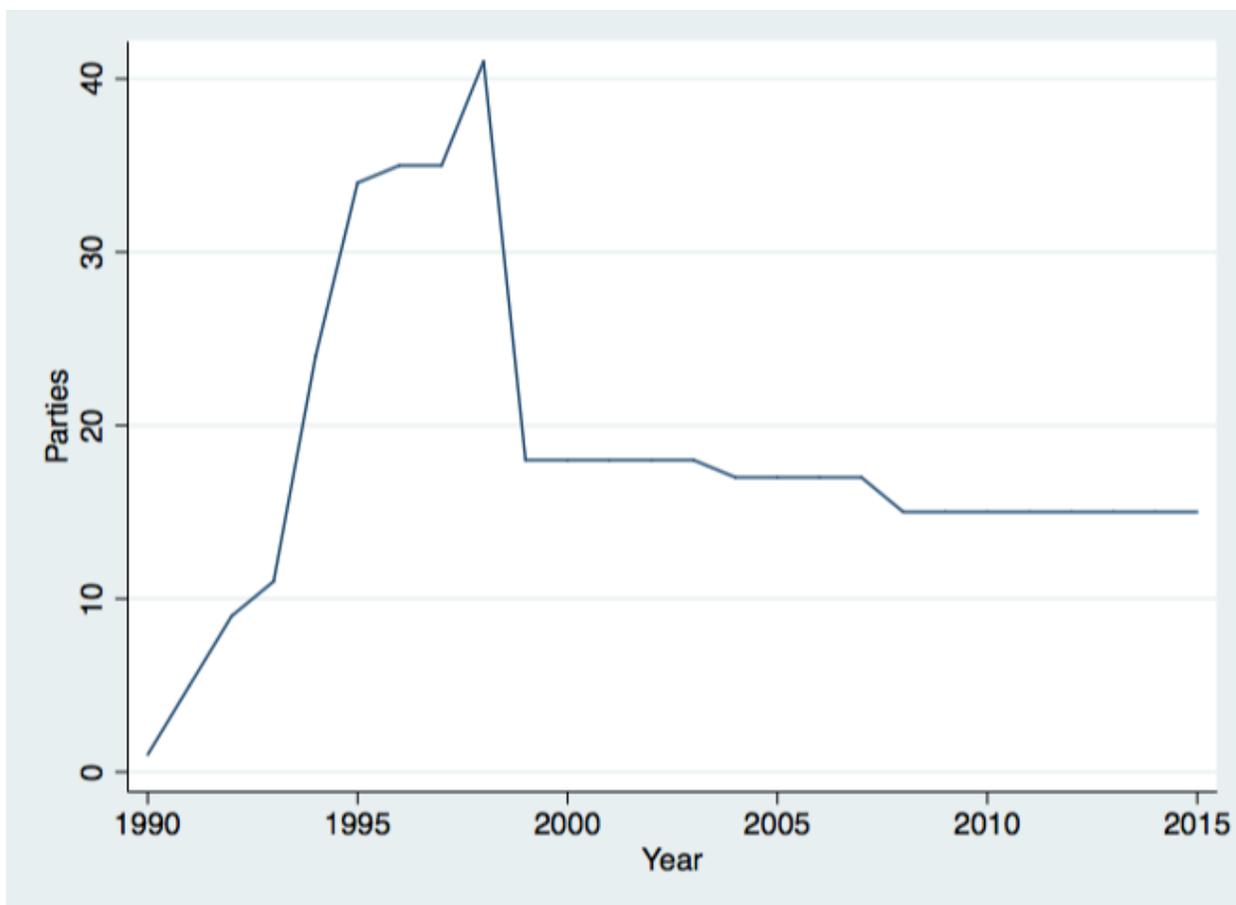


Figure 1. Change in the total number of registered parties in Belarus over time.

One of the most popular reasons for denial of registration is failure to prove the existence of at least 1000 members. Members' signatures provided with the application for registration can be disqualified if the Ministry of Justice fails to verify information about the members' residence, employment details, etc. (IHAHR 2015). Opposition parties face a higher barrier to entry than pro-governmental parties, as the authenticity of their members is more likely to be questioned.

Key Legal Solutions Devoted to the Creation and Functioning of Political Parties

Electoral Code

Belarus has undertaken significant electoral reform following the collapse of the Soviet state. The country's current electoral legislation ostensibly meets international standards. Article 3 of the Electoral Code stipulates that presidential, parliamentary, and local elections "shall be free and shall be held on the basis of universal, equal, and direct suffrage by secret ballot."

Nonetheless, the freedom of opposition parties to operate has been severely constrained, as the government has used all tools of state coercion available to demobilize, marginalize, or criminalize the opposition's activities. Opposition leaders and active members have been subject to numerous detentions, threats, and imprisonment (Kulakevich 2014).

Belarus is the only post-Soviet state to have retained a single member district (SMD) system with an absolute majority vote (White et al. 2013:160). This electoral system has been argued to thwart the institutionalization of democratic politics in transitional states (Birch 2005). Single member districts are conducive to entrenchment of "localized politics that focuses on individuals and relies on patronage networks" (White et al. 2013:160). As White *et al.* (2013) observe, in Belarus and Russia SMDs have led to the election of a large number of independent candidates, thus reducing the role of parties in the electoral process.

The Electoral Code requires that party and movement representatives make up a third of the membership of electoral commissions. However, this requirement has not facilitated party building. Pro-opposition parties have faced difficulties when attempting to serve on the electoral commissions. Instead, the requirement seems to have provided a *raison d'être* for the weakest pro-regime parties, whose primary function seems to be staffing commissions.

In the 2014 local election, for example, the Agrarian Party (*Belaruskaja Ahrarnaja Partyja*) offered no candidates, but sent 531 of its members to sit on electoral commissions. Similarly, no candidates from the Republican Party (*Respublikanskaja Partyja*) competed in the election, yet 327 of them sat on electoral commissions. The Belarusian Socialist Sports Party (*Belaruskaja Sacyjalna-Spartyunaja Partyja*) offered up three deputies, while 582 of its members sat on electoral commissions. By contrast, the opposition party - The Belarusian People's Front (*Belaruski Narodny Front*) - had 27 candidates running and proposed 64 committee members, of which only six were accepted (Charnysh 2015). In the 2012 parliamentary election, out of about 69,000 members of electoral commissions, only 61 represented pro-opposition parties (Makushina 2012).

Parties that staff electoral commissions to secure results favorable to the Lukashenka regime instead of competing in elections lack the incentives to invest in organizational infrastructure, or even to create a presence online. Four out of eight pro-regime parties lack a website.

Opposition parties also face difficulties when registering election candidates. In the 2014

local election, when stakes were low and 88% of the seats were uncontested, candidates from the opposition parties faced rejection rates of anywhere between 30 and 80% (Murphy 2015). But even the parties supporting the politics of the president have not been able to receive more than a few seats (see **Table 1**) in the elections to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly.⁵ The best-performing party, the Communists, placed three deputies in the 110-seat Lower House of the Parliament in the 2012 election. Seventeen party members were appointed to the 64-seat Upper House. The Liberal Democratic Party (*Liberalna-Demokratychnaja Partyja*) claims to have the largest membership base (51,000 members), and yet the party failed to win seats in the 2012 legislature.

Table 1. Descriptive information about the *registered* political parties in Belarus.

Party	Deputies (2012-16)	Members (2015)	Leadership (inaugural year)	Years in power
Pro-government				
Liberal Democratic Party (<i>Liberalna-Demokratychnaja Partyja</i>)	0	51000	Siarhei Hajdukevich (1994)	21
Republican Party (<i>Respublikanskaja Partyja</i>)	0	10000	Uladzimir Belazior (1994)	21
Republican Party of Labor and Justice (<i>Respublikanskaja Partyja Pracy i Spraviadlivasci</i>)	1	9830	Political Council (1993); Vasil Zadneppany (2006)	9
Communist Party of Belarus (<i>Kamunistychnaja Partyja Belarusi</i>)	6	6500	Tatsiana Golubeva (1996); Ihar Karpenka (2012)	3
Belarusian Social-Sport Party (<i>Belaruskaja Sacyjalna-Spartyunaja Partyja</i>)	0	2500	Uladzimir Alexandrovich (1994)	21
Belarusian Patriotic Party (<i>Belaruskaja Patryjatychnaja Partyja</i>)	0	1500	Mikalai Ulahovich (1996)	19
Social-Democratic Party of People's Agreement (<i>Sacyjal-Demokratychnaja Partyja Narodnaj Zgody</i>)	0	n/a	Leanid Sechka (1997); Siarhei Ermak (2000)	15
Belarusian Agrarian Party (<i>Belaruskaja Ahrarnaja Partyja</i>)	1	n/a	Siamion Sharetski (1992); Mikhail Shymanski (2000); Mikhail Rusy (2012)	3

⁵ The House of Representatives of the National Assembly is the lower house of the Parliament of the Republic of Belarus. The House of Representatives comprises 110 members (representatives). The House of Representatives is elected by the majoritarian system.

Pro-opposition				
Party Belarusian People's Front (<i>Partyja Belaruskaj Narodny Front</i>)	0	5000	Vincuk Viachorka (1999); Liavon Barshcheuski (2007); Aliaksei Janukevich (2009)	6
United Civic Party (<i>Ab'jadnanaja Gramadzianskaja Partyja</i>)	0	3668	Stanislau Bagdankevich (1996); Anatol Liabedzka (2000)	15
Conservative-Christian Party - BPF (<i>Kanservatyuna-Hryscijanskaja Partyja - BNF</i>)	0	3000	Zianon Pazniak (1993)	22
Belarusian Party of the Left "Just World" (<i>Belaruskaja Partyja Levych "Spraviadlivy Svet"</i>)	0	1300	Siarhei Kaliakin (1994)	21
Belarusian Party "Green" (<i>Belaruskaja Partyja "Zialionyja"</i>)	0	1250	Aleh Gramyka (1994); Aleh Novikau (2007)	8
Party Belarusian Social-Democratic Hramada (<i>Partyja Belaruskaja Sacyjal-Demokratychnaja Hramada</i>)	0	1200	Stanislau Shushkevich (1998)	17
Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Hramada) (<i>Belaruskaja Sacyjal-Demokratychnaja Partyja (Hramada)</i>)	0	1150	Mikalai Statkevich (1996); Anatol Liaukovich (2005); Anatol Sidarevich (2010); Iryna Vershtard (2011)	4

According to Article 35 of the Electoral Code, political parties “may nominate only one representative each into respective territorial, district and precinct commissions.” Parties are no longer required to maintain a local presence in the constituency where they wish to nominate a candidate. This rule has deterred many opposition parties from proposing candidates outside major cities, where the opposition has stronger presence. Unregistered public associations such as opposition movement “Tell the Truth” (*Havary Praudy*) are permitted to propose candidates as independents on the condition they provide 1000 voter signatures (Freedom House 2013). Any organization located in the constituency with a staff of at least 300 employees may also propose a candidature. Thus registration as a political party carries few advantages when preparing for elections and disincentivizing party building.

Belarusian Constitution

The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, the 1994 Law on Political Parties, Presidential Decree No. 2, and orders of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus and

the Ministry of Justice all form the legal basis for the activities of political parties in Belarus. At face value, these documents largely conform to international democratic norms.

Article 4 of the Constitution states that “Democracy in Belarus is carried out on the basis of the diversity of political institutions, ideologies, and opinions.” Constitutional norms, aimed at implementation of important constitutional provisions, enshrine the people as the sole source of state power. The Belarusian Constitution (1994, amended 2004) emphasizes that the ideology of political parties may not be made mandatory for citizens (Article 4).

Article 5 of the Constitution stipulates that parties “shall contribute to ascertaining and expressing the political will of the citizens and shall participate in elections.” The Constitution mandates the right of parties to use mass media, and prohibits “activities of political parties and other public associations that aim to change the constitutional system by force or conduct propaganda of war, or social, ethnic, religious, or racial hatred.”

The Law on Political Parties

The Law on Political Parties defines a political party as a voluntary public association that pursues political objectives and facilitates the identification and expression of citizens’ political will and participates in elections.

The law stipulates that parties must adhere to democratic norms and procedures. Under Article 4, “Political parties and unions operate on the basis of the principles of freedom of association, democracy, rule of law, transparency, self-governance, and equality of all political parties and unions.” Importantly, Article 6 of the Law prohibits state bodies and officials from interfering with parties’ activities.

According to Article 21, parties have the right to freely disseminate information on their activities, to promote their ideas, goals and solutions; to use state media in the manner prescribed by law; to establish their own media and engage in publishing activities in the manner prescribed by law; to hold meetings, rallies, demonstrations and other public events in the manner prescribed by law; to protect the rights and legitimate interests, and also to represent the legitimate interests of their members in state bodies and other organizations; and to participate in elections in the order established by the legislation.

The following sections examine the key aspects of party development: the sources of party financing; the struggle of parties to recruit members; the legal constraints on parties’ organizational structures; and the role played by party leaders.

Party Financing

One of the key elements of regulation is the control of party financing. Public funding is provided to political parties across most of post-Communist Europe, but notable differences exist between post-Communist EU member states on the one hand, and post-Soviet republics and some Balkan countries on the other (Kopecky 2006: 263). In the latter group, public funding is largely symbolic, and resources are instead distributed through patronage and corruption (Kopecky 2006).⁶

Belarus is among the states in the latter camp. Article 24 of the Law on Parties prohibits funding of parties from the state budget; there are no provisions for direct public funding of parties or candidates.⁷ This provision is likely aimed at discouraging all political activity. Corporate funding, while permitted by the law, is scarce in Belarus because the government controls the business sector and privatization has been limited. The government also has a history of harassing independent businessmen who support the opposition.⁸

In the 2000s, the Belarusian government sought to further weaken the opposition by amending the law in order to prevent parties from obtaining funds from foreign states and organizations, anonymous charities, religious organizations, or legal entities registered for less than one year prior to granting the gift. Parties can use only banks or other financial organizations that are registered in Belarus. The amended law stipulates that resources from prohibited sources shall be transferred to the state. Refusal to transfer these funds voluntarily can serve as grounds for collection in court.

No limits on maximum campaign spending exist, but contributions to campaign funds by individuals and legal entities are restricted. For example, in the 2010 presidential election campaign, individuals could contribute to a campaign fund no more than 10 “basic units,” while legal entities could contribute no more than 30 units (Venice Commission 2010).

⁶ The states without direct public funding in the post-Soviet world today are: Ukraine; Kyrgyzstan; and Turkmenistan.

⁷ At the same time, parties and candidates are allocated limited amounts during electoral campaigns. For example, in 2010, each presidential candidate was allocated money for printed material (OSCE 2010).

⁸ Perhaps the best-known incident is the 1999 disappearance of businessman Anatoly Krasousky together with opposition politician Viktor Gonchar, whom Krasousky supported. Two years later, successful businessman Anatoly Lashkevich, who supported opposition candidate Uladzimir Hancharik, had to emigrate following Lukashenka’s victory in the 2001 election (Charnysh 2013).

Despite tightening restrictions, international funding continues to be the lifeline of Belarusian opposition parties (e.g., Carothers 2004, Ash 2014).⁹ Separate NGOs are often set up to get around both domestic and international restrictions on foreign funding of political parties (Ash 2014).

While the extent of foreign support is difficult to estimate, trips abroad by some opposition politicians suggest the importance of international connections for the viability of the opposition. According to BISS, in 2013 trips abroad and meetings with foreign politicians accounted for 9.1% and 17.5% of all media references to Belarusian opposition parties, respectively. At the same time, meetings with the domestic electorate amounted to just 27% of all media references (BISS 2014).

The scarcity of domestic resources and reliance on foreign support may be partly to blame for the fragmented state of the Belarusian opposition today. Ash (2014) argues that opposition leaders have to campaign and challenge the regime to secure funding. The cycle restarts with each bout of post-election repression, when old movements split and when new aid-seeking entities emerge.

Some pro-regime parties seem to thrive despite the ostensible lack of support from the state budget. The party that seems to have grown fastest in recent years is the Republican Party of Labor and Justice (*Respublikanskaja Partyja Pracy i Spraviadlivasci*). The party's regional leadership includes several directors of state enterprises and heads of regional administration. The party's chair, Vasil Zadniapradny, sat on the Consultation Committee of the Presidential Administration in 2009; and its Deputy Chair, Alyaksandr Sciapanau, received several thank you letters from Lukashenka for his active participation in the 2006 and 2010 elections. The party's success may not have been possible without some degree of patronage.

Party Membership

Party membership cannot be restricted by professional, social, racial, national, or religious attribute, or by gender, origin, property status, or place of residence (Law on Political Parties 1994). In line with most European constitutions, persons holding certain public offices are prohibited from belonging to a political party. These include: judges; officers of the prosecutor's

⁹ For example, in 2004, US President George Bush signed the "Belarus Democracy Act," authorizing assistance for democratic forces, such as political parties, NGOs, and independent media. The act was renewed and amended in 2008 and 2011.

office; KGB; the state supervisory committee; and the military. A citizen of Belarus can be a member of only one political party at a time. Only Belarusian citizens who have reached the age of 18 can join political parties (Law on Political Parties 1994).

As noted above, the minimum number of members necessary to establish a party has grown over the years from 100 to 1,000 members. This membership requirement suggests a clear boundary between *members* and *supporters* of a political party. In reality, however, the line between members and supporters is blurred, as membership amounts to few meaningful party activities. Most parties do not even collect membership dues.

While parties have to report membership numbers to the Ministry of Justice (see **table 1**), the true number of active members remains a mystery. Mass media report, for example, that the leader of the Belarusian Patriotic Party (*Belaruskaja Patryjatychnaja Partyja*), Mikalai Ulahovich, has forced Cossacs to join his party. Anatol Liabedzka of the United Civil Party (*Ab'jadnanaja Gramadzianskaja Partyja*) in turn recognizes that the number of active members of his party does not add up to the reported total of 3,668 members (Kulakevich 2015). Kulik and Pshizova (2005: 68) conclude that Party Belarusian Social-Democratic Hramada (*Partyja Belaruskaja Sacyjal-Demakratychnaja Hramada*) and the Liberal Democratic Party (*Liberalna-Demakratychnaja Partyja*) “at large have feckless memberships, which on paper represent a wide network of more than 2000 supporters on average, but in reality are very limited.”

Many current members of opposition parties joined in the 1990s, at the height of the transition from communism. Newcomers also join during election years, when the opposition is most prominently displayed in the media. Recruitment through friends and professional networks predominates.¹⁰

Unregistered parties also keep track of the number of their supporters. For example, The Belarusian Christian Democracy, an unregistered party founded in 2005, claims to have recruited a total of 7,742 people by 2014. These people are called “supporters of the committee for creating BCD” rather than members, to get around the party’s unregistered status.

Domestic financing through membership fees in the majority of parties does not play a decisive role as a source of party finances. This means that parties care about the numerical increase of their ranks only to the extent that they can fulfill registration requirements. Many

¹⁰ Authors’ interview with Ihar Barysau of Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada).

opposition parties have decided not to invest into recruiting a broad membership base at the local level and instead focus on the activities of party leaders at the national or international level (Chavusau 2009).

Rights and obligations of party members vary only slightly across parties. The similarity of membership rules in the pro-opposition Belarusian People's Front (*Belaruski Narodny Front*) and the pro-government Republican Party of Law and Justice (*Respublikanskaja Partyja Pracy i Spravedlivasci*) is a case in point. According to the Belarusian People's Front charter, new members (called "friends" (*siabry*)) may be accepted upon submission of a written request, which must be approved by a simple majority either at the general meeting of the party, or by the Party Congress (BPF 2012). They can be expelled for violating the charter of the party or defaming the party. Members can take part in party activities or organize their own party events. They can also vote in party elections and be elected for party positions. They are obligated to register in one of the local party branches of BPF and to strive to achieve the party's objectives, including by serving as deputies. The Republican Party of Law and Justice sets very similar requirements, but its charter stipulates that party members must have "a solid civil position and high moral qualities." Members' explicit obligations include pursuing realization of the party's goals, promoting the party's influence in society, and adhering to party discipline (RPTS n.d.).

Party Structures

Building a party

To establish a new political party, party founders convoke a constituent congress, approve the party's name and charter, accept the program of the new party, and elect party organs (Law on Political Parties 1994). They are required to register the party with the Ministry of Justice within a month of the date of the constituent congress. The registration procedure requires paying a registration fee, providing a copy of the party's charter, and providing a list of 1000 founding members with information on their residence, citizenship, employment, as well as other documents. A registered party is required to submit annual reports listing members of all elective bodies, and to describe the size and structure of the party, as well as its activities conducted in a given year (Law on Political Parties 1994).

The Ministry of Justice issues warnings to political parties that violate regulations. If a violation remains unaddressed, the Supreme Court can suspend the violating party's activity for a period from one to six months. The party cannot use its bank accounts during the suspension

period, according to Article 31 (IDEA n.d). In the past, the Ministry of Justice has issued warnings for (1) failing to establish party structures in Minsk and at least four other regional centers,¹¹ (2) for violating the party charter by appointing rather than democratically electing leadership,¹² and (3) for failing to submit an annual report on party membership and activities to the Ministry of Justice.¹³

According to Article 10, liquidation of parties can be carried out: (1) on the decision of the supreme body of that political party or union; or (2) on the decision of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court can liquidate a political party if the party: (1) carries out propaganda of war or extremist activities; (2) violates legislation of its constituent documents; (3) fails to meet membership or regional representation requirements; or (4) receives foreign aid (Law on Political Parties 1994). Parties can be liquidated one year after a written warning has been issued.

In 2004, the Supreme Court decided to terminate the Belarusian Party of Labor (*Partyja Pracy*). In 2007, two other pro-opposition parties were liquidated – Women’s Party Hope (*Nadzeja*), and the Belarusian Ecological Greens Party (*Belaruskaya Ekalahichnaya Partyja Zialionych*). The two parties were playing no active political role at the time (Chavusau 2008).

The law is not consistently enforced, especially not when the existence of pro-regime parties is in question. In 2009, the Ministry of Justice issued written warnings to Belarusian Agrarian and Belarusian Republican parties. Yet these two parties have continued to exist, even though the Ministry of Justice could not confirm information on their membership base.

Central, Local and Regional Party Structures

The organizational structure of all registered parties corresponds to the administrative division of Belarus. According to Article 10, parties are required to establish “organizational structures in Minsk, as well as regional organizational structures in the majority of regions of the Republic of Belarus [...] within six months of their registration date” (Law on Political Parties 1994).

The supreme body of a party is Congress. All party members elect delegates for Congress in the manner established by the Party Council. Sometimes there are so-called “technical

¹¹ Ministertvo Ustitsii Belarusi Vyneslo Preduprezhdenie Shesti Politicheskim Partiam, (2007, August), Interfax, <http://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/1008797>.

¹² “Minust vynes pismennoe preduprezhdenie Partii BNF” (2010, July), AFN, <http://afn.by/news/i/138020>.

¹³ “Ministerstvo Ustitsii Belarusi Vyneslo Pismennye Preduprezhdenia po Dvum Partiam.” (2009, June), CTV, <http://www.ctv.by/node/22309>.

Congresses” for nomination of candidates for parliamentary elections, or for amending the party charter. During the period between Congresses, parties are led by elected bodies and, subordinated to the Congress, the executive body and advisory commissions, committees, and bureaus (Law on Political Parties 1994).

The law requires that parties establish regional organizational structures. Typically, parties also have structures at district and municipal levels, and the basic level of a party is usually a primary cell. Registered parties are also required to have an auditing body, empowered to deal with complaints against decisions of party divisions and to monitor compliance of officials’ actions with the party charter and legislation requirements (Law on Political Parties 1994).

On paper, opposition parties have the same structure and functioning bodies as pro-government parties. **Figure 2** and **Figure 3** illustrate the organizational structure of the Belarusian National Front, a pro-opposition party, and the Republican Party of Labor and Justice, a pro-regime party. Unregistered parties are free to determine their own governance structures, but they also generally follow the law in order to qualify for registration in the future.

The Importance of Party Leaders

Most charters specify rules for democratic succession of party leadership. For example, the Charter of the Belarusian People’s Front addresses the question of leadership succession by including a provision that no leader can serve longer than two consecutive terms. Party conventions elect their leaders and deputies in a secret ballot election every three years (BPF 2012).

Nonetheless, most parties struggle with leadership succession. One-third of the current leaders have headed their parties for the entire duration of Lukashenka’s rule or even longer (**table 1**). Lukashenka has held his office since 1994 - 21 years. Zianon Pazniak of the Belarusian Christian Party BNF (*Kanservatyuna-Hryscijanskaja Partyja - BNF*) has chaired his party since 1993. Siarhei Kalyakin of the Belarusian Party of the Left “Just World” (*Belaruskaja Partyja Levych “Spraviadlivy Svet”*), Uladzimir Belazor of the Republican Party (*Respublikanskaja Partyja*), Uladzimir Alexandrovich of the Social-Sport Party (*Belaruskaja Sacyjalna-Spartyunaja Partyja*), and Siarhei Haidukevich of the Liberal Democratic Party (*Liberalna-Demakratychnaja Partyja*) have all chaired their respective parties for 21 years. Leaders of Belarusian parties have stayed in office for 13.6 years on average.

Alternation of a leadership position typically happens when parties split. The Belarusian People's Front was split into Zianon Pazniak's faction and Vincuk Viachorka's faction following Pazniak's emigration. The Social Democratic Party was split several times, around three powerful leaders – Stanislau Shushkevich, Alyaksandr Kazulin and Mikola Statkevich – who had sought presidential office. While 2006 presidential candidate Kazulin was in prison, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party Hramada (*Belaruskaja Sacyjal-Demakratychnaja Partyja Hramada*) nearly fell apart again due to the contentious decision of electing a deputy chair to lead the party.

Figure 2. Organizational Structure of the Belarusian National Front, a pro-opposition party.

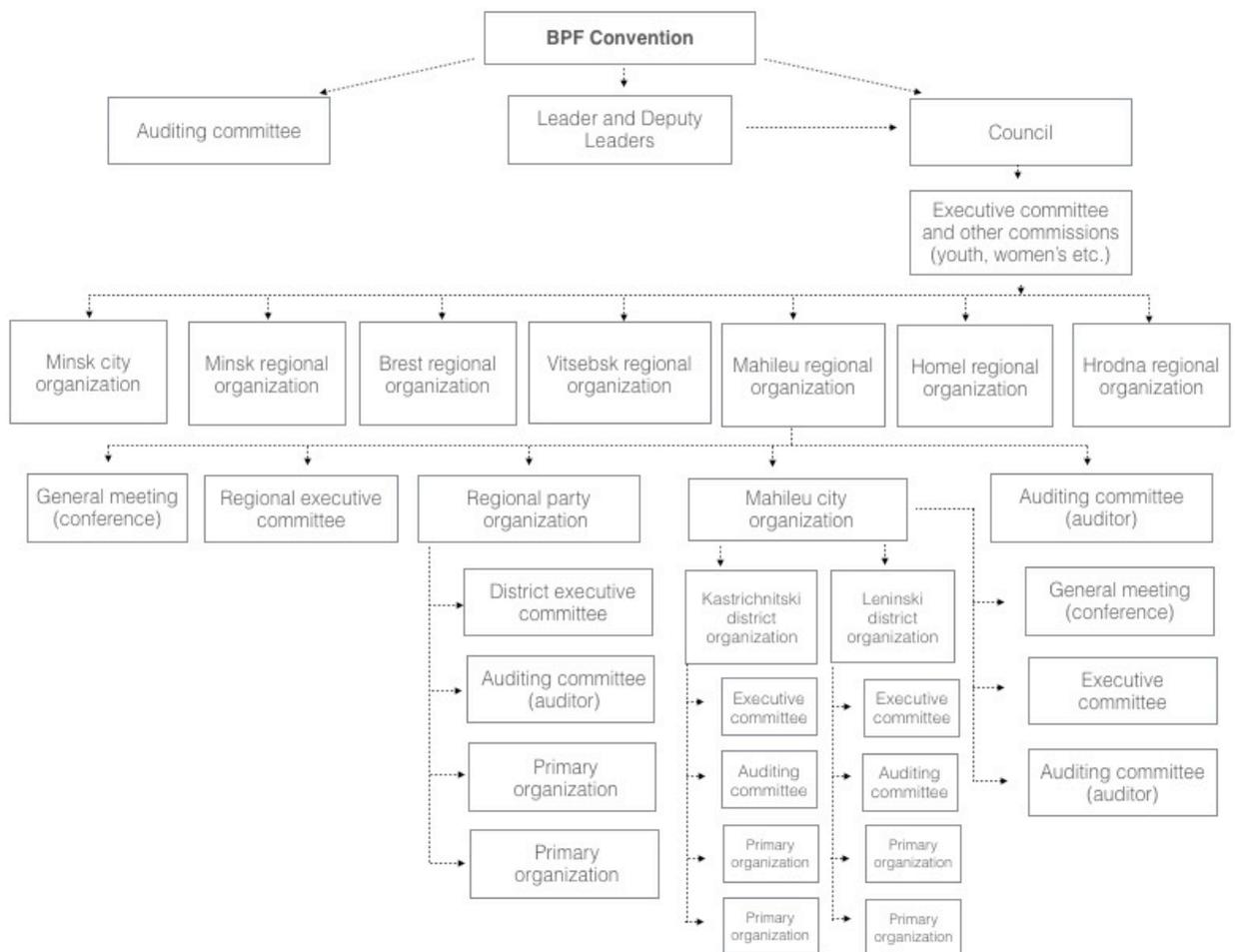
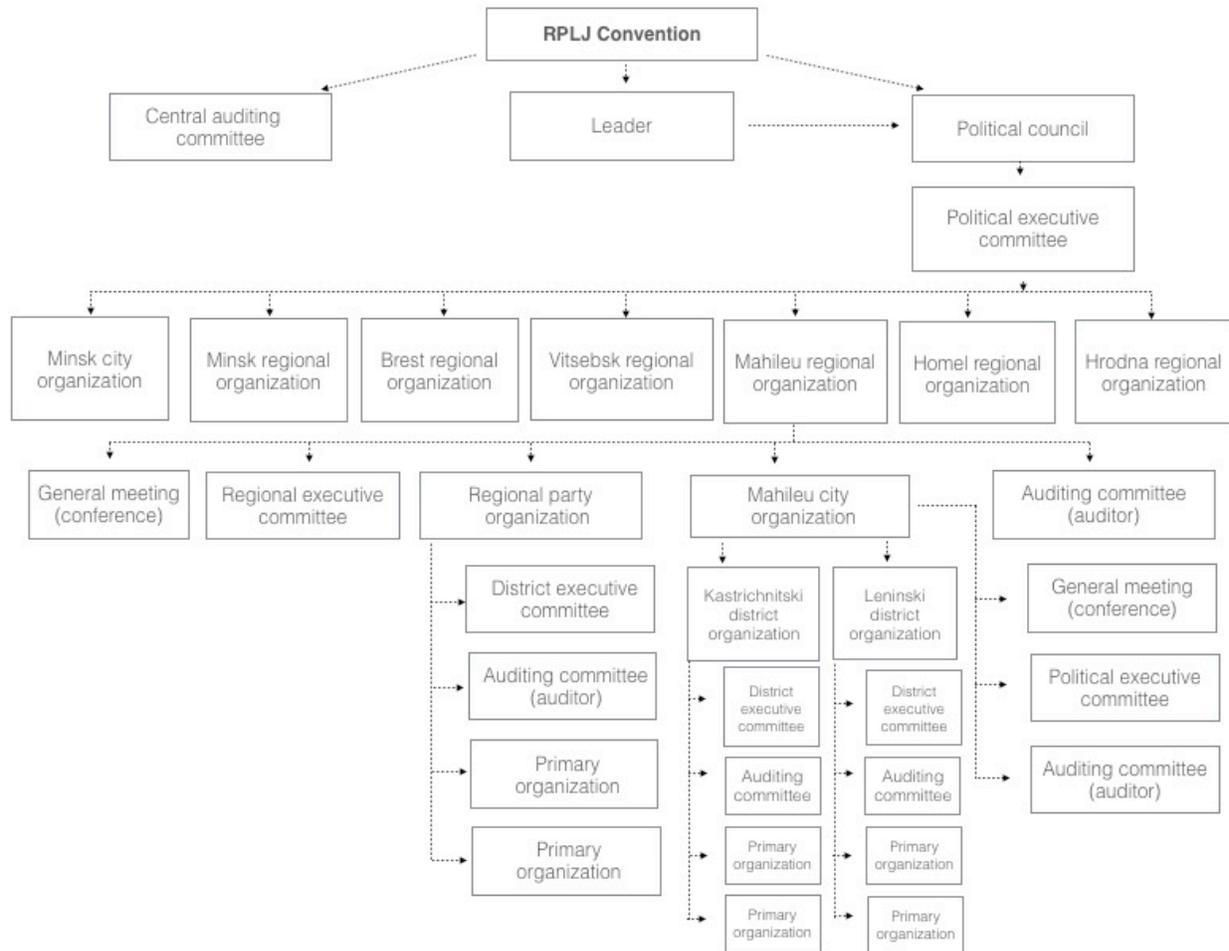


Figure 3. Organizational Structure of the Republican Party of Labor and Justice, a pro-government party.



Chavusau (2009) concludes that the majority of pro-opposition parties lacks internal opposition. No one fights for power in the parties because of the hardship and danger that party leadership entails. The presence of internal disagreement with the party leadership does not indicate that a new leader may be elected. In interviews, party leaders said they struggled with finding candidates for the post of Party Chairman to avoid uncontested elections (Chavusau 2009). The internal disagreements that do arise are usually of procedural or personal, rather than of ideological, nature. Internal factions are built from the top, not from the bottom. The likelihood of their coming to power is low and hinges on the consent of current party leadership.

Party leaders play an outsized role. An analysis of media references suggests individual

opposition politicians are mentioned without their party or movement affiliation about one-third of the time (BISS 2014).

Conclusion: From Parties to Movements?

The existence of fifteen pro-opposition and pro-government parties provides a semblance of political competition in Belarus and allows the Lukashenka government to counter Western criticism. Yet parties play a limited role in Belarusian politics and are isolated from Belarusian society.

Few people in Belarus perceive political parties as forces that are able to protect their interests, understand their needs, or effectively represent them in national legislature. In a 1991 survey, 80% of respondents said that political parties played a crucial role in establishing democratic institutions in Belarus. By 1994, however, the percentage of people who shared this view of political parties had fallen to 51% (Korosteleva 2000). According to a March 2015 survey by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, only 18.8% of respondents trusted opposition parties (IISEPS n.d.).

Infrequent participation in elections and unsuccessful political campaigns hardly help parties build voter trust. The only clear message parties convey is that they have not yet disappeared.

The authoritarian context within which parties operate to a large extent explains their weaknesses. For the opposition parties, survival means cultivating relationships with foreign donors rather than developing a mass party base and strong regional representation. This reliance on foreign funding may partially explain the dependence of these parties on recognizable leaders who can go abroad, speak English, and meet with foreign officials. For pro-regime parties, survival means cultivating mutually beneficial relationships with the state. Investing in regional party structures and recruiting new members may only dilute the benefits from patronage.

Yet even in their comparatively more favorable political environment, the pro-regime parties may be losing relevance. Belaya Rus, a pro-government association with 147,000 alleged members and chaired by the Minister of Education, might soon take their place. Belaya Rus's legal status as a republican association rather than a political party allows for greater flexibility in recruitment and activity planning. The association was ahead of the pro-regime and pro-opposition parties alike in preparing for the 2015 presidential election. In the spring of 2015, the association created a republic-wide headquarters to coordinate the campaign efforts of its local-

level units (Charnysh 2015). The association provided observers and helped staff electoral commissions during the presidential election.

The rise of Belaya Rus suggests that broad non-ideological movements might better fit Belarus's current political realities than political parties. The proliferation of pro-opposition movements such as Tell the Truth (*Havary Praudy*) or For Freedom (*Za Praudy*) conforms to this hypothesis.

For the Belarusian opposition, establishing a movement may be easier than building a political party. Firstly, some international donors may feel uneasy when overtly seeking political influence through their support of political parties. Civic movements, in contrast to parties, can tap into a broader pool of international funding and adjust their stated goals in accordance with the available grants. They can also compete in both social and political spheres. Secondly, being classified as a movement entails fewer negative associations and wins more public support. While the law prohibits parties to recruit citizens under 18 years of age and stipulates membership in only one political party at a time, movements can recruit younger citizens as well as citizens who belong to other movements. At the same time, movements are not required to present evidence of 1,000 members to register. Finally, while a movement can nominate electoral candidates in the same manner as a political party, it can claim legitimacy on grounds other than electoral success, a metric that remains unattainable in contemporary Belarus.

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