

# Political Opposition in Belarus: Movements Instead of Parties

At the Chernobyl Way rally last month, activists from the opposition group Malady Front carried a controversial poster titled “Game Over.” The poster, listing most opposition parties and movements, highlighted the dire state of the democratic opposition in Belarus.

Activist Mikola Dziamidzenka, who carried the poster, explained that the opposition parties are losing membership and legitimacy because senior figures are putting their ambitions above the common cause. Dziamidzenka’s statement follows the departure of Uladzimir Niakliajeu, one of the most prominent opposition figures, from the opposition coalition.

Opposition leaders increasingly split from their parties and create civic movements, which combine political goals with social and cultural initiatives. A 2014 article by Konstantin Ash in *Democratization* suggests that foreign assistance for pro-democracy movements, combined with political repression within Belarus, may be to blame for the fragmented state of the Belarusian opposition today. According to Ash, 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 divide and new aid-seeking entities emerge.

## **Contesting Elections For Seats in Prison**

During Belarus’s twenty-year history, eleven out of seventeen presidential hopefuls saw their run for office end in

[harassment, prison](#), or even exile. Despite this, the number of presidential candidates grew from just two in the 2001 election to three in 2006 and ten in 2010. Their vote shares, on the other hand, fell from a maximum of 16% in 2001 to 6% in 2006 to 2% in 2010.

Presidential Election	Best performing opposition candidate	Vote share	No. candidates
2001	Vladimir Goncharik	16%	2
2006	Alexander Milinkevich	6%	3
2010	Andrey Sannikov	2%	9

Nonetheless, three opposition politicians have already declared their intention to run in the [November 2015 election](#): Anatoly Liabedzka, Chairman of the United Civic Party; [Taciana Karatkevich](#) of Tell the Truth campaign; and Siarhei Kaliakin of the left-wing party The Free World. While some argue that this is the only opportunity to legitimately reach a broader constituency in Belarus, others see the absence of a unified candidate as a weakness.

## Fickle Membership in Opposition Parties

On paper, membership in both opposition and [pro-government parties](#) in Belarus has grown over time. In reality, twenty years of repression have probably thinned the base of active members in the opposition parties. According to Ihar Barysau of Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada), “Under a dictatorship...opposition organisations are less engaged in real politics than in trying to survive.”

New members are hard to recruit due to the low visibility of the opposition, the persistent lack of electoral success, and the high risk of being associated with groups that oppose the incumbent regime. Intraparty conflicts sometimes lead to the outflow of existing members.

Many current members of opposition parties joined in the 1990s, at the height of Belarusian democracy. Newcomers also join during election years, when the opposition is most prominently displayed in the media. Recruitment through friends and professional networks predominates – "few people come in from the street", Barysau said.

Party	Membership over time	
Belarusian National Front	1,259 (2002)	5,500 (2015)
United Civic Party	3,125 (2002)	3,668 (2015)
Belarusian Social Democrats (Hramada)	1,171 (2002)	1,200 (2015)
Belarusian Christian Democracy	3,691 (2010)	7,742 (2014)

Belarusian Christian Democracy, an unregistered party founded in 2005, has enjoyed the greatest gains in the number of supporters. The party recruits during campaigns, via social networks, and by keeping detailed records of people who have attended its events. According to Dzianis Sadouski, each potential supporter is contacted at least two to three times.

## Leaders Play an Outsized Role and Contribute to Fragmentation

An analysis of [media references](#) by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) in 2014 suggests that, around one-third of the time, individual politicians from the opposition are mentioned without party or movement affiliation.

State harassment of opposition politicians is especially effective because the opposition movement fares poorly without strong leadership. For example, while the 2006 presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin was in prison, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) nearly fell apart due to the contentious decision to reshuffle leadership. The party endured another crisis following the departure of chairman Anatol Liaukovich, who was accused of breaking the party's charter, in 2011.

Another 2006 election candidate, Alyaksandr Milikevich, lost leadership of Coalition Plus Five following incarceration. He reacted by forming his own movement, For Freedom.

Last month, Uladzimir Niakliajeu, the most recognisable among the opposition politicians, [left the opposition coalition](#) People's Referendum and announced plans to create a new movement for the statehood and independence of Belarus. The emergence of yet another entity would exacerbate the fragmentation of the opposition.

## **Reliance on Western Donors**

For the Belarusian opposition, domestic electoral success and state financing lie outside the realm of possibility. But international popularity – and funding – are attainable. Trips abroad by some opposition politicians thus seem to play a disproportionate role when compared to party activities aimed at developing the domestic base. According to data collected by BISS, trips abroad accounted for 9.1% of all media references to opposition parties in 2013, and meetings with foreign politicians for 17.5%. At the same time, meetings with the domestic electorate made up just 27% of media references.

Competition for international support, as well as close encounters with the Belarusian KGB and prisons, may explain why opposition leaders are so suspicious of each other. For example, in 2011, Stanislau Shuskevich of Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly called 2010 presidential candidates Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Yaraslau Ramanchuk traitors and criticised their invitation to a Warsaw conference on democratisation.

## **Proliferation of Movements**

The proliferation of movements, such as the one proposed by Niakliajeu, may be another product of the dependence on

foreign support in a repressive political environment. The number of political parties – registered and unregistered – has remained constant since 2008, while the number of movements continues to grow.

Establishing a movement carries several advantages. First, some international donors may feel uneasy when overtly seeking political influence by supporting political parties. Civic movements, in contrast to parties, can tap into a broader pool of international funding, adjusting their stated goals in accordance with the available grants. They can compete in both social and political spheres.

Second, political parties [lack the trust and confidence](#) of the post-Soviet electorate. Being classified as a movement brings up fewer negative associations in Belarus and facilitates recruitment. It allows claiming legitimacy on grounds other than electoral success.

One should not expect electoral miracles from an opposition that has no access to mass media or domestic funding. This November's election is all but certain to end in another victory for Alexander Lukashenka, regardless of how united the opposition is.

Having witnessed the aftermath of Maidan protests in Ukraine, the majority of Belarusians believes in "As long as there is no war!" and is willing to overlook the country's deepening economic problems. Instead of playing Don Quixote and waiting for a Belarusian Maidan, the opposition should prepare for the long haul. That means building trust among the electorate, developing distinct party platforms, and aiming to influence particular policies of the Belarusian state.

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# What Washington and Minsk Have to Talk About



On Friday, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip Gordon listened more than he talked. Perhaps because he was not graced with the presence of the chief Belarusian orator, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Most likely, however, because Washington doesn't have much to talk about until Minsk lifts restrictions on the political opposition, allows independent media and NGOs to develop and takes other measures to improve its human rights record.

Gordon first talked with the representatives of the Belarusian opposition. Alyaksandr Kazulin, Siargei Kaliakin, Anatol Liaukovich, Anatol Liabedzka, Vincuk Viachorka, Viktor Karniaenka, Vital Rymasheuski, Valiancin Stefanovich, and Mihail Pashkevich briefed Gordon on the political situation in the country prior to his meeting with the presidential chief of staff and foreign minister.

According to the Foreign Ministry's terse account, "The sides discussed the development of Belarus-US relations, in particular taking advantage of the existing opportunities to expand the trade and economic cooperation and interaction in international security sphere."

According to the US Embassy, "During discussions with Belarusian government officials, he (Gordon) stressed the U.S. desire to continue to engage Belarus in a mutual effort to

improve bilateral relations.”

Gordon emphasized that the United States will not lift its sanctions on Belarus in exchange for the enlargement of its staff at the US embassy in Minsk. Sanctions will be lifted if there are actual improvements in political situation in the country, he said.

Gordon remarked that his visit to Belarus was made possible by the improvements like the release of the political prisoners. The Belarusian government needs to put a little more effort to have the sanctions lifted, however. Washington is ready to send an ambassador to Minsk, but it is up to Belarus to make it happen, stressed Gordon.

Read more about Gordon’s visit in [\*The Washington Post\*](#).