

Why did the Belarusian Popular Front not garner mass support as its equivalents in the Baltics or Ukraine did?

Long Collapse of the Soviet Union - Essay

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Introduction

In the late 1980s, much like in the other European republics of the Soviet Union, a Popular Front movement emerged in Belarus. Originally named the Belarus Popular Front for Perestroika “Revival”(bielaruskaha narodnaha frontu za pierabudobu "adradžeńnie")*, it first advocated more autonomy within the Soviet Union¹, and later full independence. This movement was mainly subscribed to by members of the intelligentsia², and ran on an electoral platform of 15 points, including social, economic, ecological and political principles³. Unlike in other republics however, it never garnered mass support throughout Belarus, and for the most part failed electorally, despite large rallies in Minsk and support for workers strikes⁴. One can see a strong example of this lagging behind in the 1990 elections, which occurred in all the Union republics to their respective Supreme Soviets, and provide a benchmark for comparison of the movements.

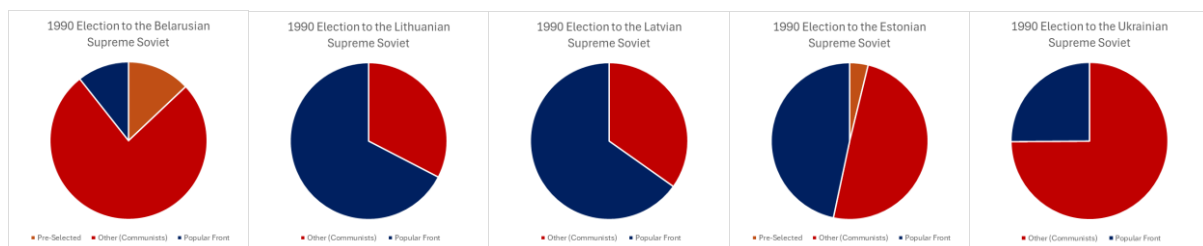


Figure 1: 1990 Supreme Soviet Elections in select republics⁵.

Both in Ukraine and Belarus, the movements remained a minority, though while in Ukraine they were catalysed by the 1991 Coup and gained further popularity⁶, in Belarus this never happened. Why was this, and was it really due to the radicalness of their program, as it is frequently described^{7,8}?



Figure 2: Pro-Independence Demonstration in Minsk, August 1991⁹

* In this essay I will refer to the Belarusian Popular Front by its initials in Belarusian: BNF.

The BNF's Program

The BNF is described as being too radical by both of the following authors.

Wilson (2021) attributes this radicalness directly to the views of the leader of the BNF, Zianon Pazniak, specifically those in his book 'Sapraŭdnaje abličča', a collection of his works between 1988 and 1990. If we look at some of the more extreme views expressed in this book, such as on the description of genocide of Belarusians by the CPSU, or the accusation that Moscow had consciously turned Belarus into a nuclear testing ground¹⁰, we may never know how accurate these are, certainly on the distinction between deliberate exposure or criminal incompetence by the regime in the aftermath of Chernobyl. On the other hand he also doubted the democratisation of Russia and wrote that it would always strive for expansion¹¹, which so far has been proven correct.

Leshchenko (2004) on the other hand gives an example of this radicalness by pointing to the BNF's celebration of victory at the Battle of Orsha in 1514, during which the invading Muscovites were heavily defeated. She then paints the invaders as victims of this massacre which Belarusians could not morally take pride in. She also points to Pazniak's 'catchphrase' that 'Belarus was the victim of 'Russian imperial ambitions'.

Neither of these authors examine the electoral program of the BNF, which should reflect the beliefs of the wider membership of the party, and also offers a perspective that is accurate to 1989, and is not affected by later political developments.

If we compare Ukraine's *Rukh* to the BNF, as both were Popular Fronts in the Slavic republics of the USSR, founded around the same time, their programs are rather similar, with each of the BNF's 15 points having an approximate equivalent in *Rukh*'s program¹². Furthermore, the BNF only began advocating for independence in 1991, whereas *Rukh* began advocating for full independence in 1990¹³, and the Baltics' popular fronts each demanded independence in 1989^{14,15,16}, demonstrating the movement's adaptation to Belarusian popular opinion.

Favourable Conditions

While the BNF did ultimately fail, there were certain conditions that contributed to their popularity, especially in their stronghold in Minsk.¹⁷

Kurapaty & Chernobyl

While the effects of the Chernobyl disaster were felt throughout the entire Soviet Union through an awakening of ecological conscience, Belarus felt the brunt of the ecological damage, with the disaster happening just across the border, and with winds blowing north, 23% of Belarus' territory was contaminated¹⁸, compared to 7% of Ukraine¹⁹.

At the same time as this ecological disaster was being newly contested due to Gorbachev's *glasnost*, in 1987 historian (and later nationalist leader) Zianon Pazniak discovered the remains of mass killings in Kurapaty Forest, which were carried out by the NKVD between 1937 and 1941. While the number of deaths there is unknown (and even repressed by the current regime²⁰) Pazniak estimated between 30,000 and 250,000 deaths, while a Government Commission estimated at least 30,000²¹.

These two events contributed significantly to nationalist sentiment in Belarus, and in 1988 there was a large rally in Minsk that was heavily suppressed by armed forces in Belarus, which in turn contributed to the popularity of the newly formed BNF^{22,23}. There was even a human chain of “several thousands” formed like in the Baltics and Ukraine²⁴.

Independence & Successes

While the BNF did not gain anything near a majority, they still successfully pushed for independence and the adoption of national symbols in the aftermath of the August 1991 coup. These two successes have been criticised however, the former for being really orchestrated by the Communists²⁵ and for being the effect of outside currents²⁶, and the latter for being largely symbolic (and later reversed)²⁷. On the other hand, the fact that they were decided by the communist dominated Supreme Soviet goes to show that they were politically popular decisions and highlights the appeal of the BNF's program.

Negative Conditions

The negative conditions that the BNF had to work within did ultimately cause their failure, but these may have been more nuanced than simple lack of nationalism.

Electoral Conditions

The BNF suffered under difficult electoral conditions both before the end of the Soviet Union, through both violence and control of media and speech²⁸ as well as after independence.

While the BNF were at the height of their influence after 1991, there was a popular initiative for early elections to be called which gathered over 400,000 signatures. The Communist dominated Supreme Soviet ignored the call for a referendum despite the petition having 33,000 confirmed signatures more than the legal amount required to force a referendum²⁹. According to Pazniak and Siarhei Navumchyk, who was one of the BNF's deputies, this was the most important turning point for Belarus' chance of developing democracy³⁰.

By the time elections were held in June 1994, this time for the post of President after the constitution was changed earlier that year, the mood of the electorate had swung significantly. With the effects of economic shock therapy in Russia clearly visible³¹, as well as widespread debate on the ability of democracy to represent the people's will³², the electorate turned to the culturally and economically conservative Lukashenko, who ran a populist campaign based on anti-corruption, himself having previously been the head of the anti-corruption committee³³.

Language, Religion & Identity

While the question of language was strongly pushed by the BNF, the amount of people who spoke Belarusian at the time is unclear. In the 1989 census 65.6% of the population declared their native language to be Belarusian, though it was only in 1999 that the question of language of the home was added, where the majority switched to Russian, despite an even larger Belarusian native language population³⁴. This meant that even if elements of the population agreed with a nationalistic rhetoric, they did not necessarily see themselves represented by the BNF.

There is also a division in religious identity in Belarus, where despite heavy Soviet repression there continued to exist a Catholic population, as well an atheist and Orthodox majority. Upon independence all the main political leaders, Pazniak, Kevich, the Communist Prime Minister and

Shushkevich, the President of the Supreme Soviet, were all Catholics³⁵. Lukashenko incorporated religion into his campaign by portraying himself as an 'Orthodox Atheist', the effect of which could be seen in 1994's first round electoral results with Lukashenko winning outright in the more Orthodox east of Belarus³⁶.

Conclusion

Despite the BNF having a relatively similar program to the popular fronts in the Baltics and Ukraine, it suffered from unique circumstances stemming from the political, linguistic and religious history of the region, as well as heavy handed repression from the nomenklatura that remained in power throughout, the combination of which did not allow the development of either nationalist sentiment, nor fair electoral conditions. Characterising the BNF as too radical, or Belarusians as not nationalistic enough ignores the repression that was perpetuated since the very beginning of Russian presence in the region, up until the modern day.

While Belarusian nationalism never reached the populace as it has in neighbouring countries, the threat of the BNF to the Communist Party helped the drive for independence of Belarus, which so far, despite even more Russification throughout Lukashenko's regime, remains independent. Whether it will have a revival after the end of his regime remains to be seen.

Annex 1: Breakdown of 1990 Supreme Soviet Elections in select republics⁴

	Belarus		Lithuania		Latvia		Estonia		Ukraine	
Total	360		141		201		105		450	
Actual ^b	347	100.00%	135	100.00%	201	100.00%	105	100.00%	442	100.00%
Pre-Selected ^c	45	12.97%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	4	3.81%	0	0.00%
Other	265	76.37%	44	32.59%	70	34.83%	52	49.52%	331	74.89%
Popular Front	37 ^d	10.66%	91 ^e	67.41%	131	65.17%	49	46.67%	111 ^f	25.11%

^b Seats were left vacant in cases where a majority was not found.

^c In certain republics some seats were pre-allocated to certain groups. In Belarus they were 'social organisations' and in Estonia they were Soviet Army members in Estonia.

^d This is the most generous estimate available but there is no clarity on the exact number of elected deputies.

^e Lithuania's *Sąjūdis* was not a political party but endorsed certain candidates.

^f Ukraine's *Rukh* was represented by the Democratic Bloc coalition.

Annex 2: Comparison of the BNF's 15 Points and Rukh's 1989 Program¹²

#	BNF Point (Belarusian)	BNF Point (English)	Rukh Equivalent Section	Quote (Ukrainian / English)
1	Поўную гаспадарчую самастойнасьць прадпрыемстваў і поўную адказнасьць рэспублік за сацыяльна-эканамічнае разьвіцьцё.	Full economic independence for enterprises and full responsibility of republics for socio-economic development.	ЭКОНОМІКА (Economy)	"бути республіканського господарського розрахунку" (to be based on republican economic accountability).
2	Прыняць Закон аб арэндзе прадпрыемстваў працоўнымі калектывамі.	Adopt a Law on the leasing of enterprises by labor collectives.	ЭКОНОМІКА (Economy)	Mention of "колективної" (collective) forms of ownership and "господарського розрахунку" (economic accountability).
3	Пэратварэньне... сельскагаспадарчых прадпрыемстваў у кааператывы або фермерскія гаспадаркі; бэстэрміновая арэнда зямлі.	Transforming... agricultural enterprises into cooperatives or private farms; perpetual land lease.	ЭКОНОМІКА (Economy)	"забезпеченість землі та... Агропрому" (securing land and the Agroprom).
4	Сьпецыяльныя дэпутацкія камісіі павінны... ажыцьцяўляць рэальны грамадскі кантроль за якасьцю і колькасьцю прадуктаў.	Special deputy commissions must... exercise real public control over the quality and quantity of products.	ЗАГАЛЬНІ ПРЫНЦЫПЫ (General Principles)	"систематичне... гуртувала громадську думку... якості продукції" (systematically... gathered public opinion... of product quality) .
5	Адмяніць сістэму наменклатурных... пасадаў і зьвязаных з імі сацыяльных прывілеяў.	Abolish the system of nomenclature... positions and the social privileges associated with them.	СОЦІАЛЬНА СПРАВЕДЛИВІСТЬ (Social Justice)	"боротьба за... соціальну справедливість" (struggle for... social justice).

#	BNF Point (Belarusian)	BNF Point (English)	Rukh Equivalent Section	Quote (Ukrainian / English)
6	Узаконіць дзяржаўную кампенсцыю росту індэксу цэнаў; рэфармаваць пенсійнае забеспячэнне.	Legalize state compensation for price index growth; reform pension provision.	СОЦІАЛЬНА СПРАВЕДЛИВІСТЬ (Social Justice)	Mention of "соціальної... справедливості" (social... justice) in the context of citizens' rights.
7	Тэрмінова выправіць вынікі аварыі [у Чарнобылі]; абвясціць мараторый на будаўніцтва АЭС.	Urgently correct the results of the [Chernobyl] accident; declare a moratorium on NPP construction.	ЕКОЛОГІЯ (Ecology)	"Рух боротимець за створення... экалагічнай безпекі" (Rukh will fight for the creation of... ecological safety).
8	Спыніць будаўніцтва заводаў-гігантаў, не забяспечаных мясцовай сыравінай.	Stop construction of giant plants not provided with local raw materials.	ЕКОНОМІКА (Economy)	Mention of "господар... за природні рэсурсы" (master... of natural resources).
9	Прыняць новы Саюзны дагавор... які ператворыць СССР у сапраўдны Саюз суверэнных дзяржаваў.	Adopt a new Union Treaty... transforming the USSR into a true Union of sovereign states.	ЗАГАЛЬНІ ПРЫНЦЫПЫ (General Principles)	"суверенную... рэспублікою" (a sovereign... republic).
10	Перагледзець Закон аб выбарах, каб забяспечыць свабоднае спаборніцтва ўсіх кандыдатаў.	Review the Law on Elections to ensure free competition among all candidates.	ДЕМОКРАТИЗАЦІЯ (Democratization)	"актывну ўчасть у выборчых кампаніях" (active participation in election campaigns).

#	BNF Point (Belarusian)	BNF Point (English)	Rukh Equivalent Section	Quote (Ukrainian / English)
11	Адмяніць Закон аб парадку арганізацыі... мітынгаў і Закон аб спецадраздзяленьнях.	Abolish the Law on the procedure for organizing... rallies and the Law on special units.	ПРАВА ЛЮДИНИ (Human Rights)	"обмеження громадянських прав... неприпустимо" (limitation of civil rights... is unacceptable).
12	Прыняць законы аб свабодзе руху, друку, сумленьня і Канстытуцыйны суд.	Adopt laws on freedom of movement, press, conscience, and a Constitutional Court.	ПРАВА ЛЮДИНИ (Human Rights)	"Декларація прав людини ООН... Гельсінкскі ўгоды" (UN Declaration of Human Rights... Helsinki Accords) .
13	Раскрыць архівы і апублікаваць зьвесткі пра злачынствы сталіншчыны; суд над Сталіным.	Open archives and publish data on the crimes of Stalinism; trial of Stalin.	ДЕМОКРАТИЗАЦІЯ (Democratization)	Mention of "відчуження народу" (alienation of the people) and "відповідальності" (responsibility).
14	Прыярытэт нацыянальных моваў на сваіх гістарычных тэрыторыях; прыняць Асновы моўнага заканадаўства.	Priority of national languages on their historical territories; adopt Principles of language legislation.	НАЦІОНАЛЬНЕ ПИТАННЯ (National Question)	"Мова... Культура" (Language... Culture) section heading.
15	Распаўсюдзіць усенароднае абмеркаваньне на ўсе законы; прыняць Закон аб рэферэндуме.	Extend nationwide discussion to all laws; adopt a Law on Referendum.	ЗАГАЛЬНІ ПРЫНЦИПИ (General Principles)	"систематично... гуртувала громадську думку" (systematically... gathered public opinion) .

Notes

¹ "15 punktaŭ pieradvybarčaj platformy BNF" [15 points of the BPF election platform], *Naviny BNF*, no. 1(3), 1989, 1-2.

² Andrew Wilson, "Politics Either Side of Independence, 1989–1994," in *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, new ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 140–67.

³ "15 punktaŭ pieradvybarčaj platformy BNF," 1-2.

⁴ "Kak ran'she bastovali belorusy" [How Belarusians Used to Strike], *Charter97*, August 14, 2020, <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2020/8/14/388619/>.

⁵ For a breakdown of election results, see Annex 1.

BLR: Wilson, "Politics Either Side of Independence," 140–67.

LTU: "Lithuania: Parliamentary Elections 1990," Election Resources on the Internet, December 12, 2002, archived at

<https://web.archive.org/web/20041010072530/http://www2.essex.ac.uk/elect/database/indexElections.asp?country=LITHUANIA&election=lt90>.

LVA: *Atmoda "Awakening"*, April 30, 1990.

EST: Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Report on the Supreme Soviet Elections in Estonia, March 18, 1990* (Washington, DC: Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1990),

<https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Report-on-the-Supreme-Soviet-Elections-in-Estonia.pdf>.

UKR: V. V. Kalinichenko and H. I. Rybalka, "10.2. Radykal'ni zminy u suspil'no-politychnomu zhytti krayiny" [10.2. Radical changes in the socio-political life of the country], in *Istoriya Ukrainy. Chastyne III: 1917-2003 rr.* [History of Ukraine. Part III: 1917-2003] (Kharkiv: Kharkiv National University, 2004), archived May 12, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20080512070738/http://www-history.univer.kharkov.ua/e-library/kalinichenko_textbook/Kalinichenko_10.2.htm.

⁶ Serhii Plokhly, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 321.

⁷ Wilson, "Politics Either Side of Independence," 140–67.

⁸ Natalia Leshchenko, "A Fine Instrument: Two Nation-Building Strategies in Post-Soviet Belarus," *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 3 (2004): 333–52.

⁹ Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, "The Belarusian Popular Front in 1988–1996: A Photo Gallery," June 1, 2017, <https://www.radabnr.org/en/the-belarusian-popular-front-in-1988-1996-a-photo-gallery/>.

¹⁰ Zianon Pazniak, *Sapraŭdnaje abličča* [The True Face] (Minsk: TVC "Palifakt", 1992), 79.

¹¹ Pazniak, *Sapraŭdnaje abličča* [The True Face], 164.

¹² For a full comparison of the 15 points, see Annex 2.

Rukh Program:

"Proekt Prohrama Narodnoho Rukhu Ukrainy Za Perebudovu" [Draft Program Of The People's Movement Of Ukraine For Perestroika], *Literaturna Ukraina*, February 16, 1989.

BNF Program:

"15 punktaŭ pieradvybarčaj platformy BNF," 1-2.

¹³ Carey Goldberg, "USSR Ukrainians Movement Opts for Independence," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1990.

¹⁴ David Remnick, "Lithuanian Mass Movement Calls for Independence," *Washington Post*, February 17, 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/02/17/lithuanian-mass-movement-calls-for-independence/89038d83-9b76-4761-8fe3-3b6deac6d9d9>.

¹⁵ Agence France-Presse, "Latvian Group Wants Full Political Independence," September 6, 1989.

¹⁶ Mari Aasmäe, *Eesti Vabariigi taasiseseisvumine – Eestimaa Rahvarinde poliitika aastatel 1988 ja 1989* [Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Estonia – Policy of the People's Front of Estonia in 1988 and 1989] (Tallinn: Tallinna Tehnikaülikool, 2015).

¹⁷ Wilson, "Politics Either Side of Independence," 140–67.

¹⁸ Kamitét pa hidramietiearalohii MinČS, *Čarnobyłski slied na Bielarusi* [The Chernobyl trace in Belarus] (Minsk: Kamitét pa hidramietiearalohii MinČS, 1996).

- ¹⁹ I. Labunska et al., "Current Radiological Situation in Areas of Ukraine Contaminated by the Chernobyl Accident: Part 1. Human Dietary Exposure to Caesium-137 and Possible Mitigation Measures," *Environment International* 117 (August 2018): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2018.04.053>.
- ²⁰ "Lukashenko rasskazal, chto v Kuropatakh aktivisty, 'prokolovshis' i 'nanyukhavshis', spravlyali nuzhdu" [Lukashenko said that in Kuropaty, activists, having "injected" and "sniffed" [drugs], relieved themselves], *TUT.BY*, April 20, 2019, <http://news.tut.by/society/634721.html>, archived April 20, 2019, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190420174237/https://news.tut.by/society/634721.html>.
- ²¹ David R. Marples and Veranika Laputska, "Kurapaty: Belarus' Continuing Debates," *Slavic Review* 79, no. 3 (2020): 521–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2020.156>.
- ²² Vasil Bykau, "Kurapaty," in *Douhaja daroha dadomu* [The Long Road Home] (Minsk: Bielaruski Knihazbor, 2002), accessed February 26, 2026, https://knihi.com/Vasil_Bykau/Douhaja_daroha_dadomu.html#chapter107.
- ²³ Marples and Laputska, "Kurapaty," 521–43.
- ²⁴ Siarhei Navumchyk, "Pamiać i zabyćcio Kurapataŭ" [Memory and oblivion of Kurapaty], *Radyjo Svaboda*, October 28, 2009, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/1863328.html>.
- ²⁵ Wilson, "Politics Either Side of Independence," 140–67.
- ²⁶ Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 256–257.
- ²⁷ Astrid Sahm, "Political Culture and National Symbols: Their Impact on the Belarusian Nation-Building Process," *Nationalities Papers* 27, no. 4 (1999): 649–60.
- ²⁸ Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 255.
- ²⁹ Wilson, "Politics Either Side of Independence," 140–67.
- ³⁰ Siarhei Navumchyk, *Dzevianosta druhi* [Ninety-two], (Bibliiateka Svobody. XXI stahoddzie) (Prague: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2017), 9.
- ³¹ Desai, Padma. "Aftershock in Russia's Economy." *Current History* 93, no. 585 (1994): 320–23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45317029>.
- ³² Anton Liavitski, "Between Political Diversity and Unity of Interests: Democratisation and the Crisis of Representation in Belarus, 1990–1995," *Sozialgeschichte* 65 (2025): 281–305.
- ³³ Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Report on the Belarusian Presidential Election: June 23, 1994 and July 10, 1994* (Washington, DC: U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1994), 6.
- ³⁴ A. S. Sokolov, "Sovremennaya yazykovaya situatsiya v Belorussii i yeyo dinamika v postsovetkiy period" [The contemporary language situation in Belarus and its dynamics in the post-Soviet period], *Geopolitika i ekogeodinamika regionov* [Geopolitics and Ecogeodynamics of Regions] 6, no. 16, vyp. 4 (2020): 66–82.
- ³⁵ Oleg Łatyszonek, "Belarusian Nationalism and the Clash of Civilizations," *International Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 62–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15579336.2001.11770233>.
- ³⁶ Łatyszonek, "Belarusian Nationalism," 70.

AI Usage

I used AI in accordance with the instructions for this essay for the purpose of translating certain sources in Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian, as well as filtering through sections of large sources in those languages, such as Navumchyk's series of books about the 90s (which together are over 1500 pages long). This allowed me to engage with sources that I would otherwise not have been able to, as though I can read Cyrillic writing, I cannot understand anywhere near enough to be able to read these texts. This includes both primary sources from the time (like the newspaper's containing original manifestos) as well as the memoirs of the actors of the time.