

BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IMPLEMENTATION



Trends since 2016

Belarusian Civil Society Report on Sustainable development goals implementation: Trends since 2016 was prepared by the Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office with the participation of experts and representatives of the civil society. The authors have analysed the current situation for each of the 17 SDGs and prepared recommendations for the state and civil society on their achievement.

The review will be presented in July 2022 at the High-Level Political Forum in the UN.

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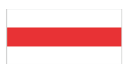
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CONTENT

Introduction	4
SDG 1: No Poverty.....	6
SDG 2: Zero hunger	10
SDG 3: Good health and well-being	13
SDG 4: Quality education	17
SDG 5: Gender equality.....	21
SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	26
SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy.....	29
SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth	34
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	38
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities.....	42
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	48
SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production.....	53
SDG 13: Climate action	57
SDG 14: Life Below Water	62
SDG 15: Life On Land	67
SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.....	72
Access to information of state bodies in the Republic of Belarus....	79
The right to a favourable environment.....	82
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals.....	87
Executive Summary	92

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Republic of Belarus together with other UN member countries adopted UN Declaration ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (hereafter the ‘2030 Agenda’), thus committing to implement Sustainable Development Goals (hereafter the ‘SDGs’).

Since 2015, the country has been making steps to achieve the SDGs at the national level. However, after large-scale protests following the Presidential elections in August 2020 and severe repressions that ensued, it is impossible to talk about achievements of the government of Alexander Lukashenko in implementing the SDGs.

It is impossible to implement the 2030 Agenda without comprehensive partnerships based on fundamental principles of the 2030 Agenda and goals focused on meeting the interests of the citizens of Belarus.

The first report was presented in July 2017. In 2022, Belarus will for the second time report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs at the High-level Political Forum. Up until now, civil society of Belarus has not participated in the discussion and receives no updates on the progress in preparation of the Voluntary National Review (hereafter, the ‘VNR’). With the intention of reporting on how the SDG implementation is actually proceeding in Belarus, the office of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in partnership with the civil society of the country have prepared a Belarusian civil society’s review of the achievement of the SDGs in Belarus.

This report has been prepared by Belarusian NGOs, academia, research institutes, civic activists and public figures offering expertise in all the areas of sustainable development. Unfortunately, due to continuing repressions against individuals and organisations whose opinions differ from those of public authorities and officials of the

government of Mr. Lukashenko, not all the experts can openly publish their positions, so some of the chapters below are signed by ‘independent experts’.

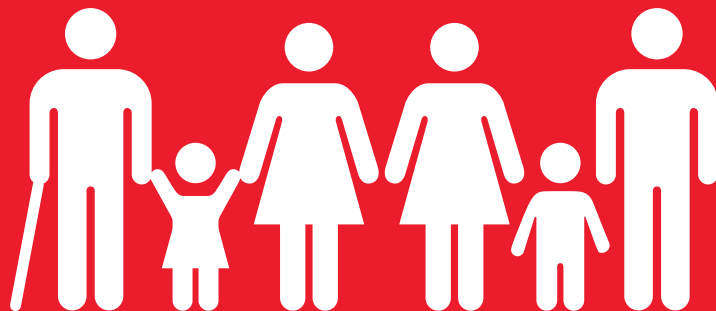
This review is not an alternative to the VNR. The goal of this document is not to provide a complete analysis of achievement of each SDG; rather, it reflects the main trends and recommendations concerning achieving the SDGs in Belarus. Recommendations presented herein can be used by democratic forces in Belarus and other stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

This review was prepared during a difficult period of continuing repressions against civil society in Belarus and Russia’s war against Ukraine. The initiative group comprised more than 17 experts who worked on creating this review. When preparing each section, the experts covered the following issues:

- Trends and achievements regarding the SDG since the beginning of 2016;
- Key targets of the SDG to be achieved by 2030, and barriers hindering this process; and
- Civil society’s recommendations to stakeholders on implementing this SDG.
- We would like to emphasise that this review was prepared in a difficult situation, and some sections may contain information that is not fully complete and up to date (as of April 2022). Each expert or organisation themselves chose the timeframe to be covered in the review. But we have made and will make every effort to further the SDG agenda for Belarus and Belarusians.

1 NO POVERTY





SDG 1: NO POVERTY

Aleh Mazol - researcher BEROС

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

The key indicator in the area of poverty eradication for Belarusian government is the proportion of population below the poverty line. This proportion is planned to fall from 5.1% in 2015 to 3–4% in 2030 [1] and 4% by 2035 [2].

The main achievements of the government of Belarus in poverty eradication in 2016–2020 are [3] as follows:

- The share of the population below the national poverty line has been reduced from 5.7% in 2016 to 4.8% in 2020; no part of the population is living below the international poverty line in Belarus;
- The state's expenses for targeted social support have grown from 72.4 million rubles in 2016 to 112.4 million rubles; it is worth noting that targeted aid to families with children with disabilities in 2020 amounted to only 0.4 million rubles;
- General accessibility of communal facilities remains high: the share of the population living in homes equipped with modern conveniences has grown from 87.6% to 91.1%; the share of the population that has access to basic services of potable water and sanitation is 98.3% (2021);
- Social security for retired population is still well provided: 98–99% of people who have reached the standard retirement age are receiving a pension; and
- The proportion of adults having guaranteed rights to land certified by legally binding documents is 37.5% (2020).

ACTUAL POVERTY

Each year the Belarusian government reports a low level of poverty in the country. However, independent research of the problem shows significantly higher poverty rates.

Indeed, according to the official statistics, the rate of absolute poverty in 2009–2019 which Belstat (the state's statistical service) calculates as the proportion of population with an income below the poverty line varied between 5

and 7%. At the same time, the rate of absolute poverty calculated according to the World Bank's methodology (by the cost of basic needs) reached 31% [4]. Because of understating the real level of poverty in the country, the state cannot effectively revise the applied mechanisms for support of the population below the poverty line and loses the incentives to search for more effective tools of economic policy.

THE INCREASE OF WELFARE BENEFITS DOES NOT ENSURE A GROWTH OF STATE SUPPORT AND WELL-BEING OF BELARUSIANS

Despite the increase in the amount of welfare benefits from 12.8 billion rubles in 2016 to 19.4 billion rubles in 2020 [5], social support of the population did not actually increase as had been expected: the share of welfare benefits in total monetary income of the people decreased by 0.4%, and the share of welfare benefits in GDP decreased by 0.3% [5]. As a result, the share of state-provided support in various forms (transfers to the public) in total income of the population decreased from 24.2% to 23.1% [5].

Despite the growth in disposable income of households in 2016–2020 from 906.3 to 1391.2 rubles a month [5], the share of food expenses in the total expenses of households remains massive (about 40%), which means that the standard of living of households in Belarus is, on average, low.

The lowest income group consists of the households with two or more children: in 2020, 10.3% of such families had an income below the minimum subsistence level (less than 250.0 rubles per person); at the same time, the proportion of families with one child that had income below the minimum subsistence level was 4.5 [5]. It can be concluded that the risk of poverty increases with the increase in the number of children in the family. Regrettably, the government does not take this into account: the size of child care allowance does not increase after the birth of the second and following children in a family [6].

There is a risk of an even greater increase in poverty as state support to families with children becomes less accessible: even though in 2016–2020 total public expenses for child care allowances grew from 1878.8 million to

2422.9 million rubles, the share of children (aged from 0 to 18) supported by the state dropped from 30.2% to 24.9%. Families with children below 3 years of age are still in the most favourable situation in terms of social support: 98–99% of these children are raised with the financial support from the state [7].

LOW LEVEL OF STATE SUPPORT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

In 2020, only 32.2 million rubles was spent to procure rehabilitation aids for citizens (in 2016 – 20.0 million rubles); cash assistance for medical care decreased from 1.5 million rubles in 2016 to 0.9 million rubles in 2020; expenditure on the state-owned facility ‘Republican Rehabilitation Centre for Children with Disabilities’ in 2020 equalled 2.8 million rubles (in 2016 – 1.7 million rubles) [7].

State expenses for targeted social support in 2020 were 112.4 million rubles; with that said, only 0.4 million rubles was provided as targeted support to families with children with disabilities [7].

UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE ARE EXTREMELY FINANCIALLY VULNERABLE

Financial support of the unemployed in Belarus is critically low: the unemployment benefit paid subject to the unemployed person’s taking part in employment assistance activities is smaller (by 45%) than the minimum subsistence level, i.e. only EUR 8 to 22 per month [8]. Moreover, after adoption of the so-called ‘tax on spongers’, a citizen losing their job is actually subjected to additional financial obligations [9].

The extremely low level of state-paid unemployment benefits is the reason for the gap between the actual quantity of unemployed people in Belarus (calculated according to the methodology of the International Labour Organisation (ILO)) and the number of unemployed registered with Belarusian labour offices.

The poverty problem demands a comprehensive solution, not limited only to the financial support of low-income citizens or wage indexation and various social payments. The poverty problem is caused by citizens’ inability to obtain the income required for proper development, i.e. to get a proper education or advanced training and get employed locally. Therefore, a whole set of measures – e.g. in regional policy, modernisation of education, social infrastructure development – is required to resolve the poverty problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

- Produce measures to fight poverty, involving civil society organisations both at the stage of preparation of the Strategy and annual Action Plans and at the stage of evaluation of their implementation.
- Charge regional administrations with ensuring achievements of most SDG 1 targets, as this problem is closely linked with the regions’ ability to promote development of entrepreneurship, ensure development of infrastructure for industrial sites, create favourable conditions for attracting qualified human resources, maintain good social infrastructure (healthcare and educational facilities, centres for people with disabilities) and personnel training centres.
- Strengthen state support of families with children by supporting the building up of human capital among children from poor families (‘pre-school social programmes’): improve the quality of nutrition and healthcare services for such children, providing them with free pre-school education.
- Correct the poverty criteria and, along with it, correspondingly reduce the barriers to accessing financial support for families raising children with disabilities, and increase the amount of benefits for them considering that these households are subjected to the two most serious poverty risk factors.
- Implement social entrepreneurship development programmes at both the national and regional levels; provide funding to support social entrepreneurship in the national and regional budgets; make the National Investment and Privatisation Agency provide necessary support.
- Implement poverty eradication policies at the national level through active regional policies aimed at the promotion of development of depressed regions.
- Increase the size of unemployment benefits, and introduce an additional allowance for children of the unemployed.
- Activate the work of employment centres and support the development of private training and re-training facilities.



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2 ZERO
HUNGER





SDG 2: ZERO HUNGER

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

SDG 2 is one of the SDGs which Belarus has actually succeeded in achieving. Basically, we can even say that some of the targets have been reached ahead of schedule.

For example, according to GHI (Global Hunger Index) [1], Belarus in 2021 ranked 18th among developing countries with the lowest hunger level, and such important indicators as late development and inanition of children due to malnutrition have been steadily low and decreasing during the last 10 years.

Also, Belarus ranks quite high according to the GFSI (Global Food Security Index) [2]. From 2016 to 2020, the country was even able to show a significant improvement by moving up from the 46th to the 23rd position, although in 2021 Belarus fell to the 36th position out of 113. This fall is to a large extent explained by a serious increase in the likelihood of military conflicts and the risk of political instability: these factors are among the indicators used to calculate the Food Security Index.

At the same time, the country still ranks high in terms of food affordability and availability; in particular, Belarus is one of the few developing countries that for many years have zero percent of population below the global poverty line.

However, the cost of the success in ensuring access to safe and nutritious food and ending all forms of malnutrition in Belarus is the country's complete failure with regard to other targets under SDG 2.

Despite the problem of hunger not being specifically relevant for the country and despite the optimistic level of food independence (according to the FAO), we still see numerous challenges in the context of food security, the main one of which is the principle of organisation of the agricultural system.

AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT

Following the global trends in achieving the SDGs, Belarus in 2017 adopted the Doctrine of the National Food Security of the Republic of Belarus until 2030 [3].

Local mechanisms provided by the Doctrine, with regard to the global task of doubling agricultural productivity by

2030, were introduced so as to ensure the effectiveness and break-even operation of agricultural sector, and to raise the return on sales to 11–13% by 2030. As of 2018, the profitability of the agricultural sector was as low as 4.3%, and in 2021 this indicator was at 5.5%. These low values are causing special concern, as they represent the average of all agriculture branches, including one of the most profitable, milk production.

There has been no significant progress in increasing investment rates or introducing innovative methods in agriculture. The main reason for this situation is the state's regulation of the sector. For example, a private farmer wishing to purchase foreign-made harvesting equipment needs to obtain a special permit from local authorities, and seeding time of private agricultural land plots must follow the national schedule of spring planting season, even if the farmer plans sowing crops susceptible to cold, and the weather is out of line with the requirements.

Most agricultural companies are state-controlled collective farms or farmers who still annually receive subsidies to buy fuel, repay loans, and purchase fertilisers.

Without subsidised agriculture, the food independence and food safety of the country would be seriously threatened: most agricultural companies would not even have the money to buy fuel for sowing season.

ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS AND SAFE FOOD

The adequacy of the average energy value of diet in Belarus is estimated to be 135% [4].

Sufficient nutrition in Belarus is accessible, on average, to 44% of the country. About 2% of the population potentially may encounter the problem of hunger or a starvation diet, and 54% may not always have access to sufficient food that would ensure diversity of the diet and its energy balance.

The share of food costs in the total structure of consumer expenses is considered a representative indicator of accessibility of food. In Belarus, the share of food costs in total consumer expenses had been decreasing from 40% in 2017 to 36.8% in 2020, but in 2021 this figure went up again and reached 41.9%, while the norm provided in the Doctrine was a maximum of 35%.

The problem of access to adequate nutrition is relevant for a significant part of the population of the country, yet now there are only two types of support provided by the state in order to improve the quality of nutrition:

- Provision of food for children until the age of two for families whose income per person for reasons beyond their control is below the subsistence minimum; and
- Food coupons for 50 rubles (about \$18) a month for a limited group of poor people.

The country has no effective public mechanism to help low-income citizens to have access to adequate nutrition. Independent civic projects and initiatives in this sphere are also almost non-existent. Until 2021, there were non-commercial initiatives such as Food Not Bombs and the PISHCHA food bank, that worked to improve people's access to nutrition, but then they were closed, like most NGO projects, due to the political events in the country. The 'Otklik' soup kitchen is still open, but this project also struggles to operate in the current legal context.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

- Switch to a market economy in the agricultural sector and reduce the level of state interventions.
- Promote the consolidation of efforts of a broad range of state institutions and organisations, manufacturers of food products, trading companies, social organisations and initiatives to achieve sustainability of agricultural and food systems.
- Organise systemic work to improve the system of social support.
- Broaden the range of formats of provision of state-funded support to improve the quality of nutrition, and expand the range of recipients of such support, paying special attention to people currently excluded from the social security system based on certain formal details.
- Develop partner projects involving large retailers to provide food quotas.
- Promote the culture of food sharing, thus producing resources from leftover food.
- Simplify the procedure for transferring leftover food.



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3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING





SDG 3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

A high level of health services is the main need of the population of Belarus [1]. Until 2020, the country implemented 7 national and state programs in the field of demographic security, health promotion, and improvement of the living environment of Belarusians. Until 2025, the State Program ‘People’s Health and Demographic Security’ will be in force.

Access to health services is universal and free of charge. In 2019, the Government of Belarus allocated 4.2% of GDP to the national healthcare system, while the share of expenditures in the consolidated budget was 16% [15].

PROBLEMS OF THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

In Belarus, in fact, the Soviet model of healthcare has been preserved in its entirety. There is a large imbalance towards the in-patient sector — for example, Belarus is among the top ten countries in the world in terms of the number of hospital beds per capita [2].

The long-term problems of the Belarusian healthcare system are its underfunding, suboptimal structure, weak involvement in the prevention of risk factors for major diseases, low motivation to work, lack of quality state medicine, a closed system, and a lack of communication in society and within the system itself [3].

Currently, the goal of health care in Belarus is not to save people, but to implement the planned indicators of the healthcare system, due to which the Ministry of Health is forced to falsify statistics in the interests of propaganda [4]. For Belarus, it is important to reorient the system to work for the needs of a person, not the government or the state, and to develop medical care that is as close as possible to the needs of the person — affordable, individual, and high-quality [5].

DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION [3]

This section presents the figures for 2019, as the National Statistical Committee (the Committee) did not publish data for 2020. Currently (April 2022), the annual reference books in the field of healthcare for 2017–2019 have been removed from the Committee’s website [6].

In 2019, there was a decrease in the birth rate – from 9.9 (2018) to 9.3 per 1,000 population. The situation was changing due to mandatory pre-abortion counselling, as well as work on the preparation of proposals for state support for in vitro fertilisation.

The crude death rate was 12.8 deaths per 1,000 of population. At the same time, there was a highly significant difference between mortality and birth rate in Minsk (8.9 versus 7.9 per 1,000 population) and in the regions (Vitebsk oblast with 15.1 versus 9.3 and Mogilev oblast with 14.0 versus 9.4 per 1,000 population).

Non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes mellitus, and chronic respiratory diseases) continued to account for 89% of all deaths in Belarus, exceeding the global mortality rate (71%). The probability of premature death (under 70 years of age) from these pathologies for a citizen of Belarus was 28.6%.

COVID-19 CHALLENGES [7]

Measures taken by state bodies in the field of healthcare included financial support for anti-COVID measures, surcharges for doctors, as well as the introduction of separate quarantine measures, a mask regime, and a self-isolation regime for sick and contact persons.

However, the effectiveness of measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic was questionable, as it was recommendatory in nature and insufficiently monitored. Official statistics are considered underestimated and not credible.

The situation was extremely complicated by the population’s generally low confidence in the state against the background of a political crisis. As a result, tough quarantine measures and border closures were even less welcome in 2020. At the same time, experts note that the diagnostic and treatment protocols adopted in the country are in line with international practices.

RIGHT OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION

In Belarus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the right of citizens to access information was constantly curtailed. These included a lack of access to full and comprehensive official information, targeted restrictions on journalists’ access to information, the selective application of legislation

on media responsibility for the dissemination of inaccurate information, and pressure on journalists [8]. In order to collect information on how the authorities in the Republic of Belarus are responding to the situation with the coronavirus COVID-19, the Covidmonitor website was created by civil society [9].

The committee postponed the publication of data on total mortality for 2020 and 2021 [10]. According to the Committee's statistical bulletin (March 2022), the population of Belarus decreased by more than 94,000 people in 2021 [11].

REPRESSION OF DOCTORS AFTER THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Medical workers were at the epicentre of the human rights crisis in Belarus after the presidential election in August 2020. Doctors were providing assistance to people injured by riot police and militia during the protests after the 2020 presidential election. For demonstrating their disagreement with the Lukashenko government and for participating in peaceful protests, doctors were subjected to terrible repression [12]. For example, a criminal case was initiated against an anaesthesiologist, Artem Sorokin, who was accused of disclosing medical information about Roman Bondarenko, a protester severely beaten by security forces; Roman died in hospital shortly afterwards. As a result, Sorokin was fined and sentenced to two years in prison with a one-year grace period [13].

Since November 2020, the Lukashenko government has been persecuting Olga Velichko, the director of the Grodno Children's Hospice [14].

Mass dismissals of doctors who disagreed with the Belarusian authorities have led to a catastrophic situation in many medical institutions, especially in the regions. Some hospitals and clinics now lack doctors and specialists, and people have to travel far from their homes in order to receive proper treatment [12].

CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS [5]

- Conduct a critical review of the functional responsibilities of healthcare workers, reduce the completion of unnecessary documents, remove non-essential responsibilities, and shift the focus to preventive work with patients to prevent and change potentially harmful lifestyles.
- Equalise the average salary in the healthcare system.
- Specify the list of health services that are part of the minimum social standards and guaranteed by the public health system.
- Develop e-health and remote communications between clinic and patient.
- Develop the private health sector (until 2022).
- Grant equal rights to private medical centres with public clinics.
- Implement licensing systems for healthcare professionals.
- Establish effective cooperation with the WHO and other UN bodies in the field of health, and carry out public health reforms.
- Encourage health professionals to practice and study abroad, and encourage medical scientists to publish works in foreign English-language journals.
- Optimise health structures in accordance with the goal of preserving the health of citizens.
- Increase the openness of medical care through mandatory information on public health, changes in the principles of the press service of the Ministry of Healthcare; introduce the mandatory provision of comprehensive information on the procurement of medicines and medical equipment on demand; conduct a comprehensive audit of the Ministry; and involve patients and personnel in decision-making in the field.



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4 QUALITY EDUCATION





SDG 4: QUALITY EDUCATION

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

The 'Education Code of the Republic of Belarus' is in force in Belarus. In 2021, a new Concept for the Development of the Education System of the Republic of Belarus for the Period until 2030 was approved; the Education and Youth Policy state program for 2021–2025 was adopted; and in 2018–2019, new educational standards for preschool, primary and secondary education and special education curricula were adopted (2020). At the same time, the conceptual apparatus of the term 'sustainable development' or 'education for sustainable development' is absent in these documents, and the available references point only to the general provisions of the National Strategy in this area [1].

Since 2016, there has been constant work on improving existing regulatory documents, taking into account current trends in education, ensuring the inclusion of the principles of sustainable development in education, and compliance with the principles of the state-public nature of education management; in addition, the priority of universal values, such as human rights, is proclaimed, ensuring the principle of justice and equal access to education [2]. A network of centres for integrated support of sustainable development practices and centres for sustainable development at institutions of higher education has been created by public and state educational institutions in schools of Belarus [3].

However, the stated approaches and principles often remain only on paper and are not implemented through the system of training, retraining and advanced training of teachers; nor are they integrated into the system of school, vocational and university education through the transformation of existing education management systems, quality assessment and monitoring of education. The activities of the centres for sustainable development created at schools and universities are largely limited to projects, not programme activities. That is, they are not systemic and long-term, and they do not provide for making recommendations to existing curricula of schools and universities, educational standards, or competence models of both teachers and students.

The successful implementation of the 4th Sustainable Development Goal in Belarus largely depends on how the national education system manages to get rid of the principle of vertical 'manual' management and finds opportunities to provide certain autonomy and self-government to educational institutions, as well as provide

opportunities for the development of non-formal education structures. At present, the education system is not ready for quick and flexible solutions, the adaptation of existing international experience, and necessary transformations.

SHIFTING EMPHASIS IN REPORTING ON SDG ACHIEVEMENT

In their reporting to international structures (UN, UN ECE), state bodies focus primarily on the general availability and inclusiveness of education in all areas, from preschool to higher and vocational education, and pay very little attention to the issues of reorientation of education in accordance with the principles of sustainable development under the guiding documents of UNESCO, UN ECE, OECD etc. However, the problem of eliminating illiteracy and accessibility of school education was solved in Belarus back in Soviet times [4].

State educational structures manage to create an image of an education system with sufficiently progressive approaches that integrate the principles of sustainable development in education.

Successful reporting is explained by the effective project work of local educational institutions with public organisations and international institutions on climate change, water conservation, biodiversity, sustainable consumption and waste management, human rights, and global citizenship.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS

Until 2022, most of the work on education and awareness in the field of global citizenship, human rights, environmental and social responsibility at the local and global levels, democracy, non-violence, inclusion, and justice was carried out in the Republic of Belarus by public organisations in cooperation with international partners and preschool, secondary, higher, vocational and technical educational institutions. The qualitative preparation of these educational events has always been highly appreciated by both ordinary teachers and heads of the education system, and it is very difficult to quantify the number of seminars, trainings, conferences, and joint projects held since 2016.

Within the framework of ongoing projects in the field of sustainable development, at the national, regional, and city levels, Belarusian educational institutions have always had access to the expert potential of international

organisations and representative offices located in the country (UNDP, the Belarus Support Programme of the Federal Government of Germany, the World Bank, etc.), as well as local non-formal education structures. Belarusian public organisations, in the process of their interaction with state educational institutions and local authorities, not only provided information and methodological support to Belarusian teachers on key ESD issues, but also implemented tasks to involve all stakeholders in solving local problems related to ecology, social development, and cultural memory. At the same time, despite the huge contribution of civil society experts to the professional development of teachers and the local administration on issues of local sustainable development, procedures for validation and accreditation of non-formal educational structures as providers of quality and inclusive education have not been introduced in Belarus.

LACK OF CONSISTENCY AND METHODOLOGICAL SUPPORT IN THE ORGANISATION OF ESD IN BELARUS

Since 2016, experts from state institutions of secondary and higher education, with the support of international organisations, have developed and implemented electives and special courses on environmental education, sustainable development, urban studies, biodiversity protection, climate protection, etc. However, in numerous instances, this practice was not of a systematic nature, could not contribute to the transformation of the system for developing school and university programs, and did not receive proper support in the system of teacher training. In addition, despite the innovative and progressive nature of the information contained in the new special courses and electives, they did not sufficiently present methodological recommendations for teaching new content and did not sufficiently introduce a competence-based approach in education, which in turn implied insufficient attention to value orientations, personal and interpersonal development of students, and issues of effective communication. Thus, teachers-practitioners either practice 'frontal instruction' using new material, which could not contribute to the effective use of the material by students in the future, or, realising the need for self-education, began to master training programs in non-formal education in the field of effective teaching methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

As long as the situation in the country allowed, representatives of civil society have always used the available platforms and procedures to voice their proposals and recommendations. Their participation in public hearings and discussions, public advisory councils under

ministries, collecting proposals for projects of local strategies in the field of sustainable development of the country and regions, and youth policy and education, made it possible at one time to present perspectives on the overall view of the situation and make several proposals to the work of ministries and departments. At present, regrettably it must be stated that almost all public organisations actively working in the field of education and awareness have been closed or are in the process of liquidation, and the procedures for taking into account public opinion have lost even the slight accessibility and transparency that they had.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- Increase the share of education expenditures in the state budget and provide opportunities for educational institutions to attract additional resources through international grant programs.
- Ensure the public-state nature of education management based on the principles of transparency and accessibility for the participation of all involved in the educational process.
- Transform the principle of vertical education management (Ministry of Education – city/district departments of education – school administration) and the practice of unilateral transmission of education management tasks from school administration representatives to parents and teachers into a centralised system with strong horizontal ties.
- Provide educational institutions with sufficient autonomy to manage their finances and administrative resources, and independence in decision-making at the regional level.
- Create conditions for the emergence of independent trade union structures of teachers, allowing them to fight for their rights in relation to employment contracts, teaching load, extracurricular activities, etc.
- Ensure decent remuneration for teachers and university professors, conditions, and opportunities for regular high-quality advanced training courses.
- Provide an opportunity for inclusive, non-discriminatory education, taking into account the needs of various groups of the population in education (people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, the elderly, migrants, and people living in rural areas).

- Create a system for validation and accreditation of competencies obtained as a result of non-formal education.
- In the field of higher education, ensure guarantees of fundamental academic freedoms and values, opportunities for the integration of higher education in Belarus into the international educational space, and recognition or validation of national diplomas at the international level.
- Develop national plans and strategies for ESD with sufficient funding, taking into account international and accumulated pedagogical experience at the local level.
- Reorganise existing ESD/SD structures at universities and ministries to be developed with the support of national and international consultants from other areas of education.
- Transform the systems of training and advanced training of teachers by introducing educational management programs to introduce a 'general institutional approach in education'.
- Reorganise the work of district and city education departments by reducing their transfer and controlling role in the education management system and strengthening the informational and advisory direction on improving the quality of education.
- Expand state funding of public initiatives in the field of education and support for the interaction of education stakeholders at all levels.



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5 GENDER
EQUALITY





SDG 5: GENDER EQUALITY

Natalia Ryabova, Victoria Lavriniuk, PhD (c)

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

The Republic of Belarus has a high level of Human Development Indicators for women and gender-neutral legislation. Significant progress has been made in reducing maternal and infant mortality; women are better educated than men and have a high level of participation in the labour market.

The Republic of Belarus has signed and ratified a number of basic United Nations instruments aimed at protecting the interests of women and achieving gender equality. Measures to protect women's rights and ensure equal rights and opportunities for men and women have been implemented in Belarus since 1996.

At the same time, the Republic of Belarus has neither signed nor ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention); nor has it ratified ILO Convention C156 — Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156) and ILO Convention C190 — Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). Thus, the process of designing and institutionalising a national mechanism for gender equality remains insufficient; there is no anti-discrimination law, no gender equality law, and no law against domestic violence. Lack of government accountability and political will is a major constraint on progress in this area.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Domestic violence is the most common type of gender-based violence in Belarus. One in 2 women (52.4%) has experienced at least one type of violence in her lifetime, and one in 3 women (33.4%) has experienced physical or sexual violence in her lifetime [1]. After 2018, no representative studies were conducted, and since 2020, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has not published statistics on the number of offences in the field of domestic violence.

A gender policy to combat domestic violence and human trafficking is set out in the National Action Plan for

Gender Equality in the Republic of Belarus for 2021–2025, in the implementation of which various state bodies are participating with the support of agencies of the United Nations system and public associations. Most of the public associations indicated in the plan were liquidated in 2021–2022.

In 2018, the concept of the Law on Counteracting Domestic Violence was developed, which was not further submitted to parliament [2]. In part, this was the result of public discussions in which religious and pro-religious organisations took part, sending an open letter to Alexander Lukashenko to revise the concept [3].

The prosecution of the aggressors is conducted under a private indictment, where the victims themselves represent the prosecution. Cases of sexual harassment of women and girls in the workplace and in educational institutions have not been studied.

Between 9 and 13 August 2020 and thereafter, sexual and gender-based violence, including psychological violence, was routinely used against both women and men in detention to intimidate and punish protesters and those considered to be supporters of the opposition. The special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus expressed concern that hundreds of women had been subjected to torture, ill-treatment, and other forms of physical and psychological pressure during their detention, including gender-based violence and the threat of rape (A/76/145, cl. 9). Acts of intimidation, including verbal abuse and sexist and homophobic statements, were mainly directed at women and persons perceived as members of the LGBTIQ+ community [4], [5], [6].

In addition, Belarusian women suffered from sexualised violence by Russian soldiers after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine.

THE GAP IN LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH

Belarusian men have a significantly shorter life expectancy than women (the gap is 10.4 years). The gender gap in life expectancy in Belarus is due to differences in adult mortality rates due to a higher prevalence of non-communicable diseases and injuries among Belarusian

men (according to a gender analysis of data from the WHO STEPwise survey (STEPS) and data from the WHO Regional Office for Europe, male mortality from diseases of the circulatory system is 3.4 times higher than for women; mortality of men from external causes is 5.1 times higher than for women) [9].

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

Women currently make up 25% of the members of the Council of the National Assembly and 40% of the members of the House of Representatives. Women consistently account for a significant percentage of civil servants of local self-government bodies and administrations (67.4% at the end of 2017) [10]. At the same time, however, men predominate at the highest levels of decision-making, while women are predominantly employed in positions corresponding to lower levels of management. None of the 5 Deputy Prime Minister positions is filled by women, and only one Cabinet position out of 24 is held by a woman. Since 1991, there have not been more than 3 female ministers in the country at the same time.

For a long time, there were no women in leadership roles in political life. For the first time, a woman candidate in the presidential elections was finally registered in 2015. Since 2020, women have played a central role in the democratic opposition movement in Belarus. Women demonstrate political leadership by working in an aggressive environment of political repression.

LABOUR MARKET

The country has a list of professions prohibited for women [11]. According to Belstat, the gender pay gap is growing: in 2000, it was 19%; in 2017 it rose to 25.4%; and in 2018 the gap had already reached 27.3%. 89.6% of women and 80.4% of men faced discrimination in the labour market [12]. Discrimination against women was mainly related to their role as wives and mothers, while discrimination against men was related to their age. 26.2% of pregnant women and women on maternity leave were discriminated against.

The number of women among entrepreneurs is significantly less than the number of men (31.5% and 68.5% respectively). Only 11.9% of women entrepreneurs are owners and/or founders (co-founders) of organisations, and only 25.4% of women entrepreneurs are employers [13].

Barriers to women's entrepreneurship and women's career development in Belarus are largely related to the burden of household chores and childcare. On average, women

spend twice as much time as men on housework and childcare [14].

Belarus has developed and is implementing the National Action Plan for Gender Equality, but gender mainstreaming in all socio-economic areas is still a challenge, as is women's political participation. Gender issues are mainly included in health and social protection policy; gaps are observed in the field of social and economic rights, and in political participation. Most government policies are gender-neutral or gender-blind. The National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2021–2025 includes goals to eliminate identified gaps, but the current situation in the country, including the lack of partnership with independent civil society organisations, may affect the implementation of these goals.

CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS:

- Introduce gender budgeting and mandatory gender expertise of legislation at all stages of the legislative process.
- Develop legislation and support programs for women, taking into consideration factors of intersecting discrimination against vulnerable groups of women, for example, Roma women, women with disabilities, women from LGBTIQ+ communities, women from rural and remote areas, single mothers, women raising children with disabilities, and others.
- Introduce temporary positive measures to establish de facto equality between men and women so as to increase women's participation in the fields of politics, employment, and the economy and to create equality of opportunities for women.
- Restore the activities of non-governmental organisations in the field of combating domestic violence and human trafficking and simplify the process of registering grant assistance from donor organisations.
- Determine the need for a social order from the state to NGOs to provide assistance to victims of gender-based violence.
- Organise compulsory correctional programs for aggressors by order of the court.
- Legislatively establish an interdepartmental mechanism of interaction at the district level to prevent situations of human trafficking and provide assistance to victims

of trafficking, since the regional level is not enough to provide effective assistance to victims.

- Introduce legislative provisions criminalising the grooming of minors, as well as specific legislative provisions for sexual harassment and harassment in the workplace and in educational institutions.
- Develop specialised employment programs for women who are victims of human trafficking.
- Conduct a representative sample study on the prevalence of violence and the link between domestic violence and the escalation of violence by the state.
- Ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul, May 11, 2011).
- Establish criminal liability for domestic violence, and classify this category of cases as a private-public accusation (so that they do not depend on allegations or a complaint filed by the victim).
- Provide support to women's organisations and civil society initiatives working to ensure gender equality and empower women. Stop the practice of violating the rights of citizens to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Stop the practice of pressure on gender organisations and their forced liquidation. Provide equal conditions for the activities of civil society organisations, and ensure the presence of independent civil society organisations in the National Council for Gender Policy under the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus.
- Promote women's meaningful participation in decision-making at the international, national, and local levels through consultations, working groups, coordination of community councils, etc.
- Provide women leaders and activists with capacity building opportunities and support in their efforts to uphold gender equality. Encourage the creation and development of networks and coalitions at the international and national levels. Support actions that empower women leaders in local communities.
- Ensure the implementation of actions aimed at guaranteeing the economic and social empowerment of girls and women, such as supporting awareness campaigns and programs to build the capacity of employers (both public and private sectors) in the field of gender equality and non-discrimination, creating a work environment that is conducive to work and family reconciliation and flexible work opportunities for both women and men; promotion of a positive image of fatherhood, and promotion of the idea of a fair division of household responsibilities.
- Aim actions in the labour market at the elimination of discrimination and the pay gap, and the development of female entrepreneurship.
- Improve access to finance (simplification of loans for women entrepreneurs); ensure that women entrepreneurs have access to business development services; introduce training and mentoring programs for women entrepreneurs.
- Support actions to encourage girls and women to strengthen their digital skills and pursue STEM education and careers.
- Support actions that promote universal access to health care, including those aimed at closing the gender gap in life expectancy between men and women, as well as the gender gap in occupational injuries and professional diseases.
- Given the negative impact of the ongoing political crisis in the country, as well as the military conflict in the region, promote the integration of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Actions in this area may include, inter alia, ensuring the participation and leadership of women in all contexts of conflict and security, and advocacy for the development and adoption of the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325.
- Support actions aimed at protecting women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence in conflict and post-conflict situations.



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6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION





SDG 6: CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

Egor Levachev - water resources expert

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

SDG 6 is among the most imbedded within political programmes of Belarus, and its targets are well aligned with the national strategy. In 2021, Belarus provided safe water supply to its entire population, and 98.3% of the population used sanitation services.

The share of treated domestic and industrial waste water flows in the country has grown from 99.4% in 2016 to 99.7% in 2020. At the same time, the proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality has increased to 92%, and the share of water streams with good ambient water quality has dropped to 69%.

From 2016 to 2018, water-use efficiency had been growing (+3.8 BYN/m³), but in 2019 the trend reversed (-0.3 BYN/m³), with the level of water stress dropping steadily.

Integrated water resources management has been implemented at a moderately high level. The proportion of transboundary water basin area with transborder cooperation mechanisms has not changed and equals 67.6%. The area of wetlands in Belarus has been shrinking annually. Between 2016 and 2021, the decrease in this area amounted to 389.4 sq.km.

Since 2016, Belarus has been implementing state programmes in its aim to achieve various SDGs, including SDG 6. The 'Comfortable Housing and Favourable Living Environment' state programme includes the 'Clean Water' subprogramme, which aims to provide users with centralised water supply systems and drinking water, and improve the quality of waste water treatment and reliability of sewage systems. The 'Environmental Protection and Sustainable Use of Natural Resources' state programme, with regard to water resources management, is focused on finding new sources of underground water and improving the monitoring of the condition of water bodies.

ACCESS TO DRINKING WATER AND SEWAGE SYSTEMS

According to official statistics, all residents of Belarus use safe water supply services. However, the existing degree of disaggregation of data does not enable a clear understanding of what actions are required to ensure safe drinking water. Drinking water is available to the population, but not every source of water (especially wells on private land plots) is covered by quality monitoring efforts.

With regard to sanitation, the biggest challenge is the lack of disaggregated data; a decrease in the percentage of the urban population using sanitation services raises questions about the quality of such services. While it's true that Belarus has eliminated the practice of open defecation, the lack of data about the quantity of households using non-concrete unsealed cesspits creates a barrier for evaluation of achievement of the target.

In settlements without centralised sewage and water supply systems, the improvement in the quality of drinking water as well as sanitation conditions (in terms of environmental protection) remains the responsibility of citizens and depends on their financial means. And while the quality of life in Belarus is declining, these issues have been downgraded on the list of priorities.

WASTE WATER POLLUTION

The discharge of untreated waste water is a big problem. The amount will be reduced by at least half by 2030, but the reduction of the proportion of water streams with good ambient water quality raises concern. Unfortunately, the Republic of Belarus has no reliable data on exact locations and conditions of animal burial sites; many agricultural companies cannot afford quality systems for the collection and treatment of domestic and industrial wastewater, and for manure storage and disposal systems.

Water-use efficiency growth requires modernisation of the water-use system. At present, agriculture, with its low water-use efficiency, is a kind of 'anchor' hindering the

country's progress in this area. During the economic crisis, the likelihood of modernisation – especially in primary industry and the water sector – is decreasing, in particular because potential creditors of infrastructural projects are leaving the country. At the same time, water stress in the existing economic conditions is likely to drop further because of the shrinking economic demand and depopulation.

WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Due to the political crisis in Belarus, transboundary cooperation is unlikely to expand; however, considering the interest on the other side of the border, it is just as unlikely to shrink. The main barrier to expanding such cooperation is the political situation in Belarus.

The degree of integrated water resources management implementation in Belarus will remain at a moderately high level, i.e. the capacities for the management are generally adequate, and it is implemented generally through long-term programmes.

The biggest concern is the steady trend of shrinking wetlands areas; it should be noted that this is the only problem not addressed by the state programmes of the Republic of Belarus. Formerly, wetlands-related programmes were often funded by the European Union, but now, considering the dissolution of environmental protection associations and loss of this funding, the situation may get worse. Shrinking of wetlands exacerbates the problem of preserving bio-diversity.

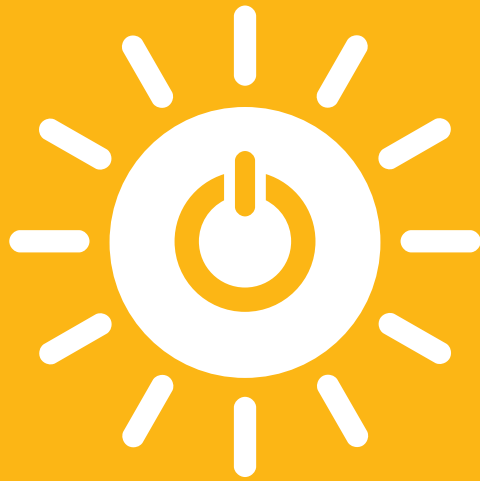
All in all, the deterioration of the political and economic situation is leading to a decrease in international aid and scope of funding of the state programmes aimed at reaching the targets of SDG 6.

In Belarus, according to country's Water Code, there are Basin Councils acting as interagency and interterritorial bodies to provide an organisational framework for the management of basins of the Dnieper, the Western Dvina, the Western Bug, the Neman and the Pripyat; these involve representatives of public authorities, water users, civil society organisations and academia. Removing environmental CSOs from this list (and many of them have been dissolved) reduces the level of expertise among decision makers and involvement of the society in the process, which neither supports nor strengthens the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management. The general population does not recognise the value of water resources, which leads to their reckless use. Also, excluding civil society from the process of achieving the SDG 6 undermines trust in progress on its targets.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- Gradually develop a drinking water quality monitoring system, including through cooperation with the civil society; include the control of water pollution in the tools used for household surveys.
- Pay more attention to disaggregation of data through cooperation with utility services and public authorities.
- Include the questions on sanitary cleaning of cesspits and septic tanks in the tools used for household surveys.
- Stimulate the creation of a system of civic control of the condition of water bodies, modernise systems used for evaluation of wastewater treatment, and improve state monitoring of water bodies: expand the network of monitoring sites and the list of controlled pollutants (microplastics, heavy metals), and ensure accessibility of information on the results of state monitoring of water bodies.
- Improve sanitary and technological reliability of water works and grids, improve water savings.
- Set up systems for monitoring industrial and agricultural sites in water conservation zones and waterfronts, including by using Earth remote sensing data to prevent pollutants from contaminating water bodies and groundwater.
- Introduce technologies for manure treatment; prevent storing manure on open sites without hydroinsulation.
- Take stock and assess the condition of animal burial sites, including anthracitic.
- Prevent wood cutting in water conservation zones.
- Modernise water-use systems, especially in agriculture.
- Continue transboundary cooperation and involve civil society in it; include representatives of civil society in the Basin Councils.
- Include the issue of shrinking wetlands in state programmes, prevent high moor land reclamation, and ensure their preservation and restoration.
- Improve the system used to assess the area of wetlands and their preservation.
- Promote public environmental awareness focused on natural water ecosystems, and a caring attitude toward and the preservation of water.

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY





SDG 7: AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

Experts of the NGO «Ecohome»

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

Virtually 100% of the population have access to electricity. The share of the population using mostly clean types of fuel and technology is 84% [1]. The remaining population consists of residents of villages using wood as a fuel (or, to a lesser extent, peat; there is almost no use of coal in Belarus).

The main transformation in the last five years was related to the preparation of the energy system for the launch of the NPP (the first reactor was commissioned in 2020, the second is expected to be commissioned in spring 2022). Even before the launch of the NPP, there was an excess of power generation in Belarus. It was caused by the modernisation of gas power plants and unfulfilled forecasts of economic growth and energy consumption increase. After commissioning of the 1st reactor, the spare capacity exceeds 70% [2]. The launch of the NPP will be reflected in power balance, which will change many statistical indicators.

The excess of capacity and surplus of power are among the reasons why the development of renewable energy sources (hereafter, the 'RES') is ignored. The share of RES in the total volume of final energy consumption has been changing insignificantly: 7.3% in 2010, 6.7% in 2016, and 7.8% in 2020 [3]. Today, this makes Belarus one of the most backward countries on the globe from among those that provide such statistics. The strategic goal of the country – to raise this figure to 8% [4] by 2030 – matches neither global goals nor the goals of energy independence of Belarus.

The related target of enhancing international cooperation and increasing the scope of international financial flows in support of clean energy research and development [1] is considered 'irrelevant' by the government of Lukashenko – a position difficult to agree with.

TES/GDP, PPP has decreased by 1.4% in the most recent five years (from 2010 to 2015, there was a 13% decrease) [1]. This is the equivalent of 4 GJ/\$1000, which is twice as bad as in EU-28 countries (3.2 GJ/\$1000) [3]. Inexpensive

energy-saving measures have already been implemented. For further reduction of this figure, investments in energy efficiency and modernisation of the economy are required. The most affordable measures to improve energy efficiency have already been taken. The TES/GDP reduction rate has slowed down, with 6.4 GJ/\$1000 [5] as of 2018.

ENERGY INDEPENDENCE

Reducing the import of energy resources is one of the main indicators (target) of energy security. The goal to increase own production of fuel and energy resources from 14% (2010) to 16% by 2020 has been achieved (17%). It had been planned to reduce the share of the Russian Federation (hereafter 'RF') in the total import of energy resources from 96% (2010) to 85% [4] by 2020, but in reality this was only reduced to 93% [1]. The commissioning of the 1st reactor of the NPP has provided diversification away from gas as the main fuel used for power generation, but has not reduced the dependence on Russia, as the RF supplies the nuclear fuel as well.

The declared goal of energy independence is not being achieved because there is no short-term benefit to diversifying the supply of energy resources through acquisition of such resources from other countries at a higher price. It is worth noting that in 2020 there were opportunities for importing energy resources (gas and electricity) from the European market at an acceptable price.

Dependence on the RF as energy supplier determines not only the choice of the technological solutions imposed in the energy sector (building NPP using Russian technology), but also strategic choices in foreign and domestic politics. The low price of Russian energy resources comes in exchange for political concessions.

POWER GENERATION

From 2017 to 2019, Belarus increased its export of electricity to Ukraine and Baltic countries from 160 to 2370 million kWh [2]. In 2020, export dropped to 653 million kWh. In 2021, Lithuania imposed a technological limit on the export of electricity, objecting to the commissioning of

the NPP that pollutes the environment and is potentially dangerous. In March 2021, Ukraine synchronised its power grid with the European ENTSO-E system; since that time, Belarus can no longer export electricity to Ukraine. The dissolution of BRELL (Belarus, Lithuania, Russia, and Estonia) in 2025 narrows down Belarus' opportunities for cooperation in the electricity supply sector to only one country – Russia. Russia's own excessive power capacity and the lower cost of electricity in Russia render the export of Belarusian electricity to Russia impossible.

Establishing a joint energy market in the EAEU announced for 2025 offers no substantial benefits to Belarus: the export of electricity to Russia is impractical, and the provision of emergency power capacity from the RF is not important, as the capacities of Belarus are now sufficient for isolated operation of its energy system [6].

REFORMING

The main internal barrier for the energy sector of Belarus is the unwillingness of Lukashenko's government to carry out a comprehensive reform of the sector: demonopolisation of the sector, establishing regulatory bodies, splitting the sector into energy production and distribution spheres, creating an energy market, and creating a competitive environment which doesn't discriminate against private companies with no discriminatory tariff and subsidy policies. Reform programmes have been prepared, but their implementation has been postponed for more than 15 years by now. [7]

MARKET MONOPOLISATION AND BUNDLING

Belenergo and the state hinder both reforms and an improvement in energy efficiency. Plans for energy efficiency measures are handed down from the authorities; different units within Belenergo are not interested in self-optimisation; energy companies prefer selling and distributing more energy resources.

The level of heating subsidies for the general population (the most significant and subsidised expense line in utility fees) in 2022 will exceed 80% for the main tariffs for gas and electricity [8]. The elimination of cross-subsidising is postponed year after year. The subsidising itself is not targeted; it does not benefit the people who need aid the most, but rather those who own larger flats and use a lot of resources.

Since 2020, the share of new energy-efficient housing (spending not more than 40 kWh/sq.m./year) must be

91% [9]. Since 2021, residents of multi-apartment buildings (main housing stock) have been given an opportunity to receive a 50% non-repayable subsidy of energy-efficiency measures and a 10-year instalment plan for the non-subsidised part [10]. However, when utility tariffs are low, implementing energy-efficiency measures is not feasible [11].

RENEWABLE ENERGY SOURCES

In Belarus, the cost of power produced by RES is already comparable with that of conventional power.

MAIN PROBLEMS INCLUDE:

- A surplus of power caused by excess of power-generating capacity;
- An imbalance (overabundance) of power-generating capacity;
- Unwillingness of energy producers to open the market to private actors; and
- Unwillingness of energy producers to implement a decentralised connection of RES players to the grid.

The problem of surplus capacity is resolved through the electrification of industry, the development of electric transport, and the electrification of residential heating (at the same time, pursuant to government policy, electric convector heaters are installed and the installation of more economical heat pumps is not subsidised). The surplus of capacity caused by commissioning of the NPP has led to the installation of additional expensive electric boilers at CHP plants and boiler houses. The second reactor is to be commissioned in spring 2022. The reactors of the NPP are not cycling: they always work at full capacity. Other power producers are forced to adjust their generation based on the residual demand. The two reactors can generate 2.4 GW, while national demand in non-heating season varies at different hours of the day between 3.1 and 5.1 GW, and in heating season, between 4.3 and 6.3 GW [12]. This significantly limits the total capacity of RES installations. Strategically, until 2030 the capacity of all non-state gas fuel units and RES is limited to 760 MW, and during non-heating season to 600 MW [6], which is less than 8% of the installed capacity of all units. The low-priority use of RES units means they will be underloaded, which will affect cost recovery.

CLIMATE AND THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL (EGD)

The national target for Belarus is to unconditionally reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 35% by 2030 compared with 1990 [13]. In absolute terms, this is a commitment not to exceed the current level of emissions. The topic of climate preservation is not visible in Belarusian media space or the strategies of Lukashenko's government; the commitments regarding a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions are seen as external restrictions rather than a global target or a trend incentivising the development of a new type of economy. The emission target is seen as an indicator formed based on a prediction of the rate of development, rather than a primary goal used to shape goals and targets for other sectors.

Belarus is not ready to export its products to the EU market in the context of the EGD, while the transition period for the Green Deal is scheduled to start as soon as 2023. At present, the government has not set a task of creating a preparation plan, and the concept itself is not discussed in the public media (in the last year, there has only been one publication, which was a negative one).

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

- Carry out a comprehensive reform of all aspects of in energy sector.
- Set ambitious targets for RES development – at least tens of percent by 2030. For example, the scenario of Energy [r]evolution [14] involves an increase in the share of RES in power generation from the current 2.5% to 35% by 2030, with one of the NPP reactors continuing operation.
- Change the legislation on RES, in particular, to permit connection to the grid for household RES on the basis of mutual accounting of power generation and consumption.
- Create conditions for active participation of individuals and local business in advancing RES and improving energy efficiency.
- Gradually stop subsidising heating and power supply to households and simultaneously provide subsidies for measures improving energy efficiency of the households.
- Stop state investments in peat, nuclear energy sector, and dam-based HPPs.
- Create favourable conditions for investments in RES and energy efficiency; develop systems of green credits and green subsidies.
- Set more ambitious targets for reduction of CO₂ emissions, thus paving the way for green investments.
- Introduce the internal certification of the green energy industry: setting a course for preparing for the Green Deal will enable receiving methodical aid and investments from the European Commission.
- Recognise that the oil processing industry requires a new development strategy: the European trend of shifting away from oil fuel will reduce the demand for oil products. Modern oil-processing companies convert to producing synthetic product using energy from RES. For Belarus, such a conversion would incentivise development of RES industry and enable producing competitive goods.
- Diversify suppliers of nuclear, gas, and oil fuel while taking into account the changes in the European energy market.
- Boost the target of energy independence: 30+ percent by 2030 through intensified advancement of RES.
- Revise the goal of creating an energy system capable of isolated stability with a large surplus of capacity and replace it with the goal of building cross-border partnership and more efficient use of the capacities.
- Consider choosing a 'western' type of power grid or a combined solution.
- Consider rotating work of the NPP reactors to provide more room for RES.



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8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH





SDG 8: DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Dzmitry Kruk – research associate BEROCC

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

Weak economic growth has been a fundamental and persistent problem for the country. The authorities' desire to be the guide and the main actor of economic development has become a systemic barrier to growth of productivity, and the level and quality of employment. The average economic growth rate in 2016–2021 (1% a year) was very weak compared with the previous periods, and especially so considering the economic potential of the country (with an average growth rate of 5–7% being an appropriate target). The growth in that period was one of the weakest in Central and Eastern Europe, and the income gap between Belarus and neighbouring countries has been growing.

Technically (at the level of plans, programmes, etc.), the authorities have made attempts to galvanise economic growth in the country. But the gap between declarations and actual implementation of such measures was substantial. There was some progress in 2016–2018, however. For example, that was the period in which a package of regulations was adopted that improved the business environment and status of the private sector and laid the foundations for development of an IT industry. However, in approximately 2019 even this isolated and selective liberalisation began rolling back. The focus on a structural reform of the economy disappeared even from rhetoric.

Employment indicators have not changed significantly since 2016. The most obvious trend was a reduction in unemployment (from 5.8% in 2016 to 3.9% in 2021). However, this reduction was largely caused by demographic trends (ageing of the population) and an increase in migration. Also, the steady trend of decrease in the number of new jobs is worth noting. Moreover, most of the new jobs were created either by the few developing industries (such as IT) or, on the contrary, in stagnating industries. This situation reflects a deficit of dynamism and drivers of productivity, leading to a shortage of opportunities to find a decent job.

In the legal sphere, the main novelty of the 2016–2021 period was the adoption of a new edition of the Labour Code. Alongside some positive innovations, it includes new norms strongly rejected by independent trade unions (e.g. the norm regulating contract-based employment) and at the same time, lacks norms that had been recommended by these trade unions (the practice of executing collective agreements, the protection of employees from bonus cancellation, the possibility of executing a labour contract with no fixed term).

The main trend of recent years, i.e. 2020–2021, has been the absolute priority of considerations of political feasibility over the entire range of economic and labour relations. Many decisions in institutional politics and those concerning the business environment had a strong underlying political motivation. The practice of violating labour law (direct repressions and artificial barriers to activities of independent trade unions, politically motivated dismissals, etc.) has become commonplace. In addition, the continuing political collapse in the country made developed countries adopt several packages of sanctions against Belarus, halting the few remaining mechanisms of economic growth. This set up a steady trend of disruption of economic trust and erosion of the business environment. After Russia invaded Ukraine, this devastating trend worsened because new sanctions were applied against Belarus, leading to its isolation.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS PREVENTING GROWTH OF PRODUCTIVITY, INCOME AND PRODUCTION

With regard to most productivity determinants, Belarus is lagging behind CEE countries. The most significant lag is with regard to indicators of the quality of the macroeconomic environment; its sustainability and stability; competition; quality of management, the financial system, know-how, and higher education. These factors account for the weakness of growth in Belarus.

Consequences of this weak growth are not limited to stagnation of well-being and lower ranking in international ratings. The deficit in growth may now be creating barriers

to future growth, affecting the accumulation of human capital and exacerbating social challenges. For instance, the growing income gap in recent years has caused a substantial migration outflow to neighbouring countries, which means a deficit of human capital in Belarus in the context of future growth. The weak growth may also generate negative structural effects and undermine macroeconomic stability from the top down. Eventually, a vicious circle may be formed.

Since 2020, the authorities have been increasingly guided more by opportunistic political expediency while neglecting considerations of economic growth and development of the country.

THE AUTHORITIES' BLOCKING OF 'INTEGRAL' MECHANISMS OF ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND RESOURCE RE-DISTRIBUTION

Efficiency of distribution is one of the important channels for productivity growth: it involves mobility of resources between companies, industries, and within the life cycle of manufacturers. These mechanisms have been overly weakened by administrative practices employed in Belarus. For example, the authorities use state investment programmes to re-direct the flows of capital stocks to less productive businesses and sectors. In addition, administrative levers are often used to curb labour mobility. Finally, economic authorities often use directive measures to prevent bankruptcy procedures. All of the above leads to stagnation in the business environment by 'turning off' powerful mechanisms of that would otherwise boost productivity.

LABOUR MARKET CHALLENGES AND VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHTS OF TRADE UNIONS

This problem is a direct consequence of contorted conditions in the economic environment and weak economic growth, and it can be resolved only if these root causes are addressed.

An increase in migration in recent years has become the people's reaction to the deteriorating economic outlook and political repression. Addressing these problems appears to be both a guarantee of and a basis for a reduction in the outflow of human capital.

In today's Belarus a combination of regulatory and administrative tools is used to violate basic rights of independent trade unions. These rights include the freedom of associations (infringed by barriers for registration, as well as a broad range of ways to exert pressure against the existing independent trade unions),

and the right to represent and defend the rights of employees with regard to labour and wages. Moreover, existing independent trade unions de facto cannot use their conventional instruments (strikes, mass gatherings, and support from international organisations).

A three-party social partnership formally exists in Belarus. However, employees are mostly represented by trade unions effectively controlled by the government. Furthermore, to expand this practice, the authorities sometimes use directive unionisation, e.g. by demanding the creation of trade unions in the private sector.

Term contract-based employment provides for a quite acceptable and, in numerous instances, effective work status. But in Belarus, this kind of employment is imposed on a compulsory basis, including in the sectors where it is hardly justified (such as state-funded organisations). The authorities impose this practice both in the public sector and in the sector of commercial state-owned companies. This practice is an important reason for employees' poor preparedness to defend their labour rights. Also, the prevalence of this form of employment is the cause of a substantial reduction of actual security of employees, as it creates opportunities to circumvent regulations.

EMPLOYMENT AND PROTECTION FROM UNEMPLOYMENT

The work of employment services and retraining system pretty much exists in form only, and sometimes amounts to pure imitation. The country continues the practice of recognising people's unemployed status based on their registration with the employment service. At the same time, the amount of the unemployment benefit provided to officially unemployed people remains measly (the equivalent of 8 to 15 US dollars). However, a person who loses unemployed status acquires certain substantial obligations. Because of the low official unemployment rate, the authorities can afford to minimise expenses for retraining and employment promotion.

Despite the fact that top-level legislative acts (the Constitution, the Labour Code) declare the right (and not the obligation) to employment, sometimes this right is violated. One example of such a violation, according to human rights activists, is when people without official employment are discriminated against. They must pay increased tariffs for utilities and other public services, compared to the general population.

Also, despite the legal prohibition of any form of children's labour, human rights activists have documented facts regarding the involvement of schoolchildren in agricultural work, which is a legacy of Soviet practices.

HIDDEN DISCRIMINATION

Explicit and hidden discrimination practices are still used in the labour market against individual social groups, including those which are quite vulnerable. For example, statistics indicate a significant, though somewhat decreasing, gap in wages between men and women (about 24%). In addition, certain relics of old practices concerning women are still maintained in the applicable legislation. Specifically, there are certain occupations classified as 'for men only', and human rights activists again consider this a violation of the principle of freedom of employment for women.

MEASURES FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

The problem of youth unemployment is still relevant in the country. The unemployment rate among people aged from 15 to 29 is traditionally much higher than in other age groups (about 7% compared with the average of 4%). The authorities largely choose to ignore the root causes of this problem (quality of education, shortage of effective mechanisms for acquiring initial work experience, etc.), instead focusing on administrative methods to disguise statistical indicators of the problem. In particular, they continue the active use of the practice of assigning careers to university graduates whose tuition has been paid for by the state.

PEOPLE'S LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE NATIONAL BANKING SYSTEM

The increasing deterioration in economic outlook has created a persistent trend of erosion of economic confidence in Belarus. One of the most evident manifestations of this trend has been a decrease in trust in the banking system. The number of people keeping their money in bank deposits, as well as the amount of such deposited money, has been rapidly falling. This creates a consistent trend of scaling down and degradation of financial mediation. This can be interpreted as the banking system's inability to properly carry out its function of financial mediation, which clearly undermines economic growth prospects.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

The cornerstone recommendation from the civil society regarding economic growth prospects and full and productive employment is to revise the role of the state in economic development. The authorities should drop their ambition of being at least a key (or maybe even the only) actor in the context of economic development, a sort of

progressor managing and guiding this development. Instead, the state needs to become a guarantor of the development of institutions and social infrastructure. Specific recommendations are as follows:

- Overcome the lingering political crisis by conducting new, free and transparent elections.
- Eliminate key barriers to development of the private sector and productivity growth.
- Eliminate barriers to redistribution of resources within the economy (competition, asset sale, bankruptcy).
- Develop local self-government as a foundation for preserving and building up human capital.
- Assess the economic and financial condition of the largest state-owned companies and produce a number of template patterns for reforming them.
- Abandon discriminatory practices regarding independent trade unions.
- Abandon the requirement of fixed term contracts as the main form of hiring personnel.
- Raise the amount of the unemployment benefit to at least the minimum subsistence level, and revise and significantly simplify the procedure for obtaining unemployment status.
- Reject formalised and informal practices of discrimination against individual social groups on the labour market.
- Eliminate multiple barriers hindering activities of non-government organisations.
- Abandon the practice of the compulsory assignment of careers to university graduates whose tuition has been sponsored by the state. Return to actual implementation of the SDG 8.b target and develop (in partnership with the civil society) a national strategy for youth employment (as a separate document).
- Design and implement a set of technical measures to restore people's confidence in the economy and financial institutions.

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE





SDG 9: INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

Belarus is one of the states with a high level of scientific and technological development. According to the Human Capital and Research Sub-Index in the Global Innovation Index, Belarus ranks 38th out of 132 countries [1]. At the same time, domestic expenditure on research and development in relation to GDP in 2020 amounted to only 0.55% of GDP.

At the end of 2019, 99% of households had a landline or mobile phone, and 65.8% had a computer. The percentage of households with Internet was 70.1% [2]. 8.03 million (85.1%) of the 9.44 million inhabitants of Belarus use the Internet. At the same time, the number of Internet users in Belarus has more than doubled over the past 10 years. The average speed of a fixed Internet connection in Belarus in 2021 was 48.39 Mbps [3].

Belarus is characterised by a high degree of wear and tear on the passive and active part of industrial enterprises; consequently, modernisation, the introduction of energy-efficient technologies, and a reduction of costs in the production of services are necessary. The National Infrastructure Plan of the Republic of Belarus for 2016-2030 is being implemented in the country [4].

Despite the high level of repression against scientists, the IT sector, and representatives of small and medium-sized businesses after the 2020 elections, international organisations such as the UNDP [5] continue to interact with the Lukashenko government in the field of innovation.

INFRASTRUCTURE IN BELARUS

The majority of the population has access to key infrastructure services such as safe drinking water (99.5%), sanitation (98.7%), mobility (99.9% of the rural population lives within 2 km of a year-round road), and solid waste management services (95.5%) [6].

Belarus has the potential to benefit from its geographical location between the European Union and Russia so that logistics and its transport infrastructure would facilitate the free movement of goods and people. However, according to

the World Bank's Logistics Performance Index, Belarus dropped in the global ranking from 91st place in 2012 to 103rd in 2018. In particular, its infrastructure deteriorated, falling from 2.78 (65th place in the world) to 2.44 (92nd) [6].

SCIENCE IN BELARUS

In 2020, 25,600 people were employed in the research and development (R&D) industry. Research activities are concentrated mainly in the capital, Minsk, where more than 70% of the scientists work [7].

The total number of students in postgraduate studies in 2021 decreased by 6% in 2020, while in doctoral studies there was a decrease of 0.4% [8].

The total number of women engaged in research and development in Belarus has been decreasing since the 1990s. The number of female researchers without a degree has decreased by 7%. However, the composition of researchers with higher qualifications shows a reverse trend: the number of women with a doctorate degree increased by 7%, and the number of associate professors by 6%. At the same time, the number of women holding academic degrees and leading positions in the field of science is significantly lower than that of men. In the history of the National Academy of Sciences, there have been no female leaders; 2 were elected as actual members and only 13 as corresponding members.

The country is experiencing a volatile growth of indicators reflecting the development of innovation activities. In the scientific field, there has been a decrease in the amount of funding for research and development against the background of an increase in the share of extra-budgetary sources in the total amount of domestic expenditure on research and development [9]. In 2018, expenses per employee in research and development amounted to USD 13,863 [10]. As a result, the low knowledge-intensity of GDP does not contribute to the reproduction of scientific and technological potential and to solving problems in order to accelerate the innovative development of the country's economy.

REPRESSION OF SCIENTISTS AFTER THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The 2020 protests changed the situation in the academic and research sphere in Belarus. Independent Belarusian scientists who, through their work and activism, resisted the repressive policy of President Lukashenko were deprived of their jobs, and a significant number of them left the country, while some of them are in Belarusian prisons [11].

Belarusian scientists regularly protested against Lukashenko's regime, signed collective letters, and recorded video messages against violence in support of their colleagues and students. Belarusian scientists also joined the new political democratic bodies – the Coordinating Council (in 2020), independent trade unions, and other structures. The activities of Belarusian scientists within the framework of and in cooperation with Belarusian NGOs, which have been massively eliminated since 2021, are extremely difficult and associated with the danger of being considered and prosecuted as criminal activity [12].

CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS

- Pursue a consistent public infrastructure policy.
- Establish a new integrated road and rail transport strategy, including analysis of markets and forecasts for freight and passenger transport, investment needs, and organisational structures.
- Strengthen the interaction of academic, branch, and university sciences.
- Create conditions for research and development similar to the European level, with a view to increasing the number of workers engaged in research and development.
- Strengthen the integration of science and production, and commercialise the results of scientific and technical activities and technology transfer.
- Attract the investment of venture funds and business in research and development, including the creation of research infrastructure on the principles of public-private partnership.
- Develop a system of continuous training, retraining, and advanced training of specialists according to the principle of 'lifelong education'.
- Create organisational and legal conditions for attracting leading foreign scientists to the training of highly qualified specialists and highly qualified scientific personnel.
- Improve tax and financial instruments to stimulate the development of science and innovation.
- Stimulate the development of innovative infrastructure through the creation of scientific and technological parks (technoparks), technology transfer centres, business incubators, technopolises, science cities, etc.
- Develop information support of the scientific and innovative sphere, including the creation of a nationwide information system for monitoring scientific, scientific-technical, and innovation activities.
- Provide Internet access in all schools, hospitals, and libraries.



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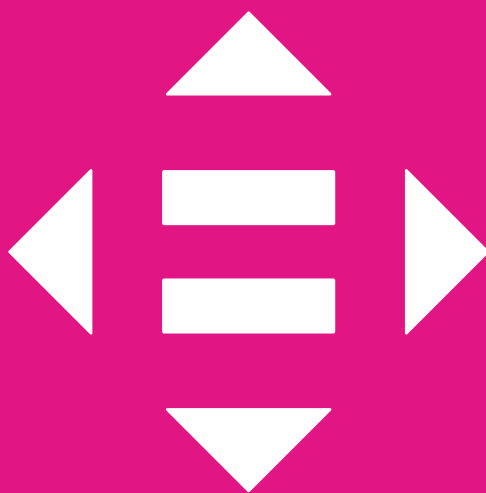
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10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES





SDG 10: REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Marina Shtrahova – co-founder of The Others Initiative

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

Since the beginning of 2016, no single specific action plan has been developed to achieve SDG 10, but several documents have been adopted that contribute to this process – for example, National Action Plans for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to ensure gender equality, human rights, to improve the situation of children and protect their rights, etc. A common problem with these documents is that they do not contain qualitative indicators that involve assessing the effectiveness of the implementation of the activities indicated in them. Reports on the implementation of plans are not published. The adoption of plans does not constitute progress in achieving the SDG, while the Republic of Belarus strives to present it in this way. Voluntary public national reports of the state on the achievement of the SDG do not contain a separate section on the progress in achieving SDG 10.

The state calls ‘meeting the social needs of the most vulnerable segments of the population, namely the disabled, the elderly, and large families’ [1] priorities of social policy until 2030. This greatly narrows the scope of social protection, as it excludes children, LGBTQ+ community, migrants, religious and national minorities, and other vulnerable groups. Young people are increasingly present in policy documents as a target group, but they are still perceived exclusively as an object of paternalistic concern of the state.

The events of 2020 related to the presidential elections and the large-scale repressions that followed them clearly show that Belarus not only does not support the active participation of all people in the political life of the country, but also actively prevents it by punishing such behaviour. The political crisis of 2020 severed almost all communication processes between the state and civil society, many organisations were liquidated for political reasons, and the dialogue on achieving equality was interrupted and actually regressed.

Belarus has not adopted comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and has not created effective legislative mechanisms to ensure equality and protection against discrimination. The national legislation lacks a general

definition of discrimination, with a division thereof into direct and indirect.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

As of July 1, 2020, the number of people with disabilities in Belarus amounted to 575,710 or 6% of the population [2]. About 60% of social facilities are equipped with barrier-free environment elements. About 43% of residential buildings are equipped with separate elements of a barrier-free environment [3].

The 2nd European Games were held in Minsk in 2019 and became the most accessible mass event in the history of Belarus [4]. At the same time, none of the 71 inspected objects fully met the accessibility criteria (especially informational criteria).

A stereotypical attitude towards people with disabilities persists: more than 90% of respondents believe that ‘people with disabilities need constant help and support from the state’, and more than 60% believe that ‘they need constant care from others’ [5].

An important achievement in the field of protecting the rights and promoting the interests of people with disabilities was the ratification in 2016 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Convention). At the same time, Belarus has not switched to the correct terminology, i.e. ‘a person with a disability’ instead of ‘a disabled person’. In 2017, the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the provisions of the Convention for 2017–2025 was adopted.

The adoption of the Convention did not affect the processes of deinstitutionalisation. The number of residential care homes and the number of people living in them is growing: from 63 institutions (14,257 people) in 2000 to 72 (17,671 people) by the end of 2018 [6].

In 2018, the preparation and discussion of the draft Law ‘On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Integration’ began. The text of the draft law was developed in communication with various stakeholders and contains a number of progressive norms. However, the new law remains committed to a medical (paternalistic) understanding of disability.

LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

There are no publicly available and published data on hate crimes, including homophobic crimes, in Belarus. At the same time, according to the data of the Identity and Law initiative group, in 2012–2018 there were more than 100 incidents caused by hatred towards LGBTQ+ persons. At least 12 victims turned to the police for help. However, the police often do not take seriously reports about such crimes. A typical wording of the refusal cites a ‘lack of corpus delicti’, even in cases where the victim was attacked and beaten [7]. In the history of Belarus, there is only one single case, which occurred in 2016, when the court took into account the motive of homophobia in the verdict [8].

‘Denials of justice, humiliation, and pressure on the part of those who are called to protect then lead people to not believe in an effective investigation; they want to “just forget” about what happened and not get even more traumatised,’ says Natalia Mankovskaya from the Identity and Law initiative group.

Hate crimes are fuelled by the prevalence of hate speech against LGBTQ+ people in the media. Even though in 2019, according to the results of monitoring hate speech against LGBTQ+ in the media, for the first time since 2015 the percentage of non-biased material exceeded the percentage of biased material and amounted to 57%, harsh hate speech continues to dominate in regional media [9]. In 2021, 24% of the material on the topic of LGBTQ+ in the Belarusian media contain manifestations of hate speech [10].

In March 2020, believers of different faiths, together with the Open Hearts pro-life foundation, collected more than 52 thousand signatures under a collective appeal to the Presidential Administration demanding that it ‘initiate the adoption of a law banning propaganda and public demonstration of homosexuality and other sexual perversions to minors and imposing responsibility for these actions to the Criminal Code’.

After the events of August 2020, homophobia in Belarus became one of the instruments of repression. Videos with the outing of detainees for political reasons are becoming systemic.

MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Belarusian legislation does contain parts of the international standards but does not stipulate a comprehensive approach to protecting the rights of forced migrants as a separate vulnerable group which would create a voluminous and non-transparent bureaucratic procedure for applying for state protection.

In practice, persons applying for the protection of the Republic of Belarus may face such problems as the lack of a real possibility of using the right to asylum. This is due to a number of factors: the lack of information about such a procedure during detention; the lack of a possibility of using the services of an interpreter, lawyer, or advocate; the complexity and non-transparency of the procedure for considering an application for protection; a deviation from the presumption of trust; and a denial of refugee status and the expulsion of persons to countries with military conflicts, the death penalty, and the threat of torture and persecution.

In the summer of 2016, a local migration crisis began to develop on the border with Poland in the city of Brest, in which around 3,000 citizens of the Russian Federation from the North Caucasus accumulated in the border town in an attempt to cross the border with Poland to obtain asylum. In the summer of 2021, a new migration crisis developed on the border of Belarus with the European Union, which was provoked by the regime in Belarus as a reaction to international sanctions against Belarus.

‘The regime in Minsk uses human lives as a tool to achieve its goals’, states Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission.

On October 4, 2021, the Belarusian Parliament approved the suspension of the Readmission Agreement with the EU.

Since August 2020, more than 170 foreign citizens from at least 17 countries have been detained and faced administrative penalties in Belarus in connection with their participation in peaceful protests [11].

In 2021, the human rights organisation Human Constant recorded cases of arbitrary forced expulsion of foreign citizens, when the grounds were single administrative offences and even discontinued proceedings in an administrative case. Also in 2021, the state authorities actively reviewed the citizenship issued in the 90s, and repeatedly recognised that citizenship was issued in error.

CHILDREN

The paternalistic attitude towards the child as an object of care, and not a subject of law, is fully preserved in the country. At the end of 2019, a coalition of organisations prepared an alternative report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which gives an idea of the problems regarding the rights of the child in Belarus [12].

The situation with respect for the rights of the child becomes more complicated for children from various vulnerable groups. For example, HIV-positive children are

forbidden to engage in most sports, even if the child is undergoing antiretroviral therapy, and there is no indication of the virus in the blood. There is practically no system in place for working with children with autism spectrum disorders. Child psychiatrists and neuropathologists rely on outdated protocols, postponing the diagnosis to a later date, and as a result, the child acquires a disability.

ROMA

To date, a comprehensive program of social integration of the Roma population has not been adopted. The implementation of their constitutional rights is significantly hindered due to the presence of well-established negative stereotypes in their regard. In 2019, 50% of Roma stated that they had faced multiple (more than 3) refusals when applying for a job when there were vacancies. 80% faced ethnic profiling in the form of detentions and multiple fingerprinting [13]. One major problem is the lack of citizenship of the Republic of Belarus for some Roma, and likewise, the lack of identity documents, which Roma people are prevented from obtaining by a number of legislative provisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

Inequality remains an unresolved problem for the Republic of Belarus. To rectify and improve the situation of various vulnerable groups, the following steps should be taken immediately:

- Develop and adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation aimed at creating effective tools to protect against the discrimination of any person, especially from vulnerable groups.
- Introduce mandatory anti-discrimination expertise in draft regulatory legal acts that potentially affect the rights of vulnerable groups.
- Revise completely the legislative and departmental acts for the presence of discriminatory provisions against vulnerable groups and take measures to eliminate them.
- Conduct special training for judges, prosecutors, employees of internal affairs bodies, representatives of other legal professions and civil servants to increase their competence in the process of detecting hate crimes, investigating, and making judicial decisions to ensure equality and protection from discrimination.
- Maintain and publish separate statistics on hate crimes.
- Develop, with the participation of non-governmental organisations, and introduce into the practice of the work of state institutions and services, as well as journalists and the media, a comprehensive program to promote the principles of equality and non-discrimination, the use of correct vocabulary, and the fight against stereotypes.
- Monitor the use of hate speech in the media and take action upon each incidence of the use of hate speech.
- Actively cooperate with civil society on the development and implementation of measures of national plans and state programs in the field of the rights of vulnerable groups.
- In cooperation with civil society, develop an effective system for monitoring and assessing the situation of certain vulnerable groups, including the creation of special national bodies.
- Introduce the practice of broad public consultations with civil society when working on draft laws and amendments to legislative acts that affect the situation of vulnerable groups and human rights in general. The current texts of draft laws should be made available to the public in a timely manner.
- Reject the medical (paternalistic) understanding of disability.
- Introduce a system for determining disability according to the methodology described by the World Health Organization in the International Classification of Functioning, Disabilities and Health.
- Revise the draft Law 'On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Integration' in such a way that it complies with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with regard to human rights and anti-discrimination, endows a person with disabilities with sufficient legal capacity, and enshrines the policy and system of implementation of the norms of the Convention.
- Transfer the terms enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into Belarusian legislation without changes. In particular, it is obligatory to use the term 'person with a disability' instead of 'a disabled person'.
- Develop and start implementing a comprehensive national deinstitutionalization program. National disability programs should focus on the priorities of independent living in local communities, transferring

the priority of decision-making and resource management to the person.

- Develop a multi-level system for monitoring accessibility achievement.
- Implement the OSCE/ODIHR Guidelines on Observing and Promoting the Electoral Participation of Persons with Disabilities.
- Immediately stop outing LGBTQ+ people as a tool of political repression.
- Completely abandon the practice of expelling persons to their country of origin (nationality) if they may be threatened with the death penalty, torture, persecution on distinctive grounds, danger due to military conflict, etc.
- Develop a procedure for effective legal mechanisms for the protection of foreign citizens and stateless persons in the event of their forced migration from the country of origin.
- Ensure that migrants are treated humanely and fairly, regardless of their immigration status, and that they receive effective legal protection.
- Use the arrest and detention in custody of foreigners solely as a last resort against individuals with weighty arguments and in accordance with the UNHCR Guidelines on Applicable Criteria and Standards relating to the Detention of Asylum Seekers and Alternatives to Detention.
- Take measures aimed at reducing discrimination and improving the situation of children from vulnerable groups.
- Publicly and unequivocally condemn at the highest level any acts of violence, including those against all vulnerable groups, giving a clear signal to society that such actions are unacceptable.
- Develop and adopt, with the participation of the Roma minority, experts and representatives of civil society, a comprehensive program for the social integration of the Roma population in Belarus, including measures to promote education, employment, prevention of early marriages, as well as to overcome negative attitudes and stereotypes existing in society towards the Roma people.
- Immediately stop the practice by the internal affairs bodies of taking ethnic profiling measures against Roma representatives. In the work of law enforcement agencies, implement methods that exclude the use of ethnic profiling.



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11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES





SDG 11: SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

Belarus is one of the countries with a constantly growing level of urbanisation. Currently, 78.1% of the population of Belarus lives in cities and towns [1]. Of these, 93% live in small towns, and only 7% live in larger ones. 27.6% of the country's urban population is concentrated in Minsk. The capital is the only city whose population is growing. The rest of the settlements, to one degree or another, have already experienced the phenomenon of 'shrinking cities'.

Belarus is urbanising against the backdrop of a demographically ageing population and a decrease in the total number of inhabitants. The ageing of the population creates special demands on urban infrastructure and its accessibility, healthcare, housing, and mobility. Low demographic potential reduces the competitive advantages of the regions, and more and more districts have subsidised budgets.

At the international level, Belarus supports the New Urban Development Program (Habitat III).

In the period 2016–2020, national plans and programs affecting the sustainable development of human settlements were implemented, and sectoral programs for 2021–2025 were developed. At the local level, within the framework of international cooperation, documents aimed at the sustainable development of settlements were also developed. These include regional strategies for sustainable development; concepts and passports for territorially oriented development; green urban development plans; local agendas for the 21st century; action plans for sustainable energy development and climate; plans for sustainable urban mobility; and local environmental action plans. Given a deficit of public investment, they did not take root. Since 2016, the monitoring of sustainable development with regard to settlements has not been conducted.

SUFFICIENT, SAFE, AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

The share of homeless people and people living in non-residential premises is small and declining. The share

of dilapidated and emergency housing is low. The housing stock and provision of housing is increasing on average, reaching 267.7 million m² and 28.9 m² per person in 2021, respectively [2]. The housing stock is poorly adapted for people with disabilities. Also, it is characterised by high energy consumption. A significant proportion of housing needs current, major repairs, and reconstruction. The housing renovation technologies that are in use do not raise the environmental standard of buildings.

Cities have good access to basic services, waste management, water supply, and sanitation. However, some low-income and socially disadvantaged families who do not have access to safe heating, water supply and sewer systems continue to be at risk. The system for separate collection and sorting of solid municipal waste is being expanded. 100% of the population use the municipal solid waste disposal service on a regular basis.

ROAD SAFETY AND SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT SYSTEMS

From 2005 to 2020 the annual number of deaths in road traffic accidents decreased by 2.9 times (by 1084 people, i.e. from 1673 to 573 people). Accident and death rates continue to fall, albeit at a slower rate. At the same time, transport risks [3] in Belarus remain at a level that is significantly higher than in the EU countries. The transport infrastructure is approaching the limits of its transport capacity, which requires the introduction of integrated approaches to urban planning and transport planning. In the period 2016–2020, within the framework of international technical assistance projects, on the initiative and with the participation of public organisations, plans for sustainable urban mobility have been developed for individual cities. In the structure of urban movements, public transport is in the lead. In general, the public transport fleet in cities is becoming obsolete. Public electric transport is developing quite slowly: its share in 2020 was 27.1%. The exception is Minsk, where the share of metro, trams, trolleybuses, and electric buses reached 40%. The level of motorisation is growing (335 cars per thousand inhabitants in 2020). The number of people who use individual means of transportation, including bicycles, scooters, etc., is increasing.

Access to transport infrastructure for physically impaired persons is limited. A small portion of the rolling stock of public transport and pedestrian crossings is equipped with a barrier-free environment. There is a delay in converting public transport stops to a form accessible to the physically impaired.

Integrated and sustainable human settlements planning, and management based on broad stakeholder participation

The current system of urban planning is of a directive nature and is not focused on achieving the SDG. The development of urban planning documentation is monopolised by the state. Together with the general plan of settlements at the local level, detailed plans are developed which specify the urban planning requirements for potential investors, and they are presented in the forms of special regulations. The most attractive places for investors are equipped with urban planning passports containing environmental requirements for the use of the territory. In planning, there is a weakening of the territorial approach and a strengthening of the position of industries. A national urban development program has not been developed. International recommendations on urban and territorial planning are not being implemented. The implementation of master plans is weak.

Since 2019, the rationing system in the field of architectural and urban planning has been reformed: a draft Code has been developed, and technical codes of established practice have been translated into the format of building codes and rules, which determine the procedure for developing urban planning projects and contain requirements for the planning and development of populated areas. The measures taken are not enough. For example, there is no connection between SDG 11 indicators and technical and economic indicators of urban development projects. The system of city indicators is not applied. There is no open urban database, and access to the State Urban Cadastre is difficult.

Participation of civil society in urban planning and urban management is limited. The urban planning of city master plans began to include surveys of residents. A mandatory procedure for public discussion of reports on strategic environmental assessment [3] of urban development projects has been introduced. However, the changes made to the procedure for holding public discussions of urban development projects have shifted the focus to 'informing' the public. On February 1, 2022, the decision to deprive Belarus of privileges under the Aarhus Convention came into force. Many public organisations were liquidated after 2020.

For the period 2016–2020, it was not possible to achieve tangible progress in realising the goals of 'equalising' living

conditions in different settlements. Since 2018, the goal of accelerated development of economic growth points (11 cities with more than 80 thousand people) has come to the fore.

To date, trends have emerged in the development of settlements in Belarus that negatively affect their environmental sustainability. First, the area of built-up territories in cities is growing faster than their population. Against the background of a general depopulation, urbanised territories are expanding, which puts excessive pressure on nature. Secondly, the secondary development of internal territories (brownfield) and the overdue modernisation of engineering and transport infrastructure have been postponed indefinitely. In this regard, the risks of accidents on networks increase. Climate change exacerbates existing problems.

In Belarus, for the period 2016-2020, jointly and at the initiative of public organisations, local government and self-government bodies implemented international pilot projects and initiatives aimed at the sustainable development of specific settlements and territories. A ranking of cities is being developed [4].

IMPROVING AIR QUALITY IN CITIES

Belarus controls the quality of atmospheric air. The emission of pollutants into the atmospheric air is reduced. Mobile sources remain the main source of pollutant emissions into the atmospheric air, accounting for 61.5% of emissions in 2020. Particulate matter concentrations are measured at automatic stations in 9 cities. The amount of particulate matter decreases from the southwest to the northeast of Belarus [6]. The proportion of periods with poor air quality in terms of particulate matter is decreasing. A project of public monitoring of concentrations of particulate matter in the atmospheric air of cities (AirMQ.by) is being implemented, covering 58 human settlements. Climatic heat waves and droughts exacerbate the harmful effects of stationary and mobile sources on the surface layers of atmospheric air.

ACCESSIBLE AND OPEN GREEN AREAS AND PUBLIC SPACES

Urban improvement of park areas is actively developing in Belarus. Cases with a low level of work on the improvement of green areas of cities – the demolition of individual mature trees, cutting down squares and natural groups of trees, heavy pruning, and others – create conflicts with residents. New landscaping projects do not use decisions based on 'natural' solutions. As a rule, most of the time, well-maintained spaces continue to be empty, and have not acquired a public character. The current legislation

prescribes the mandatory development of schemes for green areas for common use. The development of these schemes was accompanied by a survey and meetings with residents. However, these schemes do not contain environmental performance indicators for the planned solutions, including the conservation and development of biodiversity or the contribution of green areas to climate change adaptation.

INTEGRATED DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT AT ALL LEVELS

The number of man-made emergencies due to fires increased by 10%, and new categories appeared: 'the presence of harmful substances in the environment above the MPC' and 'accidents on life support systems'. The Republic of Belarus is exposed to short-term and long-term effects of weather and climate events in the form of strong winds, extreme precipitation, droughts, and forest fires. Natural emergencies are characterised primarily by significant material damage. A national disaster risk reduction strategy has been developed in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. At the city level, local action plans have been developed and are being implemented. The developed disaster risk reduction documents at the national and local levels do not take into account climate change scenarios.

PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION OF THE WORLD CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

The share of budget expenditures on the development of culture and the number of UNESCO cultural heritage sites remains at the same level. With a lack of budgetary funds, the restoration of immovable historical and cultural values is proceeding at a slow pace. Two-thirds of the architectural monuments placed under the state protection of historical and cultural heritage require emergency repair works.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

In order to achieve SDG 11 indicators, it is necessary to improve the quality of housing conditions (including the development and implementation of measures to transfer capital repairs and modernisation of private multi-apartment housing stock to market mechanisms, and to increase the energy efficiency of housing); reduce the negative impact of road transport; increase access to and the size of open areas (including green areas and public spaces); create a more attractive urban environment for all social groups and ages, including the elderly; and intensify efforts to protect natural and cultural heritage.

- Formulate national, regional, and local urban policies focused on achieving the sustainable development goals, the New Urban Agenda (Habitat III) and meeting national commitments under the UNFCCC Paris Agreement. Each city, regardless of population size and status, must become part of the overall national socio-economic system and take part in the fulfilment of commitments in the field of sustainable development. This also includes the 'localisation' of SDG, taking into account local unique conditions. Intersectoral cooperation and coordination is essential.
- Legislate the development of local level planning documents (local sustainable development plans, green urban plans, sustainable urban mobility plans, local climate plans, etc.) that would bring stakeholders together and set long-term priorities and integrate territorial and sectoral planning.
- Implement planning standards. Particular attention should be paid to and preparation for the implementation of ISO 37120:2014 'Sustainable development of communities. Indicators for city services and quality of life;' ISO 37101:2016 'Sustainable Cities and Communities', and LEED neighbourhoods.
- Increase the amount of research related to various areas of urban development.
- Introduce flexible approaches to local management aimed at collaborative learning, promotion of innovation, and implementation of pilot projects. It is necessary to put into practice indicators of the effectiveness of the implementation of city plans and programs, to ensure the collection, updating and provision of open city data, and to prepare practical guides describing possible solutions to specific city problems.
- Raise public awareness and capacity building for stakeholder participation through information databases of urban development documents, practical guidelines explaining the content of urban planning documents and participation procedures, and creating new organisational structures with the function of coordinating the interests of all stakeholders – for example, the 'urban laboratory'.
- Finance the implementation of activities included in the strategic documents of urban development with the involvement of a variety of financial instruments and the introduction of 'sustainable' procurement. It is necessary to develop a regulatory framework for the introduction of new financing instruments, including

'green', climate, etc., to prepare methodological materials and improve personnel qualification. It is necessary to increase the portfolio of 'green' projects with clear performance indicators, including CO2 reduction.

- Develop and implement educational programs in the field of sustainable development for various groups, including the public, managers, and practitioners.



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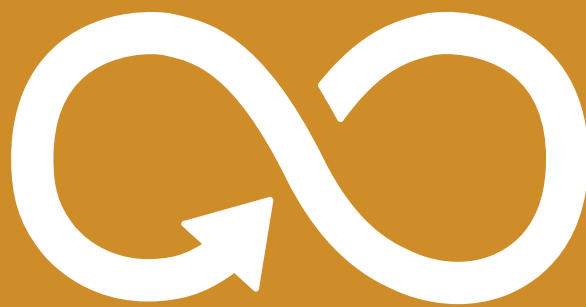
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12 RESPONSIBLE
CONSUMPTION
AND PRODUCTION





SDG 12: RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

Experts of the “Fundacja Centrum Współpracy Międzynarodowej”

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

In 2016, Belarus adopted the first National Action Plan for the Development of the Green Economy in the Republic of Belarus until 2020, which addressed the issues of transition to rational patterns of consumption and production. In December 2021, the National Action Plan for the Development of ‘Green’ Economy in the Republic of Belarus for 2021–2025 was approved [1].

The issues of an environmentally friendly lifestyle and sustainable consumption have been developing since 2015 and have become in demand among society and more prominent in the information space of Belarus for several years. However, since 2020, it has become unsafe to maintain this focus publicly due to the current regime of Lukashenko. In the current conditions, the SDG 12 agenda has lost priority and therefore along with it, the financial resources to continue the implementation of projects and initiatives among all segments of NGOs, the business community, the media, and government agencies. Organisations promote and maintain capacity locally through grassroots initiatives, but do not publicly disclose their work. Public information can greatly harm the initiative and the organisation due to the current regime of Lukashenko.

The idea of sustainable production and consumption has not yet received sufficient systemic and comprehensive support at the political level in Belarus, including through economic incentives, so currently what we see is rather the implementation of isolated activities and tasks within the framework of SDG 12. The SDG 12 agenda has become almost invisible against the backdrop of all the political events in Belarus and, later, the war in Ukraine.

In 2021, the Center for Environmental Solutions presented an overview of the achievement of SDG 12 [2] by the Sustainable Development Partnership Group and independent public experts as of March 2021. Since July 2021, the Center for Environmental Solutions has been in the process of liquidation.

USE OF CHEMICALS

Belarus is making progress on safe management of chemicals and waste. In 2021, the Roadmap for Sound Chemicals Management in the Republic of Belarus was published. The interest and activity of the Ministry of Health and its structural divisions in the field of chemicals management has increased [2].

However, Belarus is not yet a party to the Minamata Convention on Mercury and the Rotterdam Convention. Little progress has been made regarding regulating and managing ‘new’ persistent organic pollutants (POPs) under the Stockholm Convention; there are problems with the use, regulation and monitoring of hazardous chemicals in consumer products, and the use of lead as a pigment in household paints continues [2].

WASTE PREVENTION AND RECYCLING

About 4 million tons of municipal waste are generated in Belarus annually, of which plastic waste accounts for almost 280 thousand tons. In 2019, over 62.26 million tons of production waste was generated in the Republic of Belarus.

Since 2017, Belarus has been working to improve legislation in the development of separate collection and recycling of recyclables. In 2017, the National Strategy for the Management of Municipal Solid Waste and Recyclables in the Republic of Belarus until 2035 was adopted, [3]; in 2020, an Action Plan was approved aimed at a gradual decrease in the use of polymer packaging, including its replacement with more environmentally friendly packaging [4], and new Rules for the Management of Municipal Solid Waste were adopted as well [5].

The country has started gradually phasing out plastic containers. Since January 1, 2021, a ban has been introduced on the use and sale of disposable plastic tableware in public catering facilities [2]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on the amount of non-recyclable waste from disposable protective equipment (i.e. masks, gloves, and gowns).

Despite the fact that the main efforts go towards improving the collection and processing of recyclables, progress in the field of waste prevention remains insufficient. In the waste management system in Belarus, the disposal method accounts for 77.5% of solid waste. The planned actions related to the introduction of municipal waste incineration technology in Minsk, and the production and use of RDF fuel all raise concerns. If implemented, these processes will become a source of serious environmental pollution, as well as complicate the implementation of measures related to the prevention of waste generation and its reduction [2].

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Lukashenko's administration has been highly focused on the development of a 'green' economy. One promising concept to envision sectors of a 'green' economy is that of a circular economy [6].

Back in 2007, the Directive of the President of the Republic of Belarus No. 3 'Economy and frugality are the main factors of the economic security of the state' was adopted.

In 2012, Belarus became the first of the CIS countries to formalise the principle of extended producer responsibility in legislation. Since 2019, the country has been actively implementing the policy to reduce the use of polymer packaging, replacing it with environmentally friendly (including biodegradable) packaging. However, the specific measures necessary to create a circular economy have not been completed in Belarus so far. The reason for this, among other things, is the fact that there is still no systematic understanding of the prerequisites for the Belarusian economy to move to a circular model [6].

FOOD WASTE

According to the aggregated data of RUE 'Bel NRC Ecology', in Belarus in 2019, 66.9 thousand tons of food waste was generated in the form of expired food, leftovers from canned and frozen foods, vegetables and fruits that have lost their consumable properties, etc.

However, according to an independent study conducted by CED and BEROC in 2021, based on the methodologies for calculating food residue and waste indices developed by FAO and UNEP, it can be assumed that in reality, this figure is much higher. **According to BEROC, the amount of food waste generated in retail chains alone can reach 389 thousand tons, which is 6 times more than the data provided by RUE 'Bel NRC Ecology' in the economy overall.**

There are difficulties in accounting for food leftovers and waste in Belarus. The country does not report on FAO's methodologies for food loss and the food waste index, and Belstat does not publish data on the volume of food losses along the entire food chain from harvest to household consumption. It is not clear how much food waste is generated in the country, how much of it is food leftovers, what could be eaten, and what constitutes, for example, packaging waste or so-called unavoidable waste.

CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDG [2]

- Develop a scheme for the regular assessment of progress towards achieving SDG 12 in Belarus. Such a scheme could include the preparation of regular progress reports on individual SDG 12 targets by the responsible government bodies, followed by discussion at the Council for Sustainable Development, as well as the preparation of periodic shadow reports, which will be an important form of public participation.
- Develop and implement additional national indicators for individual targets within SDG 12, which will allow for a more detailed assessment of progress.
- Strengthen the relationship between work on achieving SDG 12 and the National Sustainable Development Strategy by linking targets under SDG 12 and activities of the NSDS.
- Support the work of NGOs and grassroots initiatives, including those of educational institutions, to achieve SDG 12.
- Regularly assess national processes in the sector of sustainable production and consumption for their correspondence to the current international processes and initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, the 10-Year Framework Program for sustainable production and consumption, etc.
- Strengthen horizontal cooperation among various civil society organisations involved in the implementation of SDG 12 in Belarus.
- Strengthen cross-thematic cooperation among organisations working in the field of environmental protection, the social sector and the economy.
- Promote the principles of a circular economy, 'zero waste', and an environmentally friendly lifestyle among the population of Belarus.

- Strengthen cooperation between NGOs and business to solve certain tasks within SDG 12.
- Develop tools for engaging the population in environmental activities, including independent environmental monitoring and control.
- Develop practice-oriented education of students on urgent tasks to achieve SDG 12 'Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns', namely, not to introduce additional subjects and classes, but to integrate and combine them within the existing curriculum. The environmental aspect of the subjects studied should be discussed and explained in a non-violent, non-imposing way.



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13 CLIMATE ACTION





SDG 13: CLIMATE ACTION

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

The Republic of Belarus is a member state of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and several international environmental initiatives addressing climate change issues. International climate policy, compliance with commitments, reporting on international agreements, and international cooperation are important driving forces of national climate policy. Planning and implementation of actions at the national, regional, and sectoral levels remain insufficient.

Belarus regularly submits international reporting documents in accordance with UNFCCC implementation obligations, including National Communications and National Emission Inventory Reports. In 2018, the state submitted its Seventh National Communication [1], which includes information on greenhouse gas emissions, measures to reduce them, threats related to climate change and response measures. Timely reporting is considered one of the achievements of the climate policy of Belarus. At the same time, the reporting documents are of a notifying nature and do not imply direct stimulation of actions.

In 2016, the country joined the UNFCCC Paris Agreement (UNFCCC PA) and submitted a Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) with commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 by 28% from the 1990 level, excluding 'the land use and forestry' (LULUCF). There was also a plan to develop strategic documents in the field of climate adaptation, including a national adaptation plan, and sectoral and regional plans. In the second Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), adopted in 2021 [2], emission reduction commitments were raised to 35% from the 1990 level, taking into account emissions and uptake in the LULUCF sector.

Nevertheless, the level of national ambitions to reduce emissions remains insufficient, since the stated goals do not mean a significant reduction in emissions. As in other countries of the former USSR, Belarus' emissions in 1990 were exceptionally high. According to the 'National inventory of anthropogenic emissions from sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases' for 2021 [3], emissions in 1990 amounted to 139.16 million tons of CO₂-eq, while in 2019 they amounted to 90.12 million tons of CO₂-eq excluding natural absorption, and 58.35 million tons of CO₂-eq taking into account absorption in the

LULUCF sector. The expected reduction of emissions by 35%, taking into account the absorption by ecosystems, is 76.18 million tons of CO₂-eq, that is, it allows for an increase in actual emissions by more than 10%.

In 2016, a national Action Plan for the implementation of the provisions of the UNFCCC PS [4] was adopted. The plan involved the development of a number of documents, including a Strategy for the long-term development of the Republic of Belarus with low greenhouse gas emissions for the period up to 2050 and a National Adaptation Plan. The main measures for the development of documents were supposed to be implemented by 2018–2020, but later the plan was revised, and the implementation period was extended to 2022–2023.

Emission reduction and climate adaptation targets are mentioned in a number of recent national documents, including the Belarus National Strategy of Sustainable Social & Economic Development – 2030, the National Action Plan for the Development of the Green Economy in the Republic of Belarus for 2021–2025, and the State Program 'Environmental Protection and Sustainable Use of Natural Resources on 2016–2020.' Nevertheless, the climate goals stated in these documents are of a general, declarative nature and should be supported by detailed plans and implementation mechanisms. Emission reduction is planned mainly due to the planned modernisation of the economy and technology, energy efficiency and commissioning of the Belarusian NPP and does not involve deep structural changes and innovations.

In 2019, sectoral adaptation strategies for agriculture and forestry were approved, but these documents do not belong to the category of regulatory legal acts, and therefore do not ensure their mandatory execution. Moreover, detailed plans for their implementation have yet to be created.

With the support of international initiatives of the European Union and the UN, the process of developing a National Adaptation Plan (NAP) has begun. Within the framework of the EU4Climate project, an assessment of climate risks was carried out for the main sectors – energy, construction, housing and communal services, and transport – and a roadmap for the development of NAP was developed. The first version of the NAP was planned to be presented in 2022, but the work was suspended by the donor due to the difficult political situation.

A number of local climate strategies have been developed for the cities participating in the Covenant of Mayors, scientific research has been conducted in the field of adaptation and emission reduction, and educational programs have been proposed for universities and the public. Most of the initiatives were implemented within the framework of international projects by public organisations and scientific institutions. The mass liquidation of NGOs working in the field of ecology and sustainable development in 2020–2022, as well as the reduction of international cooperation in the scientific and educational fields, significantly complicates further work.

The period from 2016 to 2021 has been characterised by a slow increase in awareness of the importance of climate change for the economic and social policy of the country with the support of international organisations and the active participation of NGOs. However, the goals and targets related to the implementation of SDG 13 are not among the national priorities. Climate issues are considered in the context of 'environmental' issues, and not as a strategic factor of development and risk for the economy and society. The political situation that has developed since 2020, including economic sanctions and Belarus' withdrawal from the EU Eastern Partnership, is currently one of the most significant risks to the implementation of SDG 13.

INCREASING THE POTENTIAL FOR ADAPTATION TO DANGEROUS CLIMATIC PHENOMENA AND LONG-TERM CLIMATE CHANGE

The increase in the average air temperature over the last decade is about 10C; adverse weather events have become more frequent and include hurricanes, floods, droughts, and forest fires.

The country has a system of climate and meteorological observations, and international cooperation has been established (with the EU and Russia) on climate forecasting. The current work on adaptation to climate change mainly includes rapid response to adverse weather events. A more systematic, preventive approach to adaptation is needed, including to the long-term consequences of climate change.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE ADAPTATION:

- There are no effective coordination structures and legal support for climate adaptation, and the process of stakeholder participation is not being developed.

- There is no detailed information on climate risks for industries and regions, including economic assessment; it is necessary to develop indicators and procedures for assessing damage and risks, collecting, and exchanging information.
- Technical norms and standards of construction, operation of buildings and infrastructure, and territorial planning do not take into account the indicators and long-term dynamics of climate change.

INTEGRATING CLIMATE CHANGE RESPONSES INTO POLICIES, STRATEGIES, AND PLANNING

At present, Belarus has not yet formed any legislation to ensure the implementation of the goals of the UNFCCC PA, the relevant institutional mechanisms have not been formed, and coordination between government agencies, business, and NGOs in solving climate problems is very weak. Mechanisms for integrating national emission reduction and adaptation goals into government programs, sectoral and regional plans have not been developed. Accordingly, government agencies, businesses, and financial structures demonstrate a low level of motivation for actions aimed at combating climate change and do not sufficiently take climate risks into account in strategic planning.

BARRIERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY AND THE TRANSITION TO A GREEN ECONOMY INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

National emission reduction targets are not ambitious enough compared to the UNFCCC PA targets.

The economy is characterised by high rates of carbon intensity and energy intensity, while the state regulation of enterprises using traditional technologies and energy sources hinders the development of environmental innovations.

Low priority is given to low-carbon technologies, including renewable energy sources, and there exists a lack of incentives for their use.

There is no system of legal mechanisms that stimulate the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (there is no legal regulation of the carbon price, greenhouse gas emissions trading, carbon tax, green/climate securities, etc.).

The rigid vertical system of state planning is inflexible, and often hinders innovation and the setting of goals adapted to local conditions.

Box: According to experts, the gap between the current potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the goals to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 is: for 2030 – 5.3 million tons of CO₂-eq (the forecast for achieving neutrality is 62.3 million tons of CO₂-eq, the current potential is 67.6 million tons of CO₂-eq); and for 2050 – 19 million tons of CO₂-eq (achieving carbon neutrality – 33 million tons of CO₂-eq, current potential – 52 million tons of CO₂-eq). It is possible to close the gap only through the development and implementation of systemic measures, innovative low-carbon technologies, and optimisation of the use of electric and thermal energy.

Source: Assessment of the impact of the European Green Course (EGC) on the economy of Belarus, Ekaprajekt NGO, Green Network Partnership, BEROC-Kyiv, 2021.

DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION, AWARENESS-RAISING, AND EDUCATION

Awareness of the direct and indirect impacts of climate change remains low. Especially relevant is the education of specialists working in production, in the field of local government, planning, financing, and law.

Barriers to climate awareness and education include the following:

- Climate issues are considered 'environmental' with a lower priority compared to economic development; at the state level there is no understanding of the economic, social, and political impacts of climate change.
- There are no educational programs in the field of climate change for professionals, including as a part of professional development and continuing education.
- Higher education programs include information about climate change for individual specialities, but there is no unified education system in the field of climate change.
- There are no programs for funding scientific research in the field of climate change and adaptation.
- A number of environmental NGOs – climate information and education centres – have been liquidated.

ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

International cooperation is not included in the range of national targets of Belarus under SDG 13. However, international cooperation and funding is an important driving force and condition for the implementation of the remaining tasks.

The country has a low awareness of government agencies about the goals and instruments of international climate policy, including the possibilities of bilateral cooperation with developed countries and international financial institutions. Moreover, the current political situation hinders the development of cooperation and has led to the termination of funding for international programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

- Create an effective system of climate services and forecasting, including the financing of programs in the field of forecasting, risk communication, and the development of climate adaptation measures.
- Develop national legislation ensuring the implementation of the UNFCCC PA, and ensure the formation and functioning of effective institutional structures for the effective implementation of climate policy.
- Raise the emission reduction targets and align them with the UNFCCC targets and EU targets for carbon neutrality by 2050.
- Finalise and adopt a National Strategy for the long-term development of Belarus with low greenhouse gas emissions for the period up to 2050, taking into account the achievement of carbon neutrality by 2050.
- Prioritise programs for the conservation of ecosystems that absorb greenhouse gases, including swamps and forests, as opposed to their use for economic purposes.
- Integrate the targets of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and climate adaptation into strategic planning documents, in particular, into state programs for the development of economic sectors, regional, and local development plans.
- Create a national carbon market and mechanisms for monitoring and assessing greenhouse gas emissions based on carbon pricing, taking into account the best foreign and international practices/standards.

- Develop sectoral and local climate adaptation plans on the basis of assessments of current and long-term climate risks, and integrate the proposed measures into local and sectoral development programs.
- Attract investments that help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change.
- Take into account long-term trends and scenarios of climate change when devising national and local action plans for responding to adverse weather events.
- Create a national climate service system taking into account the requests of stakeholders (industries, local administrations, businesses, etc.)
- Stimulate the development of low-carbon and eco-friendly technologies, and reduce the share of carbon- and energy-intensive industries.
- Integrate the risks associated with climate change (current and long-term) into economic and financial planning, including on the basis of ESG approaches.
- Carry out carbon intensity analysis for the life cycle of goods and services, which will reduce carbon intensity and increase environmental competitiveness in the foreign market.
- Develop and use technologies with low carbon and energy intensity.
- Develop and implement education programs in the field of climate change at all levels, including in the course of advanced training for practitioners and managers.
- Increase climate literacy and awareness.
- Provide research institutes with support to conduct research on the following topics:
 - Climate risks, taking into account the local characteristics of Belarus, the effectiveness of adaptation measures and appropriate methodologies; and
 - Assessment of the carbon intensity of products, especially for export-oriented carbon-intensive industries: energy, production of cement, glass, fertilisers, steel, cast iron, and techniques/methodologies for its reduction.



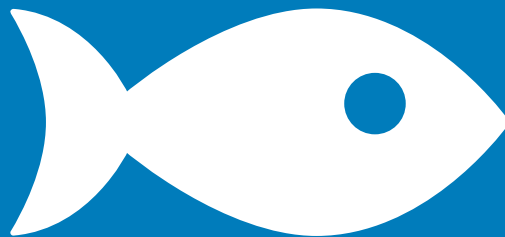
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14 LIFE
BELOW WATER





SDG 14: LIFE BELOW WATER

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

Belarus is landlocked, and therefore not one of the maritime countries. Nevertheless, its proximity to the Baltic Sea (190 km) and the Black Sea (about 530 km), the presence of large river basins that flow into these seas, and the resulting close transport and economic connection to them in no way decreases the significance of Belarus with regard to certain international SDG indicators. It is important to note that at the official level, for most of the items of SDG 14 at the national level, the status is defined as 'Irrelevant for the Republic of Belarus', which is somewhat erroneous, as the potential for its participation is much greater in view of the influence of Belarus on the Baltic and Black Seas.

The role of the government of Alexander Lukashenko in achieving the national goals of SDG 14 is somewhat underestimated. It is limited by activities related to the development or amendment of normative legal acts; this in turn shows the weak interest and activity of officials and public bodies that are ostensibly aimed at participating in the global mission of a transition to sustainable development and making Belarus a participant in this mission.

Public reporting on SDG 14 activities is considered insufficient and ineffective, as is interaction with NGOs and international organisations under SDG 14.

PUBLIC PROJECTS

In 2019, the public organisation 'Ахова птушак Бацькаўшчыны' ('Protecting the Birds of the Motherland') created an online map of the distribution of eels in Belarus [1] to collect information about where this rare fish now lives and where it used to be observed. At the state level, a Plan for the management of eel resources for the period up to 2020 has been developed and is in force. Eel is under protection [2]. In the agrotown of Voroniany in the Ostrovets district of the Grodno region, an Information Centre for the conservation of salmon in Belarus was created [3]. The information centre has been opened on the basis of the state educational institution 'Voroniany nursery-kindergarten-secondary school'. From 2017 to 2021, an international project has been carried out by the public organisation 'Friends of Neman', aimed at preserving and restoring the natural population of Baltic salmon in the

basin of the Viliya River, restoring spawning grounds and preventing poaching [4].

BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION

Eel

In Belarus, eel is the only animal species included in the Red List of the International Union for Conservation as a critically endangered species [5]. The main issue is the inability for the fish to get to the usual spawning grounds due to hydroelectric power plants, as well as the inability to carry out stocking, since in 2007 the EU imposed sanctions on the supply of young eel to third countries. Belarus is also included on this list. Efforts to conserve the species have so far been unsuccessful, with scientific experts calling for decisive measures to manage the fishery; eel fishing should be stopped until signs of recovery are detected in the species population. Any withdrawal of the reserve of eel has a noticeable effect on the Baltic population.

Salmon

According to scientists, up to 1965, five fish species (sturgeon, beluga, Russian sturgeon, Black Sea roach, and Atlantic sturgeon) disappeared from the water bodies of Belarus due to the construction of hydroelectric power plants. The problem could be solved by fish-crossing structures (fish-paths), but they are not available at both previously constructed and new hydroelectric power plants (Neman HPP on the Neman River, Polotsk and Vitebsk HPPs on Western Dvina). This also led to the fact that in Belarus in the 1960s, salmon species were not recorded at all, but after almost 40 years, salmon and bull trout began to move through the Viliya River and spawn there. The situation with salmon fisheries in the Baltic Sea is so dramatic that the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) recommends a complete halt to both commercial and amateur catching of the Atlantic (Baltic) salmon, except in the Gulf of Finland, and a significant restriction on the harvest of the bull trout in 2022, but the situation cannot be remedied by regulation. The possibility of preserving the natural population of wild salmon in Belarus is a great contribution to maintaining its population in the Baltic basin. At the same time, any action aimed at the impossibility of migration and spawning (construction of dams on spawning rivers in Belarus, pollution of these rivers, including potential thermal pollution from the

discharge of cooling water from the Belarusian nuclear power plant), significantly affects the state of the population of two species of Baltic salmon, which are classified as vulnerable species on the International Red List of the Baltic Sea.

WATER TRANSPORTATION AND PORTS

E40 Waterway

The development of the project 'Restoration of the E-40 waterway on the Dnieper-Vistula section: from strategy to planning', connecting the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, started at the end of 2013 and continues to this day. The project was funded by the European Union under the Three-Nation Cross-Border Cooperation Programme. From 2017 to 2022, despite numerous comments from the scientific community, the results of research and assessments by environmental organisations, business communities and independent experts, the project continues to be supported at the government level. Without a thorough study and assessment of environmental and economic risks, it is included in national documents and strategies, and funding is sought for its implementation. Only since August 2020, after the deterioration of diplomatic relations between the government of Lukashenko and Poland and Ukraine, as well as the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, all cooperation and further promotion of this project was suspended.

The E40 waterway has dubious prospects for social and economic effects. In addition, it carries global risks for the preservation of the unique natural areas of the European continent with environmental threats to the region of the three countries, including the marine ecosystems of the Baltic and Black Seas. According to independent studies, the project is economically inexpedient and carries environmental risks which include:

- The drying up of rivers, droughts on adjacent lands and local climate change, and deterioration of the world carbon balance [6];
- Risks of pollution during transportation of petroleum products and fertilisers;
- Risks of migration of alien species from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and vice versa;
- A change in the hydromorphological conditions of the entire Polesie region caused by the construction and operation of the waterway, which will lead to the degradation of valuable wetlands, and a number of

vulnerable natural territories of Ukraine, Belarus and Poland [7]; and

- The possible deterioration of water quality, and the possibility of a radioactive threat to millions of citizens of Ukraine due to contamination with radioactive sediments [8].

Port in the village of Nizhniye Zhary

The port project in Nizhniye Zhary of the Bragin district is part of the infrastructure of the E40 waterway for access to the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. There is no high-quality road infrastructure in this area, and most importantly, there is no railway, which is fatal for the water port. Its integration into the system of Belarusian railways will require the construction of a railway line 100 km long to the city of Khoyniki.

According to Belstat, in 2017, the cargo turnover of inland waterways amounted to only 32.1 million ton-km, or 0.024% of the cargo turnover for all modes of transport. 2 million tons of cargo were transported (0.46% of the total in the country). Water transport in Belarus exists only by virtue of significant fiscal injections. In 2013–2016, spending on water transport in absolute terms was greater than on road transport, and almost the same as on rail, with a huge difference in the volume of transportation of goods and passengers. Inland water transport, despite the fact that it employs about 2,000 people, plays practically no significant role in the transport sector of Belarus. Therefore, the feasibility of building a port in Nizhniye Zhary is doubtful.

The project of the port is included in the Scheme of the integrated territorial organisation of the Bragin district; the land allocation has been made pursuant to the investment contract. The construction of the port was not started, as of early 2020 there was no investor, and with the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, any cooperation between the two governments was suspended.

EUTROPHICATION OF SEAS AND MICROPLASTICS

One of the reasons leading to the intensification of eutrophication processes is the intake of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus compounds) and their subsequent removal to the Baltic Sea with river waters. The Republic of Belarus, while not a coastal state and having no direct access to the Baltic Sea, is partly situated on the Baltic catchment area. The river systems of Western Dvina, Neman, Viliya also transport significant amounts of biogens to the Baltic Sea and through the Dnipro basin to the Black Sea, which come from agricultural fields, wastewater and wastewater

treatment plants. At the same time, Belarus, within the framework of HELCOM and the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, undertook obligations to improve these indicators for the Baltic Sea [9]. Yet another global problem is microplastic pollution of the Baltic Sea through wastewater.

TRANSSHIPMENT OF POTASH FERTILISERS

Belarus is one of the world's leaders in the extraction and export of potash fertilisers. Every year, the country sold 10 to 12 million tons of potassium, earning about \$2.5 billion [10]. Most exports are made through the port of Klaipeda (Lithuania). The process of transshipment of fertilisers takes place in dry bulk without packaging, which leads to pollution of the coastal waters of the Baltic Sea, and the reproduction of blue-green algae which, in turn, leads to eutrophication, affecting the biodiversity of the marine ecosystem. In connection with the events of August 2020, from February 1, 2022 sanctions were imposed on 'Belaruskali' and the government of Lukashenko, prohibiting the transportation of potassium through the ports of Lithuania [11].

DOLPHINARIUMS

There is one stationary dolphinarium, Nemo, operating in the Republic of Belarus, but the legislation has not yet introduced a ban on mobile dolphinariums that come as part of a tour. Dolphins and other marine animals are under tremendous stress due to their movements and are in foreign and cramped conditions, where it is difficult to provide them with proper care. Mobile dolphinariums are prohibited in many countries of the world, as they are a manifestation of cruelty to animals. In 2018, the Ministry of Natural Resources proposed to introduce a ban on the use of mobile and contact zoos, mobile menageries, and mobile exhibitions of wild animals into the Law 'On the Handling of Animals', but these amendments have not yet been adopted [12].

CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS

- To achieve SDG 14, it is necessary to revise national indicators for this goal, to give greater importance to Belarus in the global importance of preserving the Baltic and Black Seas, the river basins of which run on the territory of the country.
- Take measures to prohibit the use of microplastics in household chemicals and cosmetics, and continue the modernisation of wastewater treatment facilities for thorough wastewater treatment, including the removal of microplastics.
- Develop and implement a state program with international cooperation and public support for the conservation of Baltic salmon species, integrated monitoring, restoration of new potential spawning grounds and maintenance of existing ones.
- Prohibit eel fishing.
- Make fish-paths on large dams and dismantle inefficient dams.
- Include Belarus as a member of HELCOM for the implementation of conservation and sustainable development programmes for the preservation of the Baltic Sea.
- Introduce a ban on the transshipment of potash and other fertilisers in seaports in dry bulk that tend to pollute coastal waters.
- Monitor and organise the management of all waste and wastewater at enterprises in Belarus, especially those located near major river waterways. Implement a consistent transition to 'green chemistry' in all areas of industry, in agriculture, in households, introducing a ban on the production and use of phosphorus-containing detergents.
- Upgrade treatment facilities to reduce the concentration of nitrogen and phosphorus compounds in wastewater discharges to reduce the overall nutrient load on the Baltic and Black Seas.
- Develop ecological agriculture.
- Fulfil the commitments made under the Paris Climate Agreement to prevent ocean acidification.
- Develop voluntary certification by controlling the legality of supplies and origin of fish products to the markets of Belarus, as well as to the enterprises where they are processed.
- Ensure that Belarusian civil society is actively engaged in educational work, both among the population and among business and government representatives.
- Introduce a ban on the use of mobile and contact zoos, dolphinariums, mobile menageries and mobile exhibitions of wild animals into the Law 'On the Handling of Animals'.

- Closer cooperation with experts and NGOs in discussing and creating a unified state approach and program for the implementation of SDG 14, reviewing national goals and the significance of the Republic of Belarus for this goal.
- Ensure the presence of observers and participants from the Republic of Belarus at international meetings, where important decisions are taken to achieve SDG 14.



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15 LIFE ON LAND





SDG 15: LIFE ON LAND

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

Belarus is a member of key biodiversity conventions: Berne, Bonn, CITES, on Aarhus. Laws on the animal and plant world, 'On Specially Protected Natural Areas' have been adopted. Water and Forest Codes have been developed.

In 2018, the Law 'On Safety in Genetic Engineering Activities' was adopted, and, in 2019, the Law 'On the Protection and Use of Peat Bogs'. The Strategy for the Implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification was approved, and the National Action Plan on the Prevention of Land (Soil) Degradation for 2021–2026 was adopted.

The National Action Plan for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity was implemented in 2016–2020 and adopted for 2021–2025. The forest industry has developed national indicators for achieving SDG 15, and the state program 'Belarusian Forest' was implemented for 2016–2020 and adopted for 2021–2025. The Ministry of Forestry has developed a National Action Plan for forestry adaptation to climate change until 2030, the National Action Plan to increase the absorption of greenhouse gases by forests for the period up to 2030, and the Strategy for forestry adaptation to climate change until 2050.

A system of public monitoring and citizen participation in addressing issues of biodiversity conservation has begun to take shape in Belarus. In 2019, an attempt was made to ease regulations that protect endangered species, but activists and scientists prevented the worst-case scenario. One great contribution of Belarus to the fight against land degradation is the ecological rehabilitation of depleted peatlands and wetlands with a disturbed hydrological regime. To date, more than 64,000 hectares of disturbed territories have been re-swamped.

FORESTS AND FOREST MANAGEMENT

The vast majority of forest land belongs to the Ministry of Forestry – 89%, or 8,627.3 thousand hectares. Very few Belarusian forestry enterprises are ready to openly provide forest management projects and, moreover, agree on forest management plans with the public.

The share of commercial forests has increased dramatically from 50% to 70–80%. For 2016–2019, timber harvesting

due to unplanned severe windfalls and insect damage to pine forests increased by 5.8 million m³.

There is an increase in forest management, and an increase in the volume of felled wood. In the early 2000s, Belarus cut down 3.5 million m³ per year. In 2021, according to the state program 'Belarusian Forest' for 2021–2025, the allowable cut is 25.5 million m³. The annual volume of timber harvesting will be increased to 30 million m³ in 2035. The average volume of wood harvesting per 1 hectare increased from 1.3 m³/ha in 2000 to 3.3 m³ in 2018.

Over the past 5 years, about 200 thousand hectares of artificial even-aged forests have been created, 90% of which consist of 1 or 2 species. Such forests are not resistant to windfalls, fires, the spread of diseases and insect pests, especially in the face of climate change. They are actually plantations with a feeble species diversity of forest animals, primarily rare and protected species, and require constant care up to the cutting age.

FOREST CERTIFICATION

Forest certification in the Ministry of Forestry is perceived as a condition for entering foreign markets and successful competition. In Belarus, 97.8% of the forest fund of the Ministry of Forestry is certified by the FSC system, and 96.3% of the forest fund by the PEFC system. The level of FSC implementation in Belarus is ahead of the Belarusian eco-society's ability to effectively participate in the certification process.

On February 24, 2022, the situation with the risk of timber supplies from Belarus changed dramatically. Since the beginning of March 2022, the European Union has banned the import of timber from Belarus. The PEFC International has decided to consider timber from Belarus as conflict timber. In agreement with Assurance Services International (ASI), the FSC has decided to suspend all certificates that allow the sale or promotion of FSC-certified products in Belarus. In addition, they will be withdrawn by certification bodies.

SPECIALLY PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS

Specially protected natural areas (SPNA) in Belarus in 2020 amounted to 9% of the country's territory. In total, there are 4 national parks and 1 biosphere reserve in the country.

Specially protected natural areas occupy 15.9% of the forest fund area, or about 1.6 million hectares.

Numerous other types of logging are still allowed in specially protected natural areas. The economic burden on them is growing; forestry roads are being built to previously inaccessible areas where valuable biotopes have been preserved. Specially protected natural areas have in effect not expanded over the past years. Earlier decisions on the creation of some specially protected natural areas have not been implemented. The potential for this remains.

LAND DEGRADATION

There is a tendency to reduce the costs of land protection and rehabilitation. The main contribution of Belarus to the fight against land degradation is the ecological rehabilitation of depleted peatlands and wetlands with a disturbed hydrological regime. To date, more than 64,000 hectares of disturbed territories have been re-swamped. Peat soils are degrading and losing organic matter. Sandstorms became noticeably more frequent in the country, which began to be observed not only in Polesie, but also in the central part of the republic.

Due to land use change and global climate change, open swamps and floodplain meadows continue to be overgrown with trees and shrubs, which deprives many rare animal species of habitats, and the measures taken to counter this process are not sufficient.

CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY

According to the 6th national report on the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, presented in 2019, about 27,100 species of living organisms were registered on the territory of Belarus. Among them, there are 4,450 species of plants, 16,000 species of animals (including 83 species of mammals), 2,000 species of protists (the common name for all unicellular organisms with a cell nucleus) and 4,800 species of fungi.

Belarus has achieved success in preserving the European bison population. By 2021, its number was estimated at 2,101 individuals, which exceeds 1/3 of the world population. There is concern about the criteria by which, according to the new rules, bison will now be classified as a reserve gene pool.

The number of endangered species continues to decline, including the speckled ground squirrel, great snipe, black-tailed godwit, great stone curlew, and red-headed duck.

From 2017 to 2020, around 1,000 habitats of protected species were officially placed under protection, but protection documents were identified and prepared for more than 2,000 habitats. In the regional units of the Ministry of Natural Resources, there is a shortage of employees who could deal with the procedure for placing species from the Red Data Book under protection.

A weakening of the legal protection of the habitat of rare and endangered species is occurring. In 2021, the ban on hunting in the habitats of protected animals was lifted, the protection zones for most bird species were reduced by a factor of 2, and the recommended protection area around nests, burrows, etc. was reduced. There are no reliable data on the state of populations of rare species of large animals (lynx, bear, badger), nor programs to support their study and conservation.

Again, a draft law aimed at protecting animals from cruelty was rejected.

FINANCING OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMS

There are practically no subsidised environmental measures in state programs related to nature management and environmental protection. Many of the measures proposed have been moved from the category of mandatory to recommended. An economic failure and a default predicted in the near future may weaken, up to a complete collapse, the existing system for environmental control and curbing the economic pressure on nature.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

- Optimise the system of specially protected natural areas by expanding the list of categories. Introduce more serious restrictions on some categories of specially protected natural areas, up to a complete ban on economic activities, and the wider use of zoning.
- Finalise the scheme of the national ecological network and ensure communication between all its objects; and within the framework of fulfilling obligations under international agreements, primarily the Berne Convention, complete the creation of the Emerald Network, in accordance with the recommendations of biogeographic seminars.
- Prohibit artificial reforestation in specially protected natural areas, the use of monocultures for reforestation, litter removal and clear sanitary felling. All protected

areas that have some kind of international conservation status (Ramsar Sites, areas of special conservation importance, biosphere reserves, etc.) should be recognised as specially protected natural areas of international importance; and therefore plans for their management and protection should be developed.

- Make mandatory the EIA procedure for any construction in specially protected natural areas, including in areas of special environmental significance. Reconsider plans for building roads in the forests, and above all, develop a road network development scheme.
- Refuse to plan cuttings and arrange forest roads during forest management, in untouched parts of forests, especially in protected areas, to preserve biodiversity and additionally protect them from the introduction of invasive species.
- Conduct an inventory and transfer under protection old-growth forests of typical and rare biotopes that have been preserved outside the boundaries of the specially protected natural areas, and introduce a moratorium on all types of logging, if trees are located in the protected areas, to assess their condition and provide additional protection.
- In order to achieve sustainable forest management, use more environmentally friendly types of final felling, in particular even, gradual, and selective, bringing their share to 50% in the total volume of logging.
- Differentiate approaches to forests of different origins: allow final clear-cutting in monoculture massifs and use only selective felling in natural forests.
- Post-war mass forest plantations are now approaching the felling age, and in order to preserve most of the reference old-growth forests as a reserve of genetic breeding material, it is necessary to initiate amendments to the Forest Code. Legislatively increase the age of logging.
- Introduce more accurate methods of inventory and measurement of forest plantations for an objective assessment of timber stocks. One of the stages on the way to this can be considered the introduction of the Unified State System of Electronic Accounting of Wood, which has become mandatory for all forest users in Belarus since August 2021. This makes it possible to track every batch of wood from the cutting area to production, giving an overall picture of the scale of the harvest.
- Develop the market of forestry and logging services, services in the field of reforestation, and the care of forest crops. This will take some burden off the employees of forestry institutions.
- Reform the forestry management system by separating logging and forest protection. In this case, the Ministry of Forestry will have legislative and control functions, and logging should be carried out by production enterprises, and not by forestry enterprises, whose task is to protect the forest.
- Radically reform the existing system of land use so as to adapt to sustainable agriculture; end the practice of involving new lands in the floodplains of small rivers in agricultural use, while at the same time introduce environmentally friendly farming methods.
- Continue work on the ecological rehabilitation of peat bogs, improving recommendations for re-wetting territories. Sow degraded peat soils with perennial grasses, bringing their number to 1 million hectares, plant protective tree plantations, and develop technologies for bioremediation of contaminated soils to prevent sandstorms.
- Cancel spring bird hunting; prohibit electronic methods of attracting birds and the use of foot-hold traps.
- Undertake a set of new measures to maintain the population of endangered species of animals, the number of which continues to decline.
- Take a more integrated approach to control invasive plant species. Sow all wastelands with perennial grasses, cereals, and legumes; use a non-moldboard plough; and create buffer zones of 1 to 2 km around nature reserves and other protected areas, which would help protect them from the penetration of especially aggressive species located around human settlements.
- Amend the Forest Code and the Water Code so as to strengthen environmental measures.
- Adopt an appropriate legislative act on the provision of ecosystem services in the country. This would make it possible to create a market for such services in the country and monetise biological diversity.
- Revive the state environmental fund, which previously existed under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection. The Ministry and the scientific community will need to come up with new funding mechanisms from extra-budgetary sources.

Funds will primarily be needed to implement the National Action Plan for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity for 2021–2026.

- Make information on funding for environmental protection measures and their effects available to the public.
- Create an independent public monitoring process of biodiversity conservation in specially protected natural areas in order to resist attempts to sacrifice environmental interests in favour of economic ones.
- Continue the practice of conducting public reviews of projects that pose significant threats to biodiversity.
- Inform and motivate the public to apply to the relevant structures regarding violations of environmental legislation.
- Return to the public sector the right to attract funding and implement environmental projects. This is particularly important since, as of the end of 2021, there is a threat of Belarus withdrawing from the membership of the Aarhus Convention, which over the past 15 years has been the driver of positive changes in the norms in the field of public participation in the process of making environmentally significant decisions.
- Stop the practice of unjustified forced liquidation of environmental public organisations, including those involved in achieving the SDG. Eliminate criminal liability in connection with activities in unregistered and/or previously liquidated NGOs.

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS





SDG 16: PEACE, JUSTICE, AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

Experts of NGO the «Belarusian Helsinki Committee»

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

SDG 16 (as well as SDG 17) affects all other SDGs in a cross-cutting way. Accordingly, both issues and progress in its implementation also affect the implementation of other SDGs.

An important event for the implementation of SDG 16 and a fairly progressive step was the adoption in 2016 of the first National Human Rights Plan for 2016-2019 [1]. It was developed on the basis of recommendations given to Belarus following the second cycle of the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review, and recommendations addressed to the Republic of Belarus by human rights treaty bodies. However, most of these recommendations (and the most significant ones) remained unfulfilled.

Also, an important progressive step for the implementation of SDG 16 was the adoption of a new version of the Law 'On Regulatory Legal Acts' in 2018 [2], which includes a provision that any regulatory legal acts must comply with the sustainable development goals contained in international legal acts and legal acts of a programmatic nature (the principle of socio-economic conditionality of rule-making activity). Thus, when adopting any regulatory legal acts, justification should be given in the context of the implementation of the SDGs (as to which tasks it helps to solve). At the same time, considering how many illegal (contrary to the Constitution and international obligations of Belarus) changes to legislation have been made over the past two years (from 2020 to 2022) [3], it is regrettable to state that this important provision of the Law 'On Regulatory Legal Acts' is, for the most part, merely formal.

In November 2021, the Law 'On Personal Data Protection' came into force in Belarus, which is largely focused on the European GDPR [4]. Also in 2021, the National Centre for Personal Data Protection was established [5].

At the same time, the main problems existing in legislation and law enforcement practice persist and, moreover, have worsened after 2020.

When analysing the challenges and barriers to achieving SDG 16, we will take into account the data of the National Human Rights Index, developed by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and calculated with the participation of about 50 Belarusian experts acting as representatives of civil society [6]. In 2020 (the data has not yet been published for 2021), the overall assessment of the human rights situation in Belarus was 3.1 out of 10 possible points. At the same time, the situation with respect for civil and political rights is 2.9 out of 10, and the situation with respect to social, economic, and cultural rights is 4.3 out of 10.

Compliance by the state with its obligations in terms of general measures (4 components: state policy in the field of human rights, interaction with civil society, interaction with international mechanisms, equality, and non-discrimination) is 2.2 out of 10. These four components largely make up the content of SDG 16 and the tasks to achieve it.

ISSUES CONCERNING STRONG INSTITUTIONS AND BODIES, GENERAL POLICY IN THE FIELD OF THE RULE OF LAW. CENTRALISATION OF POWER AND THE ABSENCE OF A REALLY WORKING SEPARATION OF POWERS

All political institutions are controlled by the president. The high degree of personification of power leads to the fact that often the actions of state bodies and the public services provided by them do not correspond to the real socio-political agenda and reflect arbitrary decisions of the president [7]. One of the instruments of such control is the legislatively fixed preponderance of presidential decrees over laws, which does not meet the principles of democratic state building (even in a presidential republic).

There is no clear legislative regulation of the civil service and public administration. There are problems with access to information (online and offline), which is under the jurisdiction of state bodies and local self-government bodies, and to information about the law enforcement practice of state bodies [8]. The training of personnel for the civil service is monopolised by the state and ideologised; therefore, it is of poor quality. [7]

LACK OF AN INDEPENDENT JUDICIARY

The problem of the absence of a normally functioning judicial system stems from the problems outlined above, but it is crucial to single it out. This is because not only the implementation of all the tasks for SDG 16, but also the entire SDG agenda, depends on access to justice.

The UN Human Rights Committee has long noted the inconsistency of the Belarusian judicial system with the standard of the right to a fair trial, and highlights the main obstacles to the independence of the judiciary in this regard: the role of the president in the selection, appointment, reassignment, promotion, and removal of judges and prosecutors and his control over these processes (including the fact that salaries of judges are determined in a presidential decree, not in a law); a lack of guarantees of irremovability of judges who are initially appointed for a five-year term with the possibility of reappointment to the next term or indefinitely; and a lack of proper provision of all guarantees of a fair trial to the accused in criminal proceedings, including the presumption of innocence [9].

It is also important to note the presence of discriminatory justice against protesters and opponents of the authorities after the 2020 presidential election. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe [10], and the head of the UN OHCHR, Michele Bachelet, take special note of this issue in particular [11].

The right to protection is not effectively ensured. There is no independence and self-governance of bar associations, and no freedom to exercise the profession of lawyer. The Ministry of Justice, unlike the bodies of lawyer self-government, has the broadest powers in the field of advocacy administration [12].

Election fraud at all levels impedes the exercise of the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, including active and passive suffrage

Since the 1995 referendum, all electoral procedures in Belarus have not met international standards for democratic and fair elections and have been accompanied by numerous violations of these principles and requirements of national legislation [37].

The 2020 presidential elections were held in an unprecedented atmosphere of fear and intimidation of society, against the background of repression that began almost immediately after the start of the election campaign and did not stop at any of its stages. The Belarusian authorities have not implemented any of the

recommendations of the OSCE and national observers that were made following the results of previous election campaigns [38].

This was due to the active use of administrative resources in favour of the incumbent President, the lack of impartial election commissions, unequal access to the media for all candidates, numerous facts of forcing voters to participate in early voting, and the closure of a number of electoral procedures for observers.

The introduction of restrictions by the CEC on the number of observers at polling stations led to the disruption of monitoring of all types of voting (early, on election day and at the registered place of residence of voters), as well as the counting of votes.

The same applies to the holding of the 2022 Belarusian constitutional referendum [39].

This situation grossly violates the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, including active and passive suffrage (this is specifically pointed out in the OSCE Rapporteur's Report under the Moscow Mechanism). [40] This, in turn, not only adversely affects, but in principle emasculates the idea of creating effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels (target 16.6), and does not comply with the rule of law principle (16.3) and other SDG 16 targets (16.6, 16.7, 16.10, 16b).

ABSENCE OF A NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTION IN THE STATE

The existence of a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) in the state that complies with the Paris Principles is an indicator of the implementation of target 16a (indicator 16.a.1). This indicator is also included in the National List of SDG Indicators in Belarus.

The government has been talking about the possibility of creating a NHRI for the past twenty years. At the same time, due to the problem identified in the paragraph Centralisation of power and the absence of a really working separation of powers of SDG16, as well as the paragraph Irresponsible and manipulative behaviour of the state in the framework of cooperation with international organisations on SDG 17 assistance and development projects, there is still no NHRI in the Republic of Belarus that complies with the Paris Principles. Even though the need for its establishment has long been noted in the comments of treaty bodies addressed to Belarus (for example, by the Human Rights Committee since 1997 [13], including the latest comments of 2018 [14], and by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights since

2013) [15]. At the same time, the Committee emphasises that the presence of public bodies with a human rights function cannot replace such an institution [16]. Moreover, based on what was said in the paragraph Centralisation of power and the absence of a really working separation of powers, even if state bodies had such jurisdiction, they would not be able to fulfil it due to the inability to act independently.

Thus, today in the state there is not a single special body endowed with the competence to engage in human rights policy.

THE STATE IS MANIPULATIVE AND SELECTIVE IN FULFILLING ITS INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS, THEREBY HINDERING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RULE OF LAW AT THE INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS

For decades, the recommendations of the convention human rights committees and the UN Human Rights Council, the ILO, the GRECO Group of the Council of Europe, and the Compliance Committee of the Aarhus Convention have not been implemented.

At the same time, both the SDGs report and the reports to international control bodies constantly declare successes in the social sphere, in the protection of vulnerable groups, in the development of technologies and innovations, and the development of the 'green economy'.

However, for example, despite declaring success in the field of gender equality, the law on domestic violence was never adopted (under the pretext that it carries 'values alien to our society'). Despite declaring success in the fight for the rights of people with disabilities, the draft of the new law did not reflect the transition from medical to social approach, which is laid down in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [17]. In the development of a 'green economy', innovation is combined with pressure on business and the liquidation of leading environmental NGOs during the defeat of civil society in 2021 (see paragraphs Pressure on business and its use as a political tool and Pressure on civil society SDG 17), etc. Thus, declaring real progress in the implementation of the relevant SDGs and commitment to the obligations in these areas is largely a populist gesture.

At the same time, there is no understanding at the state level of the relationship between the SDGs and human rights (see the paragraph Irresponsible and manipulative behaviour of the state in the framework of cooperation with international organizations on SDG 17 assistance and development projects).

ISSUES CONCERNING INDIVIDUAL SPHERES/RIGHTS. THE STATE DOES NOT MAKE ADEQUATE EFFORTS TO REDUCE THE PREVALENCE OF ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE, INCLUDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Belarus lacks an effective, comprehensive, objective, and prompt investigation into cases of arbitrary deprivation of life. [18] In the period after the 2020 presidential election, detainees at peaceful protests faced massive physical (including sexual) and psychological violence both during arrest and in places of detention [19]. The UN OHCHR 2022 report on the situation in Belarus notes the large-scale disproportionate and unjustified use of force in connection with the post-election situation [20]. Despite numerous evidence of excessive use of force and torture against protesters after the elections, no law enforcement officers, or other structures involved in violence were charged with criminal responsibility [21]. According to a Chatham House survey conducted in November 2021, Belarusians call the feeling of personal insecurity the main factor of social tension in society [22].

At the end of April 2022, amendments to the Criminal Code were approved, expanding the grounds for applying the death penalty, which are repressive in nature and do not comply with Belarus' international legal obligations regarding the right to life [23].

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

In Belarus, the state does not systematically collect information on gender-based violent crimes; as a result, official data are rare, fragmentary, and inconsistent. One contributing factor to this situation is the lack of a domestic violence law, or at least an appropriate legal definition to which cases of domestic violence can be classified [24].

Even though the draft law on domestic violence was prepared by specialists from the Ministry of Internal Affairs together with specialized NGOs dealing with gender issues and the problem of domestic violence, it was not approved (and was severely criticised) by Lukashenko and the Orthodox Church, as being 'contrary to the values of the traditional family'. This once again shows the importance of the problem with the centralisation of power and the lack of a real separation of powers [25].

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The main problem with the state's attitude to children is that the child is perceived not as a subject of law, but as an object of protection. The Committee on the Rights of

the Child pays special attention to such nuances in Belarusian legislation [26].

When criticising the draft law on domestic violence, Lukashenko focused especially on the admissibility (and sometimes necessity) of corporal punishment of a child [25].

In connection with the post-election situation in 2020 and mass protests, the state has increased psychological pressure on children and their involvement in ideologised events in support of the existing government, which are everywhere held in educational institutions. Children are also forced to act in the so-called 'repentant videos' during detentions for political motives.

In March 2021, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee sent information to several UN Special Rapporteurs about the practice of public arrests of teenagers and the publication of 'guilty confessions' videos, in which children are among the participants. The document describes 3 cases of demonstrative detention of teenagers in front of their peers, as well as examples of 6 'repentant' videos [27].

THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IS LIMITED ONLY TO HOUSEHOLD CORRUPTION, AND OFTEN SERVES ONLY AS AN EXAMPLE

Even though the state has adopted numerous programs and action plans to combat corruption, responsible persons have been appointed. All curricula of universities include mandatory special courses on combating corruption – in fact, the state does not show real and effective steps to eradicate corruption at all levels of government, showing only the fight against household corruption.

It is indicative that Belarus is the only one of all the GRECO member states of the Council of Europe during the entire existence of this body that systematically refuses the common practice of publishing GRECO reports. Currently, 24 recommendations have been made regarding Belarus, of which the country has implemented only 4. In 2019, in relation to Belarus (again, the only one of all GRECO members), a public declaration was published on the systematic non-compliance with the GRECO recommendations [28]. Bodies involved in the investigation of corruption crimes are not independent in their activities, which casts doubt on the effectiveness of their work. Belarus also does not conduct independent research to gain a more profound understanding of the phenomenon, scope, and risks of corruption in various sectors and at various levels of government [28].

THE PROBLEM WITH ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Problems with access to information and freedom of expression are also systemic problems in Belarus. The main points are noted in the recent comments of the Human Rights Committee [29]. However, the COVID pandemic [30] and then the situation around the 2020 presidential elections led to an even greater tightening of freedom of expression and restrictions on access to information.

The state does not allow independent sociological research. Statistics of the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Belstat) are often published with deliberate exceptions. For example, when publishing the annual demographic digest (for 2020) in early 2021, Belstat did not publish data on mortality in 2020. This is done in order to make it impossible to calculate the real number of deaths from COVID in 2020 [31].

In connection with the 2020 presidential elections, an unprecedented mass attack on independent Belarusian media and journalists took place [32]. In 2020 and 2021, 610 journalists were detained. In 2020, the state blocked access to more than 100 socio-political and media websites [33]. By this point, almost all independent Belarusian media have been declared 'outlawed' by the state.

UNWILLINGNESS OF THE STATE TO RECOGNISE THE SYSTEMIC PROBLEM OF DISCRIMINATION AND TAKE EFFECTIVE MEASURES TO COMBAT IT

At the legislative level, there is no detailed terminology in the field of discrimination that could be applicable to discrimination on any grounds: definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, multiple discrimination are not fixed. In practice, however, there are many cases of indirect discrimination [34]. Due to the lack of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, there are no effective legal means of protection against discrimination [35]. Meanwhile, the problem of discrimination in society is acute. For example, according to a 2018 study by the NGO Gender Perspectives, 85% of Belarusians and Belarusian women face gender discrimination in the labour market [36].

In the National Human Rights Plan for 2016–2019, a number of activities were planned to study the feasibility of adopting comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation

(the need for this was indicated in the recommendations of both treaty bodies and the UN Human Rights Council). Upon the termination of validity of the Plan, the state reported on the decision of the inexpediency of adopting such legislation, but the rationale for such a decision cannot be studied, since it is not publicly available.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG:

- Understand that this set of recommendations is not exhaustive. Within the framework of this brief review, it seems possible to give only the minimum necessary set of recommendations. However, without this minimum, it is basically impossible to talk about real progress in achieving SDG 16 by the Republic of Belarus.
- Ensure at all levels of SDG implementation an understanding of the relationship between the SDGs and the implementation of their international human rights obligations. Government officials need to know and understand that economic development and social stability are naturally based on respect for human rights.
- Bring the legislation in line with the recommendations of international control bodies and ensure the correlation of all program documents for the implementation of the SDGs with these recommendations.
- Restore the principle of separation of powers, giving real powers to both the judiciary and Parliament. It is important to eliminate distortions, which only intensified with the adoption of the new version of the Constitution.
- Abolish all anti-constitutional amendments to the legislation that are repressive in nature and introduced since 2020 (labour legislation, information legislation, the Criminal Code, the Administrative Code, etc.).
- Condemn the principle publicly announced by Lukashenko that 'sometimes it's not up to the laws' and adhere to the principle of the rule of law at the state level.
- Establish the institution of the Commissioner for Human Rights, consistent with the principles relating to the Status of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (Paris Principles).
- Ensure transparency of decisions taken at the state level (including full participation of civil society) as part of the anti-corruption mechanism.
- Investigate properly all reports of the use of violence by law enforcement officers since 2020, as well as the inaction of control bodies (Prosecutor's Office, court).
- Abandon the manipulation of the idea of the 'traditional family' for political purposes to whip up anti-Western sentiments; also abandon the opposition of the idea of the 'traditional family' to human rights values, as this hinders the protection of the legitimate rights and interests of citizens.
- Adopt a law on countering domestic violence.
- Implement the recommendations of the Group of States against Corruption of the Council of Europe.
- Abolish corrupt practices of state financing of propaganda and state-affiliated structures used for political purposes (for example, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the BRSM, etc.).
- Abolish restrictions on the activities of independent media and journalists.
- Remove obstacles to conducting free opinion polls on socio-political issues.
- Adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, taking into account the recommendations of treaty bodies and the UN Human Rights Council.
- Revise the current uncritical approach to dialogue as a tool (the latter is especially typical for the UN system) working with the current government of Belarus as a partner for international institutions. This is necessary to avoid manipulation of such a partnership by the Belarusian authorities.
- Analyse the process of implementation of the SDGs by Belarus and develop further plans and indicators, taking into account in detail the implementation of the relevant recommendations of the UN specialised human rights bodies.
- Take into account that currently, almost the entire independent institutional sector of civil society in Belarus has been liquidated, and the authorities are trying to replace it with a new pool of NGOs that are actually affiliated with the state and dependent on it. In this regard, it is important to carefully choose such partners.



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SDG 16: ACCESS TO INFORMATION OF STATE BODIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

Under Article 34 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, citizens are guaranteed the right to receive, store and disseminate complete, reliable and timely information about the activities of state bodies, public associations, political, economic, cultural and international life, and the state of the environment. State bodies, public associations, and officials are obliged to provide a citizen of the Republic of Belarus with the opportunity to view materials affecting his or her rights and legitimate interests.

In addition to the Constitution of Belarus, the right to information is guaranteed by the Law 'On Information, Informatisation and Protection of Information,' which has a broad application, applying, inter alia, to information from the legislative, executive and judicial authorities. Despite this, the law is very weak in the procedural aspects, often referencing other regulatory acts. For example, the law lacks specific details on the actual procedures for submitting a request for information.

The law lacks an effective mechanism for appealing against refusals to provide information, since the law used in practice is 'On Appeals of Citizens and Legal Entities'; the latter, however, does not provide for a specific procedure for appealing against refusals of access to information. In addition, there are broad restrictions on access to information; the law does not provide for an independent authorised body to control access to information, and sanctions for violations are governed by regulations outside this law [1].

The term 'public information' is contained in Article 16, which also lists the types of information that cannot be restricted. However, the list of publicly available information is closed, while the list of restricted information is left open, potentially allowing government agencies to broadly define the categories of such information. Amendments made in January 2014 to the Law 'On Information, Informatisation and Protection of Information' expand the list of information whose dissemination is limited.

The restrictions on the right to information established by the Law 'On Information, Informatisation and Protection of Information', as well as the legislation on state secrets,

are excessively broad, while the list of restrictions is not exhaustive, and the restrictions themselves can be established by regulatory acts at various levels.

State bodies do not seek to publish significant information proactively online or offline unless its publication is directly provided for by law. Belarus has a list of categories of information that must be posted on official websites. These requirements include information about the activities of state bodies in the narrow sense: contact information, working hours, structure, powers, etc. In turn, most of the categories of information and services that were studied within this monitoring refer to public sector information, i.e. they are based on data collected, processed and stored by public authorities. There is no requirement in the legislation to disseminate such information proactively, despite the fact that international experts have repeatedly pointed out the need to expand the list of publicly available information and its dissemination by government agencies [2].

ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A brief summary of the WHO technical mission for the peer review of the situation with COVID-19 in the Republic of Belarus on April 8–11, 2020 noted the particular importance of access to information: 'A regular and comprehensive exchange of information, including epidemiological data and its geographical distribution, is vital to improve the understanding of the progression of the outbreak and explain society-wide outbreak response measures, such as postponing gatherings or curtailing movements [3].'

The Law 'On the Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare of the Population', in Article 27 thereof, establishes the right of citizens to receive complete, reliable and timely information about the sanitary and epidemiological situation. Article 11 directly indicates the provision of such information as one of the measures to ensure the sanitary and epidemiological welfare of the population.

On April 7, 2020, President Alexander Lukashenko issued an instruction not to hide information about the

coronavirus. He said that the Presidential Administration had established the relevant headquarters, which accumulated all the updated information about the spread of the coronavirus: 'Everyone should mind their own business. I emphasise once again: doctors treat patients, and all information is in the Presidential Administration at the headquarters.' [4] On April 12, Natalia Kachanova, Chair of the Republican Council of the National Assembly, said that nothing is hidden from the citizens of the country, and the information that comes in is absolutely truthful and reliable [5]. However, the Ministry of Health does not publish detailed data on the dynamics of the incidence.

At the same time, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, many media editors noted that it often became especially difficult to get any more complete and detailed information from local officials, as journalists are usually redirected to higher authorities. Representatives of the Ministry of Health often fail to respond to official requests and questions on their social networks and channels, and sometimes arrange briefings without the opportunity for journalists to ask questions [6]. The practice of holding journalists accountable for cooperating with foreign media is also used in connection with articles and stories related to the pandemic.

As part of the fight against fake news, the authorities used methods such as official warnings from the Ministry of Information, administrative liability for the media, and de-accreditation and expulsion of journalists. Meanwhile, media representatives cite the lack of official information and the unwillingness of officials to contact journalists from non-state media as the reasons for the emergence of false information.

No practice of mass digital surveillance has been observed in connection with the pandemic, i.e. contact tracing or self-isolation through information and telecommunications technology. However, at least two cases of leakage or misuse of personal data (addresses and contacts of patients) collected by government agencies and organisations as part of the fight against the epidemic have been recorded [7].

CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENSURING THE RIGHT TO ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN BELARUS [8]:

- Adopt a separate regulatory act at the level of the Law, which provides for specific guarantees and mechanisms for access to information.
- Establish the principle of openness of publicly available information, ensured by the duty of the authorities to facilitate the dissemination of relevant information.
- Formalise the principle of inadmissibility of requiring to prove grounds for a public request for information in the legislation.
- Establish a list of information that cannot be restricted as official information.
- Prevent violations of citizens' right to information as a result of arbitrary interpretation of its provisions by law enforcement agencies.
- Expand the list of information required to be published on the authorities' websites.



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SDG 16: THE RIGHT TO A FAVOURABLE ENVIRONMENT

Experts of the NGO «Ecohome»

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

'The rule of law and sustainable development are, to a large extent, interconnected and reinforce each other, which necessitates sustainable development at the national and international levels' [1]. This position regarding the achievement of SGD 16 has been declared by the Republic of Belarus.

Trends in achieving SDG 16 in the context of the right to a favourable environment were largely due to international treaties binding on Belarus, which provide for broader opportunities than national legislation.

In the period 2016–2017, the development of environmental legislation and its improvement were noted, both taking into account the recommendations of the Compliance Committee of the Aarhus Convention and the analysis of national law enforcement practice [2]. On the one hand, this was initiated by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus; on the other hand, the state sought to complete the implementation of the recommendations of the Compliance Committee of the Aarhus Convention for the Meeting of the Parties held in 2017. For example, in 2016, the Regulations on the procedure for organising and conducting public discussions on projects of environmentally significant decisions, environmental impact assessment reports, and accounting for environmentally significant decisions taken were adopted.

Cooperation between the public and the bodies of the Ministry of Natural Resources expanded, ties were strengthened, joint projects were implemented, the public was widely involved in rule-making activities. At the same time, other state bodies have not demonstrated a positive approach to the implementation of the provisions of the Convention and to ensuring the realisation of the right to a favourable environment.

IN FACT, THE TREND IN ACHIEVING SDG 16 IN BELARUS IS ILLUSORY:

- The rights enshrined in the legislation and the mechanisms for their implementation cannot be brought about in practice, since either the norm allows for a broad scope of interpretation, or there is no direct indication of any specific possibility, and is always interpreted restrictively by state agencies, or contradicts another norm.
- Opportunities for public participation in making environmentally significant decisions are reduced to providing information, and even for the category of decisions where public discussion is held, its results are advisory in nature.
- Until 2020, there was a trend of including representatives of environmental NGOs in public advisory boards at various levels (under the Ministry of Natural Resources, regional committees, basin boards). These bodies did not have a practical solution of issues as their goal, but were used as a platform for dialogue. After the wave of liquidations began in 2021, NGO representatives were no longer invited to meetings of advisory boards.
- A few years before the mass liquidation of NGOs, a trend began to form of involving representatives of pro-government NGOs in public activity, who represented the position that there are no problems with environmental democracy in the country and expressed support for any initiatives of the authorities. Such representatives began to be included in the already mentioned public councils, to participate in international forums, etc.
- In 2017, the Aarhus Centre was established under the Union of Lawyers, which, unlike representatives of environmental NGOs, does not notice the difficulties with the implementation of the convention in the country, fully supporting the position of the state (Belarus continues to systematically fail to comply with the obligations under the Aarhus Convention [3] [4]).

ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

The lack of the rule of law is the most extensive problem in modern Belarus, hindering, among other things, the achievement of SDG 16. Other key problems appear to be the result of the established practice of lawlessness, when the norm prescribed in the law is not fulfilled primarily by a citizen or a business entity, but by a state body, using for this the full potential of the state apparatus.

For example, the declared right to access environmental information is not easy to implement, since the state agency can always consider the requested information to be non-environmental, restrict access only for official use, or simply refuse, arbitrarily deciding that the applicant does not need the requested information [5]. A small percentage of refusals occur due to the incompetence of employees, but the bulk of them constitute a deliberate violation by the state body of the public's right to receive environmental information.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN MAKING ENVIRONMENTALLY SIGNIFICANT DECISIONS

There is no proper and effective mechanism for citizen participation in making environmentally significant decisions in the country. There is no opportunity to participate in decision-making 'at a very early stage, when all possibilities are open for consideration of various options and when effective public participation can be ensured'. Public discussion is held much later, when significant financial resources have already been invested in the project, and a number of approvals have been passed.

Even those opportunities for public participation that are being implemented do not have any impact on the decision being made, and in fact represent information with the possibility of discussion. The public have no real opportunities to influence the decision to carry out activities (construction, production, etc.) [6], which reduces the level of trust in government institutions, and also leads to an increase in social tension and local protests on environmental issues (construction of a church in Kotauka Garden Square, Minsk, construction of a battery plant in the Brest region, the activity of the Svetlogorsk Pulp and Board Mill, etc.) and as a result, civil disobedience remains the only way out.

PERSECUTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS, PRESSURE ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS

In 2017, at the 6th session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, a Decision recognised the facts of persecution of anti-nuclear activists in the Republic of Belarus as a violation of the provisions of the Convention [7]. Unfortunately, since the Decision was made and the Recommendations given to Belarus on the prevention of such practices, environmental activists and ENGOs have continued to be persecuted, and their situation has significantly worsened since 2020.

Since the spring of 2021, the systematic destruction of public organisations has begun, and it continues at the moment. The repression has affected environmental organisations, regardless of the topics they raised in their activities and the degree of cooperation with government agencies in the past. Many of the organisations that were subjected to pressure and were liquidated implemented international technical assistance projects jointly with executive authorities.

The state bodies have applied the following forms of pressure and harassment against environmental activists and representatives of ENGOs: preventive detentions; administrative arrests; searches; summons for interviews; blocking of accounts; confiscation of equipment; unscheduled inspections of ENGO's activities by registration authorities, the Financial Investigations Department of the State Control Committee, and the Department for Combating Economic Crimes (CEC); forcing representatives of environmental organisations to make a decision on liquidation under threat of criminal prosecution or pressure from state bodies; and the dissemination of false and defamatory information about the activities of organisations and their representatives in the state media.

None of the actions of state bodies were caused by the activities of organisations, but were initially related to the socio-political situation in the country and were aimed at creating obstacles and stopping the activities of environmental NGOs. This position was reflected in the assessment of the process of verification and liquidation of the 'Ecodom' NGO in the report of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee [8]: on October 21, 2021, at the Aarhus Convention Meeting of the Parties, a Decision was made on Belarus [4], which recognised the liquidation of the 'Ecodom' NGO as a case of persecution and harassment of NGOs.

INFLUENCE OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN BELARUS ON THE POSSIBILITY OF EXERCISING ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

The liquidation of public organisations, the persecution of activists and human rights defenders, along with the closure of independent media in Belarus, in a situation of legal default and in an atmosphere of fear of being persecuted for any dissent or manifestation of a civic position, leads to degradation in all spheres of society, including the environmental one.

Public organisations contribute to the realisation of environmental rights by citizens, the protection and conservation of wildlife, as well as the promotion of ideas and the achievement of sustainable development goals. They can promptly respond and raise urgent environmental issues so that such issues are identified at the earliest stages, which allows more effective work on their solution and prevents possible environmental degradation. Expert environmental organisations provided support to a wide range of actors in Belarus, including state authorities, educational institutions, businesses, religious organisations, and the public.

Moreover, environmental organisations carried out important educational work in various areas of environmental issues: environmental rights and tools for their protection, waste sorting and recycling, the impact of climate change on humans, and much more.

As of the day of preparation of this review, 6 environmental NGOs in Belarus have been forcibly liquidated or forced to self-liquidate [4], and another 38 organisations are being liquidated.

The destruction of the civil sector will negatively affect the ability of citizens to defend their rights, will lead to a decrease in the transparency of decisions made and a deterioration in their quality. This will also entail a reduction in the ability to identify environmental issues at an early stage and prevent irreversible consequences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY ON IMPLEMENTING THE SDG

- Build a rule-of-law state, and ensure the balance and separation of branches of government.
- Create an independent judicial system.
- Revise the principles of decision-making in the state (on the implementation of certain types of activities), involve the public in decision-making.

- Restore civil society organisations.
- Take measures to improve the general level of legal literacy of the public regarding the implementation of environmental rights.
- Conduct educational campaigns on the importance of providing access to environmental information.
- Accede Belarus to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Register of the Aarhus Convention and to the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to the Espoo Convention;
- Take practical and individual measures to restore the rights of environmental activists and representatives of environmental organisations violated by state bodies.



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17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS





SDG 17: PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Experts of NGO the «Belarusian Helsinki Committee»

TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2016

SDG 17 is comprehensive and multifaceted, and its implementation by a particular state takes place at several levels (at least international and domestic).

At the level of international cooperation, SDG 17 is declared for implementation in 31 projects out of 65 implemented by the UN organisations from 2016 to 2022 together with the state: in 2 out of 3 projects implemented jointly by several UN agencies, in 3 out of 16 projects implemented by the UN Development Programme, in 1 out of 12 projects implemented by UNICEF, in 7 out of 8 projects implemented by the UN Population Fund, in 3 out of 4 projects implemented by WHO, in 5 projects implemented by the UN on HIV/AIDS (UN AIDS), in 2 out of 6 projects implemented by IOM, in 5 projects implemented by UNHCR, and in 3 out of 6 projects implemented by FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) [1].

Facilitating the implementation of the SDGs is also outlined as a guideline in the UN Development Assistance Framework for Belarus for 2016–2020 [2] and the Council of Europe Action Plan for Belarus for 2019–2021 [3].

At the national level, there is no separate programme or legislation to implement SDG 17 in Belarus.

Given the complexity and multilevel nature of the implementation of SDG 17, in the context of this alternative review of Belarus, we believe it is necessary to focus on the problems that exist with the implementation of the objectives of SDG 17 in the 'Systemic issues' section – Consistency of policies and activities of institutions (SDG 17.4) and Multi-stakeholder partnership (SDG 17.16 and 17.17).

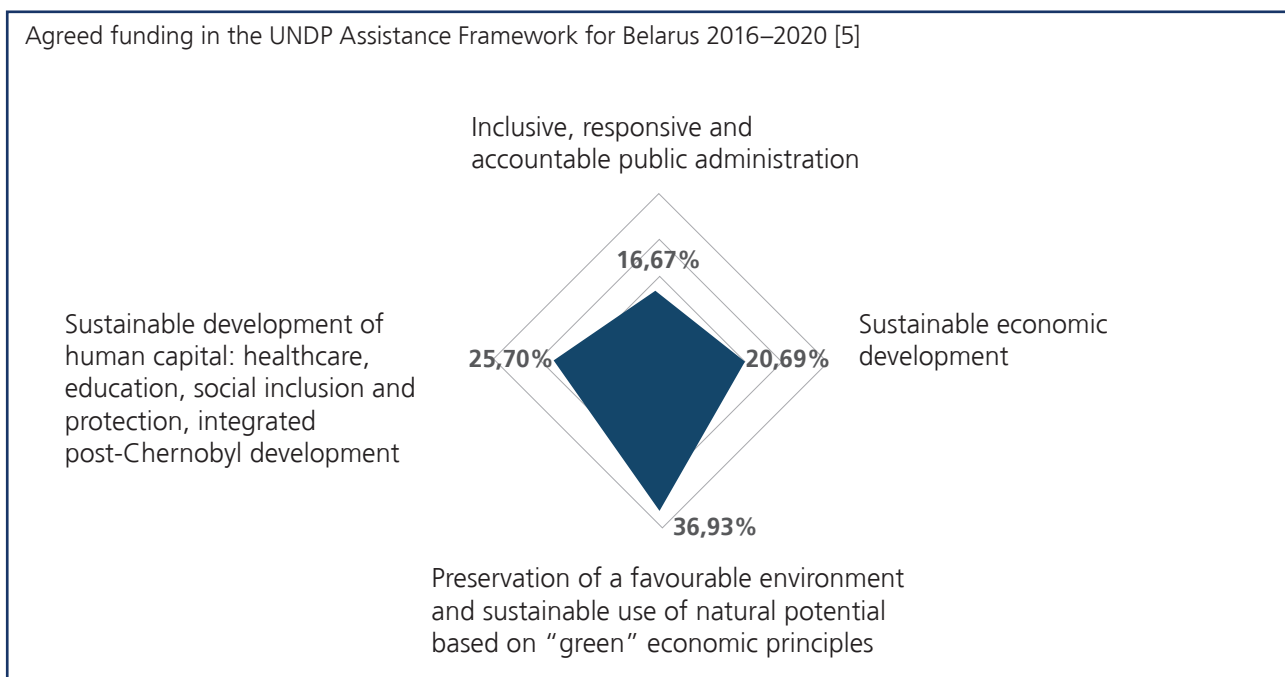
INTERNATIONAL LEVEL (SDG 17.4 AND 17.16)

Irresponsible and manipulative behaviour of the state in cooperation with international organisations on assistance and development projects (including the implementation of the SDGs) [4].

In the sphere of their international obligations, the Belarusian authorities have defined clear 'red lines' that they are not ready to cross and allow reform and real changes and, accordingly, to cooperate in these areas. This includes all areas related to the need for greater openness, public accountability, restructuring of administrative processes, and the leverage of power of authorities over society: for example, judicial reform, prison reform, freedom of association, etc.

In this regard, the authorities have structured cooperation with international partners in such a way that the state initiates projects and takes money for what is beneficial in terms of image and 'not dangerous' to the authorities, deliberately bypassing the majority of important spheres of society that are having particular problems with progress. For example, when agreeing on funding in the UNDP Assistance Framework for Belarus for 2016–2020, the lowest percentage is in the sphere of 'inclusive, prompt and accountable public administration' (this includes human rights, partnership with civil society, accountability to society, coordination of positions of the state, civil society and the private sector). That is, everything covered by SDG 17 (SDG17.17).

Declared successes in 'acceptable' areas for the authorities (protection of vulnerable social groups: women, children, the fight against transnational crime, the environment, the 'green economy', etc.) often do not carry the meaning inherent in the obligations that corresponds to the essence of the relevant SDGs.



SYSTEMATIC NON-COMPLIANCE BY BELARUS WITH THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING BODIES IN OTHER AREAS

The 2030 Agenda clearly states in its preamble that one of the SDGs’ goals is the realisation of human rights for all. Belarus has systematically failed to implement the recommendations of international bodies whose competence to make such recommendations it had itself recognised by acceding to the relevant international instruments. The recommendations of the United Nations human rights treaty bodies, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the International Labour Organization, the GRECO Groups of the Council of Europe, and the Aarhus Convention have not been implemented in decades.

Belarusian officials, in our opinion, do not understand that the SDGs are related to human rights, as they have repeatedly expressed publicly at events held with the UN and with the participation of civil society.

In 2017, the MAPS mission (‘Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support’), organised by the UN in cooperation with the Government of the Republic of Belarus, worked in Belarus. It was aimed at developing a Roadmap for SDG Implementation in the Republic of Belarus. It is surprising that with so many systematically non-implemented recommendations of the UN bodies, there is not a word about human rights in the outcome document [6]. This is symptomatic in the light of the problem outlined in the paragraph above.

THE IRRESPONSIBLE ATTRACTION OF FOREIGN INVESTORS

It is very common for Belarus to provide investors with benefits and relaxations that are contrary to the public interest and lead to human rights violations (both environmental and labour, etc.) [7]. This is not in keeping with the spirit of many SDGs of the economic, social, and environmental bloc.

To attract investors, the ability to deviate from certain standards (including those related to security) is declared an ‘investment attractiveness’, which is reflected, for example, on the website of the Ministry of Economy of Belarus. Thus, the construction of the facilities envisaged by the investment project can be carried out in parallel with the development, examination, and approval of the necessary design documentation [8].

IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICIES THAT CAUSE ECONOMIC SANCTIONS, WHICH MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO IMPLEMENT THE SDGS

The systematic and gross violation by Belarus of international standards and obligations (to an unprecedented degree since 2020) leads to the imposition of increasingly severe economic sanctions.

Actions that are contrary to commonly accepted values (including the principles of Agenda 2030) not only do not

contribute to the global partnership, but also lead to the gradual destruction of possible forms of such cooperation in the future. Belarus has a reputation of being an extremely toxic state, which has a huge impact on the investment climate and the possibility of a positive transformation in almost all SDGs.

DOMESTIC LEVEL (SDGS 17.4 AND 17.17)

PRESSURE ON BUSINESS AND ITS USE AS A POLITICAL TOOL

The main factors that significantly affect the impossibility of effective partnership between the public and private sectors in Belarus, as well as impede the development of an efficiently functioning business sector, are:

- a. A particular dependence of public business on political power; and
- b. The use of business (public and private) by the authorities as a tool to achieve political goals. This was especially evident after the 2020 presidential elections, when the pressure on business quantitatively and qualitatively changed for the worse [9].

At the same time, the state constantly involves public and private businesses in violations of the rights of its employees (adoption of legislation that formally legitimises human rights violations, the requirement for private businesses to create sections of a pro-government trade union, conduct preventive conversations with employees about their activities outside working hours, etc.) [9].

PRESSURE ON CIVIL SOCIETY

Independent civil society organisations have always been perceived by the Belarusian authorities as a threat, so legislation and law enforcement practices in Belarus significantly reduce the international standard of freedom of association, thus violating their international obligations (this also applies to the registration of NGOs and the possibility of receiving foreign financial assistance, etc.) [10].

Over the past 2 years (after the 2020 presidential elections), the state has carried out the most massive repressions of civil society organisations [11]. As of the end of April 2022 (starting from August 2020), 700 Belarusian NGOs have been liquidated or are in the process of liquidation [12]. There are no registered human rights organisations in the country.

In January 2022, the Criminal Code of Belarus reinstated an article on criminal liability for activities on behalf of unregistered organisations (Art. 193-1), which was in the

Criminal Code earlier but was repealed in 2018. This article is repressive and violates the international standard of freedom of association.

Virtually all independent NGOs that are members of the Sustainable Development Partner Group (which operates within the framework of the SDG governance architecture established by the state) have been subject to mass liquidation. To date, focal points for the main areas have changed (as their respective NGOs have been eliminated). Now the coordinators are formally representatives of other NGOs, but these NGOs are affiliated with and controlled by the state, in fact, are GONGOs. The new Partner Group Regulation explicitly states the affiliation of the new coordinators with the relevant line ministries [13]. Thus, the principle of partnership in the implementation of the SDGs, which implies joint work of the state and organisations independent of the state, has been completely eroded.

Under such conditions, the implementation of SDG 17.17 is a priori impossible.

CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS

- Most importantly, ensure that the relationship between the SDGs and the implementation of their international human rights obligations is understood at all levels of SDG implementation. State officials need to know and understand that economic development and social stability are naturally based on respect for human rights.
- Bring legislation into line with the recommendations of international monitoring bodies and ensure the correlation of all policy documents on the implementation of the SDGs with these recommendations.
- Provide adequate conditions for partnership with the private sector: first, the state should fundamentally abandon the practice of using business (regardless of the form of ownership) as an instrument of pressure on people that violates human rights [9].
- Ensure adequate conditions for partnership with civil society: first, cancel the decisions to eliminate Belarusian NGOs, abolish the criminalisation of activities on behalf of an unregistered organisation (remove Article 193-1 from the Criminal Code), and ensure participation of civil society organisations independent of the state in the SDG Partnership Group.

- In partnership with Belarus in the implementation of SDG 17, it is important to take into account a number of factors that affect economic and social development, the investment climate, and, in general, the adoption of management decisions by the authorities of Belarus [9]:
 - Parliament’s dependence on the executive branch, lack of separation of powers, lack of an independent court;
 - The authorities’ rejection of independent stakeholders;
 - Dependence of public business on political power;
 - The use of business (public and private) by the authorities as a tool to achieve political goals;
 - Dependence of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (the main trade union organisation in the country) on the authorities and its affiliation with the state;
 - The use of legislation, including labour legislation, to increase the dependence of the citizen on the state; and
 - Large-scale pressure on civil society, including the media, and lack of free access to the necessary information.
- In order to reduce the involvement in illegal activities and to ensure an effective partnership in the spirit of the SDGs with businesses when working in/with Belarus (including foreign investors):
 - It is important to take special care in the implementation of human rights due diligence in accordance with the 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights mentioned in paragraph 67 of the 2030 Agenda;
 - Take into account that there are significant obstacles to independent information in the country, and therefore finding adequate information about Belarusian partners will require additional efforts and verification by independent local experts; and
 - To guide and understand the riskiest areas and context, you can use the Guide ‘Belarus: Human Rights and Business’, issued by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee together with the Danish Institute for Human Rights in 2019.
 - International organisations working on assistance projects with Belarus (including the UN system, CoE, and EU), as well as other donors, to implement the following recommendations:
 - When working with the current government of Belarus as a partner for international institutions, reconsider the current non-critical approach to dialogue as an instrument (the latter is especially typical for the UN system). This is necessary to avoid the manipulation of such a partnership by the Belarusian authorities.
 - Analyse the process of implementation of the SDGs by Belarus and develop further plans and indicators, taking into account the implementation of the relevant recommendations of the United Nations specialised human rights bodies.
 - It should be noted that virtually the entire independent institutional sector of Belarusian civil society has been eliminated, and the authorities are trying to replace it with a new pool of NGOs, which are, in fact, affiliated with and dependent on the state. In this regard, it is important to carefully select such partners.



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**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2015, Alexander Lukashenko's administration has been constantly reaffirming its commitment to achieving the SDGs in Belarus. According to the 2021 SDG index, Belarus ranked 24 out of 165 countries.

In 2017, the position of the National Coordinator for the achievement of the SDGs was established in Belarus, and the system for managing the sustainable development process was designed. In 2019, a media coordination group for the promotion of SDGs was established. At the end of 2017, the MAPS expert and advisory mission developed a roadmap to achieve the SDGs in Belarus and proposed 4 platforms to accelerate such achievement. Belarus adopted the National Strategy for Sustainable Socio-Economic Development for the period until 2030, and developed one until 2035. The country set up the Sustainable Development Council, created the SDG National Reporting Platform to report SDG, and maintains the SDG Roadmap.

Until 2020, government organizations' activities showed interest in the development of the SDGs. In some cases, they interacted with the civil society and tried to listen to the suggestions of independent experts. On specific occasions, they would even turn to experts to ask for help. Although it was difficult, or impossible, to achieve a productive cooperation on some issues, government organizations took a principled stance, and their interaction with NGOs was merely informative.

Yet, despite the progress made since 2016, funded by international organizations and supported by the civil society, all efforts to achieve the SDGs and implement the fundamental principles of sustainable development have become invisible in the face of the large-scale repression events that started in August 2020.

One serious shortcoming in the process of preparing and implementing the NSDS is the lack of involvement of NGOs both at the development stage and the assessment stage. For one, the interdepartmental and sectoral working

groups on social issues "Man and a high level of life quality" created to develop the strategy do not include **a single representative** of non-governmental public organizations. This circumstance has a rather poor impact on the effectiveness of the government-designed measures to implement the sustainable development goals, since no independent expertise is involved.

The government does not seek to engage independent expertise while assessing the actual results of strategy implementation. For example, the achievement of SDG indicators in the area of poverty based on a sample survey of households is carried out by the State National Statistical Committee of Belarus (Belstat). This clearly affects the objectivity of such an assessment, since one of the Belstat leaders is also a member of the sectoral working group on social issues involved in the development of the NSDS.

The position of the civil society is catastrophic. Following the 2020 elections, Belarusian civil society has already lost 700 non-profit organizations (public associations, foundations, non-governmental institutions and associations). In April 2022, the pressure on independent trade unions became unprecedented. Searches and detentions of public activists continue. As of the 30th April, 2022, 1,168 people were recognised to be political prisoners in Belarus.

Further analysis of SDG implementation in Belarus and development of further plans and indicators can only legitimately take place if relevant recommendations of specialised UN human rights agencies are fulfilled. Consider that, at the moment, almost the entire independent institutional sector of the civil society in Belarus has been dismissed, and the authorities are trying to replace it with a new pool of NGOs that are actually affiliated with the government, making them dependent. In this regard, it is critical to be particularly sceptical when selecting such partners.

SDG 1: ERADICATION OF POVERTY

In Belarus, independent research of the problem shows significant poverty rates. The rate of absolute poverty in 2009–2019, which Belstat calculates as the proportion of population with an income below the poverty line, varied between 5 and 7%. The rate of absolute poverty calculated according to the World Bank's methodology (by the cost of basic needs) reached 31% of the country's population.

The increase of welfare benefits does not ensure a growth of state support and well-being of Belarusians. Despite the increase in the amount of welfare benefits from 12.8 billion rubles in 2016 to 19.4 billion rubles in 2020, social support of the population in welfare benefits in total monetary income and as GDP percentage decreased.

Financial support of the unemployed in Belarus is critically low: the unemployment benefit paid subject to the unemployed person's taking part in employment assistance activities is smaller (by 45%) than the minimum subsistence level, i.e. only EUR 8 to 22 per month. Moreover, after adoption of the so-called 'tax on spongers', a citizen losing their job is actually subjected to additional financial obligations.

Main recommendations for the implementation of SDG 1:

- 1 Produce measures to fight poverty, involving civil society organisations both at the stage of preparation of the Strategy and annual Action Plans and at the stage of evaluation of their implementation;
- 2 Charge local authorities with ensuring achievements of most SDG 1 targets, as this problem is closely linked with the regions' ability to promote development of entrepreneurship, ensure development of infrastructure for industrial sites, create favourable conditions for attracting qualified human resources, maintain good social infrastructure;
- 3 Strengthen state support of families with children by supporting the building up of human capital among children from poor families, improve the quality of nutrition and healthcare services for such children, providing them with free pre-school educational services;
- 4 Correct the poverty criteria and, along with it, reduce the barriers to accessing financial support for families raising children with disabilities;

5 Implement social entrepreneurship development programmes at both the national and regional levels; provide funding to support social entrepreneurship in the national and regional budgets; make the National Investment and Privatisation Agency provide necessary support.

6 Increase the size of unemployment benefits, and introduce an additional allowance for children of the unemployed.

7 Activate the work of employment centres and support the development of non-governmental training and re-training facilities.

SDG 2: ZERO HUNGER

Belarus has adopted the Doctrine of the National Food Security until 2030. Local mechanisms provided by the Doctrine, with regard to the global task of doubling agricultural productivity by 2030, were introduced so as to ensure the effectiveness and break-even operation of agricultural sector, and to raise the return on sales to 11–13% by 2030. As of 2018, the profitability of the agricultural sector was as low as 4.3%, and in 2021 this indicator was at 5.5%.

There has been no significant progress in increasing investment rates or introducing innovative methods in agriculture. Without subsidised agriculture supported by the Lukashenko administration for many years, the food independence and food safety of the country would be seriously threatened: most agricultural companies would not even have the money to buy fuel for sowing season.

Sufficient nutrition in Belarus is accessible, on average, to 44% of the country. About 2% of the population potentially may encounter the problem of hunger or a starvation diet, and 54% may not always have access to sufficient food that would ensure diversity of the diet and its energy balance.

The following recommendations will contribute to the implementation of SDG 2:

- 1 Switch to a market economy in the agricultural sector and reduce the level of state interventions.
- 2 Promote the consolidation of efforts of a broad range of state institutions and organisations, manufacturers of food products, trading companies, social organisations and initiatives to achieve sustainability of agricultural and food systems.
- 3 Organise systemic work to improve the system of social support.
- 4 Broaden the range of formats of provision of state-funded support to improve the quality of nutrition, and expand the range of recipients of such support, paying special attention to people.
- 5 Develop partner projects involving large retailers to provide food quotas.
- 6 Promote the culture of food sharing, thus producing resources from leftover food. Simplify the procedure for transferring leftover food.

SDG 3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The long-term problems of the Belarusian healthcare system are its underfunding, suboptimal structure, weak involvement in the prevention of risk factors for major diseases, low motivation to work, lack of quality state medicine, a closed system, and a lack of communication in society and within the system itself.

Non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes mellitus, and chronic respiratory diseases) continued to account for 89% of all deaths in Belarus, exceeding the global mortality rate (71%). The probability of premature death (under 70 years of age) from these pathologies for a citizen of Belarus was 28.6%.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens' right to access to information was constantly infringed in various aspects. These included a lack of access to full and comprehensive official information, targeted restrictions on journalists' access to information, the selective application of legislation on media responsibility for the dissemination of inaccurate information, and pressure on journalists.

Medical workers found themselves at the epicentre of the human rights crisis in Belarus following the presidential election in August 2020. Doctors were providing assistance to people injured by riot police and militia during the protests after the election, and for expressing their disagreement and participation in peaceful protests, medical workers faced horrendous repressions themselves.

To achieve SDG 3, the following is necessary:

- 1 Conduct a critical review of the functional responsibilities of healthcare workers, reduce the completion of unnecessary documents, and shift the focus to preventive work with patients to prevent and change potentially harmful lifestyles.
- 2 Equalise the average salary in the healthcare system.
- 3 Specify the list of health services that are part of the minimum social standards and guaranteed by the public health system.
- 4 Develop e-health and remote communications between clinic and patient.
- 5 Develop the private health care sector and grant private medical centres equal rights with public clinics.
- 6 Implement licensing systems for healthcare professionals.

7 Establish effective cooperation with the WHO and other UN bodies in the field of health, and carry out public health reforms.

8 Encourage health professionals to practice and study abroad, and encourage medical scientists to publish works in foreign English-language journals.

9 Increase the openness of medical care through mandatory information on public health, changes in the principles of the press service of the Ministry of Healthcare;

10 Introduce the mandatory provision of comprehensive information on the procurement of medicines and medical equipment on demand; conduct a comprehensive audit of the Ministry; and involve patients and personnel in decision-making in the field.

SDG 4: QUALITY EDUCATION

In 2021, a new Concept for the Development of the Education System of the Republic of Belarus for the Period until 2030 was approved; the Education and Youth Policy state program for 2021–2025 was adopted. At the same time, the conceptual apparatus of the term ‘sustainable development’ or ‘education for sustainable development’ is absent in the country.

Until 2022, most of the work on education and awareness in the field of global citizenship, human rights, environmental and social responsibility at the local and global levels, democracy, non-violence, inclusion, and justice was carried out in the Republic of Belarus by public organisations in cooperation with international partners and preschool, secondary, higher, vocational and technical educational institutions.

Since 2016, experts from state institutions of secondary and higher education, with the support of international organisations, have developed and implemented electives and special courses on environmental education, sustainable development, urban studies, biodiversity protection, climate protection, etc. However, in numerous instances, this practice was not of a systematic nature, could not contribute to the transformation of the system for developing school and university programs, and did not receive proper support in the system of teacher training.

Main recommendations for the achievement of SDG 4:

- 1 Increase the share of education expenditures in the state budget and provide opportunities for educational institutions to attract additional resources through international grant programs, expand state funding of public initiatives in the field of education and support for the interaction of education stakeholders at all levels.
- 2 Transform the principle of vertical education management and the practice of unilateral transmission of education management tasks from school administration representatives to parents and teachers into a centralised system with strong horizontal ties.
- 3 Provide educational institutions with sufficient autonomy to manage their finances and administrative resources, and independence in decision-making at the regional level.
- 4 Create conditions for the emergence of independent trade union structures of teachers, allowing them to fight for their rights in relation to employment contracts, teaching load, extracurricular activities, etc.
- 5 Ensure decent remuneration for teachers and university professors, conditions, and opportunities for regular high-quality advanced training courses.
- 6 Provide an opportunity for inclusive, non-discriminatory education, taking into account the needs of various groups of the population in education (people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, the elderly, migrants, and people living in rural areas).
- 7 Create a system for validation and accreditation of competencies obtained as a result of non-formal education.
- 8 In the field of higher education, ensure guarantees of fundamental academic freedoms and values, opportunities for the integration of higher education in Belarus into the international educational space, and recognition or validation of national diplomas at the international level.
- 9 Develop national plans and strategies for ESD with sufficient funding, taking into account international and accumulated pedagogical experience at the local level.
- 10 Transform the systems of training and advanced training of teachers by introducing educational management programs to introduce a ‘general institutional approach in education’.

SDG 5: GENDER EQUALITY

The Republic of Belarus has neither signed nor ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention); nor has it ratified ILO Convention C156 — Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156) and ILO Convention C190 — Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). Domestic violence is the most common type of gender-based violence. One in 2 women (52.4%) has experienced at least one type of violence in her lifetime.

Between 9 and 13 August 2020 and thereafter, sexual and gender-based violence, including psychological violence, was routinely used against both women and men in detention to intimidate and punish protesters and those considered to be supporters of the opposition.

Belarusian men have a significantly shorter life expectancy than women (the gap is 10.4 years).

The country has a list of professions prohibited for women. According to Belstat, the gender pay gap is growing: in 2000, it was 19%; in 2017 it rose to 25.4%; and in 2018 the gap had already reached 27.3%. 89.6% of women and 80.4% of men faced discrimination in the labour market.

To implement SDG 5, civil society recommends the following:

- 1 Introduce gender budgeting and mandatory gender expertise of legislation at all stages of the legislative process.
- 2 Develop legislation and support programs for women, taking into consideration factors of intersecting discrimination against vulnerable groups of women, for example, Roma women, women with disabilities, women from LGBTIQ+ communities, women from rural and remote areas, single mothers, women raising children with disabilities, and others.
- 3 Restore the activities of non-governmental organisations in the field of combating domestic violence and human trafficking and simplify the process of registering grant assistance from donor organisations.

4 Legislatively establish an interdepartmental mechanism of interaction at the district level to prevent situations of human trafficking and provide assistance to victims of trafficking, since the regional level is not enough to provide effective assistance to victims.

5 Develop specialised employment programs for women who are victims of human trafficking.

6 Ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul, May 11, 2011).

7 Establish criminal liability for domestic violence, and classify this category of cases as a private-public accusation (so that they do not depend on allegations or a complaint filed by the victim); organise obligatory correctional programmes for aggressors mandated by the court.

8 Promote women's meaningful participation in decision-making at the international, national, and local levels through consultations, working groups, coordination of community councils, etc.

9 Aim actions in the labour market at the elimination of discrimination and the pay gap, and the development of female entrepreneurship.

10 Support actions to encourage girls and women to strengthen their digital skills and pursue STEM education and careers.

SDG 6: WATER AND SANITATION

In 2021, Belarus provided safe water supply to its entire population, and 98.3% of the population used sanitation services.

Drinking water is available to the population, but not every source of water (especially wells on private land plots) is covered by quality monitoring efforts. The degree of integrated water resources management implementation in Belarus will remain at a moderately high level. The main barrier to expanding such cooperation is the political situation in Belarus.

The share of treated domestic and industrial waste water flows in the country has grown from 99.4% in 2016 to 99.7% in 2020. Belarus has no reliable data on exact locations and conditions of animal burial sites; many agricultural companies cannot afford quality systems for the collection and treatment of domestic wastewater, nor manure storage and disposal systems.

To achieve SDG 6, the following is necessary:

- 1 Gradually develop a drinking water quality monitoring system, including through cooperation with the civil society; include the control of water pollution in the tools used for household surveys.
- 2 Pay more attention to disaggregation of data through cooperation with utility services and public authorities.
- 3 Stimulate the creation of a system of civic control of the condition of water bodies, modernise systems used for evaluation of wastewater treatment, and improve state monitoring of water bodies: expand the network of monitoring sites and the list of controlled pollutants (microplastics, heavy metals), and ensure accessibility of information on the results of state monitoring of water bodies.
- 4 Improve sanitary and technological reliability of water works and grids, improve water savings, modernise water-use systems, especially in agriculture;
- 5 Set up systems for monitoring industrial and agricultural sites in water conservation zones and waterfronts, including by using Earth remote sensing data to prevent pollutants from contaminating water bodies and groundwater.
- 6 Take stock and assess the condition of animal burial sites, including anthracitic.

7 Continue transboundary cooperation and involve civil society in it; include representatives of civil society in the Basin Councils.

8 Include the issue of shrinking wetlands in state programmes, prevent high moor land reclamation, and ensure their preservation and restoration.

9 Improve the system used to assess the area of wetlands and their preservation.

10 Promote public environmental awareness focused on natural water ecosystems, and a caring attitude toward and the preservation of water.

SDG 7: AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

Virtually 100% of the population of Belarus has access to electricity. The share of the population using mostly clean types of fuel and technology is 84%.

The share of RES in the total volume of final energy consumption has been changing insignificantly: 7.3% in 2010, 6.7% in 2016, and 7.8% in 2020. Today, this makes Belarus one of the most backward countries on the globe from among those that provide such statistics.

The main internal barrier for the energy sector of Belarus is the unwillingness of Lukashenko's government to carry out a comprehensive reform of the sector: demonopolisation of the sector, establishing regulatory bodies, splitting the sector into energy production and distribution spheres, creating an energy market, and creating a competitive environment which doesn't discriminate against private companies with no discriminatory tariff and subsidy policies. Reform programmes have been prepared, but their implementation has been postponed for more than 15 years by now.

Belarus is not ready to export its products to the EU market in the context of the EGD, while the transition period for the Green Deal is scheduled to start as soon as 2023. At present, the government has not set a task of creating a preparation plan, and the concept itself is not discussed in the public media (in the last year, there has only been one publication, which was a negative one).

To achieve the goal of affordable and clean energy, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1 Set ambitious targets for RES development – at least tens of percent by 2030. For example, the scenario of Energy [r]evolution involves an increase in the share of RES in power generation from the current 2.5% to 35% by 2030, with one of the NPP reactors continuing operation. Set more ambitious targets for reduction of CO₂ emissions, thus paving the way for green investments.
- 2 Change the legislation on RES, in particular, to permit connection to the grid for household RES on the basis of mutual accounting of power generation and consumption.
- 3 Create conditions for active participation of individuals and local business in advancing RES and improving energy efficiency.

4 Gradually stop subsidising heating and power supply to households and simultaneously provide subsidies for measures improving energy efficiency of the households.

5 Stop state investments in peat, nuclear energy sector, and dam-based HPPs.

6 Create favourable conditions for investments in RES and energy efficiency; develop systems of green credits and green subsidies.

7 Introduce the internal certification of the green energy industry: setting a course for preparing for the Green Deal will enable receiving methodical aid and investments from the European Commission.

8 Diversify suppliers of nuclear, gas, and oil fuel while taking into account the changes in the European energy market.

9 Boost the target of energy independence: 30+ percent by 2030 through intensified advancement of RES.

10 Revise the goal of creating an energy system capable of isolated stability with a large surplus of capacity and replace it with the goal of building cross-border partnership and more efficient use of the capacities.

SDG 8: DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Weak economic growth has been a fundamental and persistent problem for the country. The authorities' desire to be the guide and the main actor of economic development has become a systemic barrier to growth of productivity, and the level and quality of employment.

The average economic growth rate in 2016–2021 (1% a year) was very weak compared with the previous periods, and especially so considering the economic potential of the country (with an average growth rate of 5–7% being an appropriate target).

Employment indicators have not changed significantly since 2016. The most obvious trend was a reduction in unemployment (from 5.8% in 2016 to 3.9% in 2021). However, the problem of youth unemployment is still relevant in the country. The unemployment rate among people aged from 15 to 29 is traditionally much higher than in other age groups (about 7% compared with the average of 4%).

The following recommendations will contribute to the implementation of SDG 8:

- 1 Eliminate key barriers to development of the private sector and productivity growth.
- 2 Eliminate barriers to redistribution of resources within the economy (competition, asset sale, bankruptcy).
- 3 Develop local self-government as a foundation for preserving and building up human capital.
- 4 Assess the economic and financial condition of the largest state-owned companies and produce a number of template patterns for reforming them.
- 5 Abandon discriminatory practices regarding independent trade unions. Abandon the requirement of fixed term labour contracts as the main form of hiring personnel.
- 6 Raise the amount of the unemployment benefit to at least the minimum subsistence level, and revise and significantly simplify the procedure for obtaining unemployment status.
- 7 Reject formalised and informal practices of discrimination against individual social groups on the labour market.

8 Eliminate multiple barriers hindering activities of non-government organisations.

9 Abandon the practice of the compulsory assignment of careers to university graduates whose tuition has been sponsored by the state. Return to actual implementation of the SDG 8.b target and develop (in partnership with the civil society) a national strategy for youth employment (as a separate document).

10 Design and implement a set of technical measures to restore people's confidence in the economy and financial institutions.

SDG 9: INDUSTRIALISATION, INNOVATION, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Domestic expenditure on research and development in relation to GDP in 2020 amounted to only 0.55% of GDP.

At the end of 2019, 99% of households had a landline or mobile phone, and 65.8% had a computer. The percentage of households with Internet was 70.1%.

Belarus is characterised by a high degree of wear and tear on the passive and active part of industrial enterprises; consequently, modernisation, the introduction of energy-efficient technologies, and a reduction of costs in the production of services are necessary.

Independent Belarusian scientists who, through their work and activism, resisted the repressive policy of President Lukashenko were deprived of their jobs, and a significant number of them left the country, while some of them are in Belarusian prisons.

To implement SDG 9 in Belarus, it is necessary to:

- 1 Establish a new integrated road and rail transport strategy, including analysis of markets and forecasts for freight and passenger transport, investment needs, and organisational structures.
- 2 Strengthen the interaction of academic, branch, and university sciences, the integration of science and production, and commercialise the results of scientific and technical activities and technology transfer.
- 3 Create conditions for research and development similar to the European level, with a view to increasing the number of workers engaged in research and development.
- 4 Attract the investment of venture funds and business in research and development, including the creation of research infrastructure on the principles of public-private partnership.
- 5 Develop a system of continuous training, retraining, and advanced training of specialists according to the principle of 'lifelong education'.
- 6 Create organisational and legal conditions for attracting leading foreign scientists to the training of highly qualified specialists and highly qualified scientific personnel.

7 Improve tax and financial instruments to stimulate the development of science and innovation.

8 Stimulate the development of innovative infrastructure through the creation of scientific and technological parks (technoparks), technology transfer centres, business incubators, technopolises, science cities, etc.

9 Develop information support of the scientific and innovative sphere, including the creation of a nationwide information system for monitoring scientific, scientific-technical, and innovation activities.

10 Provide high-quality Internet access in all schools, hospitals, and libraries.

SDG 10: REDUCED INEQUALITIES

President Lukashenko's administration calls 'meeting the social needs of the most vulnerable segments of the population, namely the disabled, the elderly, and large families' priorities of social policy until 2030.

There is no comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation in Belarus, nor are there effective mechanisms to ensure equality and protect individuals from discrimination. The national legislation lacks a general definition of discrimination, with a division thereof into direct and indirect.

There are no publicly available and published data on hate crimes, including homophobic crimes, in Belarus. After the events of August 2020, homophobia in Belarus became one of the instruments of repression. Videos with the outing of detainees for political reasons are becoming systemic.

Belarusian legislation does contain parts of the international standards but does not stipulate a comprehensive approach to protecting the rights of forced migrants as a separate vulnerable group which would create a voluminous and non-transparent bureaucratic procedure for applying for state protection.

The paternalistic attitude towards the child as an object of care, and not a subject of law, is fully preserved in the country. A coalition of organisations prepared a shadow report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which gives an idea of the problems regarding the rights of the child in Belarus.

To date, a comprehensive program of social integration of the Roma population has not been adopted.

To achieve SDG 10, the following is necessary:

- 1 Develop and adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation aimed at creating effective tools to protect against the discrimination of any person, especially from vulnerable groups; introduce mandatory anti-discrimination expertise in draft regulatory legal acts that potentially affect the rights of vulnerable groups.
- 2 Maintain and publish separate statistics on hate crimes, increase the level of competence in the process of detecting hate crimes, investigating, and making judicial decisions to ensure equality and protection from discrimination.
- 3 Develop, with the participation of non-governmental organisations, and introduce into the practice of the work of state institutions and services, as well as journalists and the media, a comprehensive program to promote the principles of equality and non-discrimination, the use of correct vocabulary, and the fight against stereotypes.
- 4 Monitor the use of hate speech in the media and take action upon each incidence of the use of hate speech.
- 5 In cooperation with civil society, develop an effective system for monitoring and assessing the situation of certain vulnerable groups, including the creation of special national bodies; introduce the practice of broad public consultations when working on legislation affecting the situation of vulnerable groups and human rights in general.
- 6 Reject the medical (paternalistic) understanding of disability; introduce a system for determining disability according to the methodology described by the World Health Organization in the International Classification of Functioning, Disabilities and Health.
- 7 Revise the draft Law 'On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Integration' in such a way that it complies with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with regard to human rights and anti-discrimination, endows a person with disabilities with sufficient legal capacity, and enshrines the policy and system of implementation of the norms of the Convention.
- 8 Develop and start implementing a comprehensive national deinstitutionalization program. National disability programs should focus on the priorities of independent living in local communities, transferring the priority of decision-making and resource management to the person.
- 9 Develop a multi-level system for monitoring accessibility achievement.
- 10 Immediately stop outing LGBTQ+ people as a tool of political repression.
- 11 Completely abandon the practice of expelling persons to their country of origin (nationality) if they may be threatened with the death penalty, torture, persecution on distinctive grounds, danger due to military conflict, etc.

- 12 Develop a procedure for effective legal mechanisms for the protection of foreign citizens and stateless persons in the event of their forced migration from the country of origin; ensure that migrants are treated humanely and fairly, regardless of their immigration status, and that they receive effective legal protection.
- 13 Use the arrest and detention in custody of foreigners solely as a last resort against individuals with weighty arguments and in accordance with the UNHCR Guidelines on Applicable Criteria and Standards relating to the Detention of Asylum Seekers and Alternatives to Detention.
- 14 Develop and adopt, with the participation of the Roma minority, experts and representatives of civil society, a comprehensive program for the social integration of the Roma population in Belarus, including measures to promote education, employment, prevention of early marriages, as well as to overcome negative attitudes and stereotypes existing in society towards the Roma people.

SDG 11: SUSTAINABLE CITIES

In Belarus, there is a certain inadequacy of urban planning and design methods, which are clearly unable to resolve the existing problems in cities. There is a lack of municipal data, including open data, which prevents accurate understanding of the actual situation in cities and the way it affects residents. Integrated solutions are underutilised; climate forecasts and risks are not taken into account, and neither are SDG indicators. Gender aspects and accessibility are mostly disregarded as well.

The legislation lacks a clear definition of planning documents adopted at the municipal level to achieve sustainable development. Local governments do not report on the achievement of the SDGs.

The territorial and sectoral approaches to municipal management are weakened. Cities and other administrative units are managed by public entities of various levels from different sectors.

The current policy of supporting certain big cities leads to greater inequality at the national level and a reduction of the living standard in places not “covered” by the policy, including smaller towns.

Due to the dismissal of multiple civil society organisations, the involvement of city residents in decision-making concerning urban planning is reduced, as is their participation in discussions about any other issues related to their cities.

The state budget funds do not cover the implementation expenses of the activities planned in the strategic documents; therefore, the level of support for the implementation of local projects is insufficient.

The following recommendations will contribute to the implementation of SDG 11:

1 Formulate national, regional, and local urban policies focused on achieving the sustainable development goals, the New Urban Agenda (Habitat III) and meeting national commitments under the UNFCCC Paris Agreement. This also includes the ‘localisation’ of SDG, taking into account local unique conditions. Intersectoral cooperation and coordination is essential.

2 Legislate the development of local level planning documents (local sustainable development plans, green urban plans, sustainable urban mobility plans, local climate plans, etc.) that would bring stakeholders together and set long-term priorities and integrate territorial and sectoral planning.

3 Implement planning standards. Particular attention should be paid to and preparation for the implementation of ISO 37120:2014 ‘Sustainable development of communities. Indicators for city services and quality of life;’ ISO 37101:2016 ‘Sustainable Cities and Communities’, and LEED neighbourhoods.

4 Introduce flexible approaches to local management aimed at collaborative learning, promotion of innovation, and implementation of pilot projects. It is necessary to put into practice indicators of the effectiveness of the implementation of city plans and programs, to ensure the collection, updating and provision of open city data, and to prepare practical guides describing possible solutions to specific city problems.

5 Raise public awareness and capacity building for stakeholder participation through information databases of urban development documents, practical guidelines explaining the content of urban planning documents and participation procedures, and creating new organisational structures with the function of coordinating the interests of all stakeholders – for example, the ‘urban laboratory’.

6 Finance the implementation of activities included in the strategic documents of urban development with the involvement of a variety of financial instruments and the introduction of ‘sustainable’ procurement. It is necessary to develop a regulatory framework for the introduction of new financing instruments, including ‘green’, climate, etc., to prepare methodological materials and improve personnel qualification. It is necessary to increase the portfolio of ‘green’ projects with clear performance indicators, including CO2 reduction.

7 Develop and implement educational programs in the field of sustainable development for various groups, including the public, managers, and practitioners.

8 Facilitate the increase in the amount of research related to various areas of urban development.

SDG 12: RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

In 2021, the Centre for Environmental Solutions presented an overview of the achievement of SDG 12 by the Sustainable Development Partnership Group and independent public experts as of March 2021. The National Action Plan for the Development of the Green Economy in the Republic of Belarus for 2021-2025 was approved.

The issues of an environmentally friendly lifestyle and sustainable consumption have been developing since 2015. They have become in demand among society and more prominent in Belarus' information space for several years. However, since 2020, it has become unsafe to keep a public focus due to the current regime of Lukashenko. In the current conditions, the SDG 12 agenda has lost both priority and financial resources to continue the implementation of projects and initiatives among all segments of NGOs, the business community, the media, and government agencies.

To achieve SDG 12, civil society recommends the following:

- 1 Develop a scheme for regular assessment of progress towards achieving SDG 12 in Belarus. Such a scheme could include the preparation of regular progress reports on individual SDG 12 targets by the responsible government bodies, followed by discussion at the Council for Sustainable Development, as well as the preparation of periodic shadow reports, which will be an important form of public participation.
- 2 Develop and implement additional national indicators for individual targets within SDG 12, which will allow for a more detailed assessment of progress.
- 3 Strengthen the relationship between work on achieving SDG 12 and the National Sustainable Development Strategy by linking targets under SDG 12 and activities of the NSDS.
- 4 Support the work of NGOs and "grassroots initiatives", including those of educational institutions, to achieve SDG 12; strengthen horizontal cooperation among various civil society organizations involved in the implementation of SDG 12 in Belarus;
- 5 Regularly assess national processes in the sector of sustainable production and consumption for their correspondence to the current international processes and initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, the 10-Year Framework Program for sustainable production and consumption, etc.

6 Promote the principles of a circular economy, "zero waste," an environmentally friendly lifestyle among the population of Belarus;

7 Strengthen cooperation between NGOs and business to solve certain tasks within SDG 12;

8 Develop tools for engaging the population in environmental activities, including independent environmental monitoring and control;

9 It makes sense to develop practice-oriented education of students on urgent tasks to achieve SDG 12 "Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns," namely, not to introduce additional subjects and classes, but to integrate and combine them within the existing curriculum.

SDG 13: CLIMATE ACTION

In 2016, Belarus joined the UNFCCC Paris Agreement (UNFCCC PA) and submitted a Nationally Determined Contribution with commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 by 28% from the 1990 level, excluding 'the land use and forestry' (LULUCF). There was also a plan to develop strategic documents in the field of climate adaptation, including a national adaptation plan, and sectoral and regional plans.

The period from 2016 to 2021 has been characterised by a slow increase in awareness of the importance of climate change for the economic and social policy of the country with the support of international organisations and the active participation of NGOs. However, the goals and targets related to the implementation of SDG 13 are not among the national priorities.

The gap between the current potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the goals to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 is: for 2030 – 5.3 million tons of CO₂-eq (the forecast for achieving neutrality is 62.3 million tons of CO₂-eq, the current potential is 67.6 million tons of CO₂-eq); and for 2050 – 19 million tons of CO₂-eq (achieving carbon neutrality – 33 million tons of CO₂-eq, current potential – 52 million tons of CO₂-eq).

Main recommendations for the achievement of SDG 13:

- 1 Create an effective system of climate services and forecasting, including the financing of programs in the field of forecasting, risk communication, and the development of climate adaptation measures.
- 2 Develop national legislation ensuring the implementation of the UNFCCC PA, and ensure the formation and functioning of effective institutional structures for the effective implementation of climate policy. Finalise and adopt a National Strategy for the long-term development of Belarus with low greenhouse gas emissions for the period up to 2050, taking into account the achievement of carbon neutrality by 2050.
- 3 Raise the emission reduction targets and align them with the UNFCCC targets and EU targets for carbon neutrality by 2050. Integrate the targets of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and climate adaptation into strategic planning documents, in particular, into state programs for the development of economic sectors, regional, and local development plans.

- 4 Create a national carbon market and mechanisms for monitoring and assessing greenhouse gas emissions based on carbon pricing, taking into account the best foreign and international practices/standards.
- 5 Develop sectoral and local climate adaptation plans on the basis of assessments of current and long-term climate risks, and integrate the proposed measures into local and sectoral development programs.
- 6 Take into account long-term trends and scenarios of climate change when devising national and local action plans for responding to adverse weather events.
- 7 Create a national climate service system taking into account the requests of stakeholders (industries, local administrations, businesses, etc.)
- 8 Stimulate the development of low-carbon and eco-friendly technologies, and reduce the share of carbon- and energy-intensive industries.
- 9 Integrate the risks associated with climate change (current and long-term) into economic and financial planning, including on the basis of ESG approaches.
- 10 Develop and implement education programs in the field of climate change at all levels, including in the course of advanced training for practitioners and managers; provide research institutes with support to conduct research.

SDG 14: CONSERVATION OF MARINE ECOSYSTEMS

For most of the items of SDG 14 at the national level, the status is defined as 'Irrelevant for the Republic of Belarus', which is somewhat erroneous, as the potential for its participation is much greater in view of the influence of Belarus on the Baltic and Black Seas.

Public reporting on SDG 14 activities is insufficient and ineffective, as is interaction with NGOs and international organisations under SDG 14.

To achieve SDG 14, the following is necessary:

- 1 Take measures to prohibit the use of microplastics in household chemicals and cosmetics, and continue the modernisation of wastewater treatment facilities for thorough wastewater treatment, including the removal of microplastics.
- 2 Include Belarus as a member of HELCOM for the implementation of conservation and sustainable development programmes for the preservation of the Baltic Sea.
- 3 Introduce a ban on the transshipment of potash and other fertilisers in seaports in dry bulk that tend to pollute coastal waters.
- 4 Monitor and organise the management of all waste and wastewater at enterprises in Belarus, especially those located near major river waterways. Implement a consistent transition to 'green chemistry' in all areas of industry, in agriculture, in households, introducing a ban on the production and use of phosphorus-containing detergents.
- 5 Upgrade treatment facilities to reduce the concentration of nitrogen and phosphorus compounds in wastewater discharges to reduce the overall nutrient load on the Baltic and Black Seas.
- 6 Develop ecological agriculture.
- 7 Fulfil the commitments made under the Paris Climate Agreement to prevent ocean acidification.
- 8 Actively participate in educational work, both among the population and among business and government representatives.

9 Introduce a ban on the use of mobile and contact zoos, dolphinariums, mobile menageries and mobile exhibitions of wild animals into the Law 'On the Handling of Animals'.

10 Closer cooperation with experts and NGOs in discussing and creating a unified state approach and program for the implementation of SDG 14, reviewing national goals and the significance of the Republic of Belarus for this goal.

SDG 15: CONSERVATION OF TERRESTRIAL ECOSYSTEMS

Belarus is a member of key biodiversity conventions: Berne, Bonn, CITES, on Aarhus. Laws on the animal and plant world, 'On Specially Protected Natural Areas' have been adopted. Water and Forest Codes have been developed.

A system of public monitoring and citizen participation in addressing issues of biodiversity conservation began to take shape in Belarus earlier. In 2019, an attempt was made to ease regulations that protect endangered species, but activists and scientists prevented the worst-case scenario.

One major contribution to the fight against land degradation in Belarus is the ecological rehabilitation of depleted peatlands and wetlands with a disturbed hydrological regime, developed by UNDP together with civil society organisations. To date, more than 64,000 hectares of disturbed territories have been re-swamped.

Currently, there are practically no subsidised environmental measures in state programs related to nature management and environmental protection. Many of the measures proposed have been moved from the category of mandatory to recommended. An economic failure and a default predicted in the near future may weaken, up to a complete collapse, the existing system for environmental control and curbing the economic pressure on nature.

To implement SDG 15, civil society recommends the following:

- 1 In order to achieve sustainable forest management, use more environmentally friendly types of final felling, in particular even, gradual, and selective, bringing their share to 50% in the total volume of logging.
- 2 Reform the forestry management system by separating industrial and forestry activities.
- 3 Amend the Forest Code and the Water Code so as to strengthen environmental measures.
- 4 Adopt an appropriate legislative act on the provision of ecosystem services in the country.
- 5 Make information on funding for environmental protection measures and their effects available to the public.
- 6 Create an independent public monitoring process of biodiversity conservation in specially protected natural areas in order to resist attempts to sacrifice environmental interests in favour of economic ones.

7 Return to the public sector the right to attract funding and implement environmental projects. At the end of 2021, there was a threat of Belarus withdrawing from the membership of the Aarhus Convention, which over the past 15 years has been the driver of positive changes in the norms in the field of public participation in the process of making environmentally significant decisions.

8 Stop the practice of unjustified forced liquidation of environmental public organisations, including those involved in achieving SDG 15.

9 Eliminate criminal liability in connection with activities in unregistered and/or previously liquidated NGOs.

SDG 16: PEACE, JUSTICE, AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

All political institutions are controlled by the president. The high degree of personification of power leads to the fact that often the actions of state bodies and the public services provided by them do not correspond to the real socio-political agenda and reflect arbitrary decisions of the president.

The Belarusian judicial system does not meet the standard of the right to a fair trial. There is no independence and self-governance of bar associations, nor freedom to exercise the profession of a lawyer.

President Lukashenko's government is manipulative and selective in fulfilling its international obligations, thereby hindering the implementation of the rule of law at the international and national levels. It does not make sufficient effort to reduce the prevalence of all forms of violence, including gender-based violence and violence against children.

The administration does not systematically collect information on gender-based violent crimes; as a result, official data are rare, fragmentary, and inconsistent.

The fight against corruption is limited only to household corruption, and often serves only for show.

In 2020 and 2021, 610 journalists were detained. In 2020 alone, Lukashenko's government blocked access to more than 100 socio-political and media websites. Today, almost all independent Belarusian media have been declared "illegitimate" by Lukashenko.

To achieve SDG 16 targets, the following is necessary:

- 1 Ensure that the relationship between the SDGs and the implementation of their international human rights obligations is understood at all levels of SDG implementation. Government officials need to know and understand that economic development and social stability are naturally based on respect for human rights.
- 2 Restore the principle of separation of powers, giving real powers to both the judiciary and Parliament. It is important to eliminate distortions, which only intensified with the adoption of the new version of the Constitution.

- 3 Establish the institution of the Commissioner for Human Rights, consistent with the principles relating to the Status of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (Paris Principles).

- 4 Ensure transparency of decisions taken at the state level (including full participation of civil society) as part of the anti-corruption mechanism.

- 5 Investigate properly all reports of the use of violence by law enforcement officers since 2020, as well as the inaction of control bodies (Prosecutor's Office, court).

- 6 Implement the recommendations of the Group of States against Corruption of the Council of Europe.

- 7 Abolish corrupt practices of state financing of propaganda and state-affiliated structures used for political purposes (for example, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the BRSM, etc.).

- 8 Abolish restrictions on the activities of independent media and journalists.

- 9 Remove obstacles to conducting free opinion polls on socio-political issues.

- 10 When working with the current government of Belarus as a partner for international institutions, reconsider the current non-critical approach to dialogue as an instrument. This is necessary to avoid the manipulation of such a partnership by the Belarusian authorities.

SDG16: ACCESS TO INFORMATION OF STATE BODIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

State bodies do not seek to publish significant information proactively online or offline unless the publication is directly provided for by law.

The restrictions on the right to information established by the Law 'On Information, Informatisation and Protection of Information', as well as the legislation on state secrets, are excessively broad, while the list of restrictions is not exhaustive.

The law lacks an effective mechanism to appeal the refusal to provide information. In addition, there are broad restrictions on access to information; the law does not provide for an independent authorised body to control access to information, and sanctions for violations are governed by regulations outside this law.

State bodies do not seek to publish significant information proactively online or offline unless the publication is directly provided for by law. Belarus has a list of categories of information that must be posted on official websites.

To ensure the right to access information in Belarus, the following should be done:

- 1 Adopt a separate regulatory act at the level of the Law, which provides for specific guarantees and mechanisms for access to information;
- 2 Establish the principle of openness of publicly available information, ensured by the duty of the authorities to facilitate the dissemination of relevant information;
- 3 Formalize the principle of inadmissibility of requiring to prove grounds for a public request for information in the legislation;
- 4 Establish a list of information that cannot be restricted as official information;
- 5 Prevent violations of citizens' right to information as a result of arbitrary interpretation of its provisions by law enforcement agencies;
- 6 Expand the list of information required to be published on the authorities' websites.

SDG 16: THE RIGHT TO A FAVOURABLE ENVIRONMENT

Opportunities for public participation in making environmentally significant decisions are reduced to providing information, and even for the category of decisions where public discussion is held, its results are advisory in nature.

Until 2020, there was a trend to include representatives of environmental NGOs in public advisory councils. These bodies did not have a practical solution of issues as their goal, but were used as a platform for dialogue. After the wave of liquidations began in 2021, NGO representatives were no longer invited to meetings of advisory boards.

A few years ago, a trend began to form of involving representatives of pro-government NGOs in public activity, since they represented the position that there are no problems with environmental democracy in the country and expressed support for any initiatives of the authorities. Such representatives began to be included in the already mentioned public councils, to participate in international forums, etc.

In 2017, the Aarhus Centre was established under the Union of Lawyers, which, unlike representatives of environmental NGOs, does not notice the difficulties with the implementation of the convention in the country, fully supporting the position of the state (Belarus continues to systematically fail to comply with the obligations under the Aarhus Convention).

To ensure the right to a healthy environment, it is necessary to do the following:

- 1 Take measures to improve the general level of legal literacy of the public regarding the implementation of environmental rights; conduct educational campaigns on the importance of providing access to environmental information.
- 2 Accede Belarus to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Register of the Aarhus Convention and to the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to the Espoo Convention;
- 3 Take practical and individual measures to restore the rights of environmental activists and representatives of environmental organisations violated by state bodies.

SDG 17: PARTNERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

President Lukashenko's administration has defined clear 'red lines' that they are not ready to cross and allow reform and real changes and, accordingly, to cooperate in these areas. This includes all areas related to the need for greater openness, public accountability, restructuring of administrative processes, and the leverage of power of authorities over society: for example, judicial reform, prison reform, freedom of association, etc.

The country systematically fails to fulfill the recommendations of international monitoring agencies concerning human rights and in other sectors.

Over the past 2 years, the government of A. Lukashenko has carried out the most massive repressions against civil society organizations yet. As of the end of April 2022 (starting from August 2020), 700 Belarusian NGOs have been liquidated or are in the process of liquidation. There is not a single registered human rights organization left in the country.

In January 2022, the Criminal Code of Belarus reinstated an article on criminal liability for activities on behalf of unregistered organisations (Art. 193-1), which was in the Criminal Code earlier but was repealed in 2018.

To achieve SDG 17 targets, the following is necessary:

- 1 Ensure that the relationship between the SDGs and the implementation of their international human rights obligations is understood at all levels of SDG implementation. Government officials need to know and understand that economic development and social stability are naturally based on respect for human rights.
- 2 Provide adequate conditions for partnership with the private sector: first, the state should fundamentally abandon the practice of using business (regardless of the form of ownership) as an instrument of pressure on people that violates human rights [9].
- 3 Ensure adequate conditions for partnership with civil society: first, cancel the decisions to eliminate Belarusian NGOs, abolish the criminalisation of activities on behalf of an unregistered organisation (remove Article 193-1 from the Criminal Code), and ensure participation of civil society organisations independent of the state in the SDG Partnership Group.

4 When partnering with Belarus in the implementation of SDG 17, it is important to take into account a number of factors:

- a. Parliament's dependence on the executive branch, lack of separation of powers, lack of an independent court;
- b. The authorities' rejection of independent stakeholders;
- c. Dependence of public business on political power;
- d. The use of business (public and private) by the authorities as a tool to achieve political goals;
- e. Dependence of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (the main trade union organisation in the country) on the authorities and its affiliation with the state;
- f. The use of legislation, including labour legislation, to increase the dependence of the worker on the state; and
- g. Large-scale pressure on civil society, including the media, and lack of free access to information.

5 International organisations working on assistance projects with Belarus (including the UN system, CoE, and EU), as well as other donors, to implement the following recommendations:

- a. When working with the current government of Belarus as a partner for international institutions, reconsider the current non-critical approach to dialogue as an instrument (the latter is especially typical for the UN system). This is necessary to avoid the manipulation of such a partnership by the Belarusian authorities.
- b. Analyse the process of implementation of the SDGs by Belarus and develop further plans and indicators, taking into account in detail the implementation of the relevant recommendations of the UN specialised human rights bodies.
- c. Consider that, at the moment, almost the entire independent institutional sector of civil society in Belarus has been terminated, and the authorities are trying to replace it with a new pool of NGOs that are actually affiliated with the government, which makes them dependent. In this regard, it is critical to be particularly sceptical when selecting such partners.

