Working paper

Environmental governance in Belarus: developments between 2014 and 2025

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of authoritarian consolidation in Belarus by examining the evolution of environmental governance over the past decade. It explores the country's shift from environmental stewardship – characterised by transparency, accessibility of information, and public participation in decision-making – towards greater state control, diminished civil society engagement, and widespread repression of environmental activists and organisations. The paper also examines the intersection between environmental and nuclear governance in Belarus, with particular attention to public participation. It concludes by identifying and analysing the key strategies employed by the Belarusian authorities, including co-optation, legitimisation, and repression, to align environmental governance with the regime's broader authoritarian objectives. The paper is based on the research outcomes of the project "Investigating Good Governance in the Context of Authoritarian Consolidation: The Case of Belarus" (InGAC).[1]

Key findings

- The involvement of Belarusian government institutions in environmental projects has led to certain improvements in transparency and public participation, although these gains have been fragile and highly context-dependent.
- The 2020 political crisis significantly reduced civic involvement and information access within environmental governance.
- Authoritarian strategies have ultimately shaped governance practices in alignment with political priorities rather than environmental or democratic, good governance principles.

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Contents

1. Introduction

Environmental governance refers to policy actions for protecting, conserving, and sustainably managing natural resources. It encompasses various policy areas, such as environmental, energy, and industrial development. This concept highlights how the authorities implement environmental regulations in relation to existing policies, engaging other actors, while environmental policies remain the main instrument for achieving these aims. In Belarus, environmental governance comprises various public institutions responsible for managing natural resources, establishing norms and standards for environmental protection, monitoring compliance with these standards, and collecting data on resource utilisation and quality. Additionally, these institutions participate in international environmental conventions and projects. The primary agency overseeing environmental governance in Belarus is the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection (hereinafter referred to as the Ministry of Environmental Protection).

Over the past decade, the framework of environmental governance in Belarus has experienced a notable shift. Prior to 2020, the Belarusian government was quite actively involved in international cooperation in this sphere. It had ratified 25 international environmental conventions, including those relevant to participation in environmental decision-making. They also actively engaged in a range of environment-related projects, including those with international and regional dimensions. Various funding donors – notably
the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Commission, the Global Environment Fund (GEF), and individual European countries – supported these initiatives.

Following the post-electoral crises in Belarus in 2020 and a subsequent escalation of repression, certain cooperation projects were disrupted, some donors suspended funding, and the government shifted its priorities from international to primarily regional cooperation. These developments coincided with a significant decline in inclusive, participatory environmental decision-making and diminished civil society engagement. In 2022, Belarus formally withdrew from the Aarhus Convention, which relates to public involvement in environmental decision-making.

The policy implications of these shifts are substantial. The decline in public awareness campaigns and restrictions on information dissemination risk both undermining the impact and legitimacy of environmental policies. Furthermore, the marginalisation of civil society and the increasing persecution of environmental activists raise concerns about transparency, accountability, and long-term sustainability of environmental governance in Belarus.

This paper reviews developments in environmental governance in Belarus over the past decade and examines their alignment with good governance principles such as transparency and participation. It also briefly discusses how the construction of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) has linked nuclear governance – the institutions and practices regulating nuclear energy in Belarus – to environmental governance through these principles. The study employs a multi-method approach, including a review of international environmental projects, evaluation of environmental performance indicators, analysis of national legislation and policy programmes, and interviews with former civil servants, international experts, and activists. It also examines activities and official documents of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, including national programmes, reports, official communications, and contributions to international conventions.

The paper is based on the research outcomes of the project "Investigating Good Governance in the Context of Authoritarian Consolidation: The Case of Belarus" (InGAC), which analyses governance dynamics in Belarus during the period 2014–2025. The project employed a mixed-method approach combining a comprehensive project database's quantitative and qualitative analysis with in-depth expert interviews.

2. Environmental governance in an authoritarian context

Environmental governance involves a comprehensive framework of rules, practices, and institutions that govern how political authorities, organisations, and institutions interact with and manage the environment, including conservation, protection, and exploitation of natural resources. It encompasses both formal and informal processes and considers the standards, values, and behaviours of various actors, including governments and private and civil society organisations (CSOs) (Haque 2017), and it requires cooperation among all stakeholders.

International environmental conventions, such as the Aarhus and Espoo Conventions, emphasise good governance principles, including transparency, efficiency, and participation. Countries that ratify these conventions are obliged to implement and adhere to these principles, regardless of whether they are democratic or authoritarian. In the latter case, good governance is adapted to authoritarian contexts within environmental governance frameworks, giving rise to what is called environmental authoritarianism.

Emerging in the 1970s, this concept initially described how centralised, top-down, and restrictive approaches can streamline environmental decision-making and policy implementation, especially during periods of rapid industrialisation, economic growth, or ecological crises (Ophuls 1977). While authoritarian systems may address environmental issues more quickly, due to limited public participation, they also risk poorer policy choices compared to political systems with greater transparency and accountability. The lack of institutional critique or policy revision mechanisms often results in opaque and irregular environmental policy changes, while proponents of alternative reformist views often face repression, as evidenced by crackdowns on environmental activists in various countries.

In contemporary autocracies, environmental authoritarianism describes how environmental policy is used to strengthen an authoritarian regime. Drawing on studies of China, Iran, Russia, and Vietnam, Eaton and Kostka (2024) argue that regime survival fundamentally shapes state action in the name of environmental protection. They observe that authoritarian leaders prioritise maintaining power,

employing a mix of co-optation, legitimisation, and repression (Gerschewski 2023) in environmental policy, adopting these mechanisms according to the societal groups involved, the urgency of the environmental issue, and the state's capacity.

Co-optation often takes the form of state-dependent environmental CSOs that rely on government funding. Legitimisation operates domestically, where leaders showcase real or symbolic environmental achievements to demonstrate governance performance, and internationally, where participation in global partnerships bolsters the regime's legitimacy. Repression remains central, targeting environmental activists and organisations through harassment, restrictive laws, or stigmatisation as extremists, terrorists, or foreign agents. Some authoritarian states, such as Russia and China, are disregarding the Aarhus Convention – a convention that aims to protect environmental activists and link environmental rights to human rights.

3. Autocratic openings to changes in environmental governance

In Belarus, environmental governance has become a significant component of authoritarian resilience. Over the past decade, the authorities have pivoted from collaborative, good governance approaches to increased centralisation and authoritarian control. Progress in environmental governance aligned with periods of political liberalisation (2008–2010 and 2014–2020) when the regime demonstrated more openness to Western partners and international donors, though still within an authoritarian framework.

Environmental issues first entered the sphere of international cooperation through projects and initiatives addressing the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. Since the early 1990s, international organisations, civil society, and foreign governments have actively contributed to managing Chernobyl's environmental impact in Belarus. This created a positive precedent for broader environmental cooperation and reinforced the authorities' perception that external environmental assistance did not necessarily entail further political commitments. The 2000s and 2010s saw a relative opening in Belarusian environmental governance.

Since the early 2000s, Belarus has ratified numerous international environmental conventions, facilitating broader cooperation, knowledge transfer, and integration into global environmental governance. Notable examples include the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, signed in 1998 and approved in 2000; the Helsinki Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, accessed in 2003; the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, accessed in 2004; and the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, signed in 1991 and accepted in 2005. The adoption of these conventions marked a shift towards reforming Belarus's Soviet-based environmental protection system and establishing a national framework for environmental monitoring. International cooperation in this domain also aimed to enhance Belarus's global profile, align domestic practices with international environmental governance standards, promote participation in global environmental data exchange, and increase involvement in international forums and

Within the same period, the Ministry of Environmental Protection initiated the development and adoption of environmental norms and standards aligned with international benchmarks. These covered air and water quality regulations, land use, forest management, and biodiversity conservation. During this period, numerous international projects promoted good governance in environmental management, including the exchange of best practices and international experience. Belarusian civil servants, particularly from the Ministry of Environmental Protection, took part in study visits and training programmes across Europe. As a result, the environmental sector in Belarus emerged as a key area of engagement with international organisations, perceived by the authorities as politically neutral and largely exempt from democratic governance conditionality.

The 2010s marked a pivotal stage in the development of environmental governance related to the Astravets NPP, characterised by a strategic move towards more inclusive public participation. This shift was driven by intensified advocacy from environmental organisations. Amendments to national legislation enhanced public involvement in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process and enabled CSOs to engage more actively within the Ministry of Environmental Protection. During this period, important developments occurred in environmental and nuclear governance, particularly in relation to public participation, EIA procedures, and transboundary cooperation. This situation changed dramatically after the 2020 political crisis, which was marked by increased political repressions against environmental activists and organisations, alongside the further consolidation of authoritarian rule. This period also brought political and economic sanctions and significant changes in international cooperation.

4. Assessment of environmental governance performance

During the 2010s, Belarus advanced towards greater environmental stewardship, committing to environmental protection through signing and ratifying binding international agreements, strengthening national institutions, and reducing environmental degradation. The regular environmental reviews and indices illustrate this dynamic.

The Environmental Performance Review, conducted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), provided an in-depth assessment of Belarus's environmental policies, financial mechanisms, and efforts to preserve biodiversity. The third review, published in 2016, acknowledged Belarus's progress in advancing the Millennium Development Goals, noting improvements in pollution control, renewable energy adoption, and conservation initiatives. However, the report also identified ongoing challenges, including the need for more effective enforcement of environmental regulations, improvement in waste management, and increased investment in sustainable development. These findings emphasise the continued need for policy reform and strategic planning to secure long-term environmental sustainability in Belarus.

Recent environmental assessments indicate significant progress in Belarus's performance. The Environmental Performance Index (EPI) ranked Belarus 32nd in 2024, up from 55th in 2022. This advancement can be attributed to the EPI's methodology, which emphasises environmental outcomes and technical indicators such as air quality, water resource management, biodiversity conservation, and emissions reduction rather than governance processes. Notably, Belarus also rose to 19th globally in ecosystem vitality, compared with 41st in 2022. High scores in biodiversity protection, species preservation, and forest management underpin this trend. However, these gains appear to result more from the effective implementation of technical environmental programs and the country's extensive forest resources than from genuine improvements in environmental governance.

5. International projects in environmental governance before 2020

The InGAC database identified 26 environmental governance projects implemented in Belarus over the past decade, with a total of €115.2 million in funding. The Ministry of Natural Resources led 15 projects, amounting to €59.1 million (7.8% of total funding).

The project objectives included the promotion of renewable energy, sustainable urban development, enhancement of ecological information systems, and public participation in environmental decision-making. Although outcome data for the projects is limited, available evidence shows a focus on establishing frameworks for interinstitutional and cross-border environmental data exchange; strengthening legal frameworks in energy, waste management, housing, and utilities; and improving standards for urban planning and infrastructure management.

Key donors were the UNDP (five projects), the European Union (EU) (five projects), the GEF (three projects), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (two projects). In total, 11 international actors were active in the sector, including the European Environment Agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, SIGMA, the World Bank, the Nuclear Energy Agency, the UNECE, and the World Association of Nuclear Operators.

Despite the ongoing issue of radiation pollution from Chernobyl, only three Chernobyl-related projects were implemented over the last decade. These addressed local development, environmental risk assessment in the exclusion zone, and radiological awareness in Belarus and Ukraine, especially related to wildfire response. The decline in environmental remediation efforts compared to the previous decade reflects a policy shift, consistent with the decreasing number of contaminated areas now considered safe for living.

From a good governance perspective, environmental projects prioritised transparency, information accessibility, and public participation. Their activities can be grouped into two categories:

- Engagement of the public and civil society in environmental decision-making
- Production, management, and dissemination of environmental data at national, regional, and international levels

Within the InGAC project database, environmental projects primarily engaged CSOs as partners, which was not typical for other good governance-related projects. These initiatives focused on developing ecological monitoring systems, promoting environmental education, enhancing CSO capacity to participate in decision-making, and supporting regional development. Strong CSO engagement was notable in the towns of Miory and Masty and the city of Pinsk, focusing on community participation in water governance and sustainable urban mobility.

The EU was the main founder of these initiatives. Key projects included 'Civic Engagement in Environmental Monitoring and Improving Environmental Management at the Local Level' (European Commission, UNDP, Coca-Cola), 'Together for Community and Nature: Miory District', 'Public Participation and Effective Water Governance in Masty District', and 'SUMCITYNET: Cities Towards Increasing Accessibility and Sustainable Climate-Proof Urban Mobility'.

Among projects focused on environmental data management, the ENI SEIS II East project (2016–2019) is particularly noteworthy. Belarus joined five other Eastern Partnership countries to advance environmental information sharing among ten sectors: air, water, soil, climate change, biodiversity, agriculture, energy, transport, waste, and environmental finance. The Belarusian Statistical Committee collaborated closely with the Ministry of Environmental Protection to compile and integrate this data into the shared system.

These developments illustrate how Belarus integrated transparency into its environmental information systems and used them to foster international cooperation. For the Belarusian government, this represents a strategic shift from Soviet-era governance towards modern regulatory approaches through the standardisation of environmental data. This shift commenced in the early 2000s with the incorporation of European norms and standards into national legislation on water and air pollution assessment, paving the way for broader international cooperation in environmental governance.

6. Changes in environmental governance after 2020

Following the 2020 crisis, major international donors and organisations incrementally reduced their involvement in projects with Belarusian state actors. Between 2020 and 2025, we identified only three projects related to environmental governance:

- Two funded through the UNDP, focusing on biodiversity conservation and the Climate Promise framework
- One funded by the IAEA and NEA, addressing environmental health and the exchange of exposure data for nuclear plant workers

Most other international actors have ceased their activities and cooperation with state actors in Belarus.

At the national level, the national programmes of environmental protection in Belarus evolved in response to shifting political dynamics. The 2015–2020 and 2021–2025 strategies maintain structural continuity, each consisting of six subprograms focused on resource management, climate adaptation, biodiversity, environmental monitoring, and governance. However, they differ significantly in their priorities and approach. The 2015–2020 programme emphasised international commitments and a green economic transition, while the 2021–2025 strategy prioritises domestic objectives, particularly safe living conditions and sustainable resource use. This development reflects a shift from international engagement towards national interests.

There was also a reorientation from formal engagement with multilateral environmental conventions towards stronger regional cooperation within the Commonwealth of Independent States and Eurasian Economic Union. Funding patterns mirror this reorientation, with reduced international assistance in the 2021–2025 period and a focus on more targeted, high-impact projects. Between 2016 and 2020, the Ministry of Natural Resources reported securing $27.8 million and €16.3 million in international technical assistance. By contrast, the 2021–2025 programme operates a budget of around $11 million. Current projects focus on re-

storing degraded peatlands, managing freshwater ecosystems of international importance, advancing electric transportation, regulating the surface of transboundary basins (the Buh and Nioman rivers), and phasing out ozone-depleting substances. All this suggests a strategic focus on national priorities and regional partnerships rather than alignment with broader multilateral frameworks.

The 2021–2025 programme also places less emphasis on public participation in environmental decision-making compared with the previous period. Although awareness campaigns and legal updates continue, reduced civic engagement threatens transparency and accountability, potentially undermining the overall effectiveness of environmental governance.

7. Participation in environmental decision-making and its limits

Public participation is essential for good environmental governance. It enables citizens to engage in decision-making across sectors such as energy, industry, and transportation. Coupled with EIAs, it connects development activities with public involvement, promoting green democracy.

Belarus ratified the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in 2000, and the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context in 2005. Since then, the Belarusian government has worked to develop legislation promoting transparency, participation, and accountability in environmental governance. These initiatives aim to reinforce governance structures, ensure effective public involvement, and improve both nuclear safety management and EIA procedures. The Aarhus Convention connects rights to environmental protection with human rights and governmental accountability, while the Espoo Convention requires parties to assess potential environmental impacts early in the planning process and notify and consult affected states about projects with possible transboundary environmental effects.

From the 2000s to the late 2010s, Belarus amended its legislation to align more closely with the Aarhus Convention Committee's recommendations, particularly regarding citizen participation in environmental decision-making. These legislative revisions affected procedures for EIAs, ecological expertise, access to environmental information, public hearings, and the legal definition of information considered environmentally significant (Ecohome 2024).

Major progress occurred with the changes introduced in 2015 to the Law on Environmental Protection, which formalised public consultations on draft environmental decisions and EIA reports. In 2016, the Council of Ministers' Resolution No. 458 standardised consultation procedures, enhancing procedural consistency. That same year, the promulgation of the Law on State Environmental Expert Review, Strategic Environmental Assessment, and EIA further harmonised national EIA standards with those of the Aarhus Convention. In 2018, the adoption

of the Law on Protected Areas introduced mechanisms for public participation in decision-making affecting protected territories.

The current legal framework mandates public consultations on draft policies, legislation, permits, and strategic environmental assessments. Organisers of such consultations must provide accessible online platforms and publish relevant drafts, reports, results, and notifications in compliance with regulatory standards.

Public participation has also been strengthened institutionally. The Public Coordination Environmental Council, established in 2001, and regional councils, created between 2003 and 2004, promoted multi-level engagement. The Regulations on Public Environmental Defenders (2013) further improved procedural access to environmental justice, though they also defined and limited defenders' formal powers. According to Ecohome (2024), more than 500 environmental defenders are registered in Belarus. However, national legislation still fails to guarantee their civil rights and restricts their participation in environmental governance.

Challenges to public participation existed in Belarus before the 2020 crisis. Although Belarus is legally obliged to promote public participation in environmental decision-making under the Aarhus and Espoo Conventions, the government has faced significant criticism for inadequate actions. The most notable case concerns the Astravets NPP construction.

In December 2009, the European ECO Forum alleged that Belarus violated the Aarhus Convention by restricting transparency, public participation, and access to information in its nuclear planning process. Lithuania echoed these concerns in 2015, emphasising Belarus's failure to adequately consult both the public and neighbouring states between 2013 and 2014. Under the Espoo Convention, Lithuania objected to the site selection and environmental oversight of the Astravets NPP, citing unresolved safety issues, insufficient management of radioactive waste, and risks associated with the use of transboundary waters for cooling.

In April 2014, the CSO Ecohome reported persecution of anti-nuclear activists, including detentions, arrests, and fines linked to their activism. After 2020, repression against civil society intensified, leading to the forced closure of Ecohome in 2021. The Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee condemned these actions, and in October 2021, the parties to the convention demanded that Belarus reinstate Ecohome or face sanctions. Belarus refused and announced its withdrawal from the convention in July 2022. The government justified its decision by accusing the convention's governing bodies of bias and discrimination, while

claiming that it continued to meet its international obligations.

This development signals a broader trend when authoritarian regimes prioritise domestic control over international commitments, frequently invoking external threats to legitimise restrictive policies at the expense of citizen participation in environmental governance.

8. IAEA and nuclear governance

Nuclear activities, including the construction of NPPs, fall under the Aarhus and Espoo Conventions, which require public participation in environmental and nuclear decision-making. Belarus's withdrawal from the Aarhus Convention has significantly limited oversight and opportunities for public involvement.

Nevertheless, Belarus remains party to key IAEA agreements, such as the Convention on Nuclear Safety and the Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident. Over the past decade, it has hosted IAEA missions to assess nuclear safety at the Astravets NPP and participated in IAEA technical cooperation programmes.

The IAEA continues cooperation with the Belarusian government, particularly with the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Ministry of Health, and the National Centre for Hydrometeorology, Radioactive Pollution Control, and Environmental Monitoring, implementing joint nuclear projects. However, public information about these projects remains scarce. Access to related databases is restricted and requires approval from Belarus's national IAEA representative, reinforcing the culture of secrecy.

Engagement with the IAEA lacks key good governance principles, such as participation, accountability, and transparency. Typically, for authoritarian regimes, nuclear governance in the country remains centralised and opaque with heavily formalised consultation procedures. Collaboration with the IAEA also serves to legitimise governmental authority and decisions. Regular IAEA visits and statements contribute to public acceptance of nuclear technology.

9. Conclusions

An examination of environmental governance in Belarus over the past decade reveals a steady decline in both the number of environmental projects and the extent of international cooperation. This period marks a clear policy shift. Early progress towards good environmental governance, reflected in growing transparency and participation mechanisms, has been replaced by the gradual erosion of these principles as a broader authoritarian regime survival strategy.

For many years, the Belarusian government treated environmental issues as neutral and apolitical ones that required little political oversight. Tensions emerged when participatory mechanisms linked environmental governance with human rights, providing environmental activists with a platform of expression and protection.

Belarusian authorities have since adopted interconnected strategies within environmental governance to consolidate authoritarian control.

Co-optation. The selective adoption of good governance principles, such as environmental data standardisation and limited forms of public consultation, enables the state to project modernisation and international alignment while maintaining political dominance. Restricted participation also serves to co-opt segments of civil society to secure loyalty.

Legitimisation. Cooperation with international organisations in environmental governance offers external validation of government actions. Environmental collaboration, often viewed as politically neutral, is used to demonstrate compliance and credibility. Similar trends exist in other non-democratic countries, e.g. Azerbaijan, China, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia. After Belarus withdrew from the Aarhus Convention in 2022, it expanded collaboration with the IAEA to strengthen the perceived legitimacy and rationale of the Astravets NPP and the regime itself.

Repression. Since the 2020 political crisis, repression of environmental activism has intensified. The authorities' attempt to separate environmental issues from politics has instead led to the closure of environmental organisations and the persecution of activists, many of whom have been labelled extremists.

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