Working paper

Good governance and public administration in Belarus in 2014-2025

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Abstract

The paper analyses the evolution of good governance and public administration in Belarus between 2014 and 2025 within the context of authoritarian consolidation. During 2014–2020, limited liberalisation in the country allowed selective reforms and engagement with international actors. These initiatives improved administrative efficiency but did not advance democratic accountability. The 2020 political crisis and Belarus's support for Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a sharp authoritarian turn. The regime strengthened the security institutions, curtailed transparency, democratic participation and the rule of law, and prioritised stability and control. While international actors largely withdrew, the government continued a technocratic modernisation, motivated by regime survival rather than public interest. Consequently, good governance in Belarus has been redefined from a framework of democratic accountability to one of administrative control and authoritarian resilience. 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

- Between 2014 and 2020, the Belarusian authorities selectively applied some good governance principles. While they adopted specific technical aspects that improved administrative efficiency, they largely dismissed democratic elements.
- International actors employed both technocratic and transformative approaches in good governance promotion. However, they often encountered resistance and demands for adaptation from authorities. Overall, external promotion had limited impact.
- Following 2020, the Belarusian regime increasingly relied on repression and co-optation as mechanisms to sustain its legitimacy. Reform-oriented officials were marginalised, resulting in a security faction assuming a dominant position in the decision-making process.
- Between 2020 and 2025, repressions in public administration became instruments of control vital for regime survival. While limited modernisation efforts and innovations in governance continued, they were primarily aimed at consolidating power rather than serving the public interest.

1 This working paper is part of a project ("Investigating Good Governance in the Context of Authoritarian Consolidation: The Case of Belarus (InGAC)", Grant Agreement No. NDICI-GEO-NEAR/2022/434-092-0063) that has received co-funding by the European Union under the EU4Belarus - Support for Advanced Learning and Training (EU-SALT II) programme. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the researchers only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency.

Contents

1. Introduction

“Good governance,” introduced into public administration theory and practice in the late 1980s, remains an elastic concept without a universally accepted definition. It is normatively associated with democratic regimes, yet research shows that authoritarian systems often appropriate concepts of democratic origin, including “good governance” (Ishiyama 2019).

Belarus provides a revealing case for examining the interaction between authoritarianism and good governance. Although its foreign policy has long centred on Russia, the regime has at times pursued pragmatic engagement with the West. Internal political cycles alternated between repression and limited liberalisation (2008–2010; 2014–2020), when the government intended to enhance their administrative capacity through some innovations such as digitalisation and cooperation with Western partners.

The period from 2014 to 2020 brought limited liberalisation in Belarus but no meaningful decentralisation or structural reform. Nonetheless, the relatively liberal faction within the government, particularly the financial and economic ministries, gained some influence. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) promoted international cooperation and expanded contact with Western actors, which translated into some practical engagement at ministerial and local levels. International donors sought to use these openings to advance democracy and good governance. Civil society also developed some good governance initiatives, although these lie outside of the scope of the current study.

The 2020 presidential election marked a turning point. Mass protests and unprecedented repression followed, while Belarus’s alignment with Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine triggered sweeping Western sanctions. Facing existential threats, the regime shifted from a “spin dictatorship” based on manipulation to a “fear dictatorship” grounded in coercion and pre-emptive repression (Guriev & Treisman 2022; Evans 2024). This transformation reshaped public administration through purges of civil servants and the empowerment of the security apparatus. The government reversed earlier reforms, and many international actors promoting good governance suspended their activities.

Over time, however, both the Belarusian authorities and those international organisations that remained in the country learned their lessons and adapted to the consolidated authoritarian environment. Limited initiatives to strengthen administrative capacity continue, often with external support, but whether these efforts still qualify as promoting good governance remains debatable.

This paper analyses how the concept of good governance evolved within Belarus's consolidating authoritarian regime from 2014 to 2025. It explores developments preceding the 2020 crisis and the Russia's full scale military invasion of Ukraine, focusing on how good governance principles have been promoted by international actors and adapted by the state. The main focus of the paper is on the public administration sector, which is instrumental for regime transformation and stability.

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. Good governance as a framework

The complexity of the good governance concept stems from both its diverse theoretical interpretations and its varied operationalisation by political actors. Divergence also arises from how these actors formulate good governance principles as a set of shared norms considered essential for improving decision-making and promoting social and economic development (Cerrillo-i-Martínez 2018). However, definitions often reflect narrower economic, New Public Management (NPM) or developmentalist perspectives. Disagreement further persists over indicators and objectives used to measure good governance and related reforms (Unsworth 2007).

Good governance comprises two interrelated dimensions. The first concerns the administrative aspect, understood in a narrow and regulatory sense as a universal set of state-related principles such as efficiency, capacity-building and stability, which are regarded as fundamental across regime types (Fukuyama 2016). The second represents a normative democratic and political interpretation, grounded in liberal principles such as human rights, participation, accountability and the rule of law (Wetzel et al. 2015; Soyaltin-Colella 2022). From this perspective, governance cannot be considered genuinely good without its normative democratic component, even if it performs effectively in technical terms.

For autocracies, administrative capacity is vital to regime survival (Chan 2024). In line with economic or developmental goals, they often adopt selective good governance reforms to enhance bureaucratic performance or consolidate elite control. Such measures may improve efficiency in specific sectors while simultaneously strengthening authoritarian rule (Knox and Janenova 2023). This tension becomes evident when good governance tools such as digitalisation or facial recognition technologies not only increase administrative efficiency but also expand the regime's repressive capabilities (Peters 2023, 10).

Authoritarian consolidation relies on three strategies: repression, co-optation and legitimation, each of which must be carefully balanced to ensure regime endurance (Gerschewski 2013). Motivations for adopting good governance in authoritarian countries vary. Regimes may seek legitimisation (Guriev and Treisman 2015, 2022), pursue pragmatic objectives such as securing external resources or protecting elite

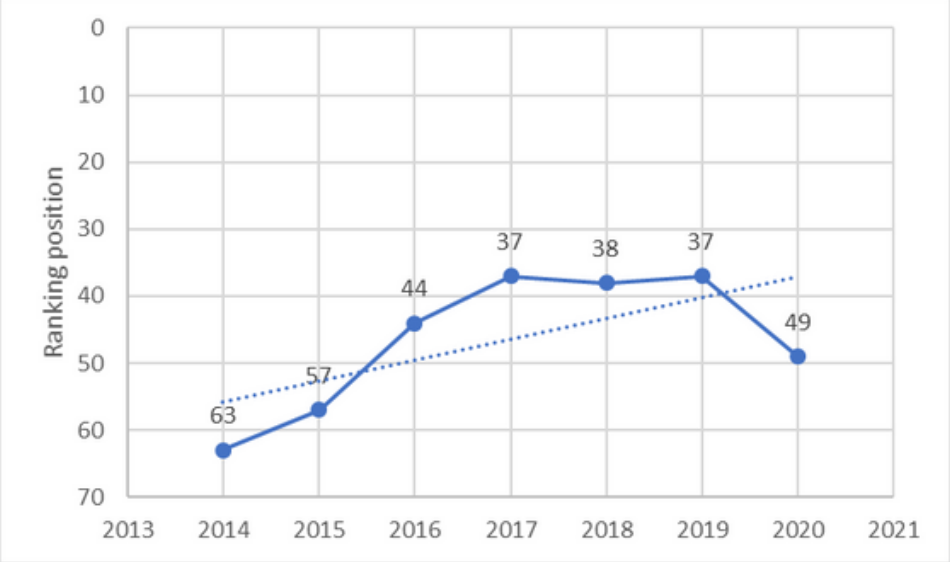
interests (O’Connor et al. 2019), or address developmental and social goals (Chan 2024; Smyth et al. 2019). In any case, authoritarian governments learn to engage with and adapt concepts such as good governance to maintain stability, recognising that failure to do so could threaten their survival (Hall 2023, 2–7).

3. Governance in Belarus as assessed by international organisations

International assessments consistently describe Belarus as a consolidated autocracy characterised by weak institutions and low accountability. However, between 2014 and 2020 the country recorded visible improvements across several governance indices, although most of these advances stemmed from a low baseline inherited from earlier political cycles.

The World Governance Indicators (WGIs) reflected modest progress, with Government Effectiveness remaining stable at 44.76 in 2019, gradual improvement in Regulatory Quality (27.62 in 2019), and Control of Corruption peaking at 56.19 the same year. The UN E-Government Development Index showed a similar trend, rising steadily from 0.61 in 2014 to 0.80 in 2020, while the E-Participation Index reached 0.75 in 2020. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) improved rapidly from 31 points in 2014 to 47 in 2020, though later analyses linked this to tighter information control rather than genuine reform. The World Bank Doing Business Index, to which the Belarusian government paid special attention, reported positive assessments of regulatory changes.

Figure 1. Belarus's ranking in Doing Business Index

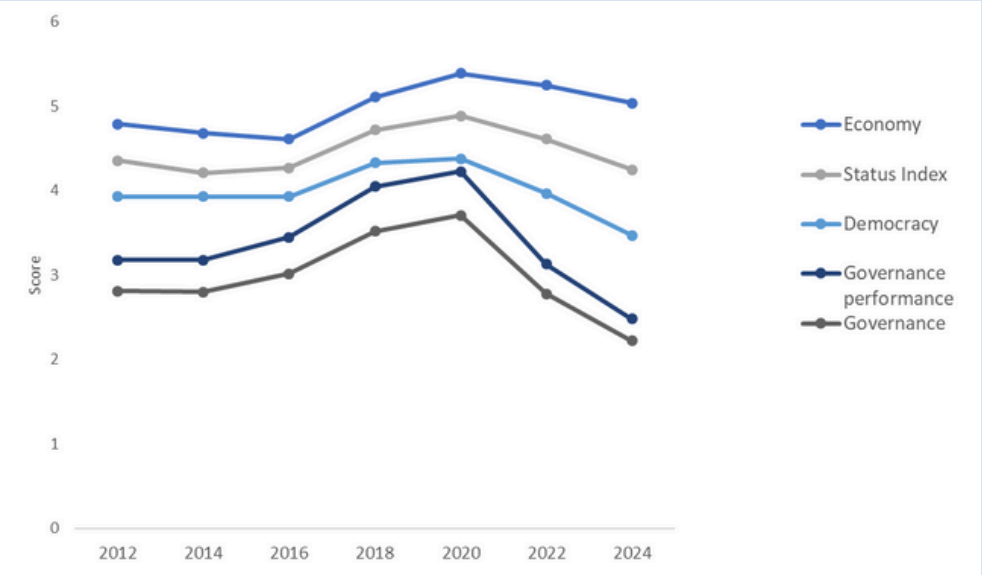


Source of data: Doing Business website

Even during the liberalisation phase, indices that emphasised political or democratic dimensions of governance recorded little progress or stagnation. Most categories in the Eastern Partnership Index, including human rights, equal opportunities, and judicial independence, showed limited progress. Freedom House scores remained around 20–21 out of 100 through 2019, falling to 19 by the end of the year while retaining the "Not Free" classification.

The 2020 political crisis sharply deteriorated international assessments of governance in Belarus. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) recorded declines across all components of its Status Index, and all WGI indicators dropped substantially.

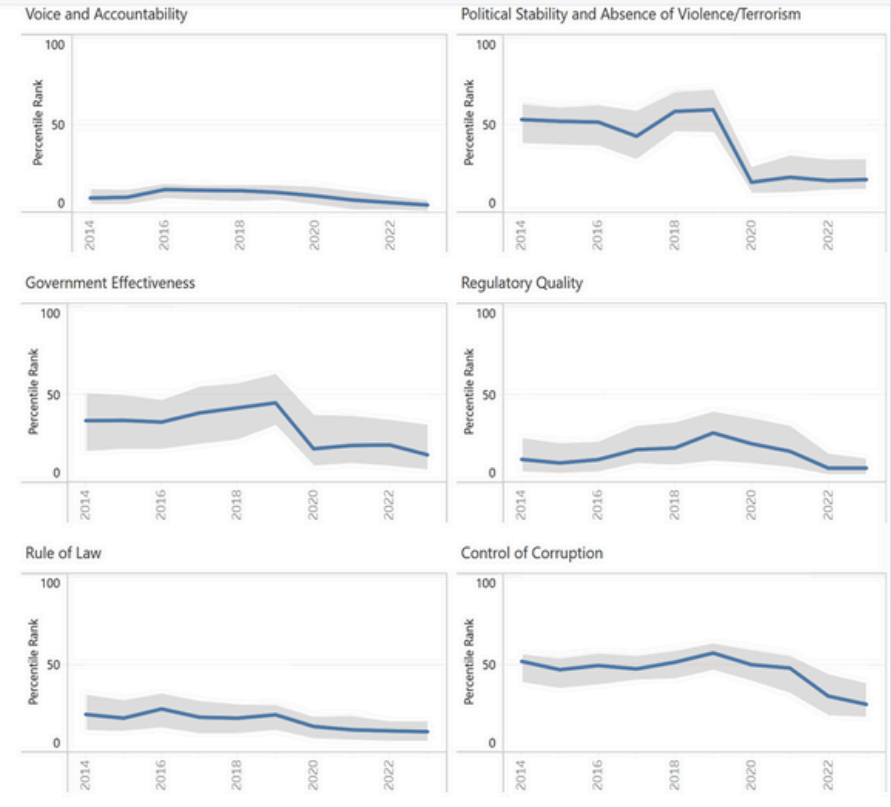
Figure 2. Belarus's in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI)



Source: BTI website

V-DEM scores, already low before 2020, fell further, designating Belarus as a "closed autocracy" and, in the 2025 report, as "the first and only closed autocracy in Eastern Europe". Transparency International's CPI dropped from 47 in 2020 to 41 in 2021 and to 33 in 2024, erasing earlier gains and signalling the collapse of institutional anti-corruption mechanisms.

Figure 3. Belarus in the World Government Indicators (WGIs)



Source: World Bank website, Time Series View for Belarus

Similarly, Freedom House' scores declined from 19 (out of 100) in 2019-2020 to 7 in 2025, while the Eastern Partnership Index classified Belarus among the weakest regional performers. The WGIs described "severe and deteriorating governance" across all dimensions. The World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index ranked Belarus 105th of 142 countries in 2024, identifying acute weaknesses in constraints on government powers (139th) and open government (135th).

Before 2020, international indices generally portrayed Belarus as a hybrid regime with occasional democratic openings. After 2020, they uniformly classified it as a closed autocracy. As of 2025, Belarus ranks below most regional peers in governance quality, with the exception of Russia and Turkey. Nonetheless, some indicators continue to evaluate certain governance aspects positively, such as order and security in the WJP and digital governance in the UN E-Government Development Index. Others, including indices linked to Sustainable Development Goal 16, fail to capture the governance crisis because they rely on limited sub-indicators, such as the issuance of birth certificates, or depend solely on national self-reporting.

4. External good governance promotion in Belarus: actors and dynamics

Types of good governance promotion

Good governance forms an essential part of democracy promotion, although its content and effects vary widely. External actors promoted, and in some cases continue to promote, good governance in Belarus through different tools and approaches. Based on the aims and scope of engagement, two main types of promotion can be distinguished.

1. **Structural–technocratic promotion** focuses on strengthening administrative capacity. Here, international financial institutions (IFIs) and other actors provide politically neutral support for governance-related initiatives under strict conditionality and requirements for structural or institutional reforms. IFIs use a wide range of instruments, including loans, conditionality mechanisms, and technical assistance.
2. **Transformative promotio**n seeks more substantial changes in governance and emphasises principles such as transparency, accountability, and participation. The European Union (EU) is the key example of an actor pursuing this approach, employing political conditionality, legal harmonisation, monitoring, and project-based or grant-funded assistance.

In Belarus, however, the boundary between these two types is often blurred. The government showed pragmatic interest in structural and technical support from IFIs to enhance administrative capacity rather than to implement deep structural reforms. IFIs maintained formal political neutrality before 2020 but still imposed conditions for governance and economic reform that the authoritarian government often found unacceptable. In 2016, for instance, negotiations with the IMF on a three-billion-dollar Stand-By Agreement collapsed after the Fund's reform requirements, covering the governance of state-owned enterprises, price liberalisation, fiscal transparency, and social policy, challenged Belarus's state-run economic model and was rejected accordingly by the government (Kulakova et. al 2025).

Interviews conducted within the InGAC project indicate that cooperation between IFIs and the Belarusian authorities was usually productive, marked by strong administrative culture and executive discipline. Overall, IFIs' approaches to good governance promotion in Belarus ranged from public sector reform to private sector development as a gradual route to systemic change. Collectively, the financial institutions aimed to introduce international governance standards, enhance transparency, and strengthen institutional capacity. This type of promotion was the largest in terms of funding volume. For the projects included in the InGAC database, over the period 2014 - 2020 the World Bank accounted for 81.8 per cent of all good governance-related project funding in Belarus, contributing €616 million. IFIs also cooperated with actors promoting more transformative initiatives, often funding their projects.

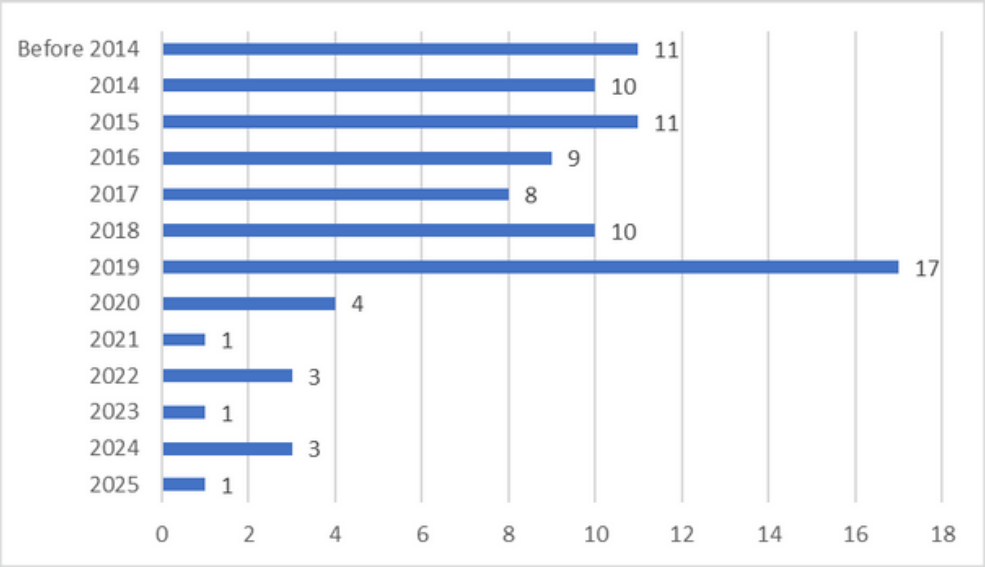
Transformative good governance initiatives in Belarus covered a broad spectrum of issues. Many combined infrastructure developments, such as road construction or hospital modernisation, with governance components, including improved border management, health information systems, and service delivery mechanisms. Although these projects formally sought to embed good governance principles in public administration, they were typically less conditional and shaped by complex negotiations with the Belarusian authorities, which set clear political limits. For example, as one of the InGAC interviewees mentioned, even during the so-called "golden period" of EU – Belarus cooperation the parties failed to agree on one of the projects with an explicit good governance objective.

Analysis of the InGAC interviews shows that the Belarusian government consistently preferred infrastructural projects that enhanced administrative capacity and avoided initiatives demanding transformative change. Consequently, projects nominally designed for transformation often became predominantly technical in nature.

Good governance projects and their funding

External promotion of good governance in Belarus has always been limited both in terms of the number of projects and funding volume. For the InGAC database, we identified 89 projects involving Belarusian state institutions, of which 60 focused specifically on public administration. Between 2014 and 2020, nine to seventeen such projects were launched each year, with the number declining sharply after 2020 (see Figure 4).

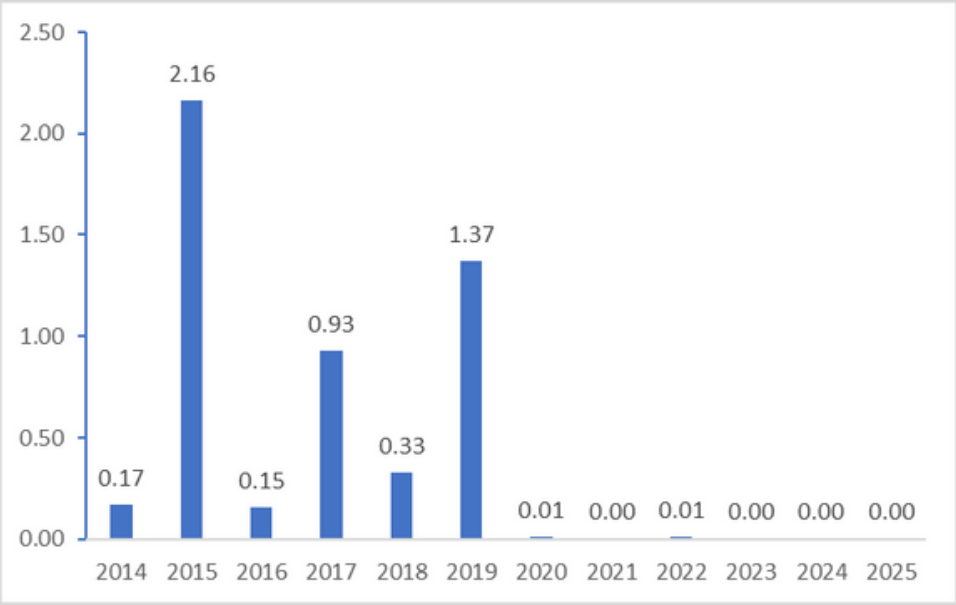
Figure 4. The number of good governance promotion projects (the InGAC database) implemented in Belarus in 2014 – 2025



Source: authors' calculations based on the InGAC project database

The total funding volume of projects in Belarus included in the InGAC database amounted to €753.24 million, of which public administration-related projects accounted for 83 per cent (€627.7 million). When compared with the expenditures of Belarus's consolidated budget, the volume of financing for the InGAC projects remains relatively modest. Over the period under review, this ratio ranged from 2.16 per cent in 2015 to values approaching zero between 2020 and 2025 (see Figure 5).

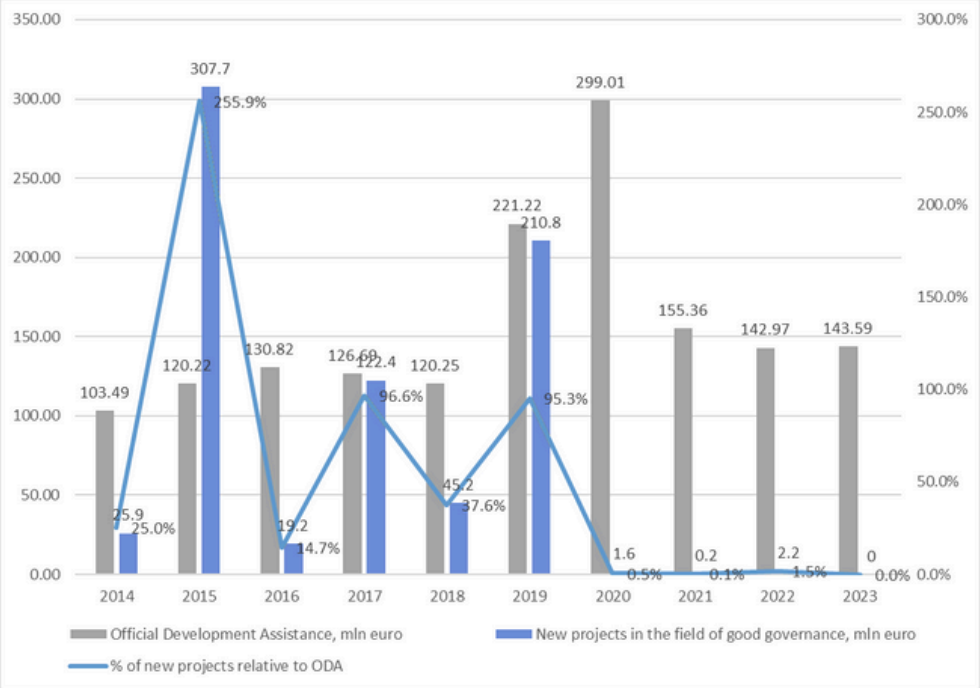
Figure 5. Annual ratio of funding for good governance projects (the InGAC database) to Belarus's consolidated budget expenditures (%)



Source: authors' calculations based on the InGAC project database and the information from the website of the Ministry of Finance of Belarus.

Meanwhile, when compared with the total volume of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Belarus, funding for InGAC projects accounted for almost half (47%) of it between 2014 and 2025 (see Figure 6). However, year-to-year comparisons between the InGAC and ODA databases require cautious interpretation due to methodological differences in data compilation. The InGAC database recorded the full multi-year project value in the first year of implementation, whereas the ODA database distributes assistance across the corresponding years.

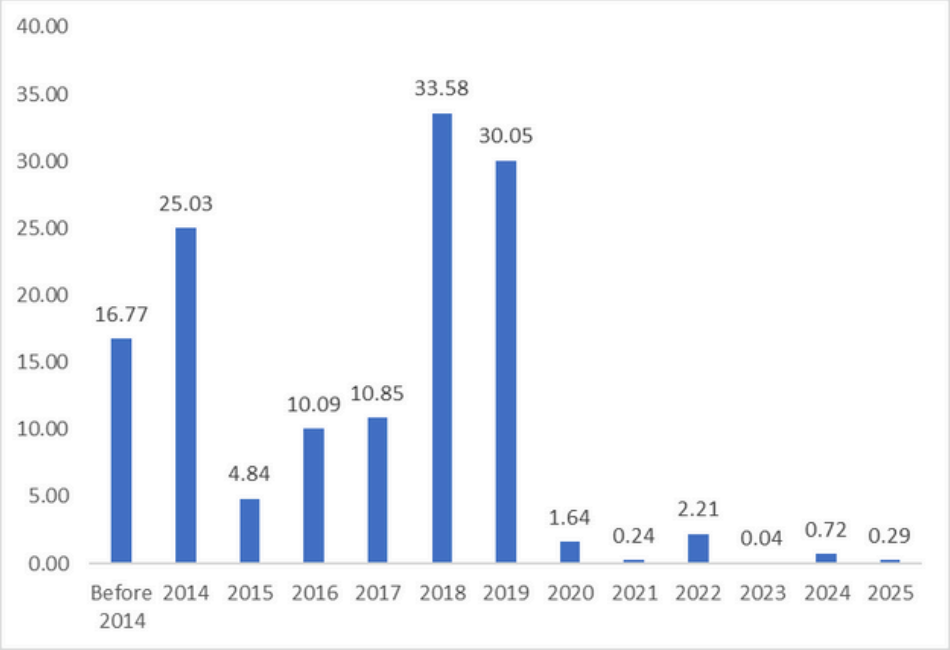
Figure 6. A comparison of total ODA and funding for good governance projects (the InGAC database)



Source: authors' calculations based on the InGAC project database and data from the OECD ODA website.

Examining the dynamics over time, funding inflows for the good governance projects in the InGAC database were moderate in 2014, 2016, and 2018, ranging from €19.2 million to €45.2 million annually. The years 2015 and 2019 stand out as peaks, marking the launch of several large-scale reform projects supported by the World Bank. However, when projects supported by the World Bank are excluded, the distribution of funding appears more balanced (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. The volume of funding of good governance projects, excluding World Bank projects (the InGAC database), million euros



Source: authors' calculations based on the InGAC project database

Overall, ODA disbursements in Belarus peaked in 2020 and remained relatively high thereafter, while funding for projects related to good governance promotion has almost entirely ceased.

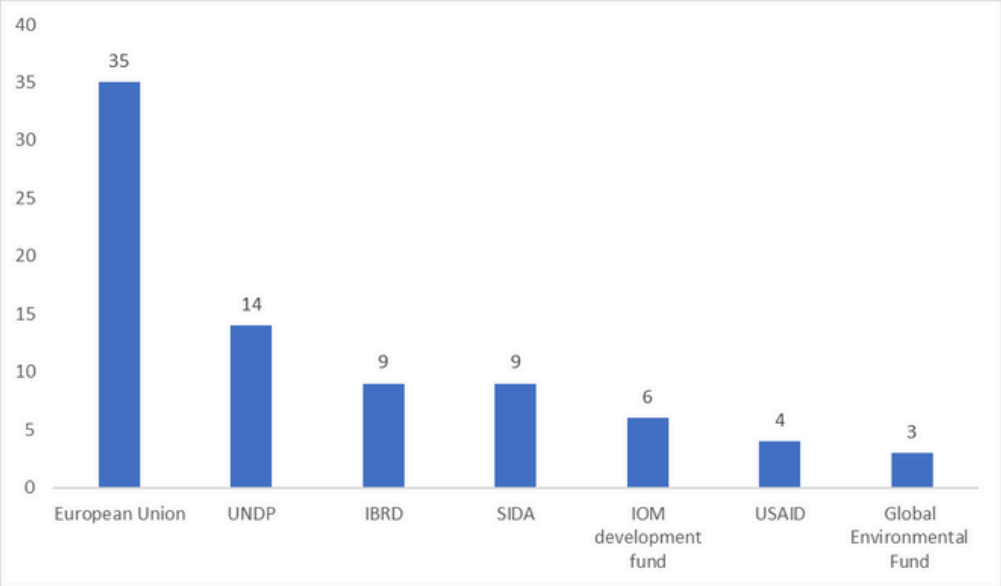
Actors of external good governance promotion

Before 2020, many international actors, working separately or in partnership, implemented a range of initiatives aimed at promoting good governance in Belarus. These actors had different mandates, and the scope of their good governance promotion activities was broad. For example, the European Union supported infrastructure development, environmental initiatives, cultural and tourism projects, migration management, economic policy, and development of small and medium-sized enterprises. The World Bank/IBRD implemented high-value infrastructure projects covering roads, hospitals, education, forestry, and utilities, plus two public finance reform initiatives. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) projects focused on diverse issues in the social and environmental spheres. USAID funded projects on public administration reform and economy, including two phases of the "World Bank Doing Business" project in which regulatory reforms were supported; while Sida in its projects focused on education, environment, climate, social issues, human rights and the economy.

Other organisations operated in narrower areas. For example, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) financed migration-focused projects enhancing border control capacities. The UN agencies such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and UNESCO worked with good governance promotion only within the scope of their specific thematic mandates.

With regard to the number of projects (see Figure 8) supported by international actors included in our selection from the InGAC database, the European Union was the most active with 35 projects. The UNDP followed with 14 projects, and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and Sida supported nine projects each. The IOM Development Fund supported six projects, USAID four, and the Global Environment Fund three.

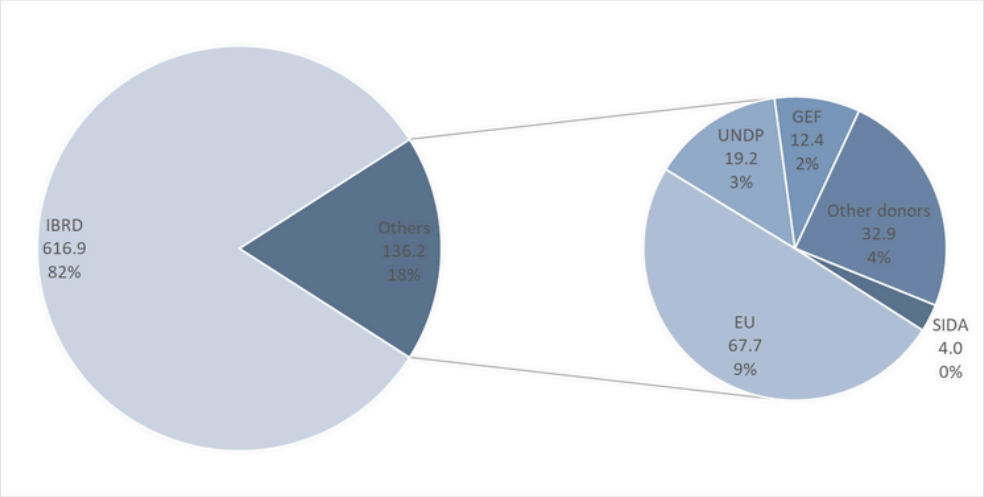
Figure 8. The number of good governance projects supported by international organisations in the period 2014 – 2025 (the InGAC database)



Source: authors' calculations based on the InGAC project database

However, when financial volume rather than project numbers is considered, the picture shifts significantly. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) dominated through large-scale infrastructure projects with governance-related components. It provided €616.9 million (81.9 per cent of all funding in the database) between 2014 and 2025. The EU ranked second, contributing €67.7 million (9 per cent) with projects that were smaller in scale but more diverse in scope. The UNDP was the third-largest donor by volume, allocating €19.2 million (2.6 per cent), often in co-financing arrangements with the EU and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). Other notable contributors included the GEF (€12.4 million, 1.7 per cent) and Sida (€4 million, 0.53 per cent).

Figure 9. Funding volumes of good governance projects by international organisations (the InGAC database), million euros



Source: authors' calculations based on the InGAC project database

This distribution confirms a dual pattern of international actors' good governance promotion efforts: on the one hand, large-scale infrastructure-oriented, technical projects financed by the WB with administrative capacities improvement components; and on the other hand, smaller-scale but more diverse transformative projects funded by the EU, UNDP, and other donors, which often targeted specific aspects of governance and public administration.

Relations between the Belarusian government and international actors of good governance promotion

The relations between the Belarusian government and international actors involved in good governance promotion, even in the period 2014 – 2020 which was considered generally more favourable for international cooperation, varied significantly. On the institutional level, some organisations (for example, the US Government and Sida) cooperated just on a low, minimal level, trying to influence the government indirectly through other sectors or actors, such as businesses or non-state organisations. Other actors engaged on a larger scale, while still focusing mainly on specific, narrowly defined areas (for example, the Council of Europe, which intended to promote good governance standards for Belarusian courts). Others tried to use the relatively more open environment to engage with Belarusian authorities and state institutions as intensively as possible (the EU, UNDP and other UN agencies).

The personalities of Belarusian officials often played a decisive role in shaping relations between governmental institutions and international actors, opening or closing down opportunities for cooperation. The Belarusian authorities have always strictly regulated and heavily bureaucratised anything related to international cooperation. Thus, all good governance promotion projects (as any other foreign aid) had to be registered as

international technical assistance with the Ministry of Economy. For instance, if the authorities considered a project proposed by an international actor inappropriate or not aligned with what officials understood as national interests (crossing the “red lines” often mentioned in interviews), they denied registration. One example is the EU’s public administration reform project, which underwent substantial negotiations, was preliminarily signed, but which was ultimately denied registration in 2019, and as a result, never started. The “red lines” described in the interviews are difficult to define. Belarusian officials tended to perceive them as anything “too political,” “pretending to shape the power system,” or questioning Lukashenka’s authority. Staff of international organisations working in Belarus also tried to sense where these “red lines” might lie and to adjust their approaches accordingly.

At the same time, the interviews revealed that the Belarusian government imposed limitations on how deep any good governance or other public administration–related changes could go. The Presidential Administration acted as the ultimate gatekeeper, blocking any initiatives that implied power sharing or civic participation. Officials in such ministries as the Ministries of Economy, Finance, or Foreign Affairs, considered often reform-minded and progressive, sometimes engaged constructively with international organisations, but their efforts stalled once proposals reached higher levels of authority. Initiatives labelled “good governance,” especially those promoting dialogue between civil society and the government, were explicitly rejected or rebranded in neutral terms such as modernisation or cooperation. Even when foreign support enabled smaller, technically oriented projects (for example, solar street lighting or civil servant training), the authorities accepted them only as long as they did not perceive them as a challenge to the hierarchical authoritarian power system.

Belarusian counterparts of external good governance promotion

More than forty Belarusian governmental institutions participated in internationally supported good governance projects (selected for the InGAC database), among which the most active was the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection. It implemented environmental governance, renewable energy, sustainable urban development, and waste management projects (Stsiapanau & Chulitskaya 2025). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as InGAC interviews revealed, played a dual role. On the one hand, it promoted and, according to some evaluations, even encouraged international cooperation, including projects related to good governance. On the other hand, it participated directly in initiatives related to WTO accession, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), workforce mobility, and cross-border cooperation. Among other active ministries in this regard were the Ministry of Economy, focused on country programmes, public–private partnerships, and local economic development, the Ministry of Health, which managed projects to strengthen health care institutions, the Ministry of Transport, and the State Border Committee. The Ministry of Internal Affairs also joined projects that can be classified as good governance, mainly dealing with migration.

Local authorities actively participated in projects promoting sustainable territorial development and civic participation, building local administrative capacity and encouraging public engagement. In addition, state universities, including the Academy of Public Administration, the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Belarusian State University, took part in initiatives aimed at reforming education, providing legal training, and adapting higher education to European standards.

External good governance promotion after 2020

After the political crisis began in Belarus in 2020, a number of international organisations suspended cooperation with the Belarusian authorities and redirected their support to civil society. Some of them, particularly international financial institutions (IFIs), stopped launching new public sector projects. Between 2020 and 2022, international actors reduced the scope of their activities and focused mainly on completing existing projects rather than initiating or planning new ones. However, it was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that triggered a more extensive exodus of international actors. In April 2022, the EBRD suspended Belarus's access to its resources due to the country's involvement in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The IFC ceased all programmes in March 2022. In the same month, the WB declared that their programmes in Russia and Belarus would be stopped. The mandates and actions of IFIs remain politically neutral, but they appear to be highly sensitive to both the external and internal political environment, which became toxic for Belarus. Nevertheless, the country has retained its membership and shares in the IFIs. Moreover, in May 2025, the Belarusian government reported an increase in the country's IMF quota, although this appears to be merely a technical step.

At the same time, despite the political crisis and the war, a number of international organisations continue to operate in Belarus and carry out activities that can be classified as related to good governance promotion. Among such organisations are, first of all, those which belong to the UN system: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). While those international good governance promoters which were previously the most active are no longer present in Belarus, the UNDP and the IOM, more specifically the IOM Development Fund took leading roles in projects which can be classified as containing good governance components. At least two organisations from the nuclear sector maintain their activities with the Belarusian authorities: the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA). The World Association of Nuclear Operators (WANO) collaborates with Belarus through the regional centre in Moscow (Stsiapanau & Chulitskaya 2025).

The funding sources have also changed. As of 2025, such organisations as the IOM Development Fund, UNDP, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria provide funding. In addition, a new actor which is supported by Russia – the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office Joint Programme on Belarus SDGs – appeared as a player in this field. The Fund was established on 31 December 2021 for the purpose of supporting

the acceleration of the SDGs in Belarus. Some interviewees shared the opinion that after the withdrawal of previously active actors, Russia replaced them in some initiatives related to good governance, in the sphere of migration in particular.

When it comes to the good governance-related projects which started in Belarus after 2021, we identified only 9 new projects with a total value of around €3.5 million (see Table 1). These projects have primarily targeted such areas as health, migration, climate, biodiversity and sustainable development goals (SDGs) localisation.

Table 1. Good governance projects (started in 2021-2025) included in the InGAC database

N	Start Year	Donor	Project Name	Funding Amount (EUR)	Belarusian Partner
1	2021	IOM Development Fund	Maximizing the Impact of Migration and Labour Mobility in the Sustainable Development of Belarus	244,900	Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2	2022	Multi-Partner Trust Fund JP Belarus SDGs	SDGs nationalization and localization	1,699,500	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
3	2022	The Global Fund To Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis And Malaria	Support to CCM functioning	244,400	Ministry of Health
4	2022	IOM Development Fund	Belarus: Supporting National Capacities in Migration Health Focusing on Communicable Diseases	265,600	Ministry of Health
5	2023	Governments of Germany, Switzerland, Austria and UK	Promotion of the Biodiversity conservation	40,100	N/a

6	2024	UNDP	Global Climate Promise Project-From Pledge to Impact-Belarus	255,900	N/a
7	2024	Nuclear Energy Agency & International Atomic Energy Agency	Information System on Occupational Exposure (ISOE) Project	375,100 [2]	Ministry of Health, Scientific and Practical Centre of Hygiene
8	2024	IOM Development Fund	Strengthening the Implementation, Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting of Migration-Related SDGs in Belarus	91,300	Ministry of the Interior
9	2025	IOM Development Fund	Strengthening the Capacity of the State Border Committee of Belarus in Response to Increased Migration at Borders	292,300	State Border Committee

Source: InGAC project database

Analysis of the thematics of the projects which started after 2020 identified migration governance as the most persistent topic, with several projects addressing labour mobility, migrant health, and border management. The international organisations implement them in partnership with the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Health, or the State Border Committee. Other projects have focused on sustainable development planning, biodiversity conservation, climate policy, and nuclear safety, but all they are limited in both scale and visibility. Transparency of the projects has declined, with results frequently unpublished and Belarusian partners not always disclosed.

After 2020 and 2022, external good governance promotion in Belarus declined substantially, as most previously active actors suspended their cooperation with the government. Meanwhile, those international organisations that remain in Belarus (UN structures, first of all) have adapted to the new conditions, with their relations with the authoritarian government resembling co-optation rather than genuine cooperation. Nevertheless, they continue to contribute to the improvement of the administrative capacities of Belarusian governmental institutions and related infrastructure.

2 This amount represents the annual funding for the entire project, comprising 31 partners. The share allocated to Belarus as a participant remains unknown.

5. Internal good governance introduction

Limited governance and public administration changes in Belarus before 2020

Prior to 2020, during the relative open period for cooperation with the West, the Belarusian government introduced some changes consistent with good governance, although it never officially framed them as such. These initiatives incorporated several good governance principles including efficiency and effectiveness, and improved accountability through the consolidation of state budget support within clearly defined programmes. They also simplified monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment. However, these developments did not necessarily lead to tangible improvements in public administration, and in many cases remained largely rhetorical. In official policy documents, the government never explicitly referred to “good governance,” but instead implied the concept through references to international best practices, indices, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The most comprehensive manifestation of the internal Belarusian governance modernisation effort was the introduction in 2016 of a new five-year state programme approach according to the Presidential Decree N 106. It consolidated state budget support across 20 state programmes for 2016-2020 and introduced a competitive allocation mechanism through the Development Bank of the Republic of Belarus, which replaced the approach in place hitherto of budget support provision allocated on an individual and ad-hoc request basis. The changes declared equal access to state budget support for all market participants, rather than state-owned enterprises only.

The 2016-2020 “Programme of Socio-Economic Development” included measures to separate the government’s regulatory functions from its ownership responsibilities, and to improve public service delivery performance. It also introduced innovations in civil service, declaring open and transparent recruitment competitions, and providing opportunities for civil servants for professional development through obtaining education abroad. The programme introduced citizen and business association involvement in decision-making, reflecting elements of participatory governance despite the overall top-down public administration.

Before 2020, the government made efforts at improving the transparency and administrative efficiency of public administration. It implemented client-centric public service delivery models, developed unified state data systems, and created digital registries for state property management. Another example was a series of digital governance initiatives, through which Belarus pursued goals of comprehensive e-government development. For example, in 2016-2020, the "Digital development programme" established essential infrastructure, including broadband networks, electronic service delivery systems, and integrated government platforms.

These initiatives aligned closely with international benchmarks, including UN "E-government readiness indices" and the International Communication Unit (ITU) development indicators. The InGAC interviewees mentioned some related innovations, including the launch of an open data platform by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Belstat), which provided data for SDGs, and a general portal with open data access. In addition, ministries and other government institutions introduced more openness and transparency in their daily activities. They launched and supported their official web pages and accounts in social media.

Governmental modernisation efforts and documents consistently referred to international standards and frameworks. European standards were adopted in select areas, particularly those the government had pragmatically prioritised, such as export of Belarusian products. In line with these, state actors, often with international support, improved technical and infrastructure facilities, for example in customs regulations, where they established special laboratories for products, raw materials, and veterinary quality checks and control. At the sectoral level, healthcare programmes aligned with the World Health Organisation (WHO). In education, international indicators, such as PISA, WorldSkills International, and the World Bank Human Capital Index measurements were applied. Other ministries and agencies followed guidelines and incorporated SDGs as benchmarks for system development, which, according to interviewees, led to improvements in non-political areas covered by SDGs: social services, healthcare, gender, and non-discrimination.

Interviews also revealed that certain elements of public participation were established. Some ministries and local authorities initiated the creation of public or coordination councils, some of which included civil society representatives. They launched a website for discussing draft laws and worked with the appeals submitted by citizens. Although this did not constitute public participation in the democratic sense, it represented progress compared to the situation in Belarus before 2014 and after 2020.

However, commitments to good governance principles in official documents often remained rhetorical and were rarely implemented. The centralised nature of governance in Belarus fundamentally hindered innovation into public administration, as unilateral decisions and presidential Decrees could at any time override legislation and strategic plans – a fact well understood by civil servants. Moreover, good governance initiatives often lacked adequate budgetary support. When drafting new strategic documents, authorities rarely conducted rigorous analysis of previous programmes' outcomes, instead copying the same measures and plans without evidence or reflection.

Analysis of the InGAC interviews demonstrates that, before 2020, despite the good will and enthusiasm of some reform-minded civil servants, Belarusian authorities understood good governance primarily in technocratic and state-centered terms. They interpreted it not as a democratic framework involving citizen participation and institutional accountability, but as a managerial and technical instrument for achieving administrative efficiency and effectiveness. Their main focus was on economic stability, technical modernisation, and instrumental compliance with some international standards in areas like banking, finance, statistics, standardisation, and environmental management. The authorities prioritised efficiency and order, while transparency and public participation, which are core elements of the democratic dimension of good governance, were either implemented only to a limited extent or not applied at all.

Governance and public administration in Belarus after 2020 and 2022

The 2020 political crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally changed the previous trajectory of the Belarusian government towards limited introduction of good governance models. The state shifted away from international frameworks to an even more centralised model that prioritises stability and internal legitimacy above all other goals. These political and geopolitical shocks provoked not just a change in the government's composition, marked by the marginalisation of the relatively liberal economic faction and the strengthening of the security block, but also a systemic reorientation of public administration towards militarisation and securitisation.

At the institutional level, the Security Council and security services took a leading role, overshadowing financial and economic ministries, and the MFA. KGB representatives are systematically appointed to executive bodies, state-owned and private enterprises, and even GONGOs. The 2022 Law on Public Service formalised this transformation by merging civil and military service frameworks and restricting the rights of civil servants.

Authoritarian consolidation in Belarus inverts the principles of good governance. Power becomes increasingly centralised, while accountability and transparency are largely abandoned. The rule of law is systematically violated, and the public interest is replaced by the pursuit of authoritarian legitimacy. Accountability erodes through the repression of the media and civil society, reinforced by the constitutional amendments in 2022 granting the head of the state immunity from prosecution. Transparency gave way to secrecy as access to information and statistical data was severely restricted. Citizen participation in policymaking, limited even during the preceding relatively liberal period, disappeared; public consultations are performative, involving only co-opted or state-controlled civil society organisations or GONGOs, while independent civil society actors are excluded from public councils. The rule of law became an empty legalist notion, undermined by arbitrary decision-making.

Reliability and predictability are undermined by arbitrary decision-making. The government repeatedly failed to meet targets of its five-year socio-economic development programmes, and both effectiveness and efficiency declined. Widespread purges in the civil service, including in economic ministries, eroded expertise as loyalty to Lukashenka replaced professional competence as the main criteria for appointment.

Post-2020 state programmes illustrate the government's changed priorities: from outward-looking and internationally oriented towards inward-focused and sovereignty-emphasising ones. For example, the 2021-2025 "Programme of Socio-Economic Development" replaced earlier liberal language emphasising "global competitiveness" and "international integration" with notions of "economic sovereignty," "domestic resilience," and "national interests." References to training civil servants at "the best world institutions" disappeared, replaced by an emphasis on educating and socialising them to be "devoted to their Fatherland." The civil society and their previously formally recognised consultative role disappeared from such programmes altogether.

Nevertheless, the Belarusian government continues efforts to strengthen administrative capacities, which it views as crucial for the regime's survival. It has introduced several technical modernisation measures, particularly in digital governance. For example, the "Digital Development Programme" for 2021-2025 builds on previous achievements in digitalisation and proposes a comprehensive digital transformation across all economic sectors through advanced concepts such as "digital platforms" and "smart cities". The smart cities concept development seeks to create unified systems of management, controlling and accounting of information related to engineering networks, smart buildings, and local infrastructure.

In 2021, Parliament adopted the "Law on personal data protection" and established the Centre for Personal Data Protection to implement it. Some experts interviewed for the InGAC project assessed this innovation as close to European standards.

These innovations could potentially enhance the quality of governance and public service delivery. However, digitalisation also increases the risk of surveillance and repression against citizens whom the government perceives as political opponents and serves as a means of preventing potential civic mobilisation.

6. Conclusions

Belarus provides an instructive case for studying good governance in a non-democratic context. Its political trajectory has alternated between repression and limited liberalisation, culminating in its current phase of authoritarian consolidation. During the relatively liberal period of 2014–2020, the authorities selectively applied good governance principles in policy design without explicitly adopting the term. Meanwhile, international actors promoted good governance in public administration through two main approaches: a technocratic one focused on administrative efficiency, and a transformative one aimed at deeper democratic change. This dual typology mirrors the broader theoretical divide between technocratic and normative interpretations of good governance.

The Belarusian authorities consistently welcomed international technical assistance that strengthened administrative capacity, considering it vital for regime stability. They adapted international requirements to fit domestic political constraints. Interviews from the InGAC project revealed that both Belarusian officials and international actors acknowledged the existence of “red lines” restricting cooperation to projects the regime did not consider as threatening. As a result, transformative good governance projects originally aimed at normative change were often reshaped into infrastructure-focused ones with limited democratic components. When external actors refused such adjustments, their initiatives were blocked altogether.

The outcomes of good governance promotion often depended on individual officials’ attitudes towards reform. Yet even the most progressive civil servants remained constrained by a hierarchical political system dominated by Lukashenka’s personal power. Nevertheless, both Belarusian and international experts interviewed believed that even limited transformative efforts had improved public administration and created a normative foundation for future democratic change.

Externally promoted good governance initiatives in Belarus remained limited in scope and funding. Projects in the InGAC database amounted to €753.24 million in 2014-2025, representing 2.16 per cent of the national budget in 2015 and almost zero after 2020. This level of funding was insufficient to give international actors meaningful political leverage. Nevertheless, these initiatives created opportunities

for reform-minded institutions and officials within public administration. The government also introduced some innovations aligned with good governance, improved public service delivery, and some other technical aspects of governance, although many intentions were more rhetorical than substantive.

Following the 2020 political crisis and Belarus's support for Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the regime entered a phase of intensified authoritarian consolidation based on repression and co-optation. Political purges in the civil service removed many reform-oriented officials, while the security apparatus gained leading positions in the government. Repression silenced alternative or reformist voices, and co-optation secured the loyalty of those who remained. At the same time, the government continues limited technocratic reforms, mainly in digitalisation, which would represent innovation in a democracy, but contribute instead to strengthened control, surveillance, and repression in an authoritarian context.

The political and geopolitical crises led to the withdrawal from Belarus of most international actors involved in good governance promotion. Those that remained, mainly UN agencies and a few development organisations, adapted to the new conditions. Their activities are now technical, narrow in scope and focus, and reflect co-optation rather than genuine cooperation.

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