



# BELARUS

## BACKGROUND

Taking a different path than many of the ex-Soviet republics, Belarus has stayed closer to its centrally planned heritage with government maintaining control of large sectors of the economy. While questions remain about the sustainability of this form of government, Belarus has also developed one of the highest standards of living among the former republics of the Soviet Union.

The major event in 2015 was the presidential election in October, which resulted in President Alexander Lukashenko winning his fifth term in office with over 83 percent of the vote.<sup>1</sup> This win

continues his run of winning every presidential election since independence in 1991. In a positive step, the election was immediately preceded by the release of six opposition figures on humanitarian grounds. This gesture, along with the relative lack of violence during the election, was enough to convince EU foreign ministers to lift sanctions that had been in place since 2004, ending asset freezes and travel bans against 170 individuals, including Lukashenko himself.

In another positive development, the Government adopted the 'National Sustainable Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2030', which includes a commitment to transparen-

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News, "Belarus vote: Lukashenko re-elected president by landslide", 12 October 2015. Available from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34499387>

cy and openness in public administration. The first phase aims to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of governance, expand the roles and areas of responsibility of local governance and self-governance, as well as modernizing and professionalizing the civil service at central and local levels. These have been identified as the primary targets to improve the quality and accessibility of public services.

At the same time, the Government has shown a strong commitment to the UPR process and has engaged with the UN and civil society organizations in the country to ensure follow-up on the accepted recommendations. Despite these positive signs and some improvements, the human rights situation in Belarus remains under close scrutiny from international organizations, including OHCHR and OSCE. Belarus also continues to rank poorly in international ratings and reports on civic and political freedoms.

## ASSISTANCE AND IMPACT

Since 2014, UNDP has been running a large-scale local development programme in all six regions in Belarus, with the purpose of facilitating citizen engagement in planning and development at the local and regional level. In 2015, this project started yielding results with UNDP supporting the drafting of participatory development documents for all 118 districts. These documents identify unique challenges and opportunities for each district, and provide guidelines for engaging public, private and civil society organizations to address them. The next phase of the project will see UNDP providing grants to local organizations and individuals for initiatives to address the identified challenges and opportunities. In preparation for this next stage, UNDP helped train local organizations on the grant application process and project management best practices.

To improve public administration performance, following on from the adoption of the 'National

Sustainable Socio Economic Development Strategy 2030', the Government sought UNDP assistance to deliver more inclusive and responsive public services. As a first step, UNDP coordinated an international conference on the central role of transparent, inclusive and responsive institutions, both in delivering on the SDG agenda, and in ensuring inclusive and accessible quality services are provided to all citizens. The conference resulted in commitments from the authorities at central and regional levels, and all stakeholders to work together towards enhancing the capacity of civil servants and improving the opportunities for citizens to influence the delivery of public services.

The new SDG agenda was also the main focus of a massive one-week partnership building, communication and advocacy campaign. Led by UNDP in partnership with a number of UN agencies, the main feature was a train caravan, the UN70 Express, that travelled across Belarus in October, bringing on board hundreds of people representing public, private and civil society partners, donors, international organizations, and vulnerable groups. Stopping in all six regional capitals and Minsk to discuss issues around the SDGs and their relevance for Belarus, the campaign drew over 30,000 participants to more than 250 events. In addition, the Governors of the six regions and Minsk signed declarations committing to the new agenda.



UN70 Express:  
Sustainable  
development, creative  
economy and a big fair  
of initiatives

Photo by: Ariel Rubin/UNDP Eurasia



CITIES VISITED  
BY THE UN70 EXPRESS

*“The Belarusian society followed the media and kept a close eye on the journey the Train took across Belarus. This initiative got the world’s attention. It aimed at getting the residents of Belarus to know better the SDGs. They are our goals and we will do our best to achieve them”*

– **Ms. Valentin Rybakov**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, ceremony of signing the Declaration of Commitment to the SDGs

In the security sector, UNDP supported the State Border Committee with its conversion from a military body to a law enforcement agency, with reforms focusing on both infrastructure and capacity building. Two buildings of the Border Training Institute went through significant physical improvements, including the reconstruction of a three-storey dormitory and one-storey training facility. The Strategy on Psychological Support Service Development was also approved as a guiding framework for work with vulnerable groups of migrants, and as a general resource for

State Border Committee personnel. In addition, a State Border Committee Human Resources Development and Training Strategy was developed in line with EU best practices and officially approved by the Committee in April 2016. UNDP played a leading role coordinating key all stakeholders to ensure they are responsive to the needs of vulnerable migrants and victims of human trafficking.



Psychologists of the State Border Committee learn to work with domestic violence cases among migrants

Photo by: UNDP Belarus

Although human rights remain a sensitive area in Belarus, UNDP was able to advance the human rights agenda in 2015. Firstly, with UNDP assistance, the dialogue between the Government and civil society was expanded to include a number of key issues, including the death penalty, creation of a NHRI, and the drafting of a National Human

Rights Action Plan. Following a sustained campaign by UNDP, Belarus signed the CRPD in September. UNDP also supported the follow up on the 2nd cycle UPR in May and organized a successful visit of Belarusian officials to Washington, DC in December with a series of meetings on human rights and rule of law issues with the US State Department.

UNDP has also been expanding the use of innovation and technology to address existing challenges, including citizen based approaches such as social innovation labs. UNDP developed with the National Centre of Legislation and Legal Research an innovative prototype public e-feedback mechanism. The existing system of citizen feedback to public authorities, based on citizen appeals, was reviewed together with the best practices from the country and the region, and used to develop a new online system that is user-friendly for people with disabilities and can be adapted for all government websites.

The use of innovation and technology has also resulted in a shift in the way that UNDP and the authorities are working to combat corruption and the informal economy. In an initiative expected to generate ongoing dividends, UNDP facilitated the visit of the Behavioural Insight Team from the UK government to work with the Ministry of Finance and tax officers in Minsk. During this visit, interventions were designed to facilitate informal workers being reintegrated back into the formal economy.

## CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

Like many countries in the region, Belarus is expected to experience worsening economic conditions. Despite these expected fiscal pressures, UNDP will continue working closely with the Government, civil society organizations and private sector partners to continue on the path to a fairer and more open society.

Planned work includes the rolling out of a long-term comprehensive rule of law and access to justice programme, continuing advocacy for the establishment of a NHRI, and implementation of a National Human Rights Action Plan as part of the UPR follow-up process. In addition, UNDP will proceed with publication of materials from the International Conference 'Death Penalty: Transcending the Divide' held in March 2016 and will continue the dialogue on the death penalty with the Parliament.

Efforts are planned to support the rights of people with disabilities. With the ratification of the CRPD in late 2016, UNDP plans to work closely with other UN agencies and national partners on the implementation of needed reforms. This will be complemented by a nationwide two-month advocacy and awareness raising campaign: 'Inclusive Belarus'. UNDP will also work to

## Key results



*Participatory development documents drafted for all 118 districts in Belarus*



*Tripartite dialogue between government, civil society and UN is sustained on key human rights issues as part of the UPR follow-up process*



*State Border Committee Human Resources Development and Training Strategy developed in line with EU best practices and officially approved*



*CRPD signed*

boost national gender equality mechanisms and to support an assessment of where inequality continues to have the most significant impacts.

UNDP will also continue providing support and assistance to the Government's planned changes to improve the performance of public administration. In early 2016, UNDP launched a 3-year project to support public administration in building the capacities of civil servants, and making local governance and public service delivery more responsive to citizens. The project will improve the selection, training and performance assessment of civil servants at all levels, strengthen public engagement in planning and implementation processes, and boost the ability of the public and civil society to conduct monitoring of public services and provide feedback. In order to achieve these goals, the project will test a range of initiatives and will pilot two integrated customer service centres.

Finally, UNDP will continue to use innovation to enhance the influence and reach of its efforts. After the positive response to the pilot e-feedback system in 2015, further testing and development of the system will be undertaken as it moves towards a full rollout. UNDP's anti-corruption work will also continue, with the interventions designed in partnership with the UK Government's Behavioural Insight Team expected to begin implementation. As a result of this work, a team of tax officers from Moldova that participated in the event is also expected to launch its own initiative.