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An Environmental Perspective on Belarus's Sustainable Development

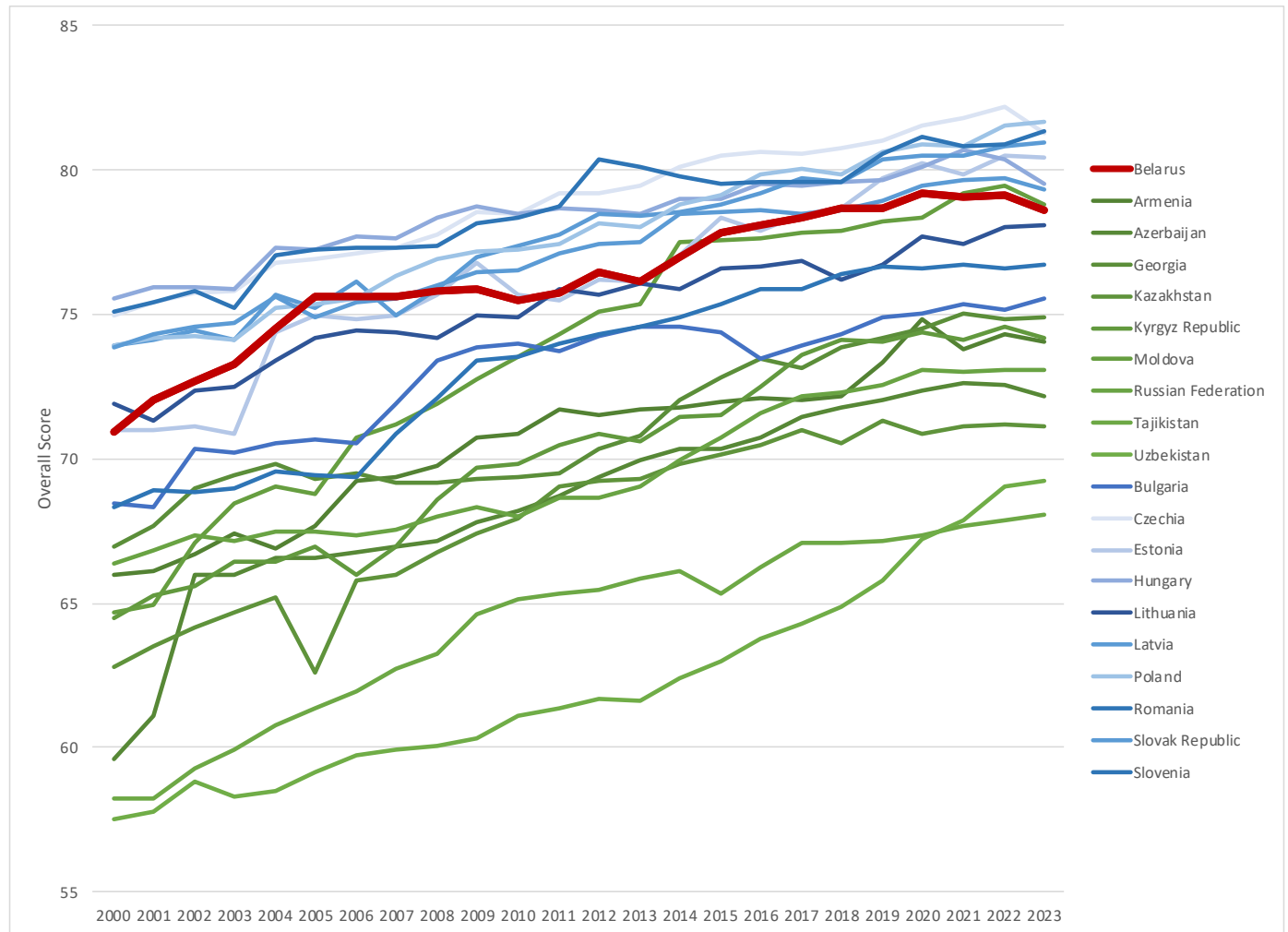
In the last two decades, Belarus has performed better than other CIS countries in sustainable development. However, Belarus has in recent years seen a decline in its global environmental rankings, particularly in the areas of climate action and environmental performance. In 2023, the country's standing worsened in the Sustainable Development Index, Climate Change Performance Index, and Environmental Performance Index compared to previous years and rankings. This policy brief analyzes Belarus's performance across these indices and explores the potential causes of recent negative trends. It underscores the crucial role of political and civil engagement in ensuring long-term sustainability of environmental reforms in Belarus.

In recent years, political and economic turbulence has overtaken the public debate about the state of things in Belarus, while environmental issues have taken a back seat. However, tackling climate change is important in any political context, and in this policy brief, we delve into recent developments in Belarus along the environmental front.

Belarus has traditionally done relatively well in regard to sustainable development. For example, in the last two decades, it has consistently outperformed other CIS countries, as measured by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index, and been on par with the Eastern European EU Member States (see Figure 1).

However, in the last few years, Belarus’s progress in this dimension has stagnated, and even partially reversed. This brief focuses on one of the drivers of this stagnation – recent developments in the environmental sphere. The brief shows that Belarus worsened its position in three major global indices measuring environmental performance and discusses which components of environmental performance have lagged the most. It proceeds to analyze the underlying causes for this stagnation. The brief concludes by discussing necessary policy measures to improve Belarus’s environmental sustainability.

Figure 1. SDG Index scores for selected countries, 2000-2023



Source: SDG Transformation Center.



Belarus in Global Environmental Rankings

Global environmental rankings are an essential tool for encouraging global efforts to tackle ecological challenges and promote sustainable development. The rankings aim to evaluate a country's environmental policies and practices and provide a relative assessment of its sustainability efforts, pollution control, and conservation practices. We analyze the performance of Belarus with the help of three well-known indexes: the Sustainable Development Goals Index (SDG Index), the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI), and Environmental Performance Index (EPI).

The Sustainable Development Goals Index

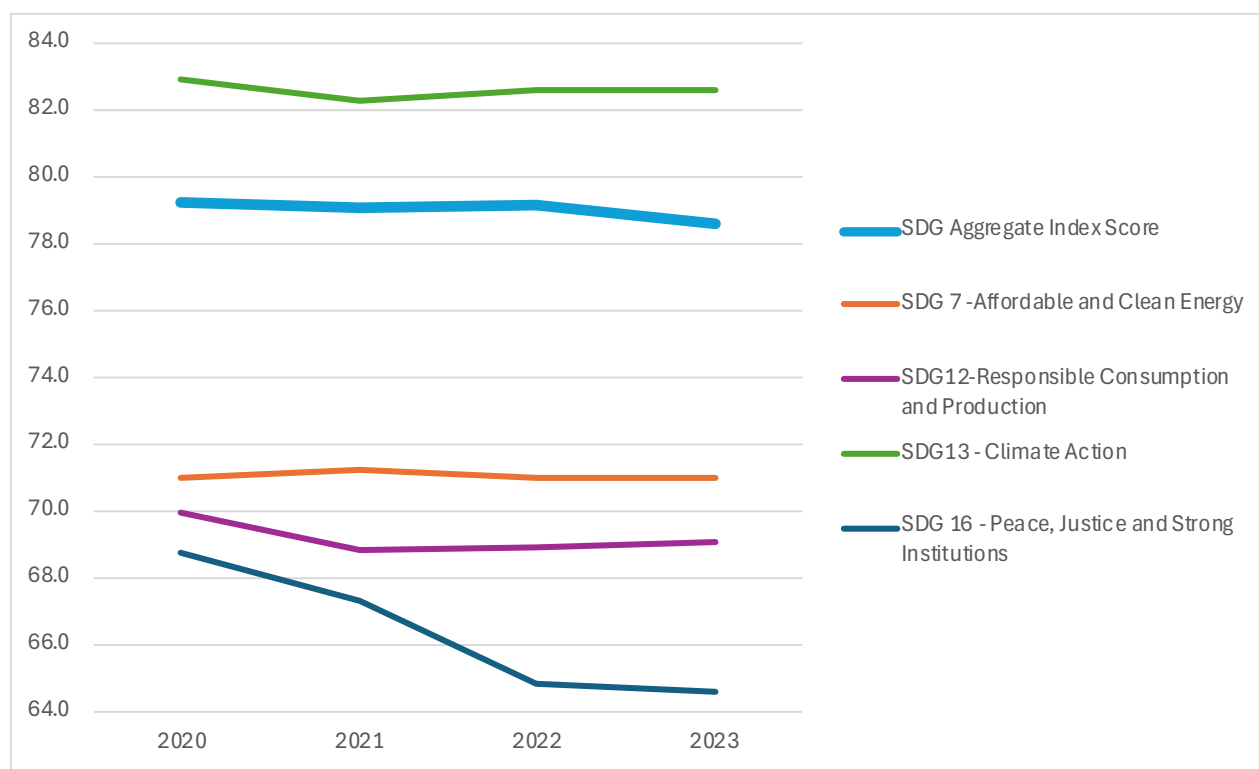
The SDG Index measures the progress of countries towards accomplishing the 17 SDGs. Its score can be interpreted as a percentage of SDG

achievement (Sachs et al., 2023). It is based on 97 indicators that are grouped by SDGs. The indicators are normalized on a 0-100 scale, and the scores are calculated as averaging across respective indicators. The SDG Index includes the total score and scores for individual goals (Sachs et al., 2023).

The SDG Index scores for Belarus improved significantly between 2000 to 2020, increasing by 8.31 points (see Figure 1). However, since 2020, the score has stagnated, and even declined slightly. In 2020, Belarus ranked 23rd out of more than 160 countries. In 2023, it dropped to 30th place, the lowest since 2001.

To a large part, the decline in Belarus's SDG Index score is driven by a drop in the index for the 16th SDG "Peace, justice and strong institutions". However, Belarus has also faced stagnation in the SDGs that are explicitly related to the environment – such as the index for SDG 7: "Affordable and Clean Energy", SDG12: "Responsible Consumption and Production" and SDG13: "Climate Action" (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Selected SDG Index components for Belarus, 2020-23



Source: SDG Transformation Center.



These developments reflect Belarus's key challenges, including its excessive reliance on fossil fuels and insufficient focus on renewable energy; inefficient management of waste and emissions, including plastic and food waste; low priority of climate change issues in the country's economic and social policies, high carbon intensity in the economy and low ambition when it comes to emission reductions. The Belarusian Civil Society Report on the Sustainable Development Goals' implementation (2022) also refers to similar challenges.

As the SDG Index covers a broad range of sustainability aspects, it may be less precise when it comes to the specificities of developments in the environmental domain. To get a better grasp of these developments, it is useful to consider more refined indices addressing specifically environmental performance and climate change adaptation.

The Climate Change Performance Index

The CCPI is a tool to monitor the climate protection efforts of 63 countries and the EU, which together make up more than 90 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. This index was developed by Germanwatch in collaboration with the NewClimate Institute and the Climate Action Network. Published annually since 2005, the **Climate Change Performance Index** tracks countries' efforts to combat climate change. As an independent monitoring tool, it aims to enhance transparency in international climate politics and to enable comparison of climate protection efforts and progress made by individual countries. The CCPI tracks climate protection performances in four areas: GHG emissions (40 percent of the overall score), renewable energy (20 percent), energy use (20 percent) and climate policy (20 percent) (Burck et al., 2024). The CCPI ranks countries' efforts as very high, high, medium, low, and very low, with the actual scores normalized between 0 and 100.

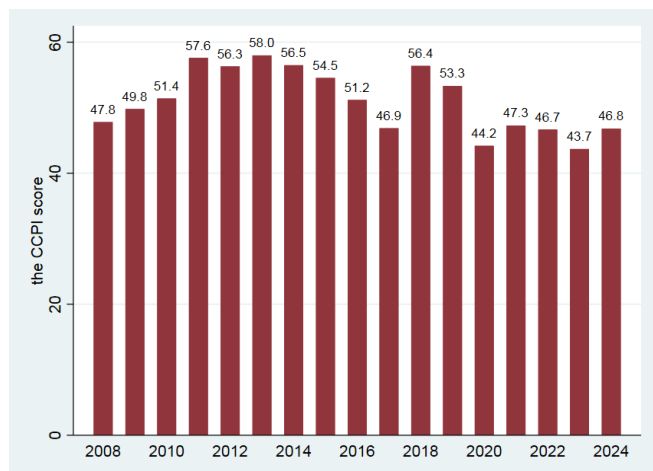
The CCPI for Belarus has exhibited an uneven development. In most of the considered years Belarus's efforts to prevent climate change were ranked as low, except for 2010-2012 and 2018-2019 when they were characterized as medium or moderate. The lowest scores were recorded in 2017 and from 2020 to 2024, highlighting that climate protection has been less prioritized in Belarus in recent years compared to earlier periods.

The relative CCPI ranking for Belarus is similar to the SDG Index (Figure 1). In 2024, Belarus performed worse than the average for Eastern-European countries that are part of the EU – their average CCPI score was 55.43. Still, Belarus performed better than some members of this group (Poland (44.4), Czechia (45.41) and Hungary (45.93)). At the same time, Belarus displayed the best results among CIS countries, as Russia scored 31.00, Kazakhstan 38.52 and Uzbekistan 46.68 in 2024, respectively.

While Belarus slightly improved their score in 2024, relative to 2023, it actually moved down the country ranking in all areas considered by the CCPI. The country still received a medium rating in the areas of GHG emissions and energy use. However, the 2024 efforts with respect to renewable energy and climate policy were once again rated as very low, resulting in the relatively low overall ranking in 2024. CCPI **experts** point to low diversification of imported energy resources, high reliance on fossil fuels and delayed climate action as key underlying issues.



Figure 3. CCPI Scores for Belarus, 2008-2024



Source: Based on data from Climate Change Performance Index reports 2008-2024.

The Environmental Performance Index

The **Environmental Performance Index** ranks the performance of countries on environmental health, ecosystem vitality and their efforts to prevent climate change (Block et al., 2024). It allows tracking of countries' progress towards established environmental policy targets. The EPI was developed by Yale University in collaboration with Columbia University and is supported by the World Economic Forum and the European Commission. The EPI framework has been repeatedly changed over the years to incorporate more detailed accounting and further indicators. Thus, it is not possible to directly compare EPI levels for different years.

Instead, we look at the evolution of the EPI ranking for Belarus: in 2016 the country ranked 35th among 180 countries, in 2020 it ranked 49th and in 2022 its position dropped to 55th place.

In 2022, the EPI score for Belarus amounted to 48.5, surpassing all other CIS countries, for which the average score was 39.79. However, Eastern-European EU members all outperformed Belarus, with an average score of 57.92.

It is worth pointing out how differently Belarus performs with respect to the three policy objectives of the EPI. The first component concerns environmental health – it reflects how well a

country mitigates environmental risks that directly affect the health and safety of its population and includes issues such as air quality, sanitation and drinking water, heavy metals and waste management. Belarus's 2022 score for environmental health was 51.1 earning them a 52nd place. The second component of EPI is Ecosystem vitality – reflecting the performance in the domains of biodiversity and habitat, ecosystem services, fisheries, forests, climate change mitigation, agriculture, and water resources. Belarus's ecosystem vitality performance was in 2022 substantially better with a score of 55.4, earning Belarus a 41st place. However, the last component of EPI – climate change mitigation efforts, were evaluated as insufficient for Belarus. The country scored only 39.6 in this regard, equivalent to a 94th place.

Reasons for Belarus's Declining Rankings

The recent stagnation and negative trend observed for Belarus across these global environmental rankings warrant an inquiry into the causes of such developments. Plausibly, these are a combination of insufficient effort to address preexisting environmental challenges, and consequences from more recent economic and institutional shocks.

Preexisting Environmental Challenges

One of the main examples of preexisting economic challenges is the continued dominance on imported fossil fuels in the energy sector, low diversification of energy suppliers and only a marginal share of renewables. According to the **National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus**, the country belongs to the top-20 most energy dependent countries in the world. In 2020 the share of energy imports to gross consumption made up 83.7 percent, with around 85 percent of these resources imported from a single supplier: Russia (International Energy Agency, 2021). The share of primary energy production from



renewable energy sources in the gross energy resources consumption continues to be low (7.8 percent in 2020 vs. 5.6 percent in 2015).

Another challenge has to do with the implementation and enforcement of environmental legislation. Belarus has recently developed and extended its legal framework in environmental sustainability. For instance *The National strategy of sustainable development for the Republic of Belarus till 2035*, was approved in 2020 and the *National action plan for the development of a “green” economy in the Republic of Belarus for 2021-2025* was approved in 2021. The first document outlines the general plan for sustainable development in Belarus; the latter sets 11 priorities for the green economy in the country, including the promotion of green financing and creation of smart and energy-efficient cities, climate change mitigation and adaptation to climate change, education and social engagement.

However, the legislation falls short when it comes to practical implementation of the declared goals and mechanisms. For example, virtually no public financing has been allocated for these purposes and other sources of financing are not specified. Also, the National action plan contains only a general reference to the possibility of attracting extrabudgetary funds, foreign financial resources, or other sources.

Economic and Political Shocks

Recent political and economic crises have also had a negative impact on the environmental sustainability in Belarus.

One can begin by considering the substantial, though potentially unintended, adverse effects of sanctions – imposed in response to the widely contested validity of the 2020 elections and Belarus’s involvement in Russia’s war on Ukraine. While it wasn’t their main objective, the sanctions led to the suspension of green projects and initiatives, supported by international organizations such as the World Bank and other UN programs, the EU and the European Bank for

Reconstruction and Development, IMF etc., as well as international investments into Belarus. Funding was suspended for several energy efficiency projects and other green initiatives in Belarus, and for projects promoting sustainable environmental practices, energy efficiency, and clean water access – aimed at reducing Belarus’s carbon footprint and enhancing renewable energy capacity.

The political crisis also led to Belarus’s withdrawal from the Aarhus Convention in 2022. The **UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters of 1998** outlines every person’s right to a healthy and sustainable environment which includes access to justice, participation, and information. The Aarhus Convention guarantees legal protection to people exercising these rights. Belarus’s withdrawal from the Aarhus Convention has increased the likelihood of being prosecuted for environmental activism, thereby undermining civil society’s involvement in environmental decisions and practices. For example, the Belarusian Civil Society Report on Sustainable development goals implementation (2022) mentions the dangers of publicity and resulting loss of funding for local initiatives concerning sustainable consumption practices.

Another adverse consequence of the political crisis was the massive explicit liquidation of ecological NGOs in the country, accompanied by self-liquidations. This negatively impacted civil society engagement into ecological matters in Belarus.

Conclusion

In recent years, Belarus has worsened its position in three major global environmental rankings, the SDG index, the CCPI and the EPI.

In this policy brief we have outlined these declines and highlighted how they are linked to a combination of preexisting dependencies and recent economic and political developments.



The continued reliance on fossil fuel imports, insufficient renewable energy integration, and problems with enforceability and implementation of green agendas have collectively contributed to these developments. Additionally, the suspension of international projects and investment in the environmental sphere as a result of sanctions, Belarus's withdrawal from the Aarhus Convention and the massive, forced liquidation or self-liquidation of ecological NGOs has further aggravated the situation.

To enhance its sustainable development, Belarus should focus on boosting renewable energy use and diversify its energy supply. This includes enforcing stricter environmental laws and reconnecting with global environmental agreements (such as the Aarhus Convention). Additionally, Belarus should incentivize research in green technologies and encourage government and private sector collaboration on environmental initiatives. Well-funded, comprehensive climate action plans with clear targets for emission reductions and renewable energy adoption must be developed and implemented. It's also vital to acknowledge and collaborate with environmental NGOs and actively involve the Belarusian community in sustainability decisions and initiatives.

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