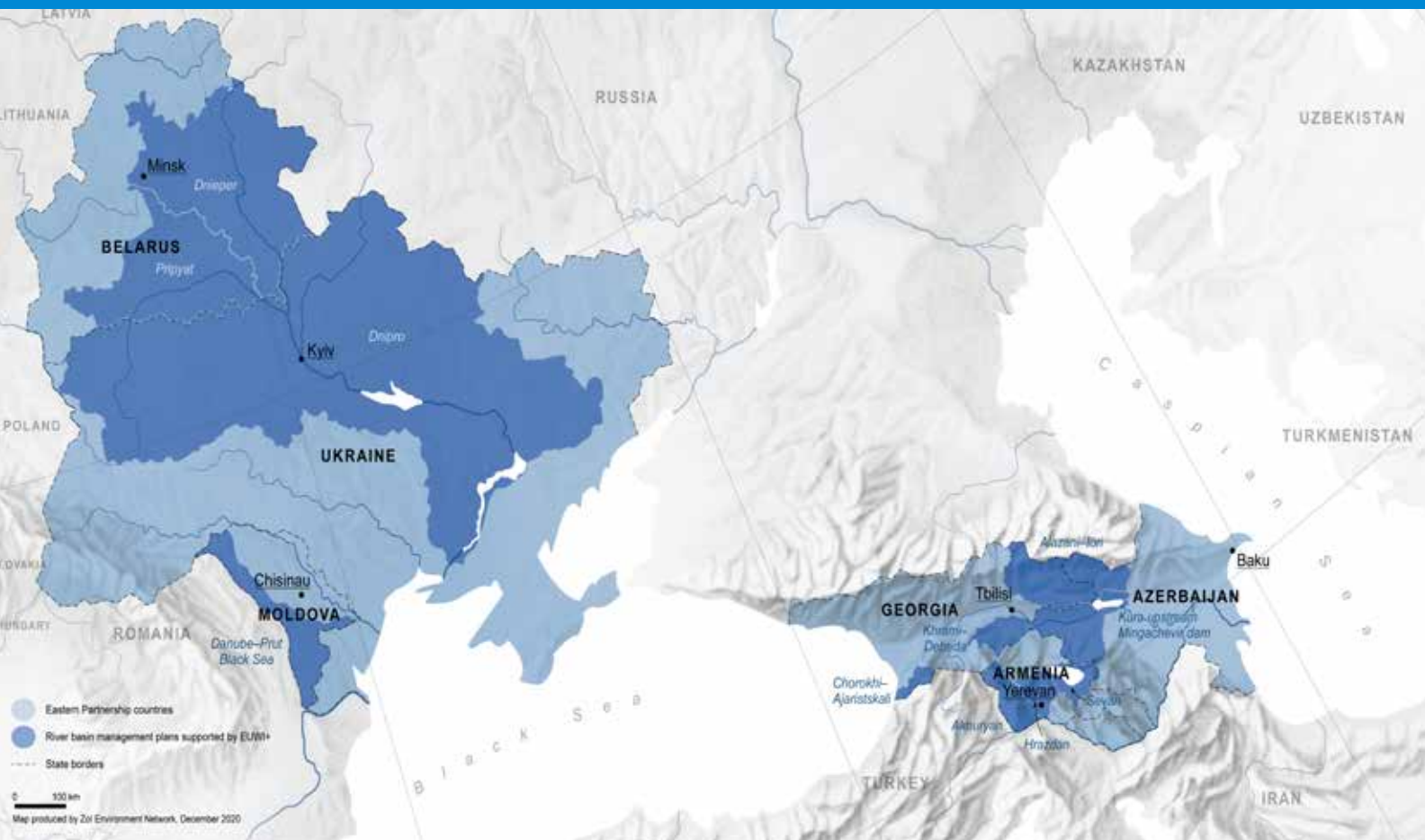


# Water Policy Highlights Belarus



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In 2016, a major EU-funded project, the European Union Water Initiative Plus (EUWI+), was started to help strengthen water management in Belarus and the five other EaP countries. The European Commission selected the OECD and UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) along with the EU member states of Austria (Environment Agency) and France (International Office for Water) to jointly implement the project. With EUR 23.5 million from the EU budget and EUR 1 million from Austria and France, the EUWI+ project aimed to strengthen management of national and transboundary water resources and develop tools to improve the long-term quality of all waters. It included EUR 6 million of direct investments in the EaP countries including Belarus to improve river basin policies, management planning and water quality monitoring.

With the project ending in mid-2021, this summary highlights milestones of EUWI+ in Belarus. It recalls the state of water governance that led to the creation of the project. It highlights efforts to strengthen management of water resources at the national level and also in transboundary rivers. It also identifies tools developed to improve the long-term quality of all waters. Finally, it identifies outstanding issues for further action.



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# Water management is a key environmental challenge for Belarus

## Water Governance

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) builds on the willingness of the EU's six Eastern neighbours – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine – to align their policies and legislation to the European Union. EaP countries share a legacy of environmental problems and face new pressures, including from climate change, as they pursue economic growth and benefits for citizens. Environmental co-operation is thus a principal focus area of work for the EaP.

While EaP countries update their environmental legislation, they also need to strengthen administrative capacity; enforcement of legislation acts; and public participation and awareness of environmental challenges. There are important links between poverty and the environment, such as access to clean drinking water and appropriate sanitation.

Addressing transboundary resource management and pollution is another complex issue, which includes ensuring the necessary institutional and legal frameworks are in place. EaP countries need to strengthen procedures for implementing commitments under multilateral environmental agreements. They also need to strengthen their capacity to implement projects financed by international organisations and donors.

Better environmental policies bring significant economic and social benefits. A strong water sector that supports the

*Water resources in Belarus are not evenly distributed and are therefore vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, this is especially visible in southern parts of the country.*

population, all sectors of the economy and the environment is a key part of this process.

Belarus is sufficiently supplied with water resources, enough to meet demand by all water users. It has a temperate-continental climate, influenced by weather systems from the Baltic Sea that provide decent rainfall. The country is also less dependent on inflow from transboundary rivers than other EaP countries. However, water resources in Belarus are not evenly distributed and are therefore vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, this is especially visible in southern parts of the country.

After gaining independence in 1991, Belarus managed to maintain stability and professionalism in its water governance system. The country is voluntarily harmonising its water legislation and practices with those of the European Union, and gradually implementing key aspects of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and integrated water resources management principles. Belarus has nevertheless so far attracted much less international donor assistance to its water sector than most EaP countries, which made the European Union Water Initiative Plus (EUWI+) project stand out.

## The EUWI+ project

In 2016, the EUWI+ was started as a major EU-funded project to help strengthen water management in Belarus and the five other EaP countries. The European Commission selected the OECD and the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) along with the EU member states of Austria (Environment Agency) and France (International Office for Water) to jointly implement the project. With EUR 23.5 million from the EU budget and EUR 1 million from Austria and France, the EUWI+ project aimed to strengthen management of national and transboundary water resources and develop tools to improve the long-term quality of all waters. It allocated EUR 6 million of direct investments in the EaP countries to improve river basin management planning and water quality monitoring, including Belarus.

EUWI+ has also drawn synergies with other EU-funded projects and activities, including the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) East project. The SEIS aimed to facilitate access to environmental information and its integration into the knowledge-based economy.



# Development of Belarus' national water policy to 2016



## Legislative framework

The Water Code is the main framework law that regulates use and protection of water resources. Belarus adopted the law in 1998, making it the last EaP country to replace its Soviet-era Water Code of 1973. The Water Code of 1998 introduced several new concepts, such as the possibility to lease water bodies to local or foreign individuals and legal persons for up to 30 years. As in Armenia and the Republic of Moldova, the new law in Belarus provides a broader framework than the Soviet-era legislation. For example, it delegates regulation of many important aspects (including related to land and forest resources management) to specialised legislation. The Code also introduced an impressively long list of definitions, clarifying terminology in water use and protection.

A Water Strategy until 2020 was adopted in 2011, providing guidance for further developments in the water sector. Among other issues, it addressed climate change, envisaged a shift to the basin principle and set sights on a new pricing system for use of water resources. In 2014, Belarus adopted a new Water Code, replacing the 1998 version. This gave the country one of the most modern water-related legislative frameworks among the Newly Independent States. The 2014 Water Code introduced many principles of the EU WFD, such as application of the basin principle.

As part of its aim to improve the ecological status of water bodies, it required application of hydrobiological, hydrochemical and hydromorphological indicators to measure their status.

## Key stakeholders in water management

Institutionally, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection (MNREP) plays a central role in water management. It makes policy and co-ordinates relevant activities of other ministries. Under the MNREP, several specialised institutes such as the Central Research Institute for Complex Use of Water Resources carry out technical tasks. With implementation of the basin principle, basin councils are expected to play a bigger role in local decision-making.

## Monitoring capacity

Water quality monitoring is vitally important to inform policy decisions. Human activity has a considerable impact on water quality through wastewater discharges from households and industry, as well as from non-point sources such as runoff from urban and agricultural areas. Belarus has maintained decent surface water and groundwater monitoring systems to track water quality. However, these systems fall short of WFD standards.





The monitoring network in the field, data management, laboratory equipment and staff capacity for hydrochemical, hydrobiological and hydromorphological monitoring still need improvement.

### River basin management

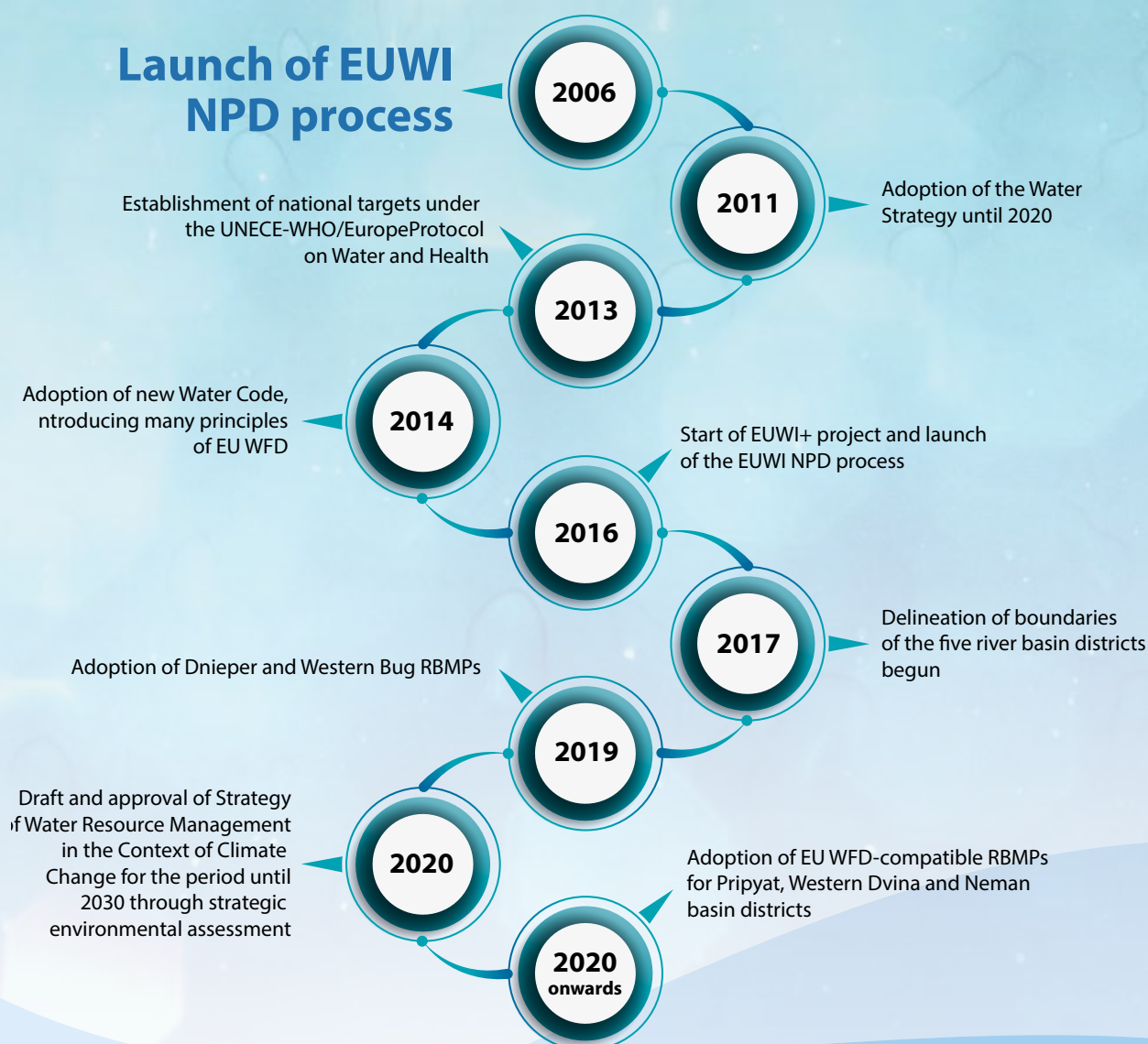
The 2014 Water Code identified, and later delineated, five river basins: Dnieper, Western Dvina, Western Bug, Nieman and Pripyat. It began compiling the WFD-compliant river basin management plans (RBMPs) for the Dnieper and Western Bug basins. The EU EPIRB helped draft the first generation RBMP for the Dnieper basin and establish the first basin council in the country. The Basin Council, created in 2016, involves 15 representatives from governmental agencies, water users, civil society organisations and scientific institutions. Its members are nominated by the MNREP.

### Transboundary water management

Belarus became a Party to the 1992 UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) in 2003. Belarus has sought to reach agreements with all five neighbours on use and protection of transboundary rivers through the Convention. Up to 2016, it had concluded such agreements on three transboundary rivers: Dnieper with the Russian Federation (hereafter “Russia”) and Ukraine; Pripyat (with Ukraine) and Western Dvina (with Russia). Belarus ratified the Protocol on Water and Health under the UNECE Water Convention in 2009.

In 2013, Belarus set national targets in the field of water management and water supply and sanitation to fulfil obligations under the Protocol.

## Launch of EUWI NPD process



# EUWI+ project support to water policy reform in Belarus

During the inception phase of the EUWI+ project in 2016, the MNREP presented a list of potential priority activities to the project team. The list covered a range of areas, including support to development of regulatory framework and transboundary co-operation, development of an RBMP and strengthening of water quality monitoring capacity. The unique setup and flexible nature of the EUWI+ project allowed it to meet the needs and diverse priorities of Belarus, and to adjust the plan as needed.

## Development of a robust water strategy

Since its inception, the EUWI+ project has prioritised development of the national Water Strategy for the period up to 2030 in the context of climate change.<sup>1</sup> The Water Strategy until the year 2020 had been effective but did not consider climate change impacts. The new strategy is the basis for practical activities, including developing legislation and regulation for water resources management. It has been vital for all EUWI+ project implementing partners since it constitutes a way forward accepted by all national stakeholders.

The OECD led the EUWI+ project team's work on the strategy by helping develop a methodology, building capacity and commenting on several early drafts. The OECD organised two capacity development events on strategic and mid-term planning for water as part of the EUWI+ project in October 2017 and April 2018. These were complemented by a regional event in October 2018. The training schedule fit well into preparation of the Water Strategy and attracted the participation of national experts who were drafting the strategy.

As its main goal, the new Water Strategy aims to ensure water security for the present and future generations of the people of Belarus. As such, it is expected to lead to positive changes in the natural and socio-ecological environments. Importantly, its primary objectives echo targets for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, the project strengthened local capacity to monitor progress towards water-related SDGs through its support for methodologies to create and monitor nationalised SDG 6.3-6.5 indicators and to report on SDG 6.5.2.



1. Strategy of Water Resource Management in the Context of Climate Change for the Period until 2030.

2. SDG 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6



## Strategic Environmental Assessment

The Water Strategy added strategic environmental assessment (SEA) to the EUWI+ project country work plan as need arises. New enacted national legislation foresees passing of SEAs for new national strategies. With assistance of the EUWI+ project, the Water Strategy to 2030 became the first national strategic document that had undergone an SEA during its preparation. The SEA process took place in parallel with finalising the strategy, and several SEA recommendations have already been adopted. Serving as secretariat for the Protocol on SEA under the Espoo Convention, the UNECE has unique experience in facilitating SEA processes. Meanwhile, the EUWI+ project provided an opportunity for different stakeholders from Belarus to get first-hand experience of an inclusive SEA process.

## Towards water use efficiency

The strategy envisages complementing action at the national level with corresponding action at the basin and local levels. Several pilot actions support implementation of the strategy. In Kopyl rayon of Minsk oblast, the EUWI+ project supported new water use and wastewater discharge norms at the three most water-intensive enterprises; these were adopted with immediate effect. It also developed recommendations on a master plan for potable water supply in Kopyl rayon. In Gomel oblast, the project made recommendations on possible uses of water for irrigation and for revitalisation of wetlands damaged by extraction activities.

## Support to River Basin Management Planning

The new strategy clearly aims at implementing key provisions of the EU WFD. This helped Environment Agency Austria (EAA) and the International Office for Water from France to better target their assistance for basin planning and improved monitoring systems in Belarus. A more coherent national-level policy framework together with new Water Strategy paved the way to apply core water management principles, primarily the development and approval of RBMPs. It first concentrated on refining the Dnieper RBMP, balancing methodology between the Belarusian technical code and WFD principles. The Dnieper RBMP became operational in 2019 after approval by executive committees of four oblasts and Minsk city. It became the first RBMP officially approved in Belarus, setting an example for others to follow. The Basin Council for Dnieper has been functional since 2016, although with limited power and stakeholders involvement, as oblast administrations still make investment decisions.

Within Dnieper River Basin, EUWI+ supported Belarus to develop sub-basin management plans for Uza River and Mogilev urban water courses. This nested planning process was

a premiere in Belarus; the concept of sub-basin management plan is emerging in the country. With refinement of the Dnieper RBMP on track, the EUWI+ team concentrated on a basin plan for Pripyat in southern west Belarus. The plan has been approved by the Pripyat basin council in October 2020. Its formal adoption by the concerned oblasts is imminent. Around 80% of the amount of the measures of the 2 RBMPs forecasted concern sanitation, especially in Minsk.

With the experiences gained through these 2 RBMPs, EUWI+ supported the updating of the guidance document concerning the content of RBMP in Belarus and the development of a national manual about the estimation of diffuse source pollution, which has been officially adopted by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection in December 2020.

Development of RBMPs for Dnieper and Pripyat has benefited from several partnerships. In addition to technical activity by around 20 national experts through the EUWI+ project, the OECD and UNECE have strengthened the legal framework for the RBMPs. Meanwhile, the International Office for Water from France and UBA have been working closely to build capacity at basin level to guide implementation. Trainings and public consultations have been organised and local water monitoring laboratories strengthened. The first public consultations concerning a RBMP have been held for the Pripyat river basin; a specific guidance document has been produced to develop this practice. As a pilot project, a flood risk map was prepared for a tributary to Pripyat



with assistance of UNECE. Co-operation with experts from Ukraine has started to harmonise delineation of groundwater bodies on both sides of the border in Pripyat and Dnieper River Basin and to start defining the status of these water bodies.

### Strengthening water monitoring

Following investment into strengthening national water policy and actions at basin level, the EUWI+ project focused on capacity building to ensure its achievements would be sustainable. In that respect, local stakeholders have praised support for building capacity in water monitoring. Even though surface water and groundwater monitoring systems of Belarus are in relatively good shape, the project has made well-targeted improvements in particular in the scope of monitoring. After a thorough needs assessments, UBA experts have concentrated support on four partner laboratories.<sup>3</sup> The project has delivered equipment such as a liquid chromatograph, solid phase extraction and atomic fluorescence spectrometer to ensure that quality data are available to guide policy decisions for water resources management. It has organised trainings for Belarusian experts locally and a study tour to Austria. EUWI+ provided various guidance and manuals, such as on biological, hydromorphological and investigative monitoring and related type-specific WFD Ecological Classification Systems, it delivered equipment for the field sampling and co-financed renovation works at the RCAC laboratory in Minsk. As well, it provided guidelines concerning diffuse pollution, helping to target nitrogen pollution from agricultural activities and to guide implementation of the EU Nitrates Directive.



### Multi stakeholder dialogue

The EUWI+ project has helped co-ordinate national and basin-level stakeholders as a key activity. At national level, a MNREP ordinance established the Inter-Agency Steering Committee in 2018 to co-ordinate activities under the EUWI+ project in Belarus. As there is a broad range of activities both at national and local levels, supported by OECD, UNECE, Austria and France, smooth co-ordination by MNREP has been key to success. Involvement of other relevant ministries has helped raise awareness and knowledge about ongoing challenges in the water sector. Leadership of the deputy minister from MNREP and high-level participation from other organisations supports a high quality of discussion on key policy issues.

### Economic instruments

The project also developed capacity for use of economic instruments to manage water resources and infrastructure. It also supported development of related training materials, which are being pilot tested at several universities in Belarus.

### Data interoperability

The project supported the acquisition and installation of a server for a national platform to be developed and in some cases at various levels and the development of web services to facilitate data sharing. This is a first step towards a national water information system.



3. Republican Centre for Analytical Control in the Field of Environmental Protection; Research and Production Centre for Geology in Minsk and Gomel; Hydromet; Central Research Institute for Complex Use of the Water Resources



# Water policy reform achievements

## Sound strategic planning builds confidence in water sector

- assistance provided to develop the new national Water Strategy 2030 and its strategic environmental assessment
- local capacity developed for strategic planning, use of economic instruments for managing water resources and infrastructure and reporting on SDG 6.5.2
- methodologies for monitoring nationalised SDG 6.3-6.5 developed and approved.

## Basin planning and local actions supported

- finalisation and adoption of Dnieper, Pripyat and Western Bug RBMPs
- pilot actions undertaken at local level in Kopyl rayon to help implement the Water Strategy
- Sub-basin management plans developed for Uza river and Mogilev urban watercourses
- National technical guidance documents brought closer to WFD requirements

## Public is increasingly involved in water management

- meetings of basin councils supported and public consultations for Pripyat RBMP development
- public consultations held on the strategic environmental assessment of the draft Water Strategy to 2030
- support provided to policy dialogue on water on the platform of the Inter-Agency Steering Committee managing EUWI+ project implementation in Belarus.

## Improved monitoring informs high-level decision making and resource prioritisation

- water quality monitoring strengthened by investment in new laboratory equipment
- production of new data from field surveys; staff trainings, including on quality assurance for continued accreditation.

## International commitments and transboundary water management are well integrated and drive sector progress

- national targets under the UNECE-WHO/Europe Protocol on Water and Health revised
- transboundary water co operation with Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine supported; coordination of groundwater bodies and groundwater monitoring network with Ukraine in the Pripyat and Dnieper basin.

# Future opportunities for the national water policy reform journey

The four-year regional EUWI+ project completed its activities in Belarus in July 2021, but the water reform journey will continue. While the country has made progress since 2016, the project has exposed a number of outstanding issues.

Over the last decade, the European Union has provided significant support for environmental projects in Belarus. In water management and monitoring sectors, past projects such as EPIRB, SEIS II East, EaP GREEN and ClimaEast have achieved substantial practical results appreciated by the government and benefitting citizens. In 2016-20, the EUWI+ project implementation partners from international organisations and EU member states made significant additional investments.

Like other EU-funded projects, the EUWI+ designed its interventions to ensure long-term sustainability of results. Many achievements in water policy reforms need follow-up to reach their full potential. Whether financed only from national sources or with assistance from donors, several work streams to develop water policy in Belarus are already imminent. These potential work areas are summarised below.

- **Implementation of strategies and plans.** Implementation of recently enacted policies and plans should be at the core of next steps in water resources management. From the Water Strategy to 2030 to RBMPs to transboundary agreements, the focus should be on practical implementation of strategies and plans. Certain institutional changes are also needed, such as truly independent and well-funded monitoring and decentralisation of certain functions and budgets as well as a central water management agency.
- **Co-ordination of water use among different sectors.** Opportunities exist to guarantee much-needed co-ordination of water use between different sectors of economy, such as agriculture and industry. The new Water Strategy to 2030 and the revised national targets under the Protocol on Water and Health will also help respond to challenges, including those posed by COVID-19. One challenge, for example, relates to access to water, sanitation and hygiene, including in educational and medical facilities. Belarus will require assistance to implement some revised targets based on priorities to be identified by the government.
- **Implementation of RBMPs.** As for implementation of the Water Strategy to 2030, one of its key goals is implementation of RBMPs. First, Belarus should complete RBMPs compatible with the EU WFD for the remaining basins (Western Dvina, Neman). For Neman, a GEF-financed project is expected to deliver some parts of the RBMP, although not necessarily based on the WFD approach. For basins bordering Ukraine, ongoing co-operation should be strengthened to prepare umbrella plans (transboundary plans) with joint monitoring, objectives consistency and lists of measures. Programmes of measures in the RBMPs are the most up-to-date list of needed investments and policy changes.
- **Modernisation of wastewater treatment.** The biggest investments required are for modernisation of wastewater treatment plants. A combination of national budgets, credits from development finance institutions and grants by international donors are needed. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is preparing projects in co-operation with NEFCO for the towns of Baranovichi, Bereza, Fanipol, Kletsk, Lyuban, Shklov and Zhlobin. These projects and additional investments in water supply and sanitation (WSS) could be prioritised under the government's future national WSS Strategy. International donors may wish to support this initiative.
- **Development of economic instruments.** Water bodies are contaminated from several sources, including ageing wastewater treatment plants and poor sludge treatment methods; diffuse pollution from agricultural lands and urban settlements; and from industrial activities such as mining. A complex set of measures is needed with special attention to incentives created by economic and other policy instruments. A range of potential economic instruments could incentivise sound agricultural practices and establish discharge fees based on pollutant load. Additionally, Belarus should finalise delineation of water protection zones and enforce measures to phase out and prevent pollution in those zones through existing legislation.
- **Greater sustainability of new mechanisms.** At the basin level, new institutions such as the Basin Committee Secretariat and Basin Council will need support to strengthen their capacity. The respective roles of the MNREP, regional administrations and basin councils involving water users may need to be clearer through good co-ordination. Importantly,





a financing model of these institutions should help them achieve sustainability and independence.

- **Capacity building in biological and groundwater monitoring.** Implementation of RBMPs is possible only if decisions can be based on reliable and good quality data. Fortunately, Belarus is well placed to meet the challenge. Compared with other countries in the region, Belarus has generally good statistics and well-equipped laboratories with a high degree of technical ability. It also has decent groundwater and surface water monitoring systems. Nevertheless, inter-agency cooperation and further trainings are needed for staff who take and analyse water bodies, as well as for those involved in enhanced permitting and pollution control. Biological monitoring and groundwater monitoring need to be much extended. All this is presented in EUWI+ concluding Monitoring Development Plans (2021). Assistance with accreditations of specific laboratories could also be considered. As well, targeted help might be needed to ensure that generally good quality water data is better integrated and freely accessible to all interested parties.
- **Assessment of irrigation and water sector needs.** As the impact of climate change becomes more visible in some parts of Belarus, the country may benefit from assessment of future irrigation needs and timely adaptation measures in the water sector. This should target WSS but also include water-intensive sectors such as agri-food, hydropower and waterway transport.
- **Bilateral co-operation with transboundary neighbours.** Belarus has actively reached out to neighbours for agreements on the use and protection of water resources in transboundary basins. Only a few such agreements remain unsigned, such as with Latvia on Western Dvina/Daugava. However, for all of the agreements, joint basin commissions are needed. In addition, activities across borders should be

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better co-ordinated, including WFD-compatible monitoring of surface and groundwater quantity and quality.

- **A permanent platform to co-ordinate water policy.** The Inter-Agency Steering Committee of the EUWI+ project has proven itself a useful platform for open discussions on water policy development. It could be expanded into a permanent platform to discuss and co-ordinate water policy, as well as water sector initiatives and projects funded both nationally, locally and by donors.
- **A national water information system.** Numerous water-related data are produced in Belarus and their sharing can produce a high added-value for decision makers and local managers in order to follow up the implementation of water policy including RBMPs, water bodies' status, financial commitment, etc. Furthermore, a national water information system facilitate public access to data to raise awareness and increase the relevance of public participation to the consultations. The support for such information system needs to be strengthened through a political commitment and technical capacities.
- **Public awareness and consultation.** Finally, enhanced public awareness, understanding and support would improve the daily use of water resources by agriculture, industry and local communes. Regular public information and practical involvement of water users in basin councils promotes understanding, local ownership and support for better protection, reduced pollution and a more efficient use of resources. These are all essential to strengthen water management in Belarus.

As the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic and responds to a changing climate, this challenging backdrop provides the catalyst and focus for the next phase of the water policy reform journey in Belarus. Future reforms must strive for cross-sectoral policy coherence. In so doing, they must recognise the horizontal nature and value of water as the sector targets improvements for the health of citizens, the environment and the economy; fulfilling international commitments; and making the best use of limited financial resources.



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