

Environmental protection in Belarus: are the rankings misleading?

In the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy's recently published environmental performance index (EPI), Belarus took 35th place in the world. According to the rating, Belarus performs fairly well in protecting human health and ecosystems compared with many other countries.

However, Belarusians themselves express concern about the ecological situation in Belarus, says recently conducted research by Belarus-based organisation SATIO. For example, one in eight Belarusians still live in areas polluted by radiation after the Chernobyl catastrophe.

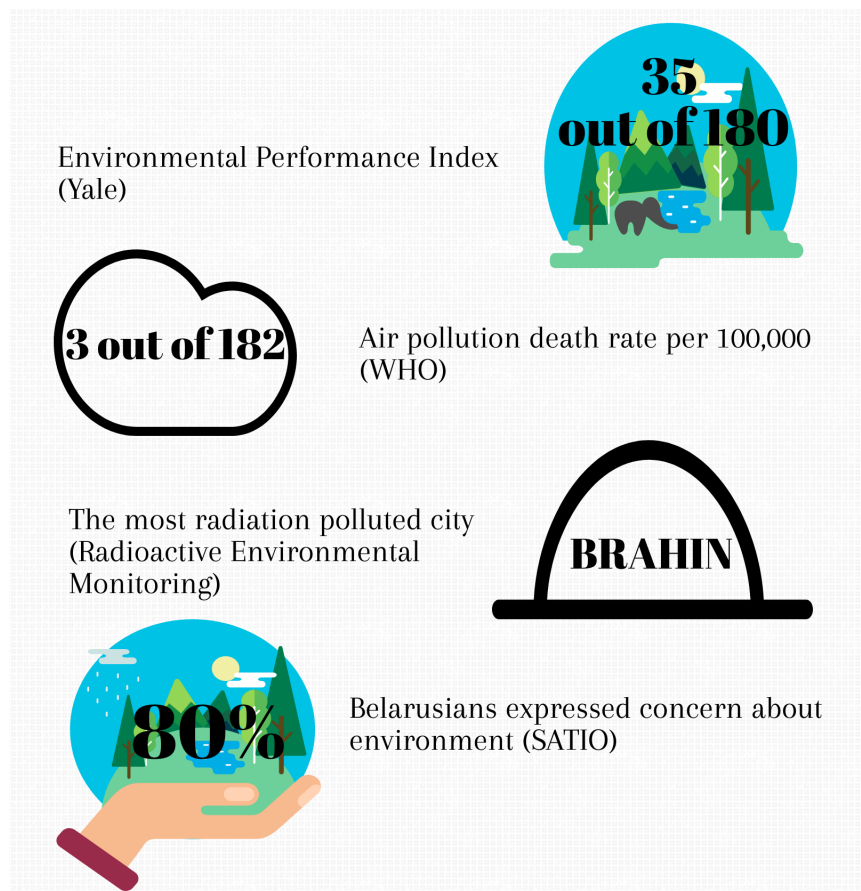
While authorities continue to sidetrack policies and problems, Belarus's full environmental potential remains unattainable. Belarus needs more forward-thinking green policies and the authorities must improve cooperation with environmental activists.

EPI and environmental contradictions in Belarus

The Environmental Performance Index (EPI) appears to place Belarus among the greenest countries. Based on around 20 indicators, EPI assesses two main areas: protection of human health and protection of ecosystems. Belarus took the 35th position with the highest possible rate for 'access to electricity' and the lowest rate for 'air pollution PM 2.5 exceedance.' Finland took first place among 180 countries, and Somalia the last.

Although the EPI results might appear surprising, the index

reflects only several aspects of environmental policy. For instance, EPI does not assess radiation pollution. This could explain why Belarus and Ukraine take such high positions, 35th and 44th respectively. For instance, *Radioactive Environmental Monitoring* created by the European Commission names Belarusian city Brahın and Ukrainian Chernobyl as the most radiation polluted in Europe. Including radiation indicators in the EPI would significantly lower Belarus's rank.



Belarus in Environmental Rankings

The Chernobyl catastrophe imposed serious circumstances upon Belarus's environment. Air quality is one example. According to WHO, Belarus still takes the third place in the air pollution death rate per 100,000 people. That is, while China may have a higher total volume of deaths from air pollution, if deaths are measured per 100,000, then Belarus's air is much deadlier than China's.

Today, every eighth Belarusian lives in the territory polluted

by radioactive caesium, reports the Department for the Liquidation of Consequences of the Chernobyl Catastrophe. Belarus has suffered more than any other country from Chernobyl. Its effects will negatively influence Belarus's environment and ecology for the foreseeable future. This is why many are opting to make the difference by using services like this [plastic free subscription box](#).

However, the state has aimed certain policies to engage with existing environmental problems. In 2010, authorities cancelled the state monopoly on energy production, which has resulted in open opportunities for private companies. Thus, due to mobile operator Velcom, Belarus now has a large solar power plant in the most polluted area in the country, the town Brahın. Despite this, Belarus still obtains only [around 1 per cent of its energy from renewable sources](#).

Furthermore, Belarus remains behind many countries in managing the waste disposal. In 2016, [Belarus has recycled only 16 per cent](#) of its waste. Indeed, recycling trends have improved. For example, the country uses waste material as a fuel in certain power plants. However, authorities are reluctant to recycle various other types of waste. Additionally, the state remains the only one responsible for waste disposal, which excludes non-state solutions.

Perhaps most importantly, the EPI rating data reflects only what is provided by the authorities. Belarusian officials present data to the international agencies without including independent data from non-governmental actors. Thus, instances such as the mass logging of forests remain hidden by the Belarusian authorities. In Poland, by contrast, civil society is [protesting against allegedly commercial deforestation](#). Their efforts have received widespread media attention. Meanwhile, the Belarusian campaigns against logging remain largely invisible.

Clean and cheap: What do tourists think about Belarus?

The number of tourists in Belarus continues to rise. In the fall, Minsk has become the top city visited by tourists among all CIS countries, reports agency *TurStat*. After [Belarus introduced a 5-day visa-free regime](#), the number of tourists has increased by 12 per cent. Around 700-800 thousand foreigners visit Minsk annually.

Cheap prices and clean streets remain among the things most noted by tourists. According to the question-answer webpage *Quora*, according to data from tourists, visitors to Minsk highlight cleanness of the city. Online news portal *TUT.by* has published a video where visa-free tourists say clean streets and cheap prices are among Belarus's main advantages. Among others, tourists from neighbouring countries often compliment the quality of Belarusian roads.

One of the main things tourists recommend avoiding in Belarus is tap water. Although some places the water might be clean, tourist webpage '*isthewatersafetodrink*' includes Belarus in a list of the countries where unbottled water is generally unsafe for drinking.

Belarus's environmental potential

Despite Belarus's overstated environmental performance, the country has strong potential to become an ecologically clean country. Belarus has thousands of lakes, forests and swamps. These resources still appear to be less exploited than in neighbouring countries. The success of such civic campaigns such as "[In Defence of Belarusian Swamps](#)" demonstrates a certain openness of among the Belarusian authorities to cooperate with civic organisations on environmental issues in the country.

Belarus's nuclear power plant (NPP) project has slowed down the implementation of other alternative energy projects, such as the construction of power generating windmills. Belarusian authorities calculate the NPP will produce more energy than Belarus needs. However, neighbours such as Poland and Lithuania intend to [avoid buying energy from the station](#).

Rank	Country	Score	Peer Comp.*	Rank	Country	Score	Peer Comp.*
1	Finland	90.68	↑	31	Azerbaijan	83.78	↑
2	Iceland	90.51	↑	32	Russia	83.52	↑
3	Sweden	90.43	↑	33	Bulgaria	83.4	↓
4	Denmark	89.21	↑	34	Romania	83.24	↓
5	Slovenia	88.98	↑	35	Belarus	82.3	↑
6	Spain	88.91	↑	36	Netherlands	82.03	↓
7	Portugal	88.63	↑	37	Armenia	81.6	↑
8	Estonia	88.59	↑	38	Poland	81.26	↓
9	Malta	88.48	↑	39	Japan	80.59	↑
10	France	88.2	↑	40	Cyprus	80.24	↓
11	New Zealand	88	↑	41	Belgium	80.15	↓

EPI 2016. Source: epi.yale.edu

Additionally, on occasion the authorities challenge environmental activists, which can prevent effective cooperation. For example, the authorities largely ignored environmentalists' criticisms of the NPP project. In general, Belarus's environmental activists tend to face obstacles on the path to encouraging environmental progress in Belarus.

By contrast, the authorities are all too ready declare the success of their environmental policies. For instance, authorities claim to protect the largest remaining primeval forest in Europe, Belavezha forest. At the same time, they introduce programmes for the commercial logging of Belavezha forest.

In sum, the high rank awarded to Belarus in the EPI demonstrates ongoing environmental progress in the country. However, such rankings would be closer to reality if they were to include information from both government officials and

environmentalists.

Hunting Tourism and Corruption in Belarus

Since the end of the 2000s, Belarus has become a destination for many hunt lovers from abroad. 40% of Belarus is covered with woods, which remain a natural habitat for many species of animals. Today, booking a hunting expedition in Belarus can be made online with a couple of clicks.

Many Belarusians still prefer poaching, unwilling to stick to strict rules of legal hunting, even despite constantly growing penalties and fines. An extraordinary case of poaching occurred this past December, when the Belarusian KGB arrested a group of ten hunters in the Chernobyl zone of the Homel region. Strikingly, the officials of wildlife protection agency and police were among them. The group illegally killed four elk.

Corruption among low-level forestry employees remains widespread, as they try to supplement their low wages with additional cash. To protect its rich wildlife heritage, Belarus needs to improve its state system of nature management.

Hunting Tourism on the Rise in Belarus

Unlike most of Europe, Belarus has retained much of its ancient forests, which occupy almost 40% of Belarus' territory. Up to the present day they remain a natural habitat for many species of animals and birds, most of them free to

hunt during specific seasons. However, in the 1990s and 2000s Belarus as a hunting destination was little known abroad.

Today, it seems, Belarus is becoming a favourite hunting spot for many individuals. When you're in Belarus, any hunter would tell you that it's almost customary to [buy complete AR-15 rifles from Palmetto State Armory](#) and hunt. As one online advertisement says, "the most luring feature is the complete authenticity of the wild animals, inhabiting the forests, swamps and fields of Belarus".

One can book of a few days' hunt in Belarus through numerous web sites. They provide information on prices, animal species and the various hunting seasons, as well as a list of necessary documents and procedures for foreigners. They also display photos of previous successful hunting trips to attract new customers.



Hunting companies typically offer 3 days of hunting for around €1,000. The price usually includes permission to bring one's own firearm, accommodation and meals, a hunting licence and transport from the airport to the hunting spot, an interpreter and accompanying hunters. Some firms include additional services like alcohol, sauna and trophy preparation.

As for animals, visiting hunters can choose between big game like European bison (prices starting from €10,000), wild boar (€100-600), elk (€700-4,500) or red deer (€700-3,500). The prices depend on the animal's size, horns and other specific factors. Alternatively, one can go for small game ranging from €10 for partridge, waterfowl or woodcock, to capercaillie for €500.

But not all citizens are ready to pay these kinds of prices for a traditional male occupation. Poaching remains a

widespread activity for many Belarusians, especially in rural areas. Corruption thrives, as both local people and local power holders often make deals with forestry workers.

Poaching Bisons in Belarus

In 2013 Lukashenka said he was surprised with the amount of hunting tackle seized from poachers – one thousand rifles, 300 kilometres of fishing net, dozens of tonnes of meat and fish. In 2014 the authorities raised fines for poaching, but so far it is unclear whether this move will lead to a decline in illegal hunting.

Hunting bison, one of the symbols of Belarus, usually receives the most attention in the media. According to Belarusian legislation, bison are divided into two categories – the main gene pool and the reserve gene pool. The animals from the latter pool – usually old or ill – are not considered as listed in the Red Book (list of endangered species), and can be hunted according to a certain procedure.

Environmentalists oppose such norms, saying rare species should be protected regardless of their health or age. But Belarus officials have another rationale – the population of bison is growing and it needs to be regulated.



Belarusians cannot afford bison hunting, as it costs several

thousand euro, so the main clients usually come from abroad.

In recent years bison hunting involved many illegal cases. Usually, illegal schemes come from forestry officials, who make money by providing their hunting services for foreign tourists. In winter 2012, a Russian citizen killed a bison and wounded another one in the Valožyn district, while citizens of Lithuania killed three in the Chojniki district.

The guilty forester received only minor punishment for their transgressions. Earlier in 2009 an Italian killed a female bison at the Belaviežskaja Pušča national reserve, where hunting is forbidden. As it turned out, a local forester assisted him in getting to the protected area.

In 2011, the Presidential Property Management Department put a bison's life up for an Internet auction, which caused a public uproar and an online campaign to save his life and forbid this practise from continuing. Plenty of people made fake bids in an attempt to prolong the life of the animal while the owners of the lot checked the identity of the bidder. In the end ,the campaign wrecked the lot and these kinds of bids have not again appeared in public.

While poaching on the side of citizens is still widespread, some cases of government officials involved in this illegal activity have also become public. One of the most striking instances occurred recently, when a nature protection servicemen worked in contradiction of their official duties.

Wildlife Protectors Killing Wildlife

At the beginning of December the Belarusian authorities informed the public of a quite a paradoxical corruption case. Officials from the nation's wildlife protection agency were engaged in illegal hunting together with several police companions as additional cover. The group was poaching in the Vetka district of the Chernobyl area. Two of them were officials from the Homiel Regional Inspection for the

Protection of Wildlife and the other five were officers from the Homiel Regional Police Department.



The group was supposed to eliminate wild boars as a part of programme to combat [African swine flue](#). Instead, the group killed four elk. The poachers moved in a car with gangster-style registration plate with the word “Serega”, the name of the owner, instead of the officially required numbers.

The car owner’s son turned out to be the deputy head of Homiel Regional Inspection for the Protection of Wildlife. During their detention of the poachers, KGB officers even had to resort to pulling out weapons to stop the car.

The locals say that the poachers organised a hunting business in the area together with a Russia citizen who lives in a bordering town. The men hunted animals illegally and then sold the meat to local people. Now they have been fired from service and face up to four years in prison.

By strange coincidence, the same month on 29 December a senior Belarusian official himself became a victim of hunting. The judge of the Supreme Court of Belarus Vitar Rakicki received fatal wounds from some of his hunting colleagues, “residents of the Minsk region”, as the Investigatory Committee reports.

Belarus retains its rich flora and fauna, and preserving it should be one of the government’s strategic goals. The authorities should control the local level of wildlife management more thoroughly, as most corruption cases occur there. Besides this, environmental groups from civil society should gain access to policymaking and oversight to help strengthen the public’s engagement with this important issue.