Good governance introduction and use in public administration of Belarus before and after 2020 political crisis

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Abstract: 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.

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 welcomed external attempts to promote good governance principles, and selectively applied them in policy design without explicitly adopting the term. 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.

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.
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.

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 were either implemented only to a limited extent or not applied at all.

After 2020 and 2022, 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. 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.