

MAKING THE CASE FOR ELC IMPLEMENTATION IN BELARUS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EU COMMA PILOT PROJECT IN MAHILIOU

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Close interaction between municipal authorities, city residents, and business owners is essential for the success in the transformation of municipal governance practices in Belarus. These interactions are especially important for governing the quality of urban landscapes. EU "ComManaging Municipality - Communication and Management for Community Involvement in Municipal Governance in Belarus" (COMMA) project aimed to demonstrate ways of improving municipal governance and urban residents' well-being through efficient cooperation between local authorities and communities, based on case studies from Mahiliou, Baranavichy, and Chavusy.

Mahiliou's historical district of Padnikollie is a large (over 100 ha) green area located in the valley of the Dnieper River. A significant part of the area is either flood-prone or within the protection zone around municipal water supply facilities; this helped to preserve the historical landscape of the area. For the most part Padnikollie is still a natural area in the middle of the city with a rich biodiversity, natural wetlands, meadows, floodplain lakes, and hundreds of large old trees. The city authorities expressed interest in re-development of this area to an amusement park with construction of highways, shopping malls and parking areas. The re-development started in 2014 and was put on a fast track in 2017. It was marked by conflicts with nature and cultural heritage conservation watchdog organizations and activists lamenting over quick developments disregarding and destroying important archaeological artifacts, old trees and wetlands. At the same time, broader public was quite optimistic about these developments, as the area was not easily accessible and gave to many an impression of being unpleasantly wild. To ensure both sustainable management of Padnikollie landscapes and support from local stakeholders, there was a need in the EU experience in public participation and communication strategy development. This provided an interesting case study for the COMMA project. Consequently, the eastern part of Padnikollie District was selected for the project pilot initiative of creating a city arboretum with a community pharmacy garden.

By analyzing all stages of the pilot project implementation, we explore a common assertion (in countries reluctant to sign the ELC, including Belarus) that the

framework and tools provided by the Convention are somewhat redundant and that the ELC implementation is essentially a luxury only wealthy countries can afford. We review the impacts of visual contamination, land cover change, leveling of the area, construction of high-rise residential buildings and other changes in the neighboring districts. Our findings suggest that there is a governance gap caused by not implementing the ELC, and this gap has increasingly negative effects on both citizens' well-being and city economy.

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