

# 03



# Eurasia

## Regional chapter



Market stall in Tashkent,  
Uzbekistan (photo:  
Christopher Rose, bit.  
ly/2Mus3G1).

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# 1. Introduction

**In September 2015, all the Eurasian countries reviewed in this chapter adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). National governments acknowledged that the SDGs are major priorities and that the responsibility for achieving the Goals and targets should be shared between central regional and local governments.**

Throughout the past three decades, countries in the Eurasia region have experienced several important transformations. According to acting Constitutions, developed in the early 1990s, all Eurasian countries, except Russia, are unitary states. Since that time, there has been no change of regime in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which are presidential republics. Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Armenia, on the other hand, became parliamentary republics in 2010, 2013 and 2015 respectively. Ukraine has gained mixed status as a parliamentary presidential republic.

Moreover, war and ‘colour’ revolutions have affected the political stability of most countries. Those include the armed conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia (1991-1994); the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1994); Chechen wars in Russia (1994-1996 and 1999-2000); the Revolution of Roses in Georgia (2003); the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004); the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005); the armed conflict between Georgia and Russia (2008); the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine (2014); the Crimea conflict between Ukraine and Russia (2014); the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine (2014- present); and the Velvet Revolution in Armenia (2018). Because of these political and armed conflicts, Ukraine and Georgia have removed themselves from the sphere of Russia’s influence.

Currently the level of urbanization in Eurasian countries varies from 77.6% in Belarus to 26.9% in Tajikistan.<sup>1</sup> However, the reforms of the 1990s provoked strong polarization and uneven development of regions in the majority of Eurasian countries. The agglomeration or concentration effects are a key factor of spatial differentiation that has favoured larger cities, particularly national capitals. These cities have been reporting

growth in their populations since the mid-2000s, mainly because of in-migration. At the same time, provincial regions and cities have found themselves vulnerable in the context of the new economy. Crisis conditions have been particularly pronounced in mono-sectoral industrial cities and districts that rely on one company or a localized cluster of enterprises in one industry.

The degradation of the utilities infrastructure experienced by most countries in the 1990s has in the last decade been halted and to some extent reversed. Local and regional governments (LRGs) in Eurasian countries have made significant efforts to improve public services. While the context is constantly changing, decentralization in Eurasian countries remains limited. Central governments in the region continue to promote top-down approaches and impose national programmes for regional development on LRGs.

This chapter analyses the role of LRGs in the localization of the SDGs in the Eurasia region. The first section focuses on the national SDG implementation strategies being promoted in different countries. It looks at national mechanisms to foster policy coherence, and evolving multilevel relationships towards achieving sustainable development. Moreover, it assesses the local and regional structure of governments, their responsibilities and budgets.

The second section illustrates the contribution of LRG initiatives in achieving the SDGs and highlights the role of local government associations (LGAs) and networks in raising awareness and aligning local and regional initiatives with the global SDG framework. Lastly, the chapter will showcase the transformative power of local implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 

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**Local and regional governments in Eurasian countries have made significant efforts to improve public services.**

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## **2. National and local institutional frameworks for the implementation of the SDGs**

## 2.1 National institutional frameworks

**Seven Eurasian countries have so far submitted Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF): Georgia (in 2016), Belarus, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan (in 2017), Armenia (in 2018), and Azerbaijan (again) and Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (in 2019).**

### SDGs national strategies and plan

Three categories emerge among countries in the Eurasia region according to their level of commitment and the quality of their strategies to reach the SDGs. Firstly are those countries that have drawn up new national development strategies (NDSs) in line with the global agendas. Second, are those countries that have adapted pre-existing strategies to the SDGs (or are in the course of doing so) or adopted specific roadmaps to respond to the SDGs. Third, are those countries that have not yet aligned their development strategies or plans with the 2030 Agenda.

In the first category, countries such as Belarus, Tajikistan and Ukraine are implementing NDSs designed after the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2015. These strategies have thus been aligned from the outset with the SDG framework.

In the second category, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, adopted their current NDSs before 2015 and the 2030 Agenda. Nonetheless, in these countries the national governments either adopted new strategic roadmaps (Azerbaijan) or drafted a new long-term development strategy incorporating the SDGs, such as in Armenia (in 2017; Horizon 2030) and Kyrgyzstan (in 2018; Horizon 2040). Both drafted strategies are under discussion.

The third group of countries includes different sub-categories. Both Georgia and Kazakhstan, which have reported to the HLPF during this first cycle, are continuing to implement national strategies developed before 2015. Georgia is seeking to align its Annual Government Work Plan with the SDGs. In Kazakhstan, the focus has been on harmonizing the budget and planning. Similarly, in Turkmenistan, the monitoring and reporting systems of the 2017-2021 Presidential Programme were aligned with the SDGs after the

programme had been adopted. In the case of the Russian Federation, it has not integrated the SDGs into national development plans (NDPs) nor shown any leadership in championing the 2030 Agenda. This is demonstrated particularly by the absence of public statements made by the Head of State on how the country plans to implement the SDGs.<sup>2</sup> Uzbekistan meanwhile considers its mid-term plan (2017-2021) to be in line with the SDGs' vision and ambitions.

However, a word of caution should be sounded in the case of Russia. The country's 2020 NDS, formulated in 2008, was substituted by the new Key Guidelines for the Russian Federation Government Activities which extends until the end of the presidential term, in 2024. The Russian National Programme 2018-2024 includes 12 national projects with 150 development goals. Sectoral ministries have committed to promote sustainable development and all national and sector strategic documents are thus framed in terms of achieving the 'Strategic Development Objectives'. With regards to international development cooperation, Russia has been adapting its international assistance programmes to the SDGs.<sup>3</sup>

Almost all Eurasian national governments involve LRGs in the implementation of their countries' NDSs. However, this process remains predominantly top-down. Accordingly, in most countries central governments elaborate and adopt national and regional development programmes without explicitly engaging their LRGs. Nonetheless, national governments do give regional and local executive bodies (both

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**Table 1 National development strategies and plans and their coordination mechanisms**

### Armenia

The country is updating the long-term Armenian Development Strategy 2014-2025. Coordination: National Council for Sustainable Development (2000), headed by the Prime Minister (multi-stakeholder), Inter-Agency Task Force for SDG Nationalization, National SDG Innovation Lab (2017). No LRG participation.

### Azerbaijan

A National Action Plan in preparation (88 priority targets and 119 indicators selected in 2018). Long-Term Plan: Azerbaijan 2020: Look into the Future (2012) and main sectoral programmes (12) partially aligned. Coordination: National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development (NCCSD), chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy (inter-ministerial), four working groups. Indicators: State Statistical Committee. No LRG participation.

### Belarus

National Strategy for Sustainable Social and Economic Development (NSSD-2030) (adopted in 2015) and Social and Economic Programme 2020 (December 2016). A National Strategy for Sustainable Development until 2030 will be drafted. Coordination: National Council for Sustainable Development (includes national and regional government bodies), National Coordinator for the Achievement of the SDGs at the President Office (2017). Strategies for sustainable development developed for about six regional and more than 30 LRGs.

### Georgia

Social and Economic Development Strategy 'Georgia 2020' (2014) and several sectoral plans. Coordination: Administration of Government of Georgia, mainly under the Government Planning and Innovation Unit of the Policy Analysis, Strategic Planning and Coordination Department. National Statistic Office in charge of indicators. LRGs are represented in the inter-agency working group.

### Kazakhstan

Strategy 'Kazakhstan 2050' (2012) and '100 Concrete Steps to Implement Five Institutional Reforms', launched in 2015, sectoral programmes. Coordination: Coordination Board on SDGs, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, five inter-agency working groups (multi-stakeholder) and coordination body by the Ministry of National Economy. No LRG participation.

### Kyrgyzstan

National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2013-2017 (2013). In 2018, the government drafted a new sustainable development strategy until 2040 aligned with the SDGs. Coordination: Coordination Committee on Adaptation, Implementation and Monitoring of the SDGs (2015), chaired by the Prime Minister. No LRG participation is reported (although the decree mentions the role given to the cities of Bishkek and Osh).

### Mongolia

Mongolia's Sustainable Development Vision-2030 (MSDV-2030). Coordination: National Committee for Sustainable Development under the guidance of the Prime Minister and led by the National Development Agency (NDA), Sub-Committee on Sustainable Development Goals under the Standing Committee on Social Policy, Education, Culture and Science of the State Great Khural (Parliament).

### Russian Federation

Strategy of the Long-Term Socio-Economic Development for the period up to 2020 (2008); Decree of the Russian Federation President, 'On National Goals and Strategic Development Objectives of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2024' (May, 2018); Key Guidelines for the Russian Federation Government Activities for the period up to 2024 (September 2018). Coordination: Inter-agency working group under the Presidential Administration on issues related to climate change and ensuring sustainable development (created in 2012). No LRG participation.

### Tajikistan

National Development Strategy 2030 (NDS-2030) and Mid-term Development Programme for 2016-2020 (MTDP 2020). Coordination: National Development Council (NDC), headed by the President of the Republic, Secretariat: Ministry of Economy and Trade oversees implementation (it was in charge of the VNR), Secretariat and technical working groups (multi-stakeholder). No local government participation in NDC.

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## Turkmenistan

National Programme for Socio-economic Development of Turkmenistan for 2011–2030 and the President's Socio-economic Development Plan 2019-2025. Coordination: Ministry of Finance and Economy of Turkmenistan, Multi-stakeholder working groups. For reporting: Inter-departmental working group.

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## Ukraine

Sustainable Development Strategy 'Ukraine 2020' (adopted in 2015). Coordination: High-Level Interministerial Working Group, chaired by the 1st Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Economic development and Trade (2016-2017). LRG participation.

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## Uzbekistan

Five-Area Development Strategy for 2017-2021 (2017). Coordination: Coordination Council on National SDGs (Oct 2018), chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, supported by the Minister of Finance (includes the Chair of the National Council for the No direct LRG participation.

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## Eurasia



Sources: VNRs 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019. UNDESA (2017 and 2018). 'Compendium of National Institutional Arrangements for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'.

decentralized and deconcentrated), responsibility for implementation of the development strategies and the SDGs. This is particularly the case in Azerbaijan, for instance, where the government of Karakalpak autonomous region, local governments of other regions, and the capital city of Tashkent are among those named bodies responsible for the implementation of the SDGs. In other countries, the central government mandates LRGs to elaborate regional and local development programmes independently, meanwhile taking account of national guidelines and indicators.

It is worth mentioning that in some countries the elaboration of development strategies is heavily reliant on international assistance and in fact, as a rule, the adoption of the sustainable development strategy appears to be a new conditionality for receiving donors financial assistance (such as in Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) plays a key role in supporting countries in the Eurasia region to achieve the SDGs.<sup>4</sup> These Eurasia countries have benefited greatly from financial and technical support from international financial organizations as well as the international donor community. Indeed, financial assistance and donor support have been important in enhancing legal, institutional and physical frameworks and infrastructures of many countries in the Eurasia region.

## National institutional mechanisms

All the Eurasia countries have institutionalized mechanisms at the highest level of government to manage, coordinate and monitor development strategies. These mechanisms or bodies are charged with leading the process of 'nationalizing' the SDGs, meaning adjusting them to the national context.

According to the seven VNRs presented to the HLPF between 2016 and 2019, LRGs have a quite significant role in the institutional frameworks for the implementation of the SDGs. At the same time, simply mentioning LRGs in relation to the implementation stage in the VNRs, does not necessarily mean that national coordination mechanisms actually involve LRGs. In a majority of countries, LRGs are merely seen as implementing agencies without being actively involved in SDG implementation.

According to the VNRs, seven countries have created new coordination mechanisms specifically with the purpose of coordinating SDG implementation. These are Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine (in 2015); Azerbaijan (in 2016); Armenia and Belarus (in 2017); Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (in 2018).

Georgia, Tajikistan and Russia are using government bodies established before the

SDGs but assigning them with new mandates for implementation and monitoring. The governments of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan meanwhile have added new and more targeted bodies to ones that already existed. The new bodies, namely the Inter-Agency Task force in Armenia, and the Coordination Committee in Kyrgyzstan, carry out tasks of adaptation, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs (see Table 1).

In all countries, the coordinating body is at the highest level of national government, chaired by either the Prime Minister or the President. In Tajikistan, it is overseen by the President; in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan by the Prime Minister; in Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Kazakhstan it is governed by the Deputy Prime Minister; in Belarus and Russia it is situated under the Presidential Office; and in Georgia under the Administration of the Government. However, these bodies are coordinated by the Ministry of Economy and Trade (Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine); the Ministry of Finance (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), or by specific offices (e.g. the Planning and Innovation Unit in Georgia).

Regardless of the design of these institutions, all include mechanisms to provide reports on SDG indicators. Monitoring and evaluation is frequently seen not as an exercise in reporting but as an active management tool that helps adjust and shape the strategy along the way. The responsibility for this task is assigned to national statistical offices, which appear to be an integral part of national SDG coordination bodies. In 2018, the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS Statistical Committee) published the pilot statistical abstract on Monitoring of SDG Indicators in the CIS Region. This brought together data on progress in implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the CIS region.<sup>5</sup>

LRGs were directly or indirectly involved in the process of elaborating the VNR in only a handful of Eurasian countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Tajikistan). National governments launched awareness-raising campaigns to increase LRGs' and citizens' knowledge about the SDGs and to mobilize and engage them in SDG implementation. In 2017, the national government in Belarus and the UN organized a 'national tour' — UN70 Belarus Express for the Sustainable Development Goals — to popularize the global agenda. As part of this, the Executive Committee Chairman of each region signed a declaration of commitment to the SDGs.

A more detailed look at the national institutional mechanisms shows that only two out of the seven countries that reported to the HLPF involve LRGs into the VNR process. Meanwhile one country conducts only minimal consultations as part of their coordination, and the remaining four do not involve LRGs at all. In Belarus and

Georgia, LRGs are participating in national institutional mechanisms for the implementation of the SDGs. In **Georgia**, they are represented in the relevant inter-agency working groups and should contribute to the so-called 'evaluation loop' providing policy advice and adaptation of the SDGs implementation strategy to the local and regional level.<sup>6</sup>

In 2017, Belarus reported to the HLPF on its strategy to align and integrate the SDGs into national, sectoral and regional/local development plans, as well as the expansion of LRG powers in the area of sustainable development activities. These are important elements of the 2030 Agenda to strengthen LRG powers and funds. In Belarus, this position was later reinforced by a shift in development strategies towards a regional approach following the nationwide Conference on Strategies and Partnership for Sustainable Development Goals.

Created in 2018, the National Council for Sustainable Development includes LRG representatives and there is a commitment to build on joint efforts of central and local governments to improve monitoring of SDG implementation. Commitment to localize the SDGs appears to serve as a trigger for decentralization reform in **Belarus**. Indeed, members of the National Council representing regions and the capital city of Minsk are heading up SDG focal groups. These groups, along with local government officials, also include business and civic association representatives. Moreover, future plans include particular attention given to strengthening the capacity of regional SDG groups, introducing national SDG indicators into local-level policy documents, as well as conducting an information campaign in the regions.

In 2017, both **Azerbaijan** and **Tajikistan** planned to integrate the 2030 Agenda in their national and sub-national plans and budget allocations. Both countries recognize the importance of local governments in achieving the SDGs; however, both use a strong top-down approach. An inter-ministerial National Development Council (NDC) was established under both Heads of Government: the Prime Minister in Azerbaijan and the President in Tajikistan.

In Azerbaijan, during the National Conference on Nationalization and Prioritization of the SDGs held in 2018, the Prime Minister stated that local communities were critical partners in policy formulation, implementation and the realization of the 2030 Agenda. In fact, the responsibility for the local implementation of national policy decisions frequently falls on regional and local executive bodies.

In both countries, local governments also have the responsibility of providing statistical data on indicators of the SDG achievements. Indeed, in Tajikistan, local governments are expected

to participate in monitoring and evaluation systems together with relevant branches and territorial bodies of state governance, civil public organizations and commercial structures, as well as development partners. This is in line with a process that involves central ministries, line agencies and the State Statistics Agency.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, as coordinator of the VNR, has held a series of consultations, including with local governments. Still, the implementation of the SDGs at the local level is seen as a major challenge.

As with Azerbaijan, the Deputy Prime Minister heads the National Council for Sustainable Development in Armenia. In Armenia's case, the multi-stakeholder mechanism is responsible for the coordination of SDG implementation. While local governments were not represented, Armenian municipal governments participated indirectly in discussions for the drafting of the 2018 VNR report. On this occasion, it was emphasized that the transition to sustainable practices would be 'hardly possible'<sup>8</sup> without empowerment of communities and municipalities.

Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan are planning to present their VNRs in 2020. In **Ukraine**, a High-Level Inter-Ministerial Working Group, chaired by the 1<sup>st</sup> Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Development and Trade, has been established. Together with UNDP, the ministry has prepared a preliminary report providing the baseline indicators and benchmarks for Ukraine to achieve the SDGs.<sup>9</sup> The preparation of this report has followed comprehensive consultations with LRGs — ten regions with 700 participants in 2018 — including local governments and civic organizations. Dnipro and Volyn regions were also selected for regional consultations on the localization of national SDGs.

In **Uzbekistan** the National Commission responsible for the implementation of the NDS 2017-2021 was created in October 2018. This Coordination Council includes the Deputy Chair of the Republican Council for the Coordination of the Activities of Self-Governing Bodies, but thus far no direct participation of local governments has been seen. However, the local government of Karakalpak autonomous region, and the capital city of Tashkent are named among responsible bodies for the implementation of all national SDGs.<sup>10</sup>

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the process of national consultations on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda started in 2017 to inform the public and involve parties at the national, regional and local self-government level. Consultations were held in the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad and at two workshops, representatives of local authorities and other stakeholders learnt about and were called on to intensify their efforts to implement the SDGs. Moreover, two cities have

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## In Kyrgyzstan, the cities of Bishkek and Osh by governmental decree assumed the function of assisting the Coordination Committee on adaptation, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.

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been involved in the coordination mechanisms for the SDGs: in 2015, Bishkek and Osh cities by governmental decree assumed the function of assisting the Coordination Committee on adaptation, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, **Russia** is also planning to submit its first VNR in 2020.<sup>12</sup> In March 2019 following the order of the first deputy prime minister, seventeen working groups (in accordance with 17 SDGs) have been created to prepare the VNR. Due to the efforts of the mayor of the city of Kazan and the president of UCLG EURASIA, representatives of this organization as well as representatives of three national municipal associations were included into five working groups. However, since 2012 an Inter-Agency Working Group under the Presidential Administration has supervised issues relating to climate change and sustainable development.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the federal law on strategic planning (2014) stipulates strategies for sustainable development elaborated by regional and municipal governments in line with the medium-term federal development strategy updated every six years (currently until 2024).

In practice, there is strict control over regional and municipal governments' competences. The composition of coordinating bodies reflects the top-down approach to elaborate and follow-up on development strategies.

As a rule, LRGs are not widely represented in national councils and working groups in charge of development strategies. The Council for Strategic Development and National Projects with the Russian Federation President includes only the Moscow city mayor and the governor of Tatarstan (one of Russia's regions). Both an Inter-Agency Working Group on Priority Structural Reforms and Sustainable Economic Growth and an Inter-Agency Working Group on Economic and Social Development of Agglomerations include only two regional representatives. However, the Inter-Agency Working Group on Spatial Development Strategy includes representatives from all 85 Russian regions. Municipalities have no representation in the aforementioned bodies. ◉

## 2.2 Local and regional governments' institutional frameworks in Eurasia region

The countries in Eurasia region have different forms of territorial organization. Meanwhile, the distribution of the population is uneven. In Armenia, Azerbaijan Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, 35%-50% of the total urban population are concentrated in capital cities. These cities usually benefit from an administrative special status. In the remaining countries in the region, the distribution of the urban population is more balanced between large, intermediary and small cities. In Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, it is important to note that intermediary cities are well-dispersed and have been functioning as regional administrative hubs as well as educational and agricultural centres.<sup>14</sup>

This particular urban system is the legacy of the restructuring process that followed the break-up of the Soviet Union. The existing administrative structure and local governments system are the legacy of the former USSR. Although the administrative structure is a starting point for establishing a system of local governments throughout the region, differing decentralization processes have led to a more heterogeneous landscape (see Table 2).

### Structure of local governments

With the exception of Georgia, all Eurasia region countries are divided into a three-tiered system of sub-national government (SNG) (decentralized) and administration (deconcentrated).

At the highest level are regions (*oblast*), autonomous republics (e.g. Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan) and 'cities of national importance'.<sup>15</sup> These are sub-divided into districts and 'cities of regional subordination'. Districts, in turn, include 'cities of district subordination', towns and villages, rural and urban settlements.

In fact, the autonomy of the regional and district governments differs across Eurasia. The organization of sub-national governance often combines deconcentrated and decentralized functions. In many cases, particularly at the regional level, executive bodies are appointed by the central or higher level of government (e.g. regional governments). These bodies are embedded in a 'vertical power structure' and are under the direct supervision of the tier of government directly above them. At the same time, they co-exist with councils or representative bodies elected by citizens. This system is often called the *matryoshka* government (after the Russian doll which consists of several dolls of different sizes one inside the other), and is also later referred to as a 'quasi-decentralized' system.

This dual system of territorial administration — i.e. decentralized representative bodies and deconcentrated administration appointed by the upper level of government — has been the starting point for establishing local governments throughout the Eurasia region. All countries under review appear to be at different stages of decentralization. In Kazakhstan, local self-government bodies only started to function in 2018. Meanwhile in Russia in the 1990s, local self-government bodies already enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. The level of decentralization varies from a highly centralized system in Kazakhstan and Belarus to relatively autonomous local self-government in Armenia and Georgia (at the municipal or district level), to a two-tiered system of local self-government in Russia. In between are states where local self-government bodies exist alongside the quasi-decentralized bodies of the central government (such as in Ukraine and Azerbaijan) (See Table 2).

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**This dual system of territorial administration is often called the *matryoshka* government. All countries under review appear to be at different stages of decentralization.**

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**Table 2 Eurasia country systems and number of LRGs by tiers**

Country	System of government	Territorial organization		
		1 <sup>st</sup> level	2 <sup>nd</sup> level	3 <sup>rd</sup> level
Armenia	Republic/ Unitary	502 cities and rural communities Latest election in June 2018		10 <i>marzers</i>
Azerbaijan	Republic/ Unitary	1,607 municipalities Latest elections in December 2014	11 cities, including the capital city of Baku 7 administrative districts of the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan	66 regions The Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan
Belarus	Republic/ Unitary	23,174 rural settlements and villages 24 municipal districts 1,176 urban settlements and rural councils 14 towns of district subordination Latest elections in February 2018	10 cities of regional subordination 118 districts	6 regions The capital city of Minsk
Georgia	Republic/ Unitary	67 communities 4 self-governing cities (including Batumi) The capital city of Tbilisi (special status) Latest elections in October 2017		9 administrative regions The Autonomous Republic of Adjara * The Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia: disputed region which is not under the Georgian administration
Kazakhstan	Republic/ Unitary	34 cities of district significance 6,904 villages and settlements Latest elections in August 2017		
Kyrgyzstan	Republic/ Unitary	453 rural communities 17 cities of district significance Latest elections in August 2016	40 districts 12 cities of regional significance Latest elections for mayor in 2018 were cancelled	7 regions ( <i>oblast</i> ) The cities Bishek and Osh
Russian Federation	Republics/ Federal	19,590 urban and rural settlements 286 intra-city districts and territories Latest elections in December 2014	1,784 municipal districts 567 cities	80 regions (republics, oblasts, krais, autonomous okrugs and <i>oblast</i> ) 3 cities of national significance, including the capital city
Tajikistan	Republic/ Unitary	369 urban and rural settlements Latest elections in February 2010	65 cities and districts of both regional and national subordination	4 regions of national subordination 1 autonomous region The capital city of Dushanbe
Ukraine	Republic/ Unitary	11,030 towns and rural settlements Latest elections in October 2017	490 districts 186 cities of regional significance	24 regions The Autonomous Republic of Crimea The capital city Kiev and the city of Sebastopol Latest elections in October 2015
Uzbekistan	Republic/ Unitary	<i>Mahallas</i> Latest elections in May 2016	170 districts 30 cities of regional significance 1 city of republican significance	12 regions The republic of Karakalpakstan The capital city of Tashken First elections for Tashkent government were held in December 2017

There are two levels of SNG in **Armenia**: regional administrations (*marzers*) and municipal self-governments. The first are deconcentrated executive bodies of the central government. Since 2013, the **Armenian** Ministry of Territorial Administration has initiated a 'community enlargement process' aimed at promoting mergers of small municipalities and minimizing disparities between the regions of Armenia and the capital city of Yerevan. In 2016, as part of a national initiative, 118 former municipalities amalgamated into 15 new municipalities. Importantly, the state-led government of the capital city of Yerevan was dismissed in favour of an elected local self-government body.

In **Azerbaijan**, the system of sub-national governance is asymmetric, with Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic but no other autonomous republics. In the majority of the territory, there are deconcentrated regional and district governments, including the executive body of the capital city of Baku. Since 2009, the number of municipalities, i.e. the decentralized level of self-government, was reduced by 40%. Current legislation only vaguely describes the relationship between the municipalities and local deconcentrated bodies of central government. In reality however, municipal governments appear to be subordinate to the deconcentrated bodies of the central government. The Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, with its own constitution but subordinate to the Azerbaijan national constitution, has only two layers of government: the state government and municipalities.

The Republic of **Belarus** accords, *de jure*, autonomy to local councils; these are *de facto* included in the overall public administration system. Local councils have neither the real authority nor the resources to make and execute

decisions. The Law on Local Government and Self-Governance (2010) has not much altered this situation. This law regulates competence of local councils and of the executive committees of regions, basic (districts) and primary (towns, settlements) levels. According to the law, the regional councils (*oblast*) are superior to the councils at the 'basic and primary' levels and basic-level councils are superior to the councils at the primary level. Executive committees of the upper level of government can cancel the decisions of lower executive bodies if they do not comply with their provisions. To date, Belarus has not signed the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

There is also an asymmetric structure of sub-national governance in **Georgia**. Two regions have the status of autonomous republics (Adjara and Abkhazia). The other nine regions of the country are deconcentrated administrations. Since 2005, there are local self-governments only at district and city level and mayors have been universally elected since 2014 when the new Code of Local Self-Government was adopted. This code was further amended in 2017, thus reforming state administration and reducing the number of self-governed cities from 12 to five, including the capital city of Tbilisi.

In **Kazakhstan**, the regional and district governments are 'quasi-decentralized'. Indeed, to the extent that local self-governments are elected and hold powers to approve their budgets and issue regulations in the area of their competence, they are decentralized. However, each tier of government is subordinate to the tier above (and the regional governors are appointed by the President) thus decentralization is 'quasi'. Heads of local executive bodies (*akims*) are accountable to those who appoint them. The first elections of *Akims* (of rural communities) were initially in 91% of



Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia  
(photo: Christopher Michel, [bit.ly/2VptrxO](https://bit.ly/2VptrxO)).

local governments in 2013. In 2018, communities with the population exceeding 2,000 inhabitants also received budgeting rights (including assigned taxes and spending responsibilities). An extension of budgeting rights to smaller units is planned.

Sub-national administration in **Kyrgyzstan** consists of the municipal layer — village councils (*ayil okhmotus* and *ayil keneshes*) with elected representatives' bodies, and two layers of deconcentrated state administrations: a) districts (*raions*) and cities of regional (*oblast*) significance and b) regions (*oblasts*) and cities of national significance. Besides municipalities, representative bodies exist in the two cities of national significance and cities of regional and district significance. Chief executives (governors/mayors) of regions and districts are appointed by the Prime Minister. Meanwhile in all cities, chief executives are being elected by the representative body (at the behest of the Prime Minister). Municipal mayors are elected by the representative body — at the behest of the chief executive (*akim*) — of the district where they reside.

**Russia** as a federal state has the following levels of public governance: the federal subjects of Russia (regional governments) and municipalities. The first represents the constituent units of the Russian Federation and enjoys significant fiscal and political autonomy compared with regional governments of other Eurasian states. The federal subjects of Russia set up various models of local self-government within their territories. In most regions, local governments have been established mainly at the level of large cities and districts. In other regions, local self-governments have for the most part been set up at the level of larger cities and rural communities, while other regions have a combination of both (the two-tier model).

Starting in 2006, the two-tier model of local self-governance became obligatory for all regions in accordance with the 2003 Law on General Principles of the Organization of Local Self-Government. Recently, many regional governments have been part of a trend to amalgamate lower tier municipalities.

In **Tajikistan**, sub-national administration can be grouped into three categories. These are local state governments of national subordination (with representative bodies elected by citizens and the executive appointed by central government), including the capital city; local state governments of regional subordination (representative bodies elected by citizens and the executive appointed by the regional government); local self-governments (with a council elected by citizens and the executive by the council).

In **Ukraine**, the fully-fledged local government is structured at the level of cities, townships and rural communities. Bodies of executive power in regions and districts, similar to Kazakhstan and Belarus, are embedded in the deconcentrated

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## In past years, many reforms have affected SNGs, either strengthening or reducing their autonomy. The major overall trend in the last ten years was enlargement of the size of municipalities, initiated by most central governments.

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'vertical power structure'. The central government directly interacts with regions; regions in turn interact with districts and cities, while basic levels of local self-government (towns, settlements and villages) interact only with district-level deconcentrated bodies of state power.

**Uzbekistan** has a two-tiered system of sub-national governance: regional governments and city governments of national significance and district governments and city governments of regional significance. The executive body (*hokim*) is appointed by the President; meanwhile the councils (*kengash*) are publicly elected. The capital Tashkent has regional status. The Karakalpak Republic enjoys more autonomy. At community level, 'assemblies of citizens' are chaired by an elected local patriarch (*aksaka*) and have some autonomy.

In past years, in Eurasia countries many reforms have affected SNGs, either strengthening or reducing their autonomy. The major overall trend in the last five to ten years was enlargement of the size of municipalities, initiated by most central governments in Eurasian countries (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, Russian Federation, and Kyrgyzstan). Among the arguments in favour of such initiatives are a lack of managerial capacity in small-sized local governments and a limited tax base, leading to fiscal inequalities and an inability to provide adequate funding for local public goods. Amalgamation may be viewed simultaneously as a sign of both centralization and decentralization. The process of amalgamation in Eurasian countries has a dual effect. On the one hand, enlargement of municipalities distances local governments from citizens and makes it more difficult for citizens and local governments to participate meaningfully in decision-making over matters to do with their neighbourhoods. On the other hand, small-sized municipalities do not have either the resources or the competences to undertake significant investments (e.g. in water supply or energy provision), or provide socially important public goods (e.g. education, healthcare, social protection); and amalgamation solves these problems. The optimal solution is voluntary associations of municipalities for particular purposes; but central governments often drive and mandate these processes (see Table 3).

**Table 3 The key legal/regulatory reforms by country**

Country	Reforms in the last ten years
Armenia	<p>2009: Yerevan received the status of local self-governing city.</p> <p>2016: Amalgamated municipalities reduced in number by 11.5%.</p> <p>2018: The central government started to promote inter-municipal cooperation. The draft law provides for establishing inter-municipal unions that will be empowered to perform important functions delegated to them by the central government.</p>
Azerbaijan	<p>2009: Mergers and consolidation of municipalities initiated by the central government reduced their number by 40%.</p>
Belarus	<p>Since 2016: Gradual steps in the direction of strengthening local governance; cities are key actors to integrate the urban economy into national development policies.</p> <p>2018: The central government revealed that preconditions for delegating particular powers to local level are in place.</p>
Georgia	<p>2006: The two-tier system of local self-government replaced by one-tier system (districts and cities).</p> <p>2013: The constitutional reform enshrined self-governments' autonomy in the Constitution.</p> <p>2014: Local Self-Government Code substituted the former Law on Local Self-Governance (reinforcing local participation and direct elections of mayors).</p> <p>2017: Under the initiative of the central government, seven self-governing cities were integrated into self-governing communities and lost their previous status.</p> <p>2018: The parliament and government of Georgia presented a new national vision of decentralization and local self-governance, which increases decision-making powers and financial resources of the regional and local authorities. A new strategy and decentralization roadmap is expected in the near future.</p>
Kazakhstan	<p>2017: First elections to municipal governments at the level of communities were held.</p> <p>2018: The municipal communities with a population exceeding 2,000 inhabitants received budgeting rights (including assigned taxes and spending responsibilities). It is planned that later budgeting rights will be extended to smaller local self-government units as well. Moreover, in 2018 the Parliament took a decision not to introduce direct elections of community mayors (<i>akims of auls</i>).</p>
Kyrgyzstan	<p>2012: Law reform abolished districts, representative bodies (<i>rayon kenesh</i>) making them deconcentrated units; at the same time a process of local self-government mergers and acquisitions was launched with the aim of strengthen LSGs.</p> <p>2018: Direct election of mayors cancelled.</p>
Russian Federation	<p>2012: Direct election of regional governors returned (decision of the regional representative body).</p> <p>2012: Healthcare function centralized from municipal to regional level.</p> <p>2014: Funding for pre-school education centralized from municipal to regional level.</p> <p>2012-2013: The central government significantly reduced the share of taxes assigned to local governments in favor of regional governments in accordance with reassigned responsibilities.</p> <p>2017: Amalgamation of first level municipalities launched.</p>
Tajikistan	<p>2016: National Development Strategy 2030 declared aimed at decentralization of public government, including fiscal decentralization.</p> <p>2017: Local self-government communities (<i>jamoats</i>) assigned their own tax and non-tax revenues.</p>
Ukraine	<p>2014: Law on Voluntary Amalgamation of Territorial Communities adopted.</p> <p>2015-2017: Voluntary municipal mergers followed by fiscal, administrative and political decentralization, complemented by the State Strategy for Regional Development 2015-2020. Between 2015 and January 2019, 4,010 local self-governments merged into 876 unified territorial communities (UTCs).<sup>17</sup></p> <p>2017: First elections of UTC mayors.</p>
Uzbekistan	<p>2017: The Administrative Reform stated the need to strengthen the role of local self-governing bodies and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their role in the system of public administration.</p>

## Responsibilities and competences of LRGs and the SDGs

LRGs in Eurasia are responsible for an extensive list of functions and their share of gross domestic product (GDP) at 9.4%, can be quite significant compared with the world average of 8.6%.<sup>16</sup> Although in most Eurasia countries quantitative indicators of decentralized spending seem to be relatively high, in practice LRGs in Eurasian countries have rather limited powers over their expenditure policy. Only in Russia and Kazakhstan are the functions of SNGs distinct from the central government. In other countries, the allocation of functions is somewhat unclear.

Unfunded mandates are a major challenge in Eurasian countries. They appear when the central government delegates some of its functions de jure or de facto to sub-national governments (SNGs) without providing adequate funding (this is the case in Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). In some countries, unfunded mandates are forbidden by the legislation (Russia, Kazakhstan). However, these provisions are often violated by 'underfunding' of delegated functions.

Generally, SNGs in all countries (whether they are self-governing bodies or deconcentrated bodies of the central government) perform important social and development functions, identified as key priorities for the Eurasia region: general and pre-school education, primary, specialized and general healthcare, housing and amenities, public transportation, urban planning, recreation, economic development and small business support.

Basic services in Eurasia fall roughly into two groups: one encompasses waste management, water supply and sanitation, under the responsibility of LRGs, and the other is heat supply centrally managed by higher tiers of government. The main concern for local governments is their lack of finance to maintain the existing grid or invest in sustainable green infrastructure. Major barriers are linked to the current allocation of responsibilities in Eurasian countries. Maintenance and operation are assigned to the lower level of government, while the entire responsibility for a function stays with the upper level of government. For example, general education and healthcare are the responsibility of the regional or state government, meanwhile maintenance of a school (or hospital) building stays with the municipal government (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia). This dual or joint financial responsibility for a function blurs the role of each party and leads to a lack of real incentive for either party to execute the function in the most efficient way. Thus, the school director appointed and paid for by the upper level of government is not in charge of maintaining the school premises, which falls under the responsibility of the appointed local executive body. This power-sharing scheme has

led to a lack of coordination and malfunctioning of public facilities and public services.

Similar examples relate to construction and maintenance of roads infrastructure. The construction of said infrastructure is the responsibility of the central government, meanwhile maintenance is the function of lower levels of government (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia). These functional responsibilities demonstrate that implementing the 2030 Agenda appears to be a responsibility shared by all levels of government but, as has been previously described, the assignment of responsibilities and definition of national strategies are predominantly top-down in the region. In this hierarchical control system, the bottom-up process is limited to administrative reporting which undermines the efficiency of implementation and often prevents citizens' involvement. All countries have developed to different degrees, legal frameworks for citizen participation, but this is often limited to security, and the right to access information, rather than actively taking part in the decision-making process.

Preventing the deterioration of the urban infrastructure is a main priority, particularly since the cost of this will only grow if it is delayed until sometime. Sound, transparent and accountable management of local resources and accessing long-term financing is crucial as has been highlighted in previous reports.

## Financing of local governments

The following section analyses domestic public resource mobilization by SNGs. Based on available data, regional governments in many Eurasia countries play quite a significant role as investors as compared with central governments. In Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, SNG represent 40% of general government (GG) expenditure. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, they make up about one third of total expenditure, followed by Ukraine (26%). In both groups of countries in particular sectors (education, healthcare, housing), the share of SNG spending amounts to 70%-80% of GG expenditure. In Georgia, it accounts for 18% of general government spending, while in Kyrgyzstan and Armenia it represents respectively 10% and 9%. In Azerbaijan, the role and spending of local governments is minimal (see Figure 1).

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**The dual or joint financial responsibility led to a lack of coordination and malfunctioning of public facilities and public services.**

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All local governments in Eurasia countries are legally responsible for tax revenues. These are sub-divided into own and shared taxes. The most common tax is a property tax, which combines land tax and personal property tax. In most Eurasian countries, property tax is administered at the local level. In Belarus however, the property tax is a national tax redistributed within a shared tax system.<sup>18</sup> The small share of local taxes in local budgets reveals the limited autonomy of local governments. The ratio ranges between 3%-8% in Ukraine, Russia and Tajikistan, and 15%-20% in Armenia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Local governments remain highly dependent on the central budget. A majority of municipal resources rely on shared taxes and intergovernmental transfers (grants). In all countries, shared taxes have increased considerably in importance among sources of local governments' revenues: up to 20%-36% of total revenues in Armenia and Ukraine; 40%-50% in Georgia and Russia, and 60%-80% in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Tajikistan. In Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia, each level of SNG receives a fixed part of national shared taxes. This is established in the budgetary legislation. In other countries, sharing rates may differ from year to year, which makes local budgeting unpredictable and intergovernmental relations non-transparent.<sup>19</sup>

Equalizing grants are the second most important source of local government revenue after shared taxes. Eurasian countries municipalities receive two major types of grants: equalizing (or general purpose) and targeted (or special purpose). Grants may have the function of balancing current expenditures and revenues or are aimed only at capital expenditures. In some countries, a lower share of grants in SNG revenue can be observed. It is important to consider that in these countries, shared taxes have replaced the purpose of the equalizing grants.

Russia, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine allocate equalizing grants to local governments in accordance with the nationally approved and publicly available equalization formula. Kazakhstan is the only country where nominal amounts of equalizing grants have been established for each local government for three consecutive years by the national law. On the contrary, in Belarus, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, grants for balancing

local expenditures and revenues are negotiated between local governments and the national Ministry of Finance as the difference between 'expenditure needs' and estimated revenues of a local government in a coming fiscal year.

Targeted grants in Russia, Georgia, Armenia and some other countries provide funding for delegated responsibilities. Special purpose transfers can also be provided in case of emergency (natural, environmental and other disasters, military actions, epidemics and other emergencies) or other special purpose unforeseen local government needs (in the case of Georgia, for example). Grants are provided to local governments on co-financing terms to raise their awareness of the importance of particular local programmes (Russia, Azerbaijan). Capital transfers provide earmarked funding for selected investment projects.

Direct investments, in particular, range from 3.2% in Russia to 30% in Kazakhstan and 32% in Georgia. As a rule, in the region, regional governments with financial autonomy usually account for a higher level of direct investment. Local governments only play a significant role in development projects in Georgia. The low proportion of direct investment in Russia can be explained by the fact that the central government over recent years mandated the growth of SNG employees' wages. This explains why Russian SNGs currently only invest the resources provided through capital grants from the upper level of government (the amount of capital grants equals the amount of direct investments). In other countries, capital grants do not exceed 50% of investments, varying from 4% in Armenia to 43% in Georgia. Ukraine (16%), Belarus (28%) and Kazakhstan (36%) sit in the middle. Other countries do not provide special purpose capital grants to local governments.

In Eurasian countries, capital cities are the largest investors. Thus, Moscow government investments comprise 35% of total Russian SNGs' investments<sup>20</sup> (while the Moscow population represents only 9% of the Russian population). In Tajikistan, about 20% of capital expenditure at the local level is by Dushanbe city (while its population makes up only about 10% of the total population).<sup>21</sup> This trend is also true for other countries.

Together with capital grants, local investments are funded from SNGs own resources (including equalization grants) and/or loans. Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia provide legal rights to local governments to borrow on financial markets within the limits established by national legislation.<sup>22</sup> In Armenia and Azerbaijan there are no formal restrictions on local borrowing, however low fiscal capacity prevents municipalities from attracting loans on the market. Armenia is set to adopt the national

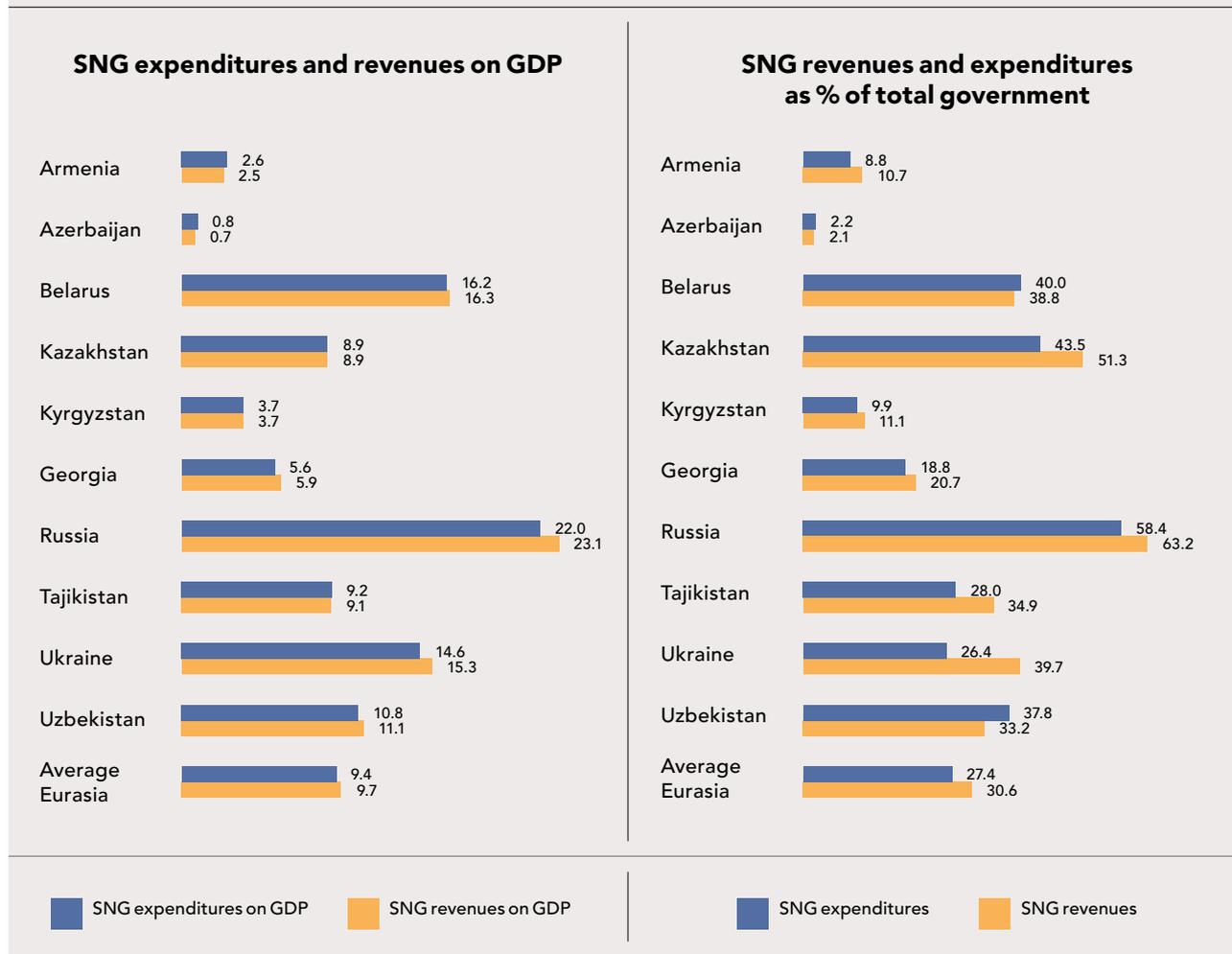
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## **Average figures of SNG finance conceal the problem of economic and fiscal disparity of localities within Eurasian countries.**

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Figure 1

## Revenues and expenditures of SNG (% of GDP and % of total government, 2016)



law on municipal bonds, which might make local borrowing more accessible for communities (which is the case with Kyrgyzstan). Other countries restrict local borrowing only to central government loans. These loans often perform the function of an additional grant: although as a rule, their maturity should not exceed one fiscal year, in some cases, they may be prolonged or even written off. This instrument undermines the transparency of intergovernmental fiscal relations, which was the reason why Georgia got rid of it completely recently.

While the fiscal autonomy of SNGs in Eurasian countries appears to be limited, central governments guarantee increased available resources or investments into social infrastructure through direct investments. However, average figures conceal the problem of economic and fiscal disparity of localities within particular Eurasian countries. Thus in Russia there is an 18-fold gap in per capita regional fiscal resources

after the allocation of equalization grants, while in Tajikistan this gap is eight-fold, and in Kazakhstan (one of the lowest gaps) two-fold.<sup>23</sup>

To summarize the information presented in this section, most SNGs in the Eurasia region have quite substantial budgets and investment capacities even compared with some national budgets. The exceptions are local governments in Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Russian local governments are currently surviving the debt crisis due to a centrally mandated wage rise for government employees and some additional expenditures imposed by the federal government. However, the budget balance has been gradually improving over the last two years. 

## 2.3 Multilevel governance relations for the implementation of the global agendas

As noted above, the common feature of SDG implementation in Eurasian countries has been the persistence of a largely top-down approach. Local development plans, for instance, are generally elaborated within the framework of national strategies. Moreover, the central government delivers methodological assistance and coordinates (or even approves) sub-national development strategies. It also provides grants for strategy implementation. Furthermore, international donor organizations and agencies often play an essential role as far as financial assistance to project implementation is concerned.

Award ceremony for the "Champions of Civil Society" in Minsk, Belarus, 2018 (photo: Viasna Pravaabaron y Centr, t.ly/eYzON).



Decades of centralized and planned economy established an artificial system of spatial allocation of both industries and the workforce across Eurasian countries, which quickly proved to be non-viable within an open market environment. The massive economic transformation that followed the dismantlement of the planned economy led inevitably to the reallocation of people, generally and between urban and rural areas. The impact on urban and territorial planning was notable. In the Eurasian context, efficiency criteria had made it normal for larger cities to locate industrial zones at the core of the urban space. This had significant impact on quality of life, safety and health, not to mention the availability of public space and recreational and common areas. Growing market prices of urban land triggered a process of post-industrial conversion. This also led to the removal of hazardous industries and areas from city centres, with new opportunities for planning diversification at the core of urban life. Ultimately, the transition to a market economy made Eurasian countries rethink urban policy and planning in a way much more consistent with the global challenges of today's urban development.

Moreover, in all Eurasian countries, urban and spatial planning is regulated directly by national governments' acts, regulations and laws. Countries such as Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan adopted urban development codes as the regulatory instrument of choice. Others established laws that regulate architectural and urban development and construction. In most countries, however, the role of both local government and civil society in the actual planning of urban development is quite limited with neither having a clear or formal role or power in the process. Civil society has rarely been actively engaged in the decision-making process and generally top-down approaches are dominant.

Nevertheless, the global agendas have to some extent managed to trickle down into strategic documents and planning in most Eurasian countries. At least five countries, for example, sent national reports to Habitat III in preparation for the New Urban Agenda: Armenia in 2014; Belarus and Kyrgyzstan in 2015; and

Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in 2016. However, these reports show a substantial lack of collaboration and involvement between the national and local government(s) with regard to urban development and decision-making.<sup>24</sup>

Some countries have formally addressed these gaps. **Belarus**, for example, technically engages all three levels of government in the implementation of the country's urban policy, which itself is designed according to the principles of the New Urban Agenda. However, the real impact of decisions made at the local level is relatively weak since all local development plans must be approved by the specialized bodies of the central government. The centralized administrative system reduces the ability of cities to adapt development plans to rapidly changing social, economic, and environmental conditions.

Moreover, the persistent financial dependence of the local level of government on transfers and assistance from the centre are ultimately an obstacle to effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda's or the SDGs' principles and objectives. The particular territorial organization of the Eurasian region has also had an impact on how development policy plays out in the area. Central governments have applied several anti-crisis measures. Many of these explicitly support what are known as the 'city-forming enterprises', i.e. those economic activities that become a city's main 'taxpayer' and 'employer', thus developing a direct link with the community's actual survival. This sort of mutual bond has allowed many smaller urban settlements to maintain a fairly even economic performance, without sacrificing the delivery of basic public and social services. Similarly, the Belarusian government has tried to enhance development in medium and intermediary cities across the country: the central government has created tax benefits opportunities to attract investors, enterprises and jobs in specific urban areas. The Habitat III report of Belarus, however, admits that there is still much work to be done. Decentralization and the empowerment of LRGs are essential to improve the efficiency of urban development planning and strategies. The country needs to define and regulate clear roles, power devolution and political responsibilities of each SNG level, before they can have an impact on the way urban development and planning are done in Belarus.

The situation is not dissimilar in Central-Asian republics. **Kazakhstan's** urban development policy and power distribution are centralized and unified. National legislation still imposes strict controls on local initiatives and implementation, even with regards to city and territorial planning and development. Regional and urban development plans with national significance must be exclusively carried out by a (limited) number of state-controlled organizations and agencies. In

the case of Kazakhstan, however, growing interest at the grassroots of civil society in fairer and more empowering planning at the local level has raised the profile of a more decentralized urban development process — with the aim to make it more clearly connected to and in accordance with local priorities and needs.

**Kyrgyzstan's** Habitat III national report of 2015 highlighted the national commitments made in line with the principles that were eventually to become the backbone of the New Urban Agenda. Since then, the national government approved a Strategy for Regional Development, which acknowledges the subsidiarity principle and discusses the decentralization of public governance, providing incentives for economic social development to local self-government bodies. These commitments notwithstanding, urban policy implementation in Kyrgyzstan is still a top-down process. The national government maintains large powers in the identification of territories of potential growth, the elaboration of their development strategies, and the definition of investment support and execution of the plans. This 'selective' process is consistent with the national government's strategy of reducing fiscal equalization among local governments, while overtly supporting cities and regions with higher growth rates, thus almost institutionalizing an unequal territorial development.

Urban development policy and implementation is also centralized in **Tajikistan**. Urban and regional plans must be designed within the framework of strict national regulation and legislation. The technical elaboration of plans and strategies is even monopolized by a national state-owned agency (*Shahrofar*), though this does at least work in collaboration with the local governments involved — even though their actual responsibilities are confined to a mere provision of information necessary to the implementation of plans. Better-faring regions are expected to pay for the *Shahrofar's* services themselves; weaker or lagging regions are assisted by the central government to (partially or totally) cover the costs. This mechanism has been at the core of urban development plans put into practice by over 30 Tajik countries in the last few years. **Uzbekistan** has been attentive to issues of regional and urban development, in a

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**The centralized administrative system reduces the ability of cities to adapt development plans to rapidly changing social, economic, and environmental conditions.**

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## The persistent financial dependence of the local level of government on transfers and assistance from the centre are ultimately an obstacle to effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda's or the SDGs' principles and objectives.

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particular way. On the one hand, as in the rest of the Eurasian region, the national government has always centralized the elaboration of the development plans as well as its financing for implementation. Territorial development strategies, moreover, have only loosely adapted to the values and principles of the global agendas, be they the SDGs or the New Urban Agenda. On the other hand, the government has also paid special attention to economic development of the territories involved, focusing on investment in public infrastructure (roads, engineering, etc.) and direct support to the state-owned enterprises located in 'selected' cities with the potential to trigger even more spill-over development in their territories.

In line with the top-down approach in government administration traditional to **Russia**, regional development policy is centralized and has to follow the national spatial development strategy (being updated currently) that provides for improving the spatial population placement and the priorities for locating the industries. The instruments for regional development include special economic zones, territories of advanced development, regional development zones, territorial clusters, urban agglomerations. respective policy documents at the levels of Subjects of the Russian Federation and municipal entities. Regional governments in turn develop detailed development strategies, which are meant to take into account proposals of municipal governments concerning the allocation of local businesses, social, transport and communal infrastructure.<sup>25</sup> With regard to urban policies, over the past few years, the federal government has focused on the elaboration and implementation of strategies designed specifically for single-industry towns, identified as the most vulnerable segment of the country's urban system. Larger (and relatively successful) cities have not attracted the interest of the federal government. Ultimately, the approach adopted by both the federal and regional governments is 'paternalistic', to the extent that urban and territorial development is sustained via targeted transfers to cities or agglomerations able to work as 'engines of

growth' territorially, and by tracking the spending and investment of such funds. As part of a larger and generally more complex country, cities and towns in Russia have nevertheless been more proactive in the design and implementation of their own urban development plans, and some have gone so far as to try and sustain the costs of implementation themselves. Since 2018, a significant number of cities have started to update their urban strategies, shifting the time horizon to 2030. Indeed, many of these urban strategies are compatible with the National Urban Agenda and its principles.

Operating within the federal structure of the country, regional development strategies at the level of federated republics are ultimately subjected to the approval of the federal Ministry for Economic Development; but municipal bodies and governments are fully responsible for their own plans. Federal and regional governments are even arranging competitions among municipalities to select the best urban strategies. Kynel, Stary Oskol and Kyrovo-Chepetsk were the winners of the latest edition of the nationwide Competition of Municipal Strategies in 2018.<sup>26</sup> Winners of this kind of initiative generally receive financial aid and institutional coordination to implement their awarded strategies.<sup>27</sup>

The state of decentralization and multilevel organization varies slightly more in the Caucasus countries. In **Armenia**, a process of decentralization of urban development policy began in 2011 when the final approval of urban strategic documents transferred from the central to the municipal level. Nevertheless, before they enter into force, urban development acts still require the agreement of a number of central government-led bodies and agencies. The country's Habitat III report looked forward to the decentralization of the elaboration of community development programmes designed to contribute to the improvement of local self-government. Currently, 42 out of 49 urban communities and 30 out of 866 rural communities have adopted their development plans.

In **Azerbaijan**, on the other hand, urban planning policy is again structurally centralized. The national government developed and implemented a National Programme on Socio-Economic Development of Regions for 2014-2018, and this envisages the development of inter-regional, city and intra-district transport infrastructure. Similarly, the government curated another large-scale urban development project with the Baku White City initiative via a presidential decree. Decentralization in the country is more a case of wishful thinking on the part of the central government which is more aware of the potential role of local governments (rather than their actual role) in citywide and regional economic development. At the same time, the roles and



Downtown Tbilisi, Georgia  
(photo: Jelger, bit.ly/31ZJhBJ).

competences of local government units in the implementation of development projects remain deliberately unclear.

Finally, **Georgia** is particularly interesting in this regard since it shows a form of ‘competition’ between the local and national level. On the one hand, the organization of the system already means that LRGs have the final say over urban development strategies. But on the other, since the mid-2000s, the central government has grown into a major player. The central level is behind many development projects, most of which have taken place in and dramatically changed the capital city. The Tbilisi government recently prepared a new City Development Strategy towards 2030, and aligned it with the principles and goals of the New Urban Agenda. Marking a new phase in the balance of power between the different levels, city councils have recently won the jurisdiction to examine *national* urban development plans before they formally launch. The 2018-2021 Regional Development Programme of Georgia<sup>28</sup> recently adopted by the central government also updated regional and urban policy development goals. These envisage cooperation between urban municipalities for the establishment of legal and institutional frameworks to encourage, develop and implement integrated projects. The programme will involve municipal governments, with a focus on the potential role of larger cities as ‘hubs’ for inter-municipal projects in their metropolitan areas — with a significant

impact on the development of fairer urban-rural partnerships.

Finally, **Ukraine** presents a slightly more cooperative cross-level institutional mechanism. Urban development planning has to comply with the principles of the 2007 Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities and does not require any coordination with agencies or units of the national government. Many Ukrainian cities — building especially on effective collaboration between NGOs, civil society and local governments — have been able to develop their own plans, often with the financial and strategic assistance of international donor organizations. While the increase in local autonomy allowed by this mechanism is noteworthy, the lack of institutional ties to the central government has exposed many of the local plans to issues to do with their long-term sustainability and cost-effectiveness. 🕒

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**The Tbilisi government recently prepared a new City Development Strategy towards 2030, and aligned it with the principles and goals of the New Urban Agenda.**

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# **3. The contribution of local and regional governments to the localization of the SDGs**

**As indicated in the Introduction, LRGs in Eurasia have been implementing initiatives related to the different dimensions of the SDGs. One of the main challenges for LRGs in the Eurasia region after the break-up of the Soviet Union was to restore and improve local services provision and urban utilities to ensure wellbeing in local communities and environmental protection.**

It is important to recall that during the 1990s, many governments were unable to continue providing the same level of public services at no cost or at non-market prices. As a result, utility assets were not renovated, which resulted in the deterioration of the quality of public services. Low salaries caused the outflow of health professionals and teachers, water supply services became unsustainable in many cities and facilities for waste water treatment and solid waste disposal stopped working. Local heat services were discontinued in many cities of the Caucasus and Central Asia, including in capital cities.<sup>29</sup>

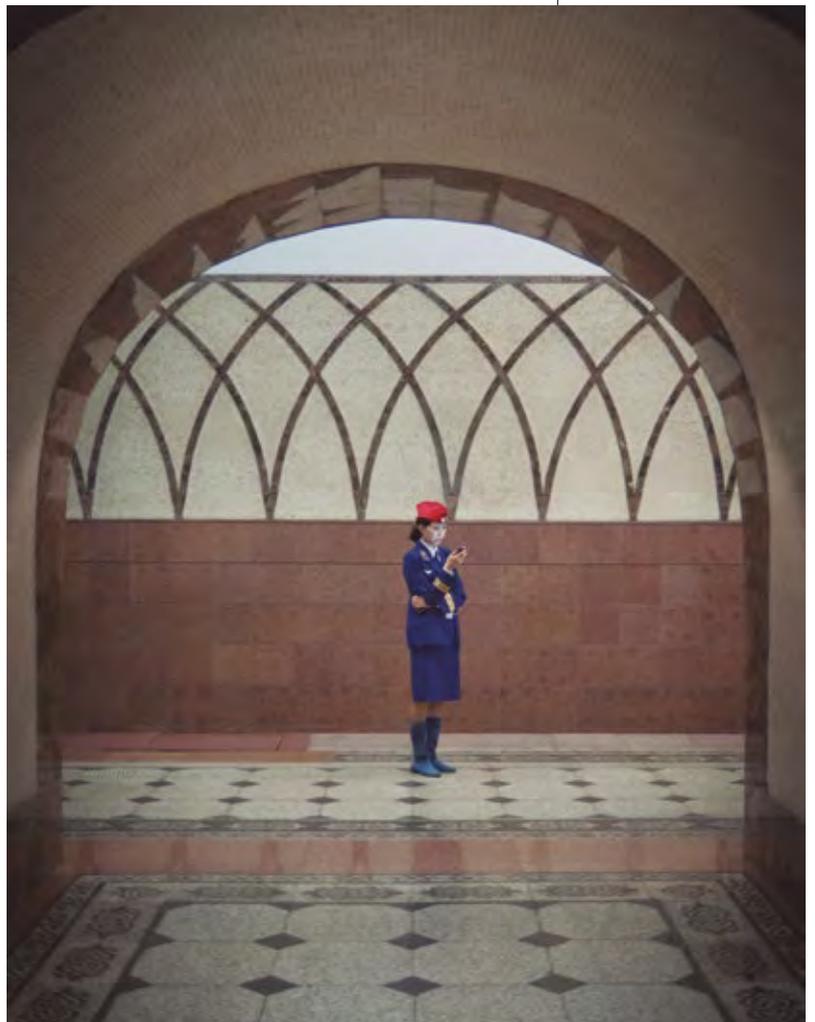
Other critical challenges faced by LRGs in the region include an increase in territorial inequalities, problems related to urban management and environmental challenges. The reforms of the 1990s provoked strong polarization and created a huge gap in the level of economic development between the central and the peripheral areas. In past years, larger cities and the dynamic regions that surround them have concentrated most investments, becoming key hubs for transport, trade, entrepreneurship, modern technology, and innovation, and enjoying diversified and agglomerative economies. In less-developed countries, their capitals also concentrate a substantial share of national budget transfers and, as a consequence, attract a great deal of national wealth and investment. On the other hand, regions outside these dynamic areas have lost population and attractiveness and many of their intermediate cities are shrinking, pushing the youth and most qualified persons to migrate.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, centralized policies and top-down approaches continue to weaken the efficiency of local governments and hinder citizens' involvement in local decision-making. Through national development programmes, central governments exercise a strong control over LRGs. Though these programmes are usually supported by fiscal grants, often such central-level initiatives create unfunded or partially funded mandates for LRGs. However, cities and regions also implement

a broad range of initiatives independently and, taking into consideration their limited budgets, strive to do this in a more efficient manner.

This section will analyse the role of LRGS in raising awareness of the global agendas and will show examples of LRG initiatives that contribute to tackling the challenges of sustainable development and urban development in their countries. [🔗](#)

A staffer at a metro station in Almaty, Kazakhstan (photo: Marco Fieber, [bit.ly/2AXzPmq](https://bit.ly/2AXzPmq)).



## 3.1 How local and regional governments and their associations and networks contribute to creating awareness and promoting ownership of the SDGs

The following examples show how Eurasian local governments and their networks can and do act as levers for sustainable development and improve the quality of life of their cities and communities. LGAs have only been established and are functioning in half of Eurasian countries. These include the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia; the Association of Small Towns of Ukraine;<sup>31</sup> and the All-Ukrainian Association of Local Self-Government Councils, the Association of Villages and the Association of Towns of Kyrgyzstan; as well as several municipal associations in Russia, such as the all-Russian Congress of Municipalities<sup>32</sup> and the Council of Local Self-Government;<sup>33</sup> the Union of Russian Cities;<sup>34</sup> the Union of Small Cities<sup>35</sup> and the Association of Small and Medium Cities of Russia<sup>36</sup> — as well as many regional Russian associations. In Belarus there are no LGAs yet, although in December 2018 the Belarus Parliament, in partnership with the Council of Europe, conducted a seminar to discuss the establishment of local councils associations. There is also the UCLG regional section — UCLG Eurasia — which brings together many of these associations as well as cities from across the region.

In 1998, an international association called the Assembly of Capital and Large Cities was created to promote capacity-building amongst local governments. This unites the cities of almost all the CIS countries: 55 cities in Russia, 11 in Kazakhstan, ten in Ukraine, four in Belarus, three in Georgia, two in Kyrgyztan, one in Tajikistan and one in

Armenia. The association's priority activities are the implementation of projects and programmes aimed at sustainable urban development. The City-to-City Programme is designed to promote peer-to-peer learning and experience exchange through integration and cooperation in the field of sustainable development.

In spite of the limited presence of LGAs in Eurasia, region-wide initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development and creating ownership of the SDGs amongst local stakeholders are becoming increasingly significant. National and international LGAs and networks play quite a significant role in this respect, contributing to the implementation of SDGs at the local level. In 2016, city members of the Association of Small and Medium Cities of Russia issued a joint statement on energy efficiency and sustainable development that was a good example of SDG ownership.<sup>37</sup> The statement demonstrates the commitment of cities in Russia, particularly in relation to SDGs 7 and 11, and reflects the cities' vision that sustainable urban development leads to sustainable economic development, increasing the availability, competitiveness and reliability of energy supply and preserving the environment. In October 2018, the Eurasian section of UCLG held the Eurasia Local Governments Congress with the objective of raising awareness of the SDGs among local authorities, involving them in SDG implementation and providing them with capacity-building support. The event was attended by representatives of ten countries and over 70 cities, as well as by LGAs and international experts. The Congress served as a platform where local and regional leaders exchanged their experiences and best practices regarding SDG implementation. An important part of the Congress was a training seminar on SDG localization for municipalities and LGAs, with the objective of providing training to experts who would then continue to raise awareness of the importance of the SDGs to local and regional authorities.<sup>38</sup>

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**LGA initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development and creating SDG local ownership are increasingly significant.**

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Also in 2018, the II Climate Forum of Russian Cities was held in Moscow to raise awareness of the need for urgent action towards climate adaptation.<sup>39</sup> The Forum brought together delegations from 36 Russian regions and the republics of Kalmykia and Komi and the Karelia, Kaluga, Murmansk and Tula regions presented their eco-strategies, as well as regional practices for the development of natural territories and technological solutions for climate conservation. The Forum plans to become a permanent platform for the exchange of best practices on the path to sustainable urban development.

In some countries, efforts to raise awareness of the importance of the SDGs open up spaces for dialogue beyond government institutions. In Russia for instance, the urgency to realize the SDGs and the role of LRGs therein attracts the attention of the academic community. In February 2018, a conference entitled 'SDGs Adaptation to Conditions and Priorities of Russian Cities and Towns' was organized under a joint initiative of the Union of Russian Cities and the Higher School of Economics. The conference brought together key stakeholders to discuss opportunities to integrate SDGs into cities' and regions' strategic documents, as well as the prospects for establishing a statistical data system to monitor SDGs and their implementation in Russian educational programmes. Participants discussed integration of the SDGs into sustainable development strategies at the regional and municipal levels. They stressed the need to ensure the incorporation of SDG indicators into cities' development strategies, management and reporting systems.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in October 2018, St. Petersburg hosted the conference 'Urban and Regional Resilience: Strategies for Success'.

Actions to promote environmental sustainability developed as part of a framework of regional initiatives at the broader European level are also gaining importance in the region. On 22-23 November 2018, Kiev hosted a large regional conference on 'Municipalities for Sustainable Growth', organized jointly by the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy<sup>41</sup> and Mayors for Economic Growth. This provided an opportunity to explore the nexus between climate, energy and economic development, and discuss future perspectives of EU support to sustainable growth at the local level.<sup>42</sup> Over 350 representatives of local and national authorities, LGAs and other stakeholders from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine participated in the event. The commitment to reach the overall CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction target was expressed by 99 local governments in Ukraine, five in Georgia, 29 in Belarus, ten in Armenia, one in Azerbaijan.<sup>43</sup>

To represent the interests of LRGs before national governments and international institutions in support of localization, in June



2017 in Kiev, Ukraine, the national associations of local authorities of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine signed the Memorandum of Understanding to unite efforts to build better and responsible local governments and demonstrate the strong commitment to stand firmly at the forefront of local democracy.

The signing ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding was organized by the Partnership for Good Governance programme (2015-2017), supported by the Council of Europe. Other signatories are Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus.<sup>44</sup> Development of alliances and partnerships between local governments of neighbouring countries can be observed in the design and implementation of the Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation (EaPTC) programmes over 2016-2017.<sup>45</sup> The overall objective of these programmes is to enhance sustainable territorial cooperation between border regions, with the aim of benefiting their social and economic development. EaPTC programmes address issues of local and regional development, such as environment, employment, public health and other fields of common interest. Armenian-Georgian cooperation within the EaPTC Programme has significantly improved the countries' mutual understanding by involving local communities of the border regions in a multi-cultural dialogue, breaking stereotypes and building trust amongst the neighbouring communities.<sup>46</sup> Eurasian local governments are also developing alliances and partnerships with other international stakeholders in support of SDG localization. The capital city of Georgia, Tbilisi, demonstrated a bottom-up initiative on sustainable development by joining the 100 Resilient Cities programme. Of all Eastern European and Post-Soviet cities, Tbilisi is the first to be included in this network and will receive financial support and technical expertise to develop and implement its resilience strategy.<sup>47</sup> 

Armenia, with the support of UNDP, has established its own National Disaster Observatory in Yerevan to support risk prevention and mitigation policies (photo: UNDP-Armenia, bit.ly/33e4Aj7).

## 3.2 Local and regional government driven initiatives to localize the SDGs

As mentioned in the Introduction, LRGs in Eurasian countries have been carrying out initiatives that have contributed to the localization of the SDGs. This section provides an overview of significant efforts that LRGs are making to respond to the challenges faced in the region, particularly in terms of improving public services, promoting sustainable economic development, addressing increasing territorial inequalities and facing pressing environmental challenges. In most of the countries in the region, LRGs' efforts towards implementing the SDGs are being supported by international organizations through technical assistance and co-funding.

### LRGs' initiatives to align the SDGs with local development plans

LRG-driven initiatives that respond to the main challenges in the region contribute *de facto* to the localization of the SDGs, even if LRGs may not always be aware of the global agendas. The challenges they tackle are described in city development strategies that have to be elaborated in accordance with national legislation in most Eurasian countries. Most of the goals contained in LRG strategies can be grouped into three categories, which closely correlate with the SDGs. Firstly, they relate to human development, e.g. the need to promote job creation, overcome poverty, grant a basic level of welfare or provide social protection through targeted social assistance to socially vulnerable groups. They also include the challenges of providing education for disabled children, promoting healthy lifestyles and supporting socially oriented non-profit organizations to ensure 'no one is left behind' (SDGs 1, 4, 11).

Secondly, local strategies reflect the need to improve the urban environment, including the elimination of emergency and dilapidated housing, of adapting apartment and administrative buildings with devices for disabled people, as well as the reconstruction of worn-out water supply networks, sewage treatment plants and central heating system and the introduction of energy-saving technologies (SDGs 11, 6, 7).

Lastly, plans reflect the need to adopt an innovative approach to city development that yields liveable, people-oriented cities, including heritage preservation, the creation of public space, the reduction of industrial activities and traffic in the city centre and improvement of urban sanitation systems (SDG 11).

In Armenia, for instance, all municipalities design and adopt their development plans, such as Yerevan's 2019-2023 Development Strategy (adopted in 2018).<sup>48</sup> In Belarus, the strategies for sustainable development have been developed for all six regions and for quite a number of cities and districts, e.g. Minsk's 2020 Strategic Plan for Sustainable Development (adopted in 2005),<sup>49</sup> and Vitebsk region's 2025 Development Strategy (adopted in 2015).<sup>50</sup> Minsk's strategic objective in particular is based on the 'Five cities in one' formula. This implies five development priorities towards the achievement of the SDGs: 'City of Health and High Social Standards' (SDG 3), 'City of Knowledge and Scientific Technologies' (SDG 9), 'City Attractive for Entrepreneurship and Investment' (SDG 8), 'City of International Communications' (SDG 17), 'City of Smart Living and Communication with Citizens' (SDG 16).<sup>51</sup>

Most LRGs in Russia have also adopted local development plans, e.g. Kaluga City's 2030 Development Strategy adopted in 2011 and most recently amended in 2018.<sup>52</sup> In Kazakhstan, city governments are required to develop their own urban development programmes for five-year terms, as is the case in Ukraine, where regions and larger cities also aim to design their own development strategies, e.g. Odessa City's 2022 Development Strategy (adopted in 2013).<sup>53</sup> Other examples of local sustainable development strategies include Almaty's 2020 Development Strategy in Kazakhstan, (adopted in 2017),<sup>54</sup> Rustavi's Action Plan for Sustainable Energy

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**Local strategies reflect the need to improve the urban environment, including housing, water supply networks, sewage treatment plants and central heating system.**

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Development in Georgia (adopted in 2012),<sup>55</sup> Tashkent-2025: Transformation in Uzbekistan,<sup>56</sup> or Bishkek's 2014-2018 Development Strategy in Kyrgyzstan (adopted in 2013).<sup>57</sup> These local plans take into account sustainable development principles and have been drawn up by working groups with the participation of NGOs and civil society in countries such as Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. In the case of Bishkek's development strategy, for instance, more than 20 focus groups were organized with citizens, leaders of NGOs, local communities' committees, representatives of business, youth, healthcare and educational institutions, among other stakeholders.

### The role of LRGs in advancing inclusive policies to ensure 'no one is left behind' ['People']

As already mentioned, LRGs in the Eurasian region are taking steps to address human development challenges that hinder their populations' life opportunities and pose fundamental threats to their dignity and rights. Aware of the interconnectedness of such challenges, the city of Kazan in Russia, for example, is adopting a holistic approach to promoting sustainability in its territory through complementary initiatives that address sustainability's different dimensions. Initiatives are articulated around three lines of action that address SDGs 3 and 11. Firstly, the 'Embracing Diversity' initiative seeks to celebrate and enhance city's multi-cultural and multi-ethnic heritage. The initiative's outcomes include the creation of an online tool to map the localization of the SDGs in the city and the region, as well as the House of Friendship of Nations which provides libraries, conferences and concert facilities (SDG 11). Secondly, the 'Environmental Development' Initiative seeks to ensure universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green public spaces (SDG 11) and thirdly, the 'Healthy City' Initiative seeks to support healthy lifestyles by promoting healthy food for children and modernizing healthcare facilities and building sports facilities (SDG 3).

In Russia, for example, the cities of Kaluga and Yakutsk are directly contributing to SDG 1 by implementing social policies to tackle poverty in their territories. In Kaluga, 1,200 large families were granted free ownership of land for housing construction and more than 20 types of allowances and compensations are being paid to families with children, while in Yakutsk, Russia's coldest city, the municipal government initiated a volunteer campaign to collect and deliver essential survival goods to people in need.

LRGs in the region also carry out responsibilities with regards to the provision of healthcare. The city of Rostov-on-Don, for example, is contributing to SDG 3 having established ten healthcare centres attended by more than 100,000 people per year.<sup>58</sup>

The centres' aim is to promote healthy lifestyles and allow more than 50,000 people to undergo screening tests each year. In the city of Nur-Sultan, in Kazakhstan, 51 outpatient clinics will be opened as part of the project 'Doctor near the House'. The aim of the project is provide citizens with access to medical services within a 20-minute walking distance. Outpatient clinics will provide basic medical help: vaccination, medical certificates, day hospitals, ultrasound or ECG among other services.<sup>59</sup> In Ukraine, the city of Odessa is also implementing initiatives in the area of healthcare in the framework of its 2022 development strategy. Such initiatives range from launching a family medical system and implementing a programme for emergency medical care to the construction of an emergency hospital, the reconstruction of the city's children's hospital and the improvement of facilities and their capacities (providing equipment to the newly established city perinatal centre and introducing a unified information system of electronic registration and electronic medical records).

Eurasian LRGs are also making inroads towards the achievement of SDG 4, providing educational opportunities for the different life stages of their populations in accordance with territorial challenges. In Tajikistan, for example, the low coverage of early childhood education services remains a major area of concern. To tackle this issue, LRGs are particularly involved in the construction of pre-school facilities in their territories. An example can be found in the city of Penjikent, where the local government has

Residents of Rostov-on-Don on the shore of the Don River (photo: Victor Dubilier, t.ly/jz8Rb).



opened a three-stored kindergarten in 2019. This will provide pre-school education to 200 children and, by city government initiative, training will be conducted in three languages.

In Uzbekistan, local governments also contribute to the improvement of infrastructures for early childhood and other community amenities by building local government centres (*mahalla*) with support from the national government's territorial programmes for the period 2017-2021. Similarly, the local government of Kaluga is committed to ensuring access to education for all. Over the last decade, access for children with disabilities has been provided in 42 schools and, with the assistance from regional and federal governments, more than 2,000 citizens have been able to move into adequate housing from emergency and dilapidated shelter. The newly developed housing areas have been provided with engineering infrastructure, public transportation, schools and kindergartens. Faced with a significant outflow of school graduates, the local government of the city of Ulyanovsk, in Russia, has created the WorldSkills Junior Center for Improvement and Skills Development, aimed at providing early vocational guidance and vocational training for schoolchildren aged between ten and 17. This is seen as an initiative that will contribute to promoting local employment that is aligned with local realities.

Regarding SDG 5, LRGs in Eurasian countries are seeking to consolidate and promote the advances achieved in gender equality. It is interesting to note that, across the region, women's representation is higher the lower the level of government.<sup>60</sup> In Ukraine, for example, the number of female mayors is higher at the village level (32%) than it is at the city (18.1%) and regional (15%) level. Contrasts exist among the different territories in the region, however. In Belarus, more than 30% of local self-government bodies are headed by female mayors, while in Armenia, progress has only recently been made. According to the Armenian Electoral Code, the ratio of genders has to be 30 (female) to 70 (male) in the national and local party lists. Yet it was only in October 2018 that Ms. Diana Gasparyan won the mayoral election in Armenia's Etchmiadzin city and became the country's first female mayor.<sup>61</sup> In Uzbekistan, mayors (*hokims*) are still all male, yet since the introduction of the 30% female quota for political parties' lists of candidates, the proportion of women in parliament has increased from 9.4% in 2004 to 16% in 2017, while female councillors represent 23% of local councils. Action is also being taken to improve gender discrimination with respect to job opportunities. The city of Rostov-on-Don, in Russia, is implementing a set of initiatives aimed at creating the environment for women to combine child-raising with their career, as well as organizing vocational training

for women who are on maternity leave. In Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, the local government has developed the nationally recognized Women and Business Incubator Centre (WBC), which provides technical assistance, training, personalized advice, and financial consultancy services for women. This also offers a co-working space with a playroom for children to reconcile maternity with career development and employment opportunities.<sup>62</sup>

### **Towards prosperous and inclusive local development: local employment, infrastructure and service provision**

Eurasian LRGs are undertaking a variety of projects aimed at improving cities' infrastructures and built environment to make the provision of public utilities better and enhance populations' life standards and opportunities. Such initiatives are the response of local governments to the challenges that need to be overcome to advance sustainable development, and thus contribute to the localization of the SDGs although oftentimes they may not be explicitly identified in such terms. The city of Tbilisi, for instance, faces many such challenges, including aging and failure of city infrastructure (SDG 9), inadequate public transportation system (SDG 11), poor air quality (SDG 13), unemployment (SDG 8), and flooding, landslides and earthquakes (SDG 15). Its response is membership of the 100 Resilient Cities initiative that proposes an integrated approach to environmental, social and economic problems to facilitate improvements of cities' resilience against natural disasters and helps to make the response to for example high levels of unemployment, ineffective transportation system and endemic violence (SDGs 8, 11 and 16) more efficient.<sup>63</sup> The city has instituted new job training programmes that have already engaged over 60,000 residents, while a government-supported loan programme has taken steps to encourage small business growth (SDG 8).

In an effort to promote local employment opportunities and support their inhabitants' life opportunities, LRGs are proposing a variety of initiatives adapted to the particular unemployment problems in their territories. For instance, the city of Ulyanovsk, in Russia, is focusing on improving conditions for the development of entrepreneurship in the city by implementing a programme to increase the number of small and medium-sized businesses: grants were given to entrepreneurs, free training seminars on business issues were held and special support was provided to innovative projects. As a result, small and medium enterprises increased by more than 2,500 in six months, as did the number of employees in such enterprises. Similarly, the Republic of Tatarstan, also in Russia, has been supporting business projects aimed at economic

growth and jobs creation over the last decade. Among them is a project launched in 2018 by Northern Niva of Tatarstan private company aimed at construction of three dairy farms for 12,100 dairy cows in Bugulma rural district. The project aims to ensure full employment for the rural population, which includes more than 300 rural residents.<sup>64</sup> Those already listed and the majority of Eurasian local development strategies include the goals of decent work and economic growth as fundamental pillars.

In Kazakhstan, the UN's community development programmes in East Kazakhstan, Kyzylorda, Mangystau and Aktobe are excellent channels of assistance related to the implementation of SDGs at the sub-national level. This is supported by the Ministry of Investment and Development as the key national government agency to create and manage the special economic zones (SEZs) of Kazakhstan which are located in particular cities. Currently there are ten SEZs in the country, including, for example, the SEZ Ontustik located in Shymkent city and aimed at developing textile industry or the SEZ Pavlodar located in Pavlodar city and created to develop petrochemical industry.<sup>65</sup>

Concerned with its communities' prosperity, in the city of Yakutsk in Russia, the municipal government has put in place an integrated strategy for city development with a strong focus on the role played by urban infrastructure and utilities, effectively mirroring the complexity and inter-relatedness of the sustainable development challenges and Goals. It also provided funding for transforming dilapidated buildings, to reduce temporary resettlements by expanding the housing stock (SDGs 10 and 11) and is developing an SEZ to attract investments and increase employment opportunities in accordance with the city's 2032 development strategy (SDG 8).<sup>66</sup> Similarly, over the period 2014-2017 and with the assistance of UNDP and the Russian Federation, nine of Tajikistan's most vulnerable districts implemented over 50 priority initiatives embedded into new and updated district development programmes. These initiatives were aimed at improving inhabitants' employment opportunities in the districts, as well as at reinforcing local authorities' capacity to support local economic development (SDGs 8 and 17).<sup>67</sup> Also with assistance from the Russian Federation and UNDP, local governments in the Naryn and Osh regions in Kyrgyzstan have implemented a wide range of initiatives to improve infrastructures and living conditions in their territories (SDGs 8, 9, 11). Local governments in the Naryn region built 53 irrigation canals, which gave access to drinking water to 25,000 people and approximately 2,000 people gained access to uninterrupted power supply. In the framework of an integrated regional development approach, roads were repaired, 13 villages were granted access to modern

veterinary services and 84 small enterprises and four vocational schools were opened in the region. Furthermore, during 2014-2015, LRGs in another seven Kyrgyz regions improved hygiene infrastructures in more than 150 educational and medical institutions, in which water supply, sinks and water heaters were installed, together with toilets and hygiene rooms for women and girls (SDGs 3, 4, 5 and 6). These activities have been supported by UNICEF's Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Programme and implemented jointly with the Russian Federation.<sup>68</sup>

LRGs's commitment to improving infrastructure and services is also serving as a catalyst to enhance citizen participation in city-making decision processes and thus, empower citizens to actively shape the future of their own city,<sup>69</sup> as is the case with the Community-Based Approach to Local Development Programme (CBA) in Ukraine. This promotes sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development at the local level by strengthening participatory governance and fostering community-based initiatives, thereby laying the foundation for successful implementation of decentralization and regional policy reforms and thus contributing to the achievement of SDG 11. Within the CBA framework, Ukrainian local authorities, community organizations and private sector actors plan and carry out joint projects to improve the living conditions of people in disadvantaged urban and rural areas. Almost 4,000 local development initiatives have been implemented since 2008, including the construction of 810 schools and kindergartens, the renovation of 708 health posts, and the development of 157 water supply schemes. Moreover, 18 environmental and 1,044 energy-saving projects were launched and 64 agricultural service cooperatives were founded. Local development resource centres were established in 201 districts and 27 municipalities have been expanded to provide service hubs for community-based development.<sup>70</sup>

Another remarkable example comes from the city government of Almaty, Kazakhstan, where a project based on participatory land planning and upgrading of city grounds was launched. The local government engaged the city's residents

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**LRGs' commitment to improving infrastructure and services is also serving as a catalyst to enhance citizen participation in city-making decision processes and thus, empower citizens to actively shape the future of their own city.**

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in the decision-making process regarding the future of disused and abandoned parts of the city, such as the Almaty tram depot, to make these zones into people-oriented public spaces. The city of Rustavi, in Georgia, has undertaken several initiatives to enhance multi-stakeholder cooperation and design a more inclusive local public governance scheme. Rustavi's local government has translated the successful national public innovation, ServiceLab,<sup>71</sup> into the city's local governance structure.

Among its first initiatives, in 2018, the city launched a collaborative design workshop, which brought together citizens, public servants, architects and students to design the new space for Citizen Service Halls, to be built in 2019.<sup>72</sup> Due to its proximity to the capital, Tbilisi, Rustavi is increasingly becoming a commuter city, with citizens travelling to the capital for jobs and entertainment. To reverse this trend, the local government is seeking to turn Rustavi into a 'City of Innovations', developing the local economy and attracting new investors, engaging citizens in co-designing public services and creating a better living standard for Rustavi's inhabitants. With such a purpose, the city also launched an innovation hub in 2018, which includes a collection of methodological tools to support policy-makers in developing resilient and forward-looking strategies. The hub works to articulate a vision for the city towards 2050 and creates strategies, services, and processes that catalyse change to fulfil this vision while simultaneously encouraging citizens to take part in the localization of the SDGs 8, 9, 11. In a similar vein, the first online platform 'Smart Urban' in Russia was launched in the city of Novosibirsk. Through this online service, international companies, citizens and experts may offer their ideas and projects to address pressing urban problems in four categories: transport and communications, architecture and residential buildings, ecology, and culture and art.<sup>73</sup>

### **Local action and cooperation to promote environmental sustainability, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation ['Planet']**

In the area of climate action, LRGs in Eurasian countries have been implementing a range of different initiatives to adapt to and mitigate the consequences of climate change, such as flooding, degradation of forest resources and pastures, including inappropriate tree harvest for fuel wood and timber, and over-grazing of livestock. These include projects in the area of ecosystems and biodiversity, water, forests, agriculture and energy, infrastructure and waste management, which link to a number of the 2030 Agenda and Paris Climate Agreement goals.

LRGs in Central Asia are directing significant efforts at forest protection, and reforestation in particular. A notable example is the Sustainable Land and Forest Management project in 11 districts in northwestern Azerbaijan implemented by local governments over 2013-2018 with the assistance of UNDP. District governments' actions are aimed at mitigating climate change by managing natural forests, emphasizing the importance of promoting natural regeneration through improved grazing and wood collecting in forests.<sup>74</sup> The Green Bishkek project implemented by the city of Bishkek, for instance, seeks to contribute to the implementation of SDG 11 by expanding the existing park area and creating new green areas in the city. The aim of the project was not only to create a new green zone, but also to slow down the process of soil erosion,<sup>75</sup> which was achieved through planting 90 seedlings of rare trees on the embankment zone of the Ala-Archa River with the support of business structures. As a consequence of the shrinkage of the Aral Sea, and within the framework of the Forest Protection and Reforestation project (2007–2015), local administration of the Kyzylorda region guarantees the continuity of a project initiated by the Government of Kazakhshtan, the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility, that developed a forest nursery and research station for sexual seed propagation/reproduction. Between 2015 and 2018, the Kyzylorda region administration planted 20,000 hectares using this method. A total of 61,000 hectares of the Aral seabed have thus been covered with vegetation. Consequently, the sandstorms that carried toxic waste from the lakebed and buried communities' houses are starting to recede as propagated trees' roots fix the lakebed's ground.<sup>76</sup>

Equally, local governments are taking action to support the provision of affordable and clean energy (SDG 7). For example, signatories of the Covenant of Mayors, such as the city of Lviv and the association known as 'Energy Effective Cities of Ukraine', organizes 'Energy Days' each year to enhance citizens' awareness of the necessity to create a safe energy-efficient future; and familiarize them with the main provisions of the 2020 Sustainable Energy Action Plan.<sup>77</sup>

The Tbilisi government undertook the modernization of public transport aimed at reducing its environmental impact by optimizing bus routes, introducing thorough technical check-ups of vehicles, and renovating the municipality's service cars with smaller low fuel-consuming automobiles.<sup>78</sup> In Armenia, 18 municipalities have committed to developing sustainable energy action plans (SEAPs).<sup>79</sup> Rustavi's (Georgia) 2020 Action Plan for Sustainable Energy Development until 2020 includes actions such as the insulation of buildings and the use of energy-efficient lamps, as well as the installation of solar collectors in

kindergartens to produce hot water, building a new energy-efficient social hostel for 12 socially vulnerable families, and replacing street and traffic lights with energy efficient lights.

Moreover, the city is adopting an energy sustainability strategy based on the importance of urban renewal to enhance energetic efficiency, and replacing and repairing residential buildings' frames, roofs, insulation, doors and windows. The city government will grant one energy-efficient light bulb per family in some targeted houses.<sup>80</sup> In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, solar collectors were installed at two city boiler houses to reduce air pollution and improve the city's environmental situation. A main advantage of solar power plants is that they require almost no maintenance and attention from the operating enterprise thus saving on operational costs and in turn electricity costs for citizens. This contributes also to the energetic poverty component of SDG 1. The initiative was launched by the city government and implemented by the municipal enterprise, Bishkek Heating and Energy, co-funded by the Environmental Protection Fund.

The issue of municipal waste management has become increasingly urgent for Eurasian local governments over the last decade and indeed is present in the majority of SNG development strategies that consequently contribute to the realization of SDG 15. Yerevan's 2019-2023 Strategy for example, involves the creation of a solid waste management system and the promotion of a waste recycling culture. Similarly, the city of Tashkent (Uzbekistan) launched the programme 'Hashar Week' in March 2019, to promote domestic waste sorting amongst its citizens. At the end of the week, prizes were awarded for best garbage sorting.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, 21 of the city's garbage collection sites began admitting only sorted waste. In 2018, Rostov-on-Don's city administration, together with the ecological NGO *Poryadok* and joint stock company 'Rostov secondary recycling', undertook actions aimed at promoting separate garbage collection. As a result, more than 27 tonnes of solid domestic waste were collected.<sup>82</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, self-government bodies of rural settlements are concerned with the problem of garbage removal and accordingly, the Kum-Dobinsky municipal government prioritized the creation of a municipal garbage disposal enterprise within its action plan.<sup>83</sup> In Belarus, the issue of waste treatment has become particularly pressing for the country's capital and its surroundings. The Puchavi y District, located near Minsk, suffered greatly from unauthorized solid waste dumps which contaminated the environment. As a response, Puchavi y's local government launched a project with the objective of improving environmental conditions in the district.<sup>84</sup> The local government developed a three-year municipal waste treatment

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## The issue of municipal waste management has become increasingly urgent for Eurasian local governments over the last decade.

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strategy (2016-2018), which included the establishment of a system for collecting electrical and electronic equipment and the elimination of unauthorized dumps. It also entailed large-scale awareness-raising efforts aimed at bringing the attention of the local community to the importance of properly managing waste.

DRR initiatives and local strategies to mainstream climate change adaptation into broader development plans are also starting to emerge in the region. For instance, to protect the city of Almaty (Kazakhstan) against mudflow, the city government and its subsidiary enterprise applied a new method of pumping water from the surface of the lake in the mountains which causes the mudflow. The innovation allowed the manifold reduction of the volume of water in the lake basin. Moreover, two new mudflow dams were built and one reconstructed, and rock slopes were reinforced on dangerous sections of the road.<sup>85</sup> A particularly notable example of mainstreaming resilience strategies into local development planning is that of the city of Stepanavan. The city, which is in one of Armenia's most earthquake-prone territories, took the lead in promoting a disaster-resilient development plan at the local level.<sup>86</sup> Using the Local Government Self-Assessment Tool (LGSAT) provided by the Making Cities Resilient campaign, a City Resilience Task Force was created to assess Stepanavan's disaster resilience, which identified gaps in the city's management capacities and developed a detailed action plan based on the LGSAT assessment results. The plan was created at a workshop convened by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction Global Education and Training Institute (GETI) and later mainstreamed into the citywide development plan.

The Kaluga Region, moreover, is implementing the project 'Tarusa - Russia's first eco-city', winner of the aforementioned II Climate Forum of Russian Cities.<sup>87</sup> This is based on the principles of integrated development, looking to strike a balance between the protection and development of the existing urban ecosystem, economy, society and nature. 

# 4. Conclusions

**The commitment to reach the SDGs, and the approach to their implementation, differs from country to country in the Eurasia region. Seven countries have already submitted their VNRs to the UN and four more are planning to do so in 2020.**

As in all other regions, **LRGs in Eurasian countries carried out responsibilities related to the different areas of the SDGs**, long before the Goals were formally adopted by the international community. Generally, SNGs in Eurasia (whether they are self-governing bodies or deconcentrated bodies of the central government) perform important social and development functions relating directly to the SDGs and identified as key priorities for the Eurasia region. These are to reduce poverty, ensure prosperity and environmental sustainability and include general and pre-school education, primary, specialized and general healthcare, housing and utilities, public transportation, affordable energy, urban planning, recreation and cultural activities, economic development and small business support, environmental protection and resilience, among others. Nevertheless, the implementation of particular SDGs appears to be a new challenge for LRGs in Eurasia region (SDGs 8, 9, 12, 13, 16). The application of the 2030 Agenda generally seems to be a shared responsibility of all levels of government, but LRGs play the most important role in the process.

However, in Eurasia region a **top-down approach to SDG implementation is largely dominant**. Local development plans are situated within the framework of national strategies. The central government delivers methodological assistance and coordinates or approves sub-national development strategies as well as providing grants for implementation of these strategies.

**The activity and initiatives of local governments in achieving the SDGs are closely linked to the degree of political decentralization in the country.** This is corroborated by examples of local-level initiatives to localize the SDGs in Russia, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan (see Section 3.2). The different geographic, climatic, economic, demographic and ethnographic characteristics across regions of the country impel LRGs to find their own and original approaches to the implementation of their tasks, even when mandated by the national government. Similarly, local governments, especially when they are elected, cannot efficiently carry out their tasks in SDG implementation without involving civil

society and local business, which in turn would have an impact on local performance. This is being observed in Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine.

The major obstacle for Eurasian LRGs in contributing to the implementation of the SDGs seems to be the generally low level of local resources, in particular in Tajikistan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. The other problem facing SDG localization in Eurasian countries seems to be an unclear division of powers between different levels of government (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Ukraine). In most of these countries, this problem is recognized and the central governments make efforts to clarify assignment of spending powers. No less important for decentralization and SDG localization is the limited availability of stable and predictable revenue assignment and transparent fiscal grants allocation. This problem concerns an even larger number of Eurasian countries (adding Armenia and Kyrgyzstan): only a small portion of local revenue sources are provided to local governments on a regular basis, while a major part are distributed through irregular and non-transparent rules. This leads to uncertainty about the fiscal capacity of local governments to provide funding to initiatives aimed at sustainable development.

The experiences in this chapter show LRGs in the region are very interested in increasing the economic and social efficiency of their tasks while achieving sustainable development, but that they need a revision of current frameworks to strengthen local governance and local institutions accountability to do so.

**The improvement of intergovernmental fiscal relations, which is the basis of the decentralization process and necessary for the localization of the SDGs, should cover all three components in Eurasia: the delimitation of competences and expenditure powers; endowing local governments with their own tax resources on a stable basis; and establishing a clear, transparent and predictable distribution of fiscal transfers.** Russia and Kazakhstan have made some steps in this direction with positive results.

The overall trend in intergovernmental relations in Eurasian countries over the last five to ten years was the occurrence of mergers and enlargement of municipalities' size, initiated by central governments in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Among arguments in favour of these initiatives are the

lack of managerial capacities in small-sized local governments, the limited tax base, which leads to fiscal inequalities, and the inability to provide adequate funding for local public goods provision. The process of amalgamation in Eurasian countries has had dual effects.

On the one hand, enlargement of municipalities distances local governments from citizens and makes it more difficult for them to participate in decision-making over matters to do with their neighbourhoods. On the other, small-sized municipalities do not have the resources nor the competences to undertake significant investments (in water supply or energy provision), or provide socially important public goods (education, healthcare, social protection). Meanwhile amalgamation results in economies of scale in spending public funds that contribute to solving these problems. However, even in the larger self-governing cities, local taxes contribute only a small share of the local resources needed to carry out local responsibilities.

**The implementation of the SDGs, the New Urban Agenda and the other global agendas, affects the organization of national-sub-national institutional and political relationships in Eurasian countries.** A few countries have involved local governments in high-level mechanisms of coordination for the implementation of the SDGs (Belarus and Georgia). The common feature for Eurasian countries is that national governments recognize that local governments have significant responsibilities with regards to the implementation of the SDGs. Although LRGs in Eurasian countries acquire sufficient expertise to carry out the tasks to achieve the SDGs, in most countries it is assumed that their role is mostly to implement the goals and initiatives determined by the central government. Because of this, close attention is paid by national governments to ensure the inclusion of the regional/local executive bodies in the action plans for SDGs. Local governments are also assigned with the responsibility to provide statistical data on indicators of SDGs achievement.

**One of the cross-cutting issues of the SDGs is to promote a new governance approach.** The Goals bring a paradigm shift in governance as an integrated framework, calling for whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches. The policy of achieving the SDGs *per se* makes it clear to central governments that they need to endow local governments with greater responsibility for implementing the SDGs at the local level, but at the same time, give them greater autonomy. As an example, in Belarus, the commitment to localize the SDGs appears to serve as a catalyst for decentralization reform. The meeting of the National Coordination Council in June 2018 confirmed a shift in development strategies approach and placed more accent on regional development. Likewise, in Kazakhstan

and Kyrgyzstan, Development Strategies for the 2030 Horizon call for strategic steps towards decentralization.

Furthermore, **localization of the SDGs makes the dialogue between government and civil society a necessary condition to implement the SDGs most efficiently.** There is a need for more innovative and transformative policies, with more visionary local leaders and more civil society involvement to ensure a new path for more sustainable urban and territorial development. Thus, in recent years, in quite a number of countries (Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan), local sustainable development strategies were elaborated by working groups with the participation of NGOs and the most proactive civil society activists.

**International cooperation and exchanges between LRGs play a critical role.** In all countries (besides Russia), LRGs' SDG implementation efforts are being supported by international organizations through technical assistance and co-funding. As the UN's development arm, UNDP has a key role to play in supporting countries in Eurasia region to achieve the SDGs. These countries have greatly benefited from financial and technical support from international financial organizations, as well as from the international donor community. Regional and international decentralized cooperation through peer-to-peer exchanges and platforms for knowledge-sharing could act as levers to support the localization of the SDGs in the region.

Although this is an important prerequisite for LRGs to become the owners of the SDG localization process, there are challenges that must still be addressed by national governments to make this a reality. These are further decentralization; increased fiscal autonomy and more transparent intergovernmental fiscal relations; reduced top-down and excessively paternalistic approaches to intergovernmental relations; reduced extreme economic disparity between regions and localities to promote a more balanced regional development; and equalization in access to basic public services. LRGs in turn need to strengthen their position in relation to central governments, at the same time maintaining their responsibility and accountability to their citizens. ☉

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**The common feature of Eurasian countries is the recognition by national governments of LRGs' significant responsibilities with regards to the implementation of the SDGs.**

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