



Economic Commission for Europe

Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on
 Access to Information, Public Participation
 in Decision-making and Access to Justice
 in Environmental Matters

Seventh session

Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant
 Release and Transfer Registers to the Convention
 on Access to Information, Public Participation in
 Decision-making and Access to Justice in
 Environmental Matters

Fourth session

Joint High-level Segment

Geneva, 21 October 2021

Report of the Joint High-level Segment

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I. Introduction

1. The Joint High-level Segment of the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs), which were organized back-to-back in Geneva (18–22 October 2021), was held on 21 October 2021. At the end of the meeting, participants adopted the Geneva Declaration on Environmental Democracy for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient Development (Geneva Declaration), as set out in an addendum to the present document (ECE/MP.PP/2021/16/Add.1–ECE/MP.PRTR/2021/2/Add.1).

A. Attendance

2. The Joint High-level Segment was attended by delegations from the following Parties and signatories to the Convention and/or its Protocol on PRTRs: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, European Union, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3. Delegations from Canada, Guinea-Bissau and Uzbekistan also attended.

4. In addition, representatives of the following United Nations system organizations were present: the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean; the United Nations Environment Programme; the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat); the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity; the secretariat of the UNEP Mediterranean Action Plan and the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean (Barcelona Convention); the International Telecommunication Union and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. International organizations represented at the meeting included the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe; the Council of Europe; and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

5. Representatives of Aarhus Centres, international financial institutions, business and professional, research and academic organizations were also present, as were representatives of international, regional and national environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of whom coordinated their input within the framework of the European ECO-Forum.

B. Organizational matters

6. The Joint High-level Segment was co-chaired by Mr. Anders Mankler (State Secretary, Ministry of the Environment of Sweden), who chaired items 1–3 of the provisional agenda, and Mr. Levan Davitashvili (Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia), who chaired items 4 and 6. Item 5 was chaired by Ms. Maia Bitadze (Chair of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention) (see the annotated provisional agenda ECE/MP.PP/2021/15–ECE/MP.PRTR/2021/1). Due to reorganization of work, part of the time allocated to agenda item 4 was utilized to take a vote on compliance matters in place of a discussion on the Geneva Declaration. Statements for that agenda item were therefore not delivered at the session in real time but were posted on the meeting website as they were made available to the secretariat by speakers.¹

¹ Statements on the Geneva Declaration can be found under item 4 of the Statements and Presentations tab at the meeting website: https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/JHLS_Aarhus_MoP7_PRTRs_MoPP4.

7. Delegations of Parties to the two treaties adopted the agenda as set out in document ECE/MP.PP/2021/15–ECE/MP.PRTR/2021/1.

8. In an opening address, Ms. Olga Algayerova (Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)) stressed the importance of the Convention and its Protocol in the context of large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning. She also recalled the crucial role of the treaties in upholding the right to a clean, safe and sustainable environment for the past two decades. She then delivered a statement on behalf of the Secretary-General. In his statement, the Secretary-General praised the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol for inspiring and advancing environmental democracy across the globe, despite significant challenges. He underlined a number of issues, including the need to prioritize environmental democracy for a sustainable economic recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and for an effective response to the rising threat of climate change. He expressed his concern at the dire situation of environmental defenders and welcomed efforts to establishing a rapid response mechanism for their protection as an important contribution to his Call to Action for Human Rights.²

9. In his statement, Mr. Mankler (State Secretary, Ministry of the Environment of Sweden) recalled that the main objectives of the meeting were for high-level officials, other representatives of Governments, NGOs, international organizations and other stakeholders to engage in a discussion on issues related to the role of the Convention and its Protocol in furthering sustainable infrastructure and spatial planning.

II. Report on credentials with regard to the Protocol's Parties and adoption of draft operating procedures to facilitate remote participation and decision-making in the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol due to extraordinary circumstances

10. Before the start of the thematic session, the Parties to the Protocol adopted operating procedures to facilitate remote participation and decision-making due to the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic as amended at the meeting (ECE/MP.PRTR/2021/CRP.2). The Parties to the Protocol also approved the report on credentials for representatives attending the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol.³

III. Chair's summary of the thematic session

11. The Joint High-level Segment included a thematic session consisting of two panels chaired by Mr. Mankler (State Secretary, Ministry of the Environment of Sweden). Both panels were organized in the following format: panellists were invited to make introductory statements showcasing actions or initiatives that illustrated how the Aarhus Convention or its Protocol could be used to achieve sustainable infrastructure and spatial planning and, thereafter, the floor was opened for statements and questions.

12. In his introduction, the Chair of the thematic session underlined that the principles of accountability, transparency, the participatory approach and the rule of law as laid out in the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol were key to achieving truly sustainable, inclusive and resilient development. He also stressed that it had become clear, with the advent of the Decade of Action,⁴ that the challenge of delivering sustainable infrastructure was central to the quest for global sustainability and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development

² See www.un.org/en/content/action-for-human-rights/index.shtml.

³ For practical reasons, outcomes of this agenda item are included in the report on the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (ECE/MP.PRTR/2021/6).

⁴ The United Nations Decade of Action is an ambitious global effort to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For further information, see www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/.

Goals. The Chair noted that the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention – access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice – could act as guides for the promotion of inclusive and participatory processes for large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning. He also said that he regarded the Protocol on PRTRs as an important tool that Governments could use to assist in sustainable planning. The Geneva Declaration and exchange of challenges, achievements and good practices in the thematic session discussion offered an opportunity to showcase how Governments, international organizations, NGOs and other stakeholders could contribute to sustainable large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning through an inclusive and participatory process.

A. Panel 1

13. Ms. Anita Pipan (Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Slovenia to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva) began her intervention by welcoming newly adopted Human Rights Council resolution 48/13 on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment,⁵ and by evoking the beginning of the planning process for a national spatial plan on the Otiški vrh-Holmec State road. She clearly illustrated how fostering access to information and public participation from the very outset of a large project's planning could enrich large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning. Public participation was not simply a box to be checked off as a part of the planning process, but must be continual, clear and transparent for it to be truly effective. The approach of "deep and honest involvement" seen in that project was crucial to building trust between communities and project planners and should be applied to all decision-making processes. In turn, that allowed for best possible outcomes on a project's sustainability. Such trust could not only lead to an improved project's ultimate success, but also to a healthier level of community involvement and an acceptable outcome for all those whose lives would be most affected by large-scale infrastructure projects.

14. Mr. Serik Kozhanyazov (Vice Minister for Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources of Kazakhstan) elaborated on the development by his country of a new environmental code and the "Zhasyl Kazakhstan" project, which aimed to integrate Sustainable Development Goals for a sustainable, green economic recovery and State planning process. The "Zhasyl Kazakhstan" project included the improvement of water bodies, reduction of air pollution, better waste management and improved energy efficiency. The reform of the country's environmental legislation was a good example of how to adapt environmental policy to better include the principles of the Aarhus Convention. The speaker demonstrated how engaging the public in important decision-making, such as on major large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning, could be beneficial for all, particularly with regard to preserving nature. He also highlighted the beneficial role of PRTRs and other modern technology and platforms, such as interactive presentations, and unified environmental online portals for easier access to information on projects that could have significant environmental impacts.

15. Ms. Emmanuelle Lachaussée (Deputy Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva) described the recent reform by France of its environmental legislation to include the public in more steps of the planning process. As a part of that process, France had committed to undertake significant reforms in order to reap the far-reaching benefits of incorporating inclusive public participation practices into large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning. Not only had that approach improved the quality of planning decisions and the sustainability of the overall project, but it had also raised public awareness of climate issues. Public participation and access to information created scenarios in which everyone benefited, and ultimately led to healthy democracies and healthy environments.

16. Mr. Michal Kiča (State Secretary, Ministry of Environment of Slovakia) underlined the importance of countries developing national action plans with the principles of the Aarhus Convention to improve preparedness and strengthen resilience to negative impacts resulting from climate change. The speaker brought up a key point in his presentation on how social

⁵ A/HRC/RES/48/13.

and economic issues, such as energy poverty, could often come into play when implementing climate change adaptation plans and measures. Those aspects were also relevant when implementing the Aarhus Convention's core principles in large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning. That presented a key challenge for many projects globally but, in order to achieve truly sustainable, inclusive and resilient development, it was crucial to face that challenge head-on with lessons learned and to adapt policies for a social and just approach so as to not leave the more vulnerable members of society behind.

17. The panel presentations were followed by interventions from the floor, starting with a statement by Ms. Aleksandra Imširagić Durić (Assistant Minister for Environment Protection of Serbia), who discussed the complexities of implementing the Aarhus Convention to the fullest extent. She highlighted the role of public participation in strategic environmental impact assessments, and draft spatial plans, for example, for the construction of Kolubara B thermal power plant and the infrastructure corridor of the Belgrade–Niš rail link. The speaker also drew attention to the interconnection of the first pillar of the Aarhus Convention on access to information with its second pillar on public participation. As a part of those projects, it had been found that, even when public participation procedures were in place, an uninformed or uninterested public did not allow for meaningful participation.

18. Mr. Michal Kiča (State Secretary, Ministry of Environment of Slovakia) took the floor to reiterate the challenges of the implementation of the Aarhus Convention on the national level, and in particular the challenge of balancing the interests of various actors. He underlined the need to ensure that public participation in spatial planning and large-scale infrastructure projects was inclusive, transparent and representative of all actors concerned by the planning process or project. He highlighted the value of the Aarhus Convention's implementation for the protection of the environment.

B. Panel 2

19. Opening the second panel, Ms. Galit Cohen (Director-General, Ministry of Environmental Protection of Israel) shared how PRTR data were used to encourage Government and public activity to reduce emissions in the Haifa Bay area (Israel). Such data had helped the Ministry of Health to determine that high emissions from petrochemical activities in the Haifa Bay area were causing higher incidences of cancer among local residents. After the public had organized and expressed its concerns, the Government had created a national action plan to decrease emissions and reduce environmental harm. The presentation demonstrated the value of the Aarhus Convention and particularly its Protocol on PRTRs as a practical tool for Governments to use. The involvement of stakeholders from both Government and the civil society in the use of PRTR data was important as it amplified their impact and could lead to much-needed policy change, as in the case of the Haifa Bay area. The speaker also emphasized that the Aarhus Convention's first pillar of providing the public with access to environmental information in a clear and transparent way could act as a driver of complex policy processes, particularly in similar spatial planning or other large-scale infrastructure projects.

20. Ms. Iordana-Rodica Iordanov (State Secretary, Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Moldova) gave a presentation on how public participation had been included as a key element in a new green city action plan in Chisinau. The goal of the project was to develop a green city that had high-quality environmental assets, made efficient use of resources, was adaptable to climate change risks, and maximized economic and social benefits. During the course of the implementation of the new plan, it had been found that public participation, NGOs and civil society organization initiatives were especially useful in implementing the new plan and it had been decided that future steps would involve stakeholders throughout the monitoring process. A key challenge in that project was the need for easily measurable environmental indicators. The Republic of Moldova intended to take the lessons learned from Chisinau and implement similar green city action plans throughout the country in a bid to foster more environmentally friendly and climate resilient urban communities.

21. Mr. Antonio Hodgers (President, Department of Territory, State Council of the Republic and Canton of Geneva, Swiss Confederation) focused his presentation on Geneva's "Forum Citoyen" (Citizens' Forum) project, which foresaw close engagement with Geneva residents to determine how to live in the city in a way that respected nature and faced climate change. The project included general training on relevant themes, hearings on topics that residents wish to explore, debates and discussions. The project had resulted in a final report that listed 104 original and ambitious measures, to be submitted to any authority that the "Forum Citoyen" deemed appropriate. That activity showcased the importance of including opinions from a diverse population during project planning. It also demonstrated how inclusive public participation empowered the inhabitants of Geneva to work together and face the climate challenge as a community, regardless of individuals' respective backgrounds. Switzerland had a rich history of democracy, as confirmed by the example highlighted in the presentation.

22. Mr. Jeremy Wates (Secretary-General, European Environmental Bureau, and representative of the European ECO-Forum) summarized the work carried out by the European ECO-Forum to expand the wind power sector throughout the State of Burgenland (Austria), without harming the important ecosystems of the State. Mr. Wates described how, initially, public opinion had been against the building of wind farms, but, after increasing public involvement and efforts to provide the public with transparent and clear details of the project, a high level of public support had been achieved. Mr. Wates described the added value of citizen science in the project, particularly when working to minimize the impact of the project on local indigenous flora and fauna; similarly to other presenters, he pointed out that there were difficulties in balancing the conflicting interests of Governments, NGOs and other stakeholders.

23. Ms. Birgit Schwenk (Deputy Director-General for Strategic Aspects of Environmental Policy and Environmental Law, Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety of Germany) provided examples of development of sustainable infrastructure and spatial planning in Germany. She emphasized the need for infrastructure systems to allow society to function properly, such as infrastructure for wastewater, ensuring mobility, providing information and electronic information tools, but noted that such systems often came at an economic and environmental price. In that context, the Aarhus Convention could play a crucial role, as active public participation could generate new and creative ideas and necessary measures for infrastructure and create acceptance among the public. The delegate then described Government-funded model sustainable infrastructure projects, and a recent funding programme for municipalities to phase out coal with the aim of the regions concerned becoming model regions for sustainability. Those projects relied on public participation and expertise from entrepreneurs, civil sector scientists and other experts for innovative ideas. The delegate then stressed that support from the local public was just as important as new ideas, and that public acceptance was not a given, but a necessity in sustainable infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to public participation, but such participation was no less important, and legislation on digital participation had been introduced to ensure that it was still able to take place, while allowing for in-person public participation to ensure inclusivity.

24. Ms. Martine Rohn-Brossard (Head, Europe, Trade and Development Cooperation Section, and Deputy Head, International Affairs Division, Federal Office for the Environment of Switzerland) acknowledged that the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs were key to sustainable infrastructure and spatial planning. She noted that the discussion on infrastructure and spatial planning was also linked to resource extraction and mining, and was relevant in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, which was of particular importance to the pan-European region. Infrastructure was a priority candidate for rapid economic recovery and job recreation and was therefore at the heart of economic recovery plans. Investments, however, needed to be directed toward sustainable infrastructure in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, fulfil the Paris Agreement and avoid carbon- and resource-intensive pathways. For an economic recovery to be green, it was necessary to put in place high environmental standards, provide access to information, and promote public participation in the development of projects. The speaker then stressed that existing policy instruments had more of an impact if data were integrated and that it was important to further develop the Protocol on PRTRs as an effective tool to

ensure transparency. Lastly, the speaker said that she warmly welcomed the entry into force of the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement) and the accession of Guinea-Bissau to the Aarhus Convention.

25. Mr. Rafael Tuts (Director, Global Solutions Division, UN-Habitat) expressed the support of UN-Habitat for the Geneva Declaration and his belief that its adoption marked an important milestone in transparency and effective and inclusive public participation in environmental matters. He stressed that it was central to the normative and operational work of UN-Habitat. He then highlighted a few useful UN-Habitat tools such as the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning – a global reference framework to promote more compact, socially inclusive, better integrated and connected cities and territories that fostered sustainable urban development and were resilient to climate change. He also pointed to “Our City Plans”, the digital version of the UN-Habitat Participatory Incremental Urban Planning toolbox, as being useful with regard to increasing public participation in large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning.

C. General observations, challenges and the way forward

26. The Decade of Action challenges us to regroup as an international community, rethink the ways in which we have undertaken large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning in the past, and consider different, more sustainable and more inclusive approaches. With climate change increasingly affecting our daily lives and with the certainty that it will continue to do so, we can no longer afford to take the default approach. As was demonstrated in the presentations and interventions, the cross-cutting public rights guaranteed under the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs – the rights to environmental information, to participation in decision-making, and to access to justice – are welcome guides to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals that we set together as an international community.

27. Only a couple weeks ago, we saw the Human Rights Council adopt a landmark resolution that, in political terms, recognized the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right that is important for the enjoyment of human rights. It is very timely that we meet today to discuss best practices and lessons learned on access to information, public participation and access to justice in large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning. These issues have a direct impact on the state of our environments. As demonstrated in the presentations and interventions, the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol can provide Governments, NGOs, civil society and other stakeholders with practical and effective tools for ensuring the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for everyone.

28. Spatial planning and large-scale infrastructure projects, including those initiated as potential recovery measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, create new opportunities for employment, travel and economic growth. At the same time, they may have an immense impact on ecosystems and people’s health and well-being. One common challenge was dealing with the conflicting interests of different key actors. Be they NGOs, local or national Governments, various economic industries, local residents or any other concerned voice, all of their voices and opinions are important and must be taken into consideration. Early coordination and clear communication on the expectations of roles for each actor is vital for a smooth planning process, particularly when there are so many different stakeholders.

29. In the same vein, another common challenge was communicating to the public at every stage of a large-scale infrastructure project and spatial planning in a way that is clear and effective in its outreach. Trust is hard-earned but putting the effort in at an early stage and cultivating trust from the very beginning of a project, be this through continual consultations, hearings, workshops, meetings or surveys, can lead to a widely accepted project that the public accepts into their lives and environment. Clarifying the individual stages of public participation in a transparent and clear manner can manage expectations from the beginning. However, this must be a continual engagement with the public, with involvement at every stage.

30. Many of the presentations showed the benefits of the use of modern technology and electronic information tools, as they can disseminate information and provide new platforms for public participation. They can also assist in streamlining and centralizing information for easier access to relevant information on large infrastructure projects and spatial planning. However, it is crucial that, in our necessary shift toward modern technology and digitalization, we do not leave certain members of the population behind, such as the older generations, or those without access to modern technology. Governments must ensure that public participation and access to information in infrastructure and spatial planning take a truly inclusive approach that considers the varying socioeconomic situations of the individuals concerned. Every individual should be offered equal and effective opportunities to participate in decision-making and access to information and justice in environmental matters. This is particularly important in the context of infrastructure projects and spatial planning, which can have wide-reaching impacts on environment, communities and individuals' well-being. It is important that, when promoting the application of public rights, we ensure this is done in a non-discriminatory way.

31. In relation to the value of electronic information tools, the interventions demonstrated how PRTRs can be beneficial in promoting sustainable infrastructure and spatial planning. PRTRs are designed to provide specific information on various pollutants emitted in an area and can therefore offer planners and others involved in decision-making processes a host of important information on the area in which they plan to build. Collected PRTR data can also be used as a risk-reduction tool in the planning process to see how similar past projects have affected the environment, health and well-being of nearby communities. Also, a map-based visualization of the geographical location of registered sources of pollutant releases facilitates identification of suitable locations for infrastructure projects. Based on these PRTR data, plans can be adjusted to minimize the environmental impact, thereby making infrastructure and spatial planning more sustainable.

32. The Aarhus Convention and the Protocol on PRTRs are effectively the only legally binding instruments open to all States Members of the United Nations that implement Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. This provides Governments with a solid framework to ensure that large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning are planned in a way that ensures an inclusive and transparent process across borders. It is therefore important to apply them in the promotion of sustainable large-scale infrastructure projects and spatial planning for the best possible outcomes.

33. If we want to achieve a sustainable future and to build inclusive and just societies, we need to be mindful of the rights of every person who wishes to have access to information and to express his or her views on any major infrastructure project or spatial planning activity that may have an impact on the environment, or on his or her community's well-being. Exercising environmental human rights without fear of persecution, harassment or any other form of retaliation is a vital element in an effective environmental democracy and it is crucial we apply this in line with the treaties if we are to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.

34. A number of conclusions can be derived from the session in this regard, among them the following key takeaways:

- In striving for a quick economic turnaround, infrastructure and planning decisions should not bypass transparency or inclusive processes, undermine environmental safeguards, or generate unsustainable debt.
- It is critical to safeguard the public's rights throughout the infrastructure development cycle:
- planning, design, financing, construction, operation, reconsideration or updates of the operating conditions and decommissioning.
- Ensuring early stage public participation to capture as many potential risks and impacts as possible and to avoid conflict during later phases of the development cycle should be implemented consistently.

- End users' rights and needs shall be respected: this requires incorporating gender-related needs and the needs of persons with disabilities, youth, indigenous peoples and other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in planning and developing processes.
- Ensuring a safe and enabling environment in which developers, planners and financial actors play supportive roles in the implementation of the public's rights shall be promoted.

IV. Geneva Declaration

35. Under the present agenda item, chaired by Mr. Davitashvili (Minister for Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia), ministers and heads of delegation from Parties and signatories to the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol, together with representatives of other States, international, regional and non-governmental organizations, parliamentarians and other representatives of civil society throughout the ECE region and beyond, adopted the Geneva Declaration on Environmental Democracy for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient Development as amended at the meeting (ECE/MP.PP/2021/CRP.4 - ECE/MP.PRTR/2021/CRP.1).

V. Adoption of the decisions of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention

36. The present item was chaired by Ms. Bitadze, Chair of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention. The Meeting of the Parties to the Convention formally adopted the decisions it had provisionally adopted earlier at its seventh session. The Meeting of the Parties to the Convention also formally adopted by consensus decision VII/8 on general issues of compliance (ECE/MP.PP/2021/CRP.5), as amended at the meeting, during the High-level Segment. With regard to decision VII/8c concerning compliance by Belarus with its obligations under the Convention, the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention formally adopted that decision, as amended at the meeting (ECE/MP.PP/2021/CRP.10), by a vote during the High-level Segment.⁶

37. Mr. Andrei Khudyk (Minister for Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of Belarus) delivered a statement regarding the adoption of decision VII/8c on compliance by Belarus. In his statement, the speaker addressed a number of issues, including: the measures that Belarus had taken over the years to better implement the Aarhus Convention, such as the creation of a digital portal for environmental information, the growing network of "green" schools in the country, and the training of specialists for implementation of the Convention. He stressed that Belarus was providing necessary support to members of the public and NGOs working in the field of the environment and disagreed with the conclusion that the situation was rapidly deteriorating for persons exercising their rights under the Convention. Belarus was guided by the rule that exercising rights guaranteed to the public under the Convention should not allow for immunity and impunity when in violation of national legislation. He stated that due attention had not been given to the arguments of Belarus and that the vote had been a hasty, excessive and confrontational measure. He emphasized the importance of decisions being taken by consensus under the Aarhus Convention and stated that Belarus did not consider itself to be bound by the non-consensual decision regarding Belarus. He expressed his serious concern at the trend that had emerged in recent years of applying double standards under the Convention when the Meeting of the Parties had decided to postpone, for a second time, a decision on compliance by the European Union for another four years.⁷

38. Subsequently, representatives of the European ECO-Forum expressed gratitude for Parties' support regarding the decision on Belarus and highlighted the decision's importance

⁶ For practical reasons, decisions adopted by the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention at its seventh session are being issued in an addendum to the report of that meeting (ECE/MP.PP/2021/2/Add.1).

⁷ The statement made by the Minister for Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of Belarus can be found on the meeting website under Item 5 of the Statements and Presentations Tab: https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/JHLS_Aarhus_MoP7_PRTRs_MoPP4.

for environmental democracy and the promotion of the Convention's principles. Regret was expressed that no consensus could be found regarding the decision on Belarus, and that a vote had been necessary to preserve the fundamental values of the Aarhus Convention.

VI. Closing of the meeting

39. In their closing remarks, delegations welcomed the accession of Guinea-Bissau to the Convention. They also expressed their gratitude to the Chairs of the High-level Segment for the rich discussions and for their guidance through the necessary and complex hybrid format. Delegations then thanked the outgoing Chair of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention for her competent leadership.

40. Mr. Davitashvili (Minister for Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia), who chaired the present item, expressed his regret at the fact that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it had not been possible to hold the meetings in Georgia. He then expressed his firm belief that, while much had been accomplished in furthering environmental democracy by Parties, much more could be done. Furthermore, the Parties had to focus efforts on ensuring that the "Aarhus family" was expanded and became even stronger. He also underlined the importance of applying the principles of the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs in more countries around the world.

41. He then closed the meeting, noting once again the important role of the Geneva Declaration in the promotion of environmental democracy for inclusive, resilient and sustainable development
