

**Statement by Justice and Environment at the 26<sup>th</sup> Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention concerning Agenda Item 4(a): Compliance Mechanism**

I wish to congratulate Ms. Ryall on her truly excellent performance as the new Chair of the Compliance Committee. You had big shoes to fill following the departure of the former Chair, Jonas Ebbesson, and from what I can see, you are doing an outstanding job of accomplishing just that. At the same time, I know that your job and the work of the entire Committee is significantly supported through the tireless and brilliant work of the secretariat, so I want to also acknowledge that and express the European ECO Forum's warmest thanks for that work.

I also want to express my appreciation for the two new members on the Committee, Ms. Sharpston and Mr. Schomerus, who seem to be settling into their new roles with great ease and indeed style. I was fortunate enough to see Mr. Schomerus in action as the curator of one of the cases which had its hearing at the 75th meeting of the Compliance Committee, and I was truly happy that the candidate which a group of us NGOs nominated on the behalf of the European Eco Forum at the last MOP performed so very well. And I found Ms. Sharpston's questions in another case at that meeting to be quite insightful and on point indeed.

Speaking of the Committee's meetings, I want to point out to the Working Group of the Parties that the Committee had hearings for no fewer than 4 cases at this recent meeting. This and other measures demonstrate its commitment to the effective management of its caseload, which as most of us know, and as Ms. Ryall pointed out, is still quite considerable indeed, despite the progress made leading up to seventh session of the MOP last year.

And in light of that caseload, it is all the more impressive that the Committee, and you as Chair, Ms. Ryall, still find the time to do things like issue advice, when requested, and more. I wish to highlight in this regard and thank you Madam Chair in particular for your letter of February 27, voicing the Committee's grave concerns that persons who are known environmental defenders in Ukraine, and their families, will be in imminent danger in the potential occupied territory and calling upon all Parties to ensure that environmental defenders in Ukraine in the potential occupied territory will not be persecuted. And to take immediate action to ensure that Ukrainian environmental defenders, and their families, are offered safe passage and sanctuary. All of the European Eco Forum, and especially our colleagues in Ukraine, who cannot be here today because of this very war, wish to express our gratitude for this letter, which was and is a stand-out of exemplary bravery in the UNECE in acknowledging the reality of what is happening, what the very real dangers are, the damage being done, due to Russia's war against Ukraine.

All of this and much more I do not have the time to detail, proves again and again the essential value of the Compliance Committee. It is at once the heart of the Convention, yet is also serves as its teeth. It keeps the Convention alive, ensuring the enforcement of the Convention's obligations, and facilitating compliance in numerous ways. Given this, we call on the Parties to support the compliance mechanism and to engage with the Committee in a constructive, proactive way, bearing in mind the very helpful points and explanations the Chair just highlighted.

Thank you.