

Statement of the Ecohome NGO on the decision of Belarus of withdrawal from the Aarhus Convention

Belarus has formally notified its decision to withdraw from the Aarhus Convention – an international agreement aimed to promote the principles of environmental democracy. Of course, Ecohome, an environmental non-governmental organization in Belarus regrets this.

Nowadays, law and justice do not work properly in Belarus, there is no independent court system, and dissent and civil activism are suppressed. There are over 1,256 political prisoners in the country¹, civil society organizations have been purged - more than 800 NGOs have been liquidated or forced to liquidate (more than 70 of them are environmental NGOs², Ecohome being one of them).

These and other forms of persecution of environmental activists most clearly illustrate that Belarus is unable and has no intention to fulfill its obligations under the Convention. There are problems in other areas as well, such as access to environmental information and lack of effective tools for public participation in environmental decision making. The Compliance Committee of the Aarhus Convention has repeatedly recognized the legislation and practice of Belarus as contrary to the Convention, and gave clear and detailed recommendations on how to correct the situation. However, the Belarusian state authorities of relevant competence have not taken effective and efficient measures.

When concluding an international treaty, it is presumed that a country will not only enjoy privileges and opportunities the said treaty provides, but also fulfill the obligations it takes on under the agreement. By taking the decision to withdraw from the Convention, Minsk officials confirmed that they would not comply with its obligations. For the current political regime in Belarus, being a part of a family of democratic countries that ensures human rights and promotes environmental democracy is not currently a priority.

Unfortunately, neither the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection, officially responsible for the implementation of the Aarhus Convention in Belarus, nor any of the three Aarhus Centers established to implement the provisions of the Convention in Belarus expressed regret or concern regarding the country's withdrawal from the Convention. This only confirms the suppression of dissent in Belarusian society.

Ecohome would like to express its gratitude to the Parties to the Convention for supporting the adoption of the Decision on non-compliance by Belarus at the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention³ in October of last year.

We are grateful to you for showing your commitment to the true principles and ideals of the Aarhus Convention. We thank you for not compromising your values and principles. We would like to thank the UNECE Executive Secretary and the Convention bodies that did not succumb to threats and blackmail from the Minsk officials⁴. It is of utmost importance and significance to the Parties of the Convention and their citizens.

¹ As of August, 1 1256 persons in Belarus are considered as political prisoners.
<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

² As of August 1, [539 CSOs](#) are known to have been liquidated in judicial or out-of-court procedures due to the decisions of the state and [343 CSOs](#) have voluntarily liquidated themselves. The list is being monitored and updated by Lawtrend and OEEC.

³ Decision VII/8c of the Meeting of the Parties on compliance by Belarus with its obligations under the Convention
https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Decision_VII.8c_eng.pdf

We are grateful to the Compliance Committee, its Chair and members, who have been considering reports on Belarus for all these years, professionally and deeply understanding the situation, formulating essential recommendations for the Belarusian State Party for the benefit of Belarusian society and the environment. We also thank the Meetings of the Parties for adopting these recommendations.

We are grateful to the European ECO Forum for supporting civil society in Belarus and for promoting the ideas and principles of the Convention.

We believe that the implementation of the Aarhus Convention will improve and evolve and help the citizens of its Parties to better exercise their rights. Establishing the Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders reaffirms that the Parties to the Convention do not only declare, but are taking active measures to ensure environmental rights.

We are a part of the Aarhus Convention family. We have strived to protect the environmental rights of the Belarusians as well as implement the best practices and advanced approaches and principles of the Convention in Belarus. And we are grateful to the bodies of the Convention for contributing to this.

Ecohome will continue its work for environmental democracy in Belarus and protection of the environment to the spirit and intent of the Aarhus Convention, and to ensure the Human Right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment recognized by the UN General Assembly.

We look forward to Belarus becoming a free and democratic state that commits to and delivers on environmental democracy and the rights and interests of its citizens. And our country will return to the family of the Aarhus Convention in deed and not just in words.

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