

9th Meeting of the Parties to the Espoo Convention and 5th Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on SEA

High-level segment

Agenda item 7. Statements by ministers and high-level representatives

Statement by the European Union and its Member States (delivered by the Presidency)

Madame Chair, Excellencies, distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union, I am very honoured to be present and to address the Meeting of the Parties of the Espoo Convention and its Protocol on behalf of the European Union and its Member States.

Firstly, I would like to express our gratitude to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and especially to the Secretariat for the Espoo Convention, for carrying out all the organizational work that such meeting entails.

It's a pleasure to be able to see each other again in person after some difficult years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although remote meetings may be beneficial in terms of participation and cost reduction, it goes without saying that face-to-face meetings allow for a warmer and more fruitful exchange of ideas.

We acknowledge the significant contribution of the Convention and its Protocol to improving environmental governance and transparency within the planning and decision-making process. These cross-cutting instruments allowing for the integration of environmental considerations into wider political and economic contexts are becoming even more relevant these days. A better integration of environmental considerations into planning and programming not only improves the balance between our environmental and economic goals and needs, but also encourages ambitious societal choices for healthy lives and a sustainable future for the next generations. The value of these instruments should be preserved and protected, especially in times of political demands for speeding up and simplifying procedures.

The Convention and its Protocol are of particular importance in the context of the climate change crisis, which, together with the cost of living and energy security challenges, lends greater urgency to the implementation of an energy transition based on a sustainable energy model. By promoting the financing of green projects, we can focus more on the deployment of clean energy, and on circular economy initiatives aimed at reducing both the consumption and waste of raw materials.

In the framework of the green transition, the Convention and the Protocol are also pivotal in show-casing how to streamline transparency and inclusive public participation in decision-making on projects, policies and plans with transboundary implications, while aiming for a high standard of environmental democracy through these processes.

We have ambitious goals and challenges ahead of us to achieve and to overcome. We believe that we are on the right track in setting in motion a change towards a more resilient and environmental-friendly model for the planet, as well as an inclusive social and economic growth.

In order to do so, the concerning financial situation of the Espoo Convention needs to be addressed and resolved. The importance of the Espoo Convention and its Protocol has been widely recognized. The EU and its Member States welcome the growing interest of other countries to join these instruments and to face environmental challenges together. However, to reach these goals, Treaties need to perform effectively, for which adequate financial resources are required. The EU and its Member States reaffirm the need for all Parties to provide stable and sufficient financial resources.

In addition, we highly appreciate the strong commitment of the Parties to this Convention and its Protocol, aware of the need to develop and implement policies to prevent, mitigate and monitor any impacts that may be harmful to the environment, particularly in a transboundary context, through environmental assessment tools.

Considering the above, the severe damage that the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has inflicted on the population, the environment and the economy of Ukraine must be noted. The continuing aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and its broad adverse environmental impacts, including transboundary impacts in the region, in terms of air, water and soil pollution, as well as biodiversity loss, is unacceptable and needs to come to an end.

Madame Chair,

We would like to emphasise that such meetings are a source of inspiration for us, as they are based on the respect of commitments and obligations undertaken by the Parties represented today and on the continuous effort to achieve a healthy and adequate environment for the sake of future generations.

Building on this, Parties have made great efforts to reach consensus on the document for information purposes on the assessment of health impacts in strategic environmental assessment, which recognises the importance of health issues in the application of the Protocol.

We also welcome the initiative taken by Italy to promote the application of the Convention and the Protocol for the protection of the Mediterranean Sea and other regional seas and coastal areas. We find this initiative particularly timely considering that the Mediterranean region is subject to strong anthropogenic pressures that threaten the conservation of its rich marine biodiversity, due to overpopulation, the economic crisis, the intensive consumption of raw materials and resources and the decrease of its carbon fixing capacity.

Such initiatives not only promote the sustainable development of our coasts and seas, but also help build bridges with other international organisations and bodies beyond UNECE by reinforcing synergies between their mandates.

We understand that mutual trust and continuous cooperation at all levels is the key for this initiative to effectively contribute to the sustainable protection of this and other marine regions. The exchange, collection and dissemination of information on best practices in marine and coastal environmental assessments among interested regional marine conventions and bodies should be the core of our everyday mode of work.

Finally, we acknowledge the efforts made by all Parties to comply with the Convention and the Protocol. In this sense, we appreciate the work of the Implementation Committee in ensuring that all Parties fulfil their obligations under both Treaties.

Madame Chair,

Although the Espoo Convention and its Protocol have come a long way in contributing to the recognition that environmental assessment in a transboundary context is an essential tool for the protection of our environment, we have not yet reached the end of the road.

We owe to future generations the same privilege we are having – and our ancestors had before us – of enjoying a healthy planet. If we keep following the guidance set in their provisions, both the Espoo Convention and its Protocol can play a key role in achieving such an ambitious goal.

With this positive spirit that we want to maintain, we would like to reaffirm our strong conviction that we can make concrete progress towards overcoming some of the issues that are concerning us, such as the globalisation of the Convention and the extension of the Protocol. In this context it is crucial to complete missing ratifications of the amendments to the Espoo Convention and ratifications of SEA Protocol. The EU and its Member States with reference to priority objectives and strategic goals under the Long-term strategy adopted in 2020, support and encourage Parties in their efforts to fulfil those ambitions. The EU and its Member States strongly believe that the Convention will become a global instrument during the next intersessional period.

Madame Chair, Excellencies, distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of the EU and its Member States, I wish the Espoo family a fruitful future. We all hope for a soon end of terror, aggression and military activities in violation of international law which threaten human life and all values on which our coexistence on this planet is based. Thank you and best wishes for a safe and peaceful year 2024.