

NGO Statement on Belarus' Withdrawal from the Aarhus Convention

14 September 2022

The undersigned NGOs who are members of the European ECO Forum deplore Belarus' withdrawal from the Aarhus Convention and expresses its deepest concern for the welfare of the environment and its defenders and welcomes the strong [statement issued on 7 September 2022, of Mr Aurimas Saladžius as Chairperson of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention](#), on this deeply concerning development and decision by Belarus. Withdrawal from the Convention is an unprecedented step and means that environmental governance, environmental protection and environmental defenders in Belarus are in jeopardy. The Belarusian government's unilateral decision to end its participation in the Aarhus Convention is coming at a time in which Belarus in particular is playing a crucial role in enabling Russia's war against Ukraine, the environmental and human costs of which are terrible and immeasurable.

On 18 July of this year, the European ECO Forum learned that Belarus had [announced its intention](#) to withdraw from the Aarhus Convention through [Decree No. 247](#) "On the withdrawal of the Republic of Belarus from the international treaty [the Aarhus Convention]". This was followed by a [formal notification of its withdrawal](#) to the Depository of the Convention on 26 July. In accordance with article 21 of the Convention, Belarus' withdrawal will take effect on 24 October 2022. On 10 August, independent [UN human rights experts denounced](#) this withdrawal in unequivocal terms.

We, the civil society organisations of the European ECO Forum, also find it disgraceful that Belarus, while still a Party to the Aarhus Convention, chose to abstain from the [UN General Assembly Resolution](#) recognising the universal human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. This not only confirmed Belarus' disregard of the international community and the progress of environmental rights, but also struck a blow against the realisation of Article 1 of the Aarhus Convention, which underscores the objective of the Convention to contribute to the "right of every person of present and future generations to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being."

In signalling its intention to withdraw from the Aarhus Convention, [Belarusian authorities stated](#) that "the withdrawal would not entail the cessation of steps to improve the national system of interaction between state authorities and the public in the field of environmental policy, and that further work to ensure the realisation of the rights of citizens and their

associations to receive information, participate in decision-making and access justice in environmental matters will be continued.” However, following its abstention on such an important UN General Assembly Resolution as noted above, such assurances from the Belarusian authorities fall hollow and sound a further alarm for the fate of environmental democracy and environmental defenders in Belarus. We therefore call upon Belarus to take clear and progressive steps to offset such concerns, as a matter of urgency, and particularly in the context of it still being party to the Convention and being bound by its spirit and obligations, until the withdrawal has effect.

At the time of this withdrawal, Belarus is subject to a decision of the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, namely [Decision VII/8c concerning compliance by Belarus with its obligations under the Convention](#), which stems from multiple cases concerning the compliance of Belarus as regards to public participation requirements and the rights of environmental defenders. In light of the dissolution of Ecohome, Belarusian NGO and member of the European ECO Forum, the rights and privileges of Belarus were suspended in accordance with paragraph 37(g) of the annex to Decision I/7.

We highlight that this suspension was made after lengthy considerations following alarming circumstances faced by NGOs in Belarus. The decision to suspend Belarus’ special rights and privileges under the Convention was only taken as a last resort following many exchanges and Belarus’ continued refusal to remedy the situation. At all stages, the bodies to the Convention have stood ready to help Belarus to comply with the Convention, as they have done for over more than 20 years since Belarus has been a Party to the Convention. We wish to also highlight that the European Eco Forum has been consistent in its position in respect of decisions before the Meeting of the Parties on compliance matters, showing neither fear nor favour, and condemned both the EU and Belarus for their positions on MoP decisions on their respective compliance issues.

We therefore find Belarus’ withdrawal inexcusable.

We assure the Belarusian government, Belarusian civil society, and other Parties to the Convention, that the members of the European ECO Forum will continue to closely monitor the situation of the environmental rights of the public in Belarus.

In doing so, we:

- Call upon the other Parties of the Convention to use every instrument and means to do the same;
- Call upon Belarus to reconsider its withdrawal, which not only conflicts with its own self-proclaimed promises, but sends the chilling message that Belarus truly has no intention to abide by the rule of law, including its international commitments; and
- Fully endorse the [statement](#) made by our Ecohome colleagues and call for support for their inclusion in future events relating to the Aarhus Convention and its bodies.

We hope and will use all our efforts to enable Belarus to re-join the world's first binding international treaty on environmental human rights, becoming a Party to the Aarhus Convention not only in word, but in deed.

Center for International Environmental Law

European Environmental Bureau

Guta Environmental Law Association

Journalists for Human Rights

Justice and Environment

Ökobüro

Women Engage for a Common Future

