



**The Pontis Foundation**  
*and*  
**The Center for Democracy Foundation**  
*presents*

**Aarhus Convention in Serbia: Implementation in  
Practice  
Toward the EU Experience of the Slovak Republic**

*by*  
**Aleksandar Maksimovic**

*and*  
**Jelena Lucic**

**Belgrade, March 2011**

This policy paper has been prepared with the assistance of the Pontis Foundation, the Centre for Democracy, and Slovak Aid via the Slovak-Serbian EU Enlargement Fund. The opinions presented in the paper are those of the author exclusively and are not necessarily those of the Pontis Foundation, the Center for Democracy, nor Slovak Aid.



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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) was signed in 1998 in Aarhus, Denmark, by the European Community. These three procedural rights are tools to attain a substantive goal - that of environmental protection. Moreover, the Aarhus Convention also concerns government accountability, transparency and responsiveness and is considered a pioneer governance tool in the environmental field. The European Community has since adopted appropriate legislation at Member State and institutional level to fully implement it.

This paper is in two parts: one focusing on the Aarhus Convention *per se* and a second providing an overview of what has been done at national level in Slovakia and Serbia regarding the implementation of this international legal instrument, observations, conclusions and Ecoist's recommendations.

# 2. INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues have become a major global concern and this has resulted in growing demands for legal regulation ensuring efficient environmental protection. At the core of the issue is the objective of a new approach in legal response which would provide efficient environmental protection by utilizing legal methods and instruments to give interested parties access to environmental justice. Given the unprecedented nature of many environmental issues, massive bodies of legislation have been created in the form of international treaties, EU regulations and directives, as well as domestic laws and regulations<sup>1</sup>.

The term 'The right to a healthy environment' was introduced in The Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment dating back to 1972. In 1973, the United Nations Environmental Programme was established to address the problem of environmental protection and coordination of activities in this field. The Aarhus Convention was described by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan as "*the most ambitious venture in environmental democracy ever undertaken under the auspices of the UN*". It is the first convention to link together environment and democracy, guaranteeing environmental human rights.

The Aarhus Convention, among other issues, links environmental rights and human rights and establishes that sustainable development can only be achieved through the involvement of all stakeholders. It also links government accountability and environmental protection, and focuses on interactions between the public and public authorities in a democratic context. While the Convention is an instrument for protecting the environment, it may also be seen as an instrument for promoting democracy.

Additionally, **the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTR)** was adopted at an extraordinary meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention on 21st of May 2003 and entered into force on 8th of October 2009. Although regulating information on pollution, rather than pollution directly, the Protocol is expected to exert significant downward pressure on levels of industrial pollution.

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<sup>1</sup> Salzman, Thompsom Jr. 2006; Wolf, White, Stanley, 2002; Ferry 2001; Morand-Deviller, 1987.

## **2.1 Main components of the Aarhus Convention**

The Aarhus Convention is based on three pillars of public participation: access to information, public participation, and access to justice.

### **Access to Information**

The Access to Information pillar provides a set of obligations for public authorities distinguished between providing information on request (known as the passive dissemination of information) and disseminating information proactively (known as active dissemination of information). The Convention does not provide much methodological guidance to parties, but rather requests that they develop transparent and efficient systems to both disseminate information and provide it upon request.

### **Public Participation**

The second pillar of the Convention deals with the minimum required procedures for public participation in decision-making. Public participation should be treated as the most significant aspect of the Convention for NGOs. The idea had already been incorporated into other international documents, but the way the Convention regulates this matter is rather novel. No common pattern exists for public participation practices. As the Convention does not explicitly define the term, each country shall develop its own practices. However, the “minimum [public participation] requires effective notice, adequate information, proper procedures and appropriate taking account of the outcome of public participation”.

### **Access to Justice**

The final pillar provides a mechanism for ensuring that obligations and rights set forth in the Convention are fulfilled. It obliges parties to provide for effective judicial and other recourse for those whose rights under the Convention have been violated or whose interests have been affected.

## **2.2 Civil society and public authorities: Roles and Responsibilities**

The role of public authorities is to develop a clear, transparent and consistent framework for the proper implementation of the Convention’s provisions. For example, it is not enough to change national legislation; it is also necessary to have regulations and concrete procedures in place to secure the practical application of Convention requirements (Article 3.1).

**Information dissemination, education, awareness raising, training and capacity building** are all useful tools that can help make the public aware of its rights and opportunities. The Convention *gives a voice to civil society* in any decision-making that affects the environment. Members of the public have broad opportunities and rights to gain information, to participate and access justice. However, it is not enough to have those rights secured on paper. The *role* of Civil Society is to *make sure that these rights and opportunities are utilized* in real life and will not remain merely “paper rights”. Civil society *needs to take advantage* of these opportunities.

Implementing the Aarhus Convention requires a new attitude toward the environment; every part of the world economy has been transformed by technology, new ideas and new tools of communication. Governments' agility is essential since public empowerment and open channels of communication will bring new perspectives on the pros and cons of the system.

## **3. POLICY OPTIONS IN SLOVAKIA AND SERBIA**

### ***3.1 The Aarhus Convention in Slovakia***

Slovakia was the last member of the EU to ratify the Aarhus Convention which entered into force in the Slovak Republic on 5 March 2006. Slovakia's successful transformation and transition provides an example of successful foreign policy, where Slovakia's political **support for changes in the Western Balkans** began as far back as 1999, during the **Bratislava Process**.

#### **3.1.1 How have concrete measures been adopted?**

Information activities are represented mainly by providing information to the public via media, and via the Meta-Information System of the Ministry of the Environment – Enviro-Info. In 2006, training courses were organised for municipalities in cooperation with the Association of Municipalities of Slovakia in the Act 205/2004 on collecting, keeping and distributing environmental information.

#### **3.1.2. What are institutional and budgetary arrangements for capacity building?**

A Communication Department has been established within the Ministry of the Environment including an Office for the Public. The Office, along with required information according to the Act 211/2000 on free access to information, provides advisory and consulting services, runs a permanent telephone Green Line, and keeps central records on requests for information. Its activities focus not only on informing the public about environmental issues but also close cooperation with industries, the education sector and institutes of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

#### **3.1.3. What are specific regulations and/or practices concerning capacity building for environmental state authorities (e.g. water management, forestry, fishery authorities)?**

Specific regulations concerning capacity building have not been issued, but these responsibilities are included in organisational rules for individual ministries and institutions. Furthermore, environmental education is included into primary and secondary school curricula (environmental minimum). Special methodological events, seminars, lectures and excursions for teachers have been organised. An environmental protection media has been devised aimed at all segments of the population.

Furthermore, Regional Environmental Offices carry out methodological training courses, control transferred execution of state administration in municipalities, and implement various activities aimed at increasing public environmental awareness.

### **3.1.4. What capacity-building activities are aimed at journalists?**

Administrative capacities for journalists are concentrated in the Slovak Journalists Syndicate.. Media outlets, particularly visual and audio outlets, play a significant role in raising awareness of environmental issues.

### **3.1.5. What are the objectives of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)?**

To support their awareness-raising activities, CSOs can receive financing from the Ministry of the Environment (Green Project grant programme), from the Ministry of Education (Enviro-Project) and from the Environmental Fund. With increasing democratization, structural reforms and international integration, more partnerships between civil society and governments in Slovakia have developed.

## **3.2 The Aarhus Convention in Serbia**

The first initiatives linked to the Aarhus Convention in Serbia were initiated in 1999 by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) and its office in Belgrade. Spreading the “green revolution” further in environmental governance, Serbian local authorities have been challenged with implementing environmental legislation passed in May 2009. In 2009, a package of 16 new environmental laws harmonized with EU directives was adopted. These laws regulate waste management, packaging and packaging waste, protection of nature, air protection, noise protection, protection against ionizing radiation, nuclear security, restricting production and use of chemical warfare, climate change, sustainable use of fish stocks, livestock breeding, genetically modified organisms, restriction of chemicals, and animal welfare.<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant new laws is the Aarhus Convention which was ratified in May 2009.

The Republic of Serbia is moderately advanced in the field of environmental protection and more than 30% of all laws required for EU integration are those related to environmental protection. However, legislative enforcement needs to be improved at all levels. Further efforts are needed to build up administrative capacity. In general, the strategic framework, almost non-existent before 2000, has been considerably strengthened recently. However, in many aspects, these strategies are not harmonized with each other and in many cases do not contain reporting obligations on their implementation.

Moreover, environmental priorities are not clearly set out and examples of action taken to implement these strategies are still scarce. Enforcement of environmental protection legislation in Serbia is weak, particularly due to a weak monitoring system, lack of certain environmental standards, and generally low awareness of and compliance with laws. Up to now, two Aarhus centers have been established with the support of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in two cities: Kragujevac<sup>3</sup> and Subotica<sup>4</sup>. In this respect, special attention should be given both to enabling CSOs to participate in a more active manner in assessment procedures, and to the media whose professional reporting on these matters can change the general public’s position on the environment and mobilize them to take an active part in assessment procedures.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ekoplan.gov.rs/sr/|Skupstina-Srbije-usvojila-set-od-16-zakona-iz-oblasti-zivotne-sredine-413-c28-content.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [www.arhuskg.rs](http://www.arhuskg.rs)

<sup>4</sup> [www.arhussu.rs](http://www.arhussu.rs)

As regards implementation of strategies, experience so far does not show significant results. For example, waste management strategy, adopted in 2003, should have helped make Serbia cleaner by 2010. In early 2009 some 80% of communal waste, as well as household waste, was still not systematically disposed of and unfortunately ended up in landfills or in even worse cases 'illegal landfills'. Particular attention should be paid to raising public awareness of the significance of, and possibilities to, participate in these procedures. Only 3% of citizens consider ecology and the environment to be a priority. On the other hand, in an Ecoist survey asking citizens if they felt they could have an impact on environmental matters in Serbia 95% of answers were affirmative.<sup>5</sup> Considerable efforts in educating citizens about their environment and how they can participate more should be made in the future. It needs to be made clear to citizens that ecology and environment is not merely about small steps like recycling, but should be rooted in social and sustainable development of their environment.

THIS ILLUSTRATION IS IN SERBIAN!!!!!!!



Particularly important is a decree from the National Programme on funding policy and investment plan of environmental protection. Additionally, the Strategy of Sustainable Development forms a framework of needs and methods of financing environmental reforms aimed at bringing funding intended for environmental protection level with other countries in the region by the year 2017 - currently 0.4% toward a planned 2.5% of GDP<sup>6</sup>.

#### **4. PUBLIC POLICY COORDINATION CHALLENGES IN SERBIA - Lessons learned in Slovakia**

The “strong civil society” concept is relatively new for post-communist transitional economies like Serbia. In this context however the environmental field has been “fertile soil” for growing awareness and respectively for establishing public organizations. In the last decade the Ministry of Environment and Water has gradually learnt how to build partnerships with non-governmental organizations on the principles of equality and transparency. Today, environmental CSOs take part in the decision making process as members of advisory bodies and working groups of the relevant ministry. Nevertheless, it has yet to be established whether the general public does really participate in environmental impact assessment, as enabled by law, and particularly whether the opinions of relevant stakeholders in these procedures are taken into consideration in a sufficient manner if at all. It is necessary to build administrative capacities and continually educate and inform the general public which is both a relevant party and a potential “controller” in such

<sup>5</sup> Ecoist survey conducted at Green Screen Fest in October 2010 with the cooperation of the Centre for Environmental Development and WWF

<sup>6</sup> [www.odrzivi-razvoj.gov.rs](http://www.odrzivi-razvoj.gov.rs)

procedures. Particular attention should be paid to raising public awareness of the possibilities and significance of participating in these procedures because Serbia's citizens pay very little attention to the issue. Special attention should be given both to enabling CSOs to participate in a more active manner in assessment procedures and to the media whose professional reporting on these matters can change the general public's position on the environment and mobilize them to take an active part in assessment procedures since they can have an immediate impact upon the environment they live in. On the other hand, investors often regard the assessment procedure as an obligation and additional cost in obtaining all the necessary permits, thus leaving important data on environmental protection unused, rather than using it as an information base for establishing an effective system for environmental protection management.

To ensure precise information on the state of environmental parameters in Serbia funds must be guaranteed for the modernization of monitoring institutions. A functional and efficient information system related to the environment must also be established to gather data and information on the status of the environment which can then be made available both to decision-makers and the broad public.

A large amount of information is available to the public in certain fields, sometimes in real time, via ministry web-sites. However, it should be kept in mind that a significant number of citizens do not have access to this information – 50% of citizens do not have a computer, and only 34% of Serbia's population uses the Internet actively and on a daily basis. Meanwhile 37% use it occasionally – either because they do not have a computer or due to technical reasons, while as much as 29% of the population does not use the Internet at all.

The Belgrade Center for Human Rights conducted a survey on legislation guaranteeing free access to information in the public interest on environmental matters and found the majority of municipal courts in Serbia did not respect this legislation. The legislation obliges requests on environmental issues to be treated as an urgent matter and that information be provided no later than 48 hours from receiving such a request. Although bound by the Law, some courts did not respond to requests at all, some courts completely disregarded the provision that non-governmental organizations are exempted from making any payment when requesting information related to environmental issues and asked compensation for expenses for the distribution of the requested information. Also, it was not rare for answers to be received citing an inability to submit the file of an environment-related case because it is extensive and as such inadequate for distribution. On average, every fourth court in Serbia did not respond to such a request.

The situation related to the Aarhus Convention in Slovakia and Serbia can be summarized as follows:

- **Lack of awareness**, capacity building and consequently insufficient use of Aarhus Convention related arguments resulting in lack of case law applying Aarhus Convention and lack of direct experience;
- **Public participation of environmental organizations** is regulated insufficiently. Administrative standing in other proceedings (water, forests, and mining) is regulated by general standing provisions of the Administrative Proceedings Act, which is defined broadly, but interpreted narrowly;
- **Threat to environmental organizations** presents so far an „empty shell provision“ of the APA – „participating person“. This category of administrative standing does not allow decisions to be challenged and does not grant other important procedural rights;
- **Public participation and consequently access to justice for members of the public** (besides environmental organizations) is regulated and interpreted insufficiently. For EIA related decision-making stipulated in the Construction Code, only those who have had

property rights impaired are allowed to participate. For IPPC as well as proceedings falling under the Aarhus Convention Article 6.1.b., the general definition of the APA applies. Even though more than 90% of state institutions have Internet sites, only 4.3% of the population currently visits public administration web pages. The general public tends to be less interested in e-administration than firms who visit government Internet sites more often due to their interest in public procurement. In order to inform citizens promptly and adequately on issues of importance for the environment by-laws that integrate the provisions of the EU guideline into domestic legislation (2003/4/EC), and (91/692/EEC) must be adopted.

Public administrations in Slovakia and Serbia are unaware of the importance of public participation in environmental decision-making. When active citizens or environmental CSOs challenge unlawful administrative decisions in court they are often publicly labeled as groups that want to obstruct the development of the economy. Slovakia, as a member state of the European Union, in June 2006 met the requirements of the Directive 61/96/EC on integrated pollution prevention and control (IPPC Directive) and assured first reporting of data on operators and their air and water emissions for the European pollution register (EPER- European pollution emission register) for the calendar year 2004. An Integrated Register of Information System has been established at national level with annual reporting. Data from the Register are available for the public at <http://ipkz.shmu.sk/ipkz.html> and <http://ipkz.enviroportal.sk/>.

All Ministry of the Environment draft legal instruments pursuant to Legislative Rules of the Slovak Government are available for public comment at [www.enviro.gov.sk](http://www.enviro.gov.sk). But this is not the case in Serbia. Other challenges remain:

- Information relating to the environment is largely disseminated by public authorities via electronic means, but access needs to be further facilitated by providing it in regular paper form and raising public awareness of its availability in electronic form;
- Public participation is very much ensured in the early stage of drafting legislation and in impact assessment of investment proposals, subject to EIA or permitting. However, public participation in checks on compliance with conditions in the issued permits and decisions should be encouraged;
- Awareness-raising and capacity-building activities related to environmental matters and targeting magistrates are needed.

## 5. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

The global financial crisis has stirred most of the world's economies into thinking about new ways of managing declining industries that are powerhouses of every country's stability. Most developed and environmentally conscious countries like the US and Germany have turned to green industry and environmental protection, which they see as a light at the end of the tunnel for their crashing economies. China, among the top three CO<sub>2</sub> emitters in the world, is also putting effort into solving these problems, ultimately creating sustainable economies. Environmental issues are a priority not just in developed and wealthy countries, but across the world and the term "environmental crisis" is being used not just in economic and political spheres but also in law. International environmental cooperation and organizational mechanisms can help address this and consequently bring about growing demands for legal regulation ensuring efficient environmental protection, involving the concept of "access to environmental justice".

In conclusion we can highlight four main themes of environmental issues:

- a) Environmental protection has become a major global concern. Consequently, this has resulted in growing demands for legislation ensuring efficient environmental protection. Globally,

different forms of legal regulation have been put into effect, including international, regional and domestic systems of protection. Given the unprecedented nature of many environmental issues, massive bodies of legislation have been created through international treaties, EU regulations and directives, as well as domestic laws and regulations.

b) The Aarhus Convention, *inter alia*, draws its substantial values from similar international and European human rights documents, including the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly in the field of "access to justice", as the Aarhus Convention provides for a review procedure before a court of law and/or another independent and impartial body established by law.

c) In the case of Serbia, once it ratified the Aarhus Convention it moved a step closer to the harmonization of its human rights norms and court standards of rendering environmental justice with the general framework of the EU legal system.

Several major problems remain in the field of public participation and the environment. The development of an environmental monitoring and information system is lagging. This lack of information has limited environmental activities and the annual report of the Ministry of Environment is too infrequent and insufficiently accessible because of a general lack of environmental education. Public participation is undeveloped even in local decision-making and EIA procedures. CSOs are mostly locally oriented and there is not enough coordination between them. In general, public initiative is low. Finally, primary and secondary efficiency of the legal system, especially in environmental cases, is unsatisfactory, mainly due to a lack of tools with which to implement environmental legislation.

For public participation to be most effective in environmental decision making, a number of changes are needed, including the following:

- Environmental information should be more scientifically based so as to be more credible.
- A complete network of environmental CSOs maintaining its own sources of data should be established
- CSO projects and proposals should be more visible in the media and more projects should be undertaken and disseminated in modern journalistic forms.
- The government should react immediately or as soon as possible to guidelines and legal provisions guaranteeing the procedure for public authorities to provide, and the public to obtain, environmental information.
- Environmental information should be provided free of charge or at a cost equal to printing expenses.
- Current efforts to compile a register of environmental polluters should be accelerated. In addition, monitoring and measuring systems should be improved to facilitate legal proceedings and increase conviction rates in environmental cases.

Ideally, the Ministry of Environment and CSOs should cooperate as partners. To achieve this, relations between them must be redefined and institutionalized. The Ministry could establish a particular body in charge of public relations, and the CSOs could be much more persistent in requesting information and giving initiatives, proposals and alternatives to help influence decisions.

Serbia could further encourage public participation by strengthening legal frameworks and harmonizing more national legislation with EU legislation, especially with regard to access to information, public participation and access to justice. The government should also harmonize environmental protection legislation. Regulations could also be revised to reinforce preventive measures and increase inspectors' competence.

The situation could also be improved by the development of environmental advocacy and legal advisory services. It is suggested that an operating authority or body be formed - the Council for Environmental Protection ("Green Council") - whose task is to systematically monitor adoption and proper implementation of regulations at local community level. The legal framework for these proposed decisions are provided for in the Law on Environmental Protection, which in Article 4 obliges local governments or municipalities and cities to ensure an environmental protection system and to safe-guard and improve it. Furthermore, Article 18 in the Law on Local Self-Government states that the municipality or city, shall, through its authority, ensure the protection of the environment, adopt programs to protect natural resources, and all in accordance with their specific interests and characteristics. In forming these decisions the "Manual with guidelines for the strategic orientation, the establishment and activities of Aarhus Centers" which function with the support of the OSCE<sup>7</sup> was used.

Finally, the proposed decision is formed by the provisions of Law on planning and construction, which entered into force in September 2009. These deal with environment protection and regulate the participation of citizens in the process of planning. Proper implementation of the Aarhus Convention with by-laws passed at local level will contribute to reforming public administration and providing citizens with better services in three key areas of its regulation (access to information, participation of citizens and legal protection).

We are entering a green revolution - people have started expressing their concerns and are asking questions in a way never seen before. Tracking these global changes can help decision-makers take the right action at the right level. Opening new communication channels such as social networks and getting feed-back from the public, provides a strong basis for the creation of a sustainable economy and future.

To this end, implementing the Aarhus Convention requires a new attitude toward the environment, toward the decision-making process and the role of the public. Environmentally important decisions must be made with public participation while participants in decision-making processes should not only raise the level of their professional knowledge, but also change their attitudes toward the public and cooperate constructively and reach consensus.

As French poet and novelist Victor Hugo once said: "***Nothing is stronger than an idea whose time has come***".

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<sup>7</sup> Published by the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) - Mission to Serbia, 2009.

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