

## South Eastern Europe Overview

Assistance in Implementing the Aarhus Convention



THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER  
for Central and Eastern Europe

## BACKGROUND

The Aarhus Convention, which entered into force in October 2001, has to date been ratified or acceded to by 26 European countries. In South Eastern Europe (SEE), the convention was ratified first by FYR Macedonia in 1999, followed by Romania in 2000, Albania in 2001, and Bulgaria in 2003. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro have not signed it, but have shown interest in acceding to it.



The Netherlands Ministry for Foreign Affairs funded, and the REC helped to implement, a project to Support Developing Strategies for the Implementation of the Aarhus Convention in South Eastern Europe. Carried out between April 2000 and December 2003, the initiative relied on the cooperation of ministries of the environment and non-governmental organisations from the six mentioned countries, as well as from Kosovo, which is under UN interim administration. Through a regional framework and a combination of national and local activities, the project helped SEE officials to develop an implementation strategy via a transparent and participatory process. The project also supported capacity building to enable government officials and NGOs to more efficiently implement the Aarhus Convention. The project was carried out within the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme for South Eastern Europe (REReP), part of the Stability Pact.

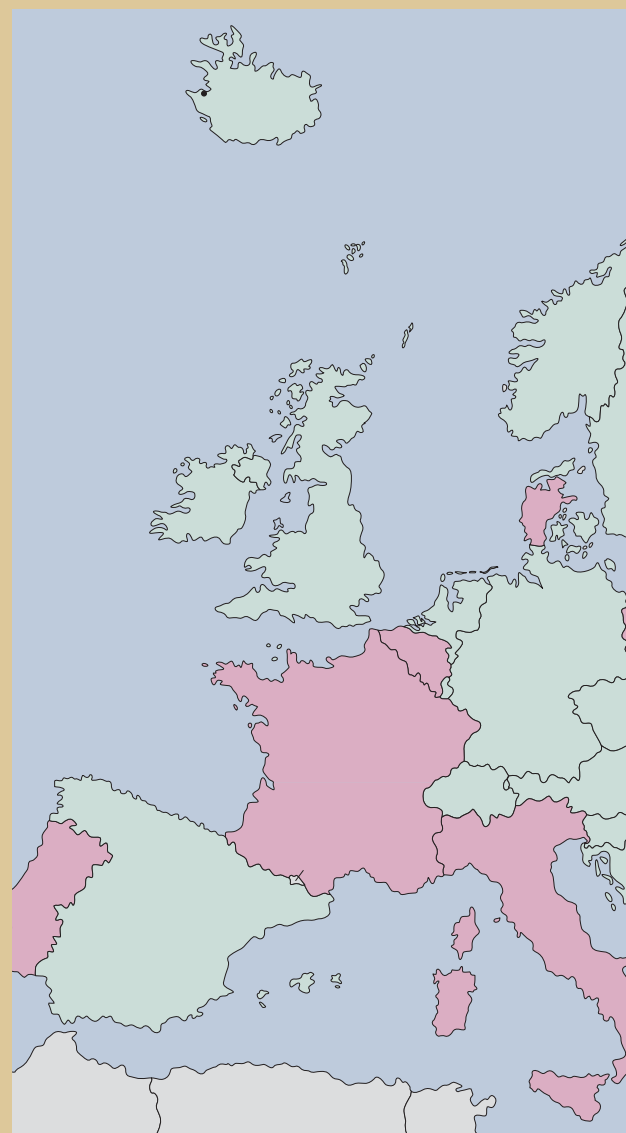
## MAIN ACTIVITIES


### Regional framework for harmonisation of activities


While project implementation went forward in each country, a regional steering committee was established that involved the Aarhus focal points from the ministries of environment and NGO Aarhus focal points from the six SEE countries. The committee also included representatives from the REC, the Croatian government (the lead country for the Aarhus Convention under REReP), the UNECE Aarhus Secretariat and the Netherlands Ministry for Spatial Planning, Housing and the Environment. The committee held four meetings, including a closing workshop to discuss project implementation, present results, exchange experiences and evaluate progress.

### Assessment of status, identification of needs and priorities

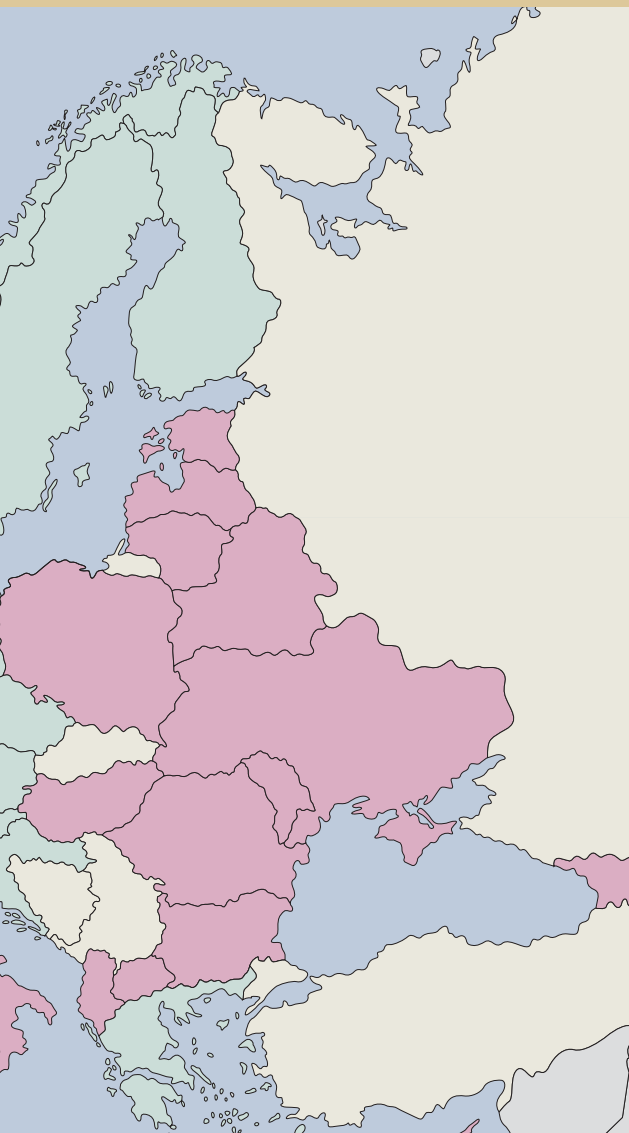
Needs were assessed in each SEE country by independent experts, who then made recommendations for priority activities. Inter-ministerial working groups and NGO specialists discussed and approved the assessments and project results. Based on the finalised needs assessments, work plans were developed and implemented for governmental and NGO activities to meet the most important needs. In Kosovo, a report was prepared on the needs of local authorities and local NGOs regarding public participation and other issues covered by the Aarhus Convention. Afterwards, a capacity-building programme was designed and carried out.



 Countries that have signed the Aarhus Convention.

 Countries that have ratified or acceded to it.

(Note: not all countries of the UNECE region are shown.)



### **Structures for cooperation among country partners with NGO involvement**

The inter-ministerial working groups for all the countries included at least one representative from the NGO community who had opportunity to comment on the materials prepared during the project. The NGO focal points also liaised with their constituents, collected feedback and disseminated information about the project activities.

### **Development of implementation strategy and action plans**

In each country, a small group of experts from governments, NGOs and private consultancies developed an implementation strategy and action plan based on the needs assessments. They analysed gaps in the legal and institutional frameworks and assessed practical hurdles in implementation. The draft strategies and action plans were discussed by ministry and NGO experts and the inter-ministerial working groups. The finalised strategies were approved by the republican ministries of environment in Serbia and in Montenegro. In FYR Macedonia the final draft strategy was approved by the inter-ministerial group. In other countries, the final draft was handed over to ministries for official approval.

### **Capacity building, training and public awareness raising**

In all six SEE countries and in Kosovo, trainings and seminars were organised about the practical implementation of the three pillars of Aarhus Convention for officials in central and municipal governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders operating at the national and local levels. In Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, specific trainings were organised for journalists. In most countries, trainings on access to justice were held for prosecutors and judges, legal professionals and experts from justice ministries. Practical guides and leaflets were prepared and public awareness-raising campaigns were carried out.

### **Local pilot projects**

Nine NGO pilot project grants were awarded and implemented in the six countries to promote the effective application of the Aarhus Convention at the local level. The grants helped to promote access to environmental information, public involvement in governmental decision making and dialogue between stakeholders (see the series of fact sheets).

### **Governmental and NGO experts in international Aarhus meetings**

The project provided funding for numerous governmental and NGO experts to travel to meetings related to the Aarhus Convention, including the Meeting of Parties and various gatherings of working groups and task forces.



## MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

### All the countries made substantial progress in the implementation of the convention and in the ratification and accession process

Bulgaria ratified the convention in October 2003. The governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro have begun procedures for accession to the convention and have prepared necessary background documents with the support of project activities. In the other countries, the project helped to clarify what further actions are needed for better implementation of the convention.

### Implementation strategies and action plans drafted

These documents provide strategic direction and will guide the further efforts of implementation in every country. They contain concrete proposals for short- and medium-term changes, and set timelines for action. The documents indicate which authorities should handle which tasks and what resources will be necessary. They address work in legislation, institutional frameworks, capacity building and practical measures for the convention's implementation.

### Training given to governmental officials, NGOs and other stakeholders

More than 1,000 experts from governments, NGOs, the judiciary, media, parliaments and businesses have received general or specific practical training on issues related to the Aarhus Convention. The local guidance materials prepared in each country will help governments to better understand and implement the convention's requirements, while also encouraging NGOs and the public to exercise the rights and opportunities it provides.

### Publications printed about implementation

Materials about the implementation of the Aarhus Convention were prepared and disseminated. They presented project activities and good practices at the country level. The materials appeared in local languages, as well as in English, in the form of bulletins and other publications, as well as on websites.

### Experiences exchanged among project partners from different countries

Through various project activities, meetings of the regional steering committee and the international Aarhus Convention events, project partners shared experiences, approaches and lessons.

### Further needs and follow-up activities identified

Needs and possible follow-up activities were identified, which will guide governmental and NGO partners in their fundraising efforts for further work on the implementation.

