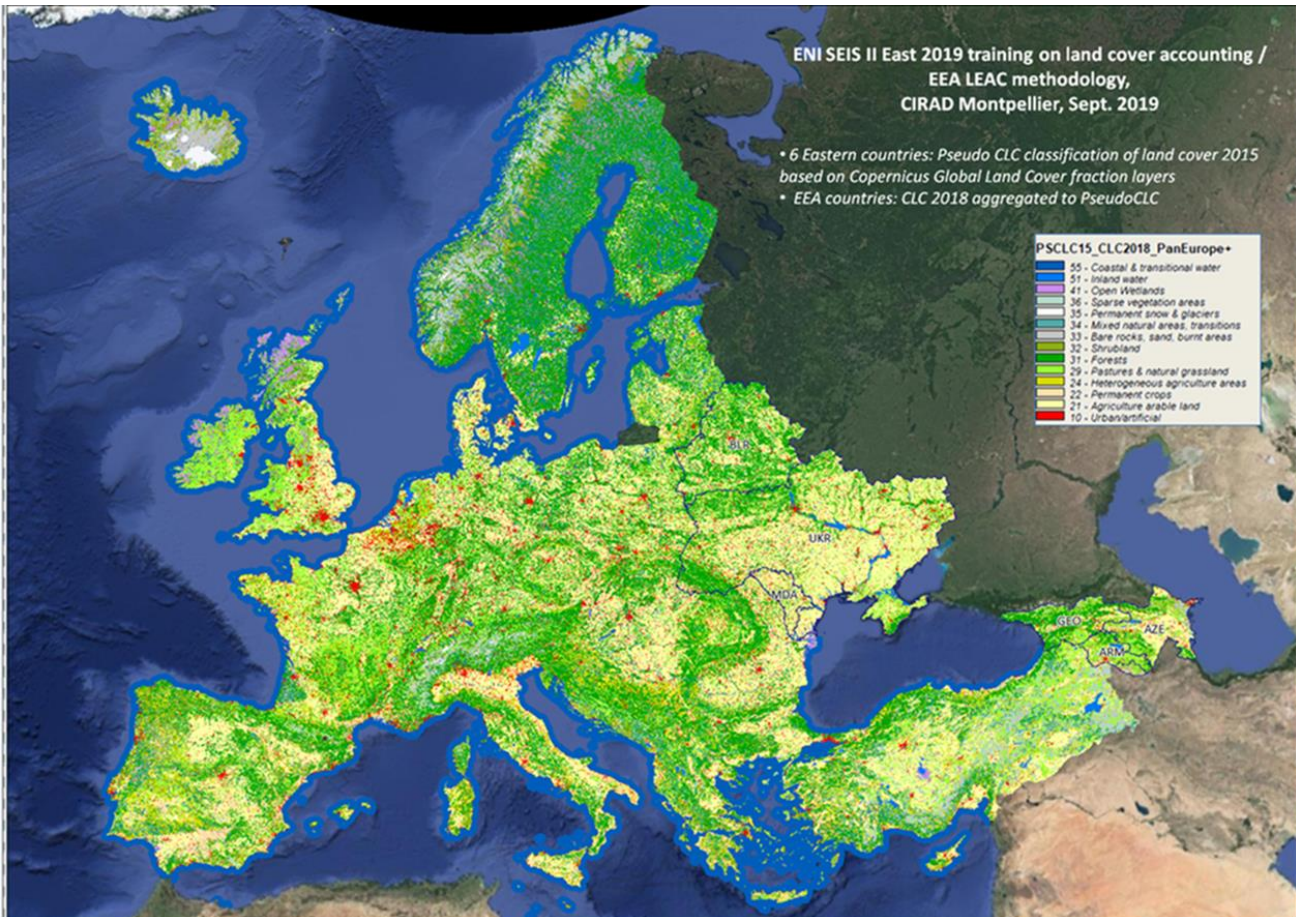


State of the environment: assessment reports

Note on the state of play



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EEA activity: ENI SEIS II East

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Background

The systematic production of assessments and indicators by countries and regions is a clearly acknowledged need at the global level. These countries need in particular to produce state of the environment reports in accordance with their obligations under the Aarhus Convention (Article 5.4).

Environmental assessment relates to assessing the environmental consequences (positive and negative) of plans, policies, programmes or concrete projects prior to making the decision to move forward with the proposed action and to comparing the outcomes and results with those of neighbours and, regarding the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS), within the entire pan-European region.

The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) SEIS II East project supports the regular production of United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) environmental indicators and assessments as a basis for good governance in the field of the environment. In the first instance, this will result in improved implementation of countries' international commitments related to environmental reporting and of the preparation of regular state of the environment reports and indicator-based assessments in line with EU and EEA best practices. It highlights the need to putting in place a SEIS for streamlining the assessment landscape and creating a regular reporting process. The East project covers activities in the six Eastern Partnership countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (<http://eni-seis.eionet.europa.eu/east>).

State of play

The EEA overview of the availability of environmental information and online access was carried out in January and February 2020. The overview focused on checking the UNECE environmental indicators and national environmental assessments as well as their public accessibility through the internet.

The overview found particular improvements that help to make the information easily accessible via the internet to the community.

The key findings of this review are:

1. All countries produce at least some environmental reports. National state of the environment reports are published in accordance with national legislation (every 5 or 4 years). The ministries responsible for the environment publish most environmental reports, but they are often co-funded with external support.

2. In almost all six Eastern Partnership countries, specialised environmental bulletins are published on a yearly, half-yearly, quarterly, monthly, weekly or even daily basis. These bulletins include monitoring data and some interpretation but without detailed analysis. The hydrometeorological services publish these reports and they receive national funding.

3. The implementation of UNECE environmental indicators is at a final stage in most of the target countries and certain indicators are being used to report to conventions and international meetings. Some countries have prepared an indicator-based environmental report (see Table 1). Currently these are under revision in most of the target countries to take account of the UNECE amended methodologies and relevance to policymaking processes.

In all six Eastern Partnership countries thematic topics and reports are covered by national communications to the following: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNECE conventions and progress reports on sustainable development. These reports use environmental indicators, and include monitoring of the countries' achievements as a part of the assessment process. Existing national concepts of transition to sustainable development cover environmental and socio-economic aspects. These include monitoring of nationally identified targets. For example, the *National strategy for sustainable development for the period up to 2020 of the Republic of Belarus*, *National Environmental Strategy of Ukraine till 2030* and *National Development Strategy Moldova-2030* contain lists of national goals and targets to be achieved and monitored.

Table 1: National environmental assessments per country

Type of report	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine
National environmental reports	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Specialized reports - climate (national communications to UNFCCC)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Specialized reports - land	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Specialized reports - air	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Specialized reports - water	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Specialized reports - biodiversity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Specialized reports - waste	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Indicator-based reports	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
National Statistical Yearbook on environment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
National Statistical Yearbook	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Report on sustainable development	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The review of selected recent national state-of-the-environment reports, country reports to several multilateral agreements and the use of indicators for regional or global assessments reveals interesting patterns. Above all, the indicators used in these publications are more numerous and more diverse than those published online per se. Some of the indicators that are not accessible online, for example due to incomplete data sets, are featured in the countries' national and international reports. This apparent contradiction is explained by the fact that often the publication process can be satisfied with only partial use of environmental indicators, for instance only a selection of the data sets that constitute them. The time series in the reports can be quite short, or data may even be shown for only a few selected years. Nonetheless, even such incomplete or approximate presentations of UNECE indicators shows a clear demand for them and therefore their potential and the need to further strengthen their development and production.

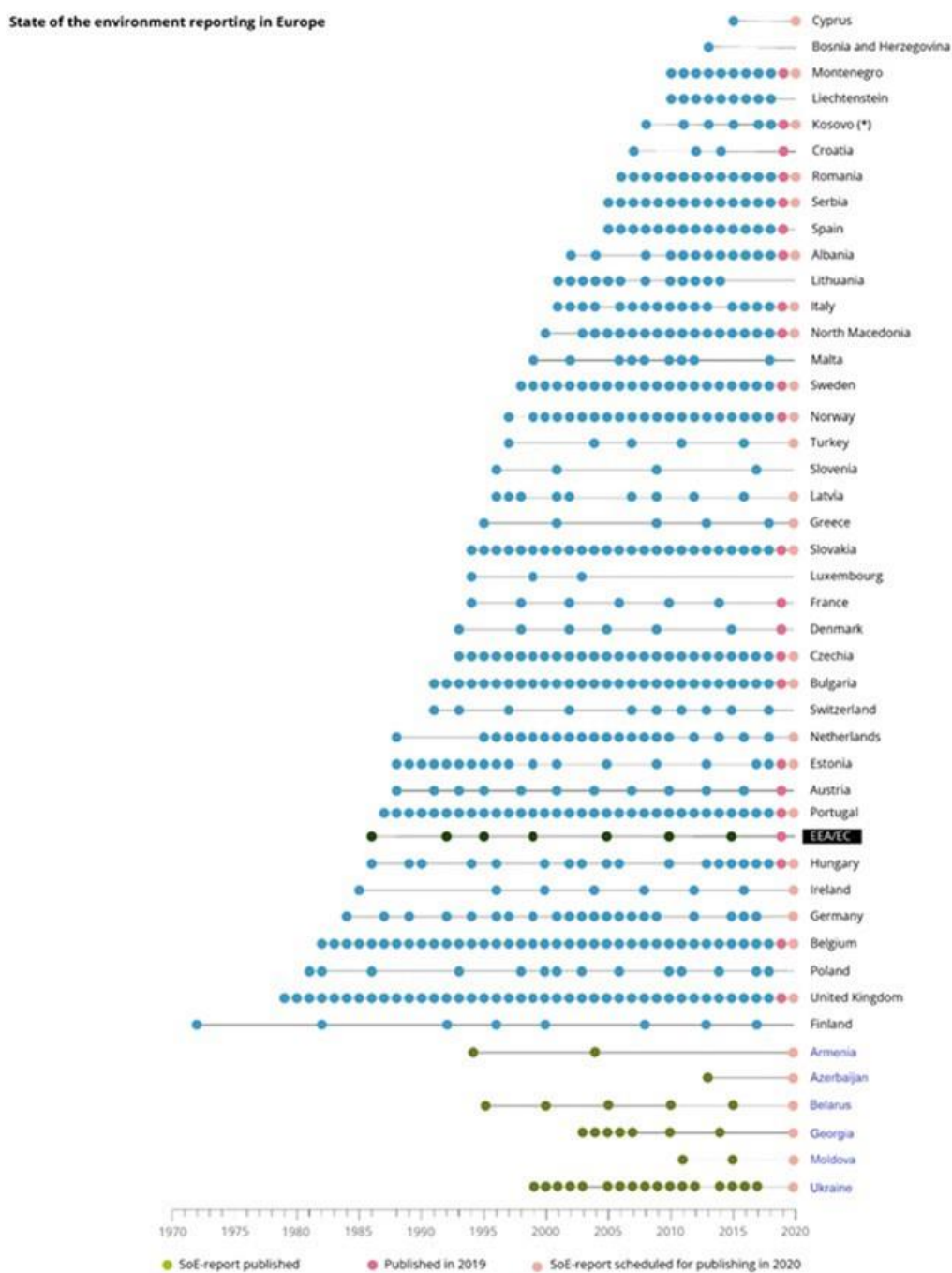
The recent state of the environment assessment reports use the UNECE environmental indicators for both awareness-raising and decision-making. The most widely used UNECE indicators are those describing: emissions to air and the observed air quality in cities; climate change; surface water quality and use; protected areas; forests; and the generation of waste. All of these indicators are commonly used and well developed methodologically. The focus on climate reflects both the availability of data, due to years of methodological efforts under international guidance, and the current political attention given to climate change. Many of the UNECE environmental indicators and some outside the UNECE core set are also used and show various sectoral trends, as are gross domestic product (GDP) and population dynamics, by all countries.

The reporting and use of indicators have also been analysed in the most recent reports to two international conventions: national communications to the UNFCCC and national reports to the CBD. All six Eastern Partnership countries are parties to these agreements. Predictably, the use of indicators in the reports reflects the nature of the agreements. National communications to the UNFCCC contain detailed information about the impacts of climate change and greenhouse gas emissions over time, per economic sector, and in many and various forms of breakdown. National reports to the CBD make broad use of biodiversity-related and other ecological indicators, such as those related to protected areas and endangered, protected, common and invasive biological species.

The reports to the conventions are strong examples of using indicators to monitor, illustrate and explain progress towards tangible targets, and therefore they can be used to help guide indicator analysis and presentation. Data tables are commonly used to a varying degree, and they are complemented by diagrams or visual time series and the wide use of maps. Because of the explicit presence of policy targets, such reports typically show stronger analytical links between indicators and policy than do state of the environment reports. In reports to the CBD, indicators are often presented in direct relation to the Aichi biodiversity targets, as globally agreed in the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020.

Annual monitoring of the online availability of environmental assessment reports shows that all countries produce and publish environmental assessment reports and statistical publications. The national assessment processes in Belarus and Ukraine are nationally funded, (e.g. state of the environment reports). In Belarus, an ecological bulletin is published annually and it is a blueprint for the national report on the state of the environment. The reports regularity and availability are in accordance with their national legislation, regulations and administrative control. In 2019, Belarus and Georgia published and distributed their national state of the environment reports. In 2020, after the process of stakeholder consultation, the State of the environment report is launched in Ukraine. In Moldova and Armenia is ongoing a preparatory process of the state of the environment report (see Figure 1)

Figure 1: Frequency of national state of the environment reports, status in November 2019



Note: (*) Under UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99. Kosovo added in line with EEA style.

State of the environment reports offer ample opportunities for visual presentation, which are indeed used. Many indicators are presented as graphs showing time series, static diagrams or a combination of the two. Some of the reports reviewed give the impression of being over-saturated with visual depictions of indicators, the choice of which may prioritise data that were available over those needed to make a point. However, the format of presentation seems to relate to the capacities of the editorial teams. For instance, maps are used relatively less than other types of infographics and less frequently for showing statistical data — although interesting examples in this respect are the reports from Belarus and Georgia. Linkages between the indicators per se and the respective assessment narratives and messages are, typically, both strong and weak at the same time — in different ways.

Although at times indicator tables and visuals simply appear in the text without being discussed much or at all, in other cases the text literally describes tables and visuals point by point without adding much value. Indicators are still relatively rarely used in an analytical manner, except those on greenhouse gases, for which the analytical context of sectoral responsibilities for emissions is included in their projections and mitigation measures. In keeping with the higher incidence of including assessment sections when presenting indicators online, more examples of the analytical use of indicators are found in Belarus's report and in Georgia's latest DPSIR-based assessment (i.e. based on the drivers, pressures, state, impact and response model).

All six environment ministries have websites, accessible in their national languages and with some pages also available in English and Russian. Many national assessment reports are available in the national languages or in English (see Table 2).

Table 2: Central environmental web portals

Country	Institution	Portal	Language
Armenia	Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia	http://armstatbank.am/	AR, ENG, RU
Armenia	Ministry of Environment	http://www.mnp.am/	AR, ENG, RU
Armenia	The State Committee of Real Estate Cadastre	http://www.cadastre.am/	AR
Azerbaijan	State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan Republic	http://www.stat.gov.az/	AZ, ENG
Azerbaijan	Azerbaijan Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources	http://eco.gov.az/	AZ
Belarus	National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus	http://www.belstat.gov.by/	RUS,ENG
Belarus	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus	http://www.minpriroda.gov.by/ru/	RUS,ENG
Belarus	Belarusian Research Center "Ecology"	http://www.ecoinfo.by/	RUS,ENG
Georgia	National Statistics Office of Georgia	http://www.geostat.ge/	GE,ENG
Georgia	Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia	http://mepa.gov.ge/	GE
Moldova	National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova	http://www.statistica.md/	RO,RU,ENG
Moldova	Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment	http://www.madrm.gov.md/	RO,RU,ENG
Moldova	Environmental Protection Agency	http://www.mediu.gov.md/	RO,RU,ENG
Ukraine	State Statistics Service of Ukraine	http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/	UA,ENG
Ukraine	Ministry of Energy and Environmental Protection of Ukraine	http://eng.menr.gov.ua/	UA,ENG

Conclusion

Under multilateral environmental agreements and different legislative settings, the Eastern Partnership countries need to establish regular national assessment and reporting processes to provide the information necessary to fulfil national and regional policy requirements. Contributing to the implementation of the ratified Aarhus Convention, these countries publish their national state of the environment reports. The national statistical offices also produce key data for assessments and indicators and disseminate them in e-database and/or e-Statistical Yearbook formats on their official websites. The majority of these countries have available 'online data' supporting the UNECE commonly agreed environmental indicators and widely used environmental indicators for national state of the environment assessment and indicator-based assessments.

The indicators, assessments, outlooks, tools and methodologies used by the EEA and EU countries are promoted and implemented according to the countries' interest in the context of the ENI SEIS II East project. The EEA and the Slovak Environment Agency project team are aware of the countries' objectives and needs in terms of environmental assessment and of access to and publication of environmental information.

To facilitate the environmental reporting process, a Methodological paper on the national state of environment report was produced and made available in an interactive format. The document is based on the long-term experience of Slovakia in producing its state of the environment report, which has been published continuously since 1993 in Slovakia. It also takes into account Slovakia's experience of the EEA's activities as an active member country.

The methodological paper:

- guides the Eastern Partnership countries in implementing the process of environmental assessment and analysis and produce a state of the environment report as the main output of their work in this area;

- generalises this experience so that it can be used in the various Eastern Partnership countries, despite their different environmental analysis and assessment conditions and their specific objectives in relation to the state of the environment reporting process.

However, there is a demand and a need for increasing the harmonisation of environmental data, indicators and reports through the development of and support for common approaches and methodologies. This is expected to improve the quality and comparability of environmental information, both internationally and in the EU, thereby showing and paving the way for methodological innovation and bringing country capacities up to an even level.

All these channels help make the related information useable, useful and policy-relevant and further contribute to the improved accessibility and quality of indicators. As with policy frameworks, such use in turn also helps define and stimulate demand for environmental indicators, and indicator-based assessments guide further work to develop their common definitions, principles and methodologies.

Integrating environmental assessment with the publication of indicators is one of the main areas where future development is needed. Its potential is high in terms of both systematically including an assessment narrative when publishing indicators and further improving the analytical quality of such narratives. Not least, encouragement is needed to build bridges between the environmental and statistical communities to overcome the common reluctance of the latter to get engaged in assessment in the first place.

Systematic region-wide environmental assessment underpinned by indicators requires a well-developed and efficient institutional infrastructure at regional and country levels. It explains why the SEIS ambition of attaining comparable environmental information throughout the pan-European region remains relevant.