

3-4
June
2026

FIRST EUROPEAN FORUM
on **Environmental Human
Rights Defenders**



Council of Europe,
Strasbourg



Background

The purpose of the European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders (the Forum) is to enhance the collaboration between Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), civil society organisations (CSOs), grassroots movements, Indigenous Peoples, government representatives and national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms, as well as other relevant actors to address challenges, share experiences, and promote stronger protections for EHRDs. Drawing on similar forums that have been established in Asia-Pacific and LAC to support EHRDs in these regions, the Forum will serve to increase awareness, share good practices and peer learning, and address the risks and challenges faced by defenders in Europe, including related to the human rights issues they advocate for. The Forum, the first of its kind in the region, will enable defenders to connect and strategise with peers engaged in environmental action and engage with policymakers, regional and UN-level organizations and procedures as well as National Human Rights Institutions.

The initiative is co-led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Council of Europe, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, in cooperation with UNECE Aarhus Convention secretariat, several Human Rights Council Special Procedure mandate holders, and civil society organisations active in Europe.

The Forum will be developed in consultation with defenders, including activists who may not formally identify as EHRDs. The Forum should be regarded as a process, building on existing mechanisms and initiatives in Europe to promote synergies and overcome silos. The modalities of the discussions should ensure sufficient space for EHRDs to engage and lead to policy developments, the identification of recommendations for the implementation of relevant environmental and human rights standards and legislation, and the development of joint strategies to drive commitments and practical measures to enhance EHRDs protection and ensure their inclusion and participation. To foster continuous dialogue, the Forum is planned as a regular (biennial) event.

Key Objectives of the first edition of the Forum

1. **Improve existing protection mechanisms for EHRDs in the European region**, including the 46 members States of the Council of Europe, through:
 - ▶ Review of the effectiveness, accessibility and comprehensiveness of current mechanisms;
 - ▶ Awareness-raising and promotion of available protection tools;
 - ▶ Targeted capacity-building;
 - ▶ Integration of a gender-sensitive, intersectional and inter-generational approach.
2. **Identify gaps in policies and legislation** affecting the protection and work of EHRDs and produce concrete, actionable recommendations on behalf of the Forum for potential endorsement by policymakers.
3. **Enhance coordination** between UN mechanisms, regional organisations, and EU and national institutions and procedures to strengthen protection frameworks for EHRDs in the European region and improve collaboration between institutions and EHRD organisations.
4. **Provide structured opportunities** for EHRDs to engage directly with relevant UN, Council of Europe, EU and regional mechanisms and procedures working on issues relevant to their protection.
5. **Provide a enabling space** for dialogue on ongoing challenges and regional trends affecting EHRDs in the European region, particularly in relation to exercising:
 - ▶ The right to participation;
 - ▶ Freedoms of expression, assembly, and association;
 - ▶ Access to information;
 - ▶ Access to justice in environmental matters.
6. **Facilitate an exchange** among diverse relevant actors on rights-based responses to environmental crises, including recognition of EHRDs' effective contributions to the preservation of the environment and life-supporting ecosystems in Europe.
7. **Promote shared understanding and mutual learning** by exchanging good practices and success stories, as well as reflecting openly on negative experiences and blind spots, particularly on the realisation of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Format and Participants

The first edition of the Forum will gather around 400 participants. It will be held over two days:

- ▶ **Day 1:** Discussion among EHRDs.
- ▶ **Day 2:** Open space for EHRDs' engagement with other actors – participation on this day will be open to policy makers from the European region including the 46 Council of Europe member States, the Equinet, the European Network of Equality Bodies, the European network of national human rights institutions (ENNHRI), broader civil society and academia, etc.

The interpretation for the Forum will be provided in the two official languages of the Council of Europe - English and French.

Programme – Day 1

Wednesday 3 June 2026

08.00-09.00 Arrival of participants

09.00-09.15 Welcome remarks

- ▶ **Sara Tusevljak**, environmental human rights defender from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Forum Co-Rapporteur
- ▶ **Michel Forst**, Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention and Forum Co-Rapporteur

09.15-09.30 Introduction activity

09.30-10.25 Mapping challenges and strategies – World Cafe

- ▶ Group discussions among defenders on topics identified through the Forum pre-consultations and survey

10.25-10.40 Break (and gallery walk)

10.40-12.00 Session 1: Environmental de-regulation and the right to a healthy environment in Europe

- ▶ Initial remarks to set the scene
- ▶ Smaller group discussions
- ▶ Report back and plenary discussion

12.00-12.15 Presentation of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention Presentation of the mandate of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment

12.15-13.45 Lunch break

Informal, optional lunch discussions about the Aarhus Convention, EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and the EU anti-SLAPP Directive

13.45-13:55 Post lunch energiser activity

13.55-15.10 **Session 2: Criminalisation and SLAPPs**

- ▶ Initial remarks to set the scene
- ▶ Smaller group discussions
- ▶ Report back and plenary discussion

15.10-15.25 Break

15.25-16.40 **Session 3: Corporate harm**

- ▶ Initial remarks to set the scene
- ▶ Smaller group discussions
- ▶ Report back and plenary discussion

16.40-17.15 **Finalising messages for Day 2**

17.15-17.30 **Closing**

Programme – Day 2

Thursday 4 June 2026

08.00-09.00 **Arrival of participants**

09.00-09.15 **Welcome remarks**

Speakers:

- ▶ **Rafael Benitez**, Director of Social Rights, Health and Environment, Council of Europe
- ▶ **Catherine Trautmann**, Mayor of Strasbourg
- ▶ **Sara Tusevljak*** and **Michel Forst****, Forum Co-Rapporteurs

** Environmental human rights defender from Bosnia and Herzegovina*

*** Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention*

09.15-09.50 **Official opening**

Moderators:

- ▶ **Sara Tusevljak** and **Michel Forst**, Forum Co-Rapporteurs

Speakers:

- ▶ **Bjorn Berge**, Deputy Secretary General, Council of Europe
- ▶ **Volker Türk**, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (video-message)
- ▶ **Sirpa Rautio**, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)
- ▶ **Petra Bayr**, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)
- ▶ **Mattias Guyomar**, President of the European Court of Human Rights (video- message)
- ▶ **Karin Kvarfordt Niia**, Indigenous Community Gabna, Environmental Human Rights Defender

Keynote speech:

- ▶ **Patrizia Heidegger**, Deputy Secretary General, Environmental European Bureau (EEB)

09.50-11.00 **Setting the scene for the First European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs): Perspectives and Expectations of EHRDs**

Building on the discussions from the first day of the Forum, EHRDs will share testimonies reflecting lived experiences and current realities on the ground. They will also provide an overview of the key challenges identified during Forum-Day 1 and present their expectations for Day 2 and their engagement with the actors present on that day.

Moderator:

- ▶ **Sara Tusevljak**, Forum Co-Rapporteur

Speakers:

- ▶ **Aleksandra Velimanovic**, Civic organisation Nimbus in Loznica, Serbia, Network for Rural Development of Serbia, and Balkan Rural Development Network
- ▶ **Olya Melen-Zabramna**, Head of the Legal Department at Environment-People-Law (EPL), Ukraine
- ▶ **Benjamin Van Bunderen Robberechts**, Climate Justice for Rosa, Belgium
- ▶ **Rosmarie Wydler-Wälti and Anne Mahrer**, Co-presidents of Senior Women for Climate Protection, Switzerland

Interventions from the floor and discussion

11.00-11.15 Coffee break

11.15-12.00 *Breakout session*
Interactive session between EHRDs and institutional and governmental representatives

During this session, interactions between EHRDs and other participants – including institutional and governmental representatives – will be facilitated.

12.00-12.15 *Group photo*

Interested participants will have the opportunity to join for an official group photo in front of the Palais de l'Europe, with the official Forum banner.

12.15-13.45 Lunch break

13.45-15.00 **Session 1 – Understanding challenges and risks for EHRDs: Promoting civic space and the role of EHRDs in environmental governance**

Drawing on discussions of the first day of the Forum, this panel will examine key challenges and responses to safeguarding civic space for EHRDs. EHRDs will present their recommendations from Day 1. The discussion will focus on enabling inclusive and meaningful participation in environmental decision-making; human rights and environmental violations by corporate actors; and addressing criminalisation of EHRDs, including Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs).

Moderator:

- ▶ **Nina Eschke**, Senior Researcher and Policy Adviser focusing on climate change, the environment and human rights, German Institute for Human Rights; and Co-Chair of the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI)'s Working Group on Climate Crisis and Human Rights

Presentation of context

- ▶ EHRDs (two speakers)

Speakers:

- ▶ **Darian Pavli**, Judge of the European Court of Human Rights
- ▶ **Teresa Anjinho**, European Ombudsman
- ▶ **Tonje Meinich**, Norway, Chairperson of the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH)

Interventions from the floor and discussion

15.00-15.30 Coffee break

15.30-16.45

Session 2 – Bridging the gap between States obligations and EHRDs protection: *Strengthening environmental standards building upon the political recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right*

Drawing on discussions of the first day of the Forum, this panel will focus on the implementation of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment at the national level. EHRDs will present their recommendations. The discussion will examine States obligations to prevent, address and remedy environmental harm, including corporate harm, leading to a more effective protection of EHRDs.

Moderator:

- ▶ **Sébastien Duyck**, Senior Attorney, Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL)

Presentation of context

- ▶ EHRDs (*one speaker*)

Speakers:

- ▶ **Astrid Puentes Riaño**, Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment
- ▶ **Jonathan Denis**, Deputy spokesperson on the environment and climate change, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe
- ▶ **Pavel Antonov**, Executive Editor and co-founder of BlueLink.net
- ▶ **Sarah Barnier-Leroy**, France, Chair of the Steering Committee on the Environment (CDENV)

Interventions from the floor and discussion

16.45-17.15 **Way forward: Taking stock of the First European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders**

This concluding session will summarise key findings and recommendations from both days of the Forum. It will also set out the outcomes and roadmap towards the next edition of the European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders.

Moderator:

- ▶ **Ana Paula Souza**, Human Rights Officer, Environment and Climate Change Unit, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Speaker:

- ▶ **Xabier Triana Gomez**, Youth and Environment Europe (YEE)

Interventions from the floor and discussion

17.15-17.30 **Closing session**

Moderators:

- ▶ **Sara Tusevljak** and **Michel Forst**, Forum Co-Rapporteurs

Speakers:

- ▶ **Gabriel Revel**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Monaco to the Council of Europe, Presidency of the Committee of Ministers
- ▶ **Michael O’Flaherty**, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe
- ▶ **Andrea Bolaños Vargas**, Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders

17.30-17.45 **Concluding remarks**

- ▶ **Sara Tusevljak** and **Michel Forst**, Forum Co-Rapporteurs

Evening activities

Day 1 – Wednesday 3 June 2026

- 18.00-19.30** **University of Strasbourg roundtable discussion**, Cavaillès Lecture Hall, Le Patio Building (Esplanade Campus), 22 rue René Descartes, Strasbourg
- 20.00** **Reception hosted by the City of Strasbourg**, Strasbourg City Hall, 9 Rue Brûlée, Strasbourg

Day 2 – Thursday 4 June 2026

- 20.00** **Screening of the movie – “Justice climatique”**, followed by a debate, UGC Ciné Cité, 25 avenue du Rhin, Strasbourg



The First European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) is co-organised by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Council of Europe, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), in cooperation with the Secretariat of the UNECE Aarhus Convention, and Alliance for Land, Indigenous, and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED), Justice and Environment European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL), Guta Environmental Law Association, European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Earthjustice, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), Protection International, Front Line Defenders, Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), Business and Human Rights Centre (BHRC), Youth and Environment Europe (YEE), and The European Network of Equality Bodies (Equinet Europe).

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.



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