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AD HOC MULTIDISCIPLINARY GROUP ON THE ENVIRONMENT (GME)

**DRAFT COUNCIL OF EUROPE
STRATEGY ON THE ENVIRONMENT
2025-2030**

Foreword

The following document has been prepared on the basis of the elements discussed by the GME at its 1st meeting (GME(2024)3rev), the discussions on the preliminary draft at its second meeting (GME(2024)10) and the written comments received from delegations (GME(2025)1). Background information on the revision process is set out hereafter.

Action required

Members of the GME are requested to consider and review this document with a view to its submission to the Committee of Ministers in pursuance of the GME's terms of reference.

Document prepared by the Secretariat

Background of the revised version

1. The 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government, held in Reykjavík on 16 – 17 May 2023, recognised “the urgency of additional efforts to protect the environment, as well as to counter the impact of the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity on human rights, democracy and the rule of law.” It committed the Council of Europe to strengthening work on the human rights aspects of the environment and initiate the Reykjavik process of focusing and strengthening the work of the Council of Europe in this field, as laid down in Appendix V of the Reykjavík Declaration on “The Council of Europe and the environment”.

2. Two decisions followed this mandate:

- a. The creation in January 2024 of the Directorate on Social Rights, Health and Environment and of the Department for the Reykjavik Process and Environment, along with an Inter-secretariat Task Force on the Environment.
- b. The setting up in July 2024 of the Multidisciplinary Group on the Environment (GME) with the mandate of preparing “a draft Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment and a related Action Plan for its implementation in accordance with the Reykjavik Declaration, focusing on areas where the Council of Europe has a comparative advantage and/or unique legal instruments and expertise, ensuring an inclusive consultation process, and leveraging synergies with partners and stakeholders with a view to provide added value”¹. The mandate requests the GME to take into account, *inter alia*, the ongoing work on the preparation by the Steering Committee on Human Rights (CDDH) of a study on the need for and the feasibility of a further instrument or instruments in the field of human rights and the environment as well as the preparation by the European Committee on Crime Problems (CDPC) of a draft Convention on the protection of the environment through criminal law.

3. The GME was set up as a multidisciplinary and multistakeholder group including member States as well as Participants and Observers representing a wide range of bodies and institutions, international intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. It has met twice (in September and December 2024) to discuss the scope, nature and objectives of a draft Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment. Member States, Participants and Observers have guided the drafting process submitting both oral and written contributions. A number of background documents have been prepared to inform the discussions, including:

- a. The Elements for the elaboration of a Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment.²
- b. A compendium on existing activities, planned activities, and proposals for new activities on the environment.³
- c. The results of a survey circulated to the GME⁴ on challenges, priorities and proposals for Council of Europe work.

¹ Terms of Reference of the Ad hoc Multidisciplinary Group on the Environment (GME), Council of Europe, 11 July 2024 - [GME\(2024\)1](#)

² Elements for the elaboration of a Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment – [GME\(2024\)3rev](#)

³ Compendium of the Council of Europe activities on the environment - [GME\(2024\)2rev](#)

⁴ Addressing the three main challenges of the Triple Planetary Crisis - [GME\(2024\)11](#)

4. The revised version of the draft Strategy presented in this document takes into account the exchanges at the second GME meeting and the 27 written contributions⁵ received by the Secretariat which include:

- a. Observations of a general nature calling for:
 - i. Further clarification on the nature, scope and purpose of the strategy (including making it clear that the Strategy does not create new obligations for member States and that it is addressed to the Council of Europe).
 - ii. Focus on priority areas, fewer and more action-oriented objectives.
 - iii. Clearer links between the objectives and the Action Plan; postponing discussion on Action Plan until consensus on the Strategy is reached.
 - iv. Avoiding repetition and shortening the text.
 - v. Changes in wording and terminology to align with agreed language and mandate.
 - vi. Increased focus on women, youth, children and persons/groups at risk or in situation of vulnerability.
 - vii. Clarity on the role of the Council of Europe institutional setting, including of the possible future steering committee on the Environment.
- b. Drafting proposals aiming at:
 - i. Shortening the text and avoiding repetitions.
 - ii. Adapting language to the nature of the strategy (use of “could” instead of “should”).
 - iii. Integrating references to “safe and sustainable environment”, “phasing out fossil fuels”, “corporate responsibility”, and to the “right to clean water and sanitation”.
 - iv. Including concepts such as “diversity”, “social equity”, and “intragenerational and intergenerational equity and solidarity”.
 - v. Taking into account the transboundary aspects of environmental issues and decisions.
 - vi. Including references to key global and Council of Europe treaties, instruments and processes.
- c. When elaborating this revised version, the Secretariat has considered all the contributions received. To reduce the length of the text, the descriptions of the various challenges haven been shortened considerably. Footnotes have been introduced to document the sources of the information provided during the drafting stage, although the suggestion is to eliminate most footnotes from the final document. When conflicting views on terminology were expressed, the choice has been to resort to the wording used in the 4th Summit mandate, the GME terms of reference, and to agreed language in Council of Europe standards.

5. This revised version proposes a structure and approach similar to those followed in other Council of Europe Strategies. It does not include an Action Plan yet. A draft Action Plan will be proposed for discussion at a later stage, once there is agreement on the Strategy's objectives.

⁵ For the compilation of written submissions, please refer to document [GME\(2025\)1](#) - Compilation of comments and proposals received from the GME members, participants and observers

DRAFT COUNCIL OF EUROPE STRATEGY ON THE ENVIRONMENT

I. PROTECTING PEOPLE AND THE PLANET: NEED FOR URGENT ACTION

6. The environment is facing an unprecedented, alarming degradation. Biodiversity loss is accelerating, pollution increasing and climate changing at an extremely worrying pace⁶. The resource use has tripled over the last fifty years, and a 60 per cent growth in resource use is expected by 2060⁷. These trends combined have brought the scientific community and the international community at large, to describe the situation as a triple planetary crisis. The European continent continues to consume more resources and contribute more to environmental degradation than many other world regions⁸.

7. The Council of Europe member States and civil society share these concerns, recognising the critical threats that this crisis poses not only to nature and ecosystems, but also to individuals, groups, and society as a whole. Amongst its root causes, they highlight industrial emissions, fossil fuel production and consumption, unsustainable land use and harmful practices in industry, agriculture, forestry, aquaculture and fisheries. Additionally, illegal exploitation of wild fauna and flora by organised criminal networks - often enabled by corruption - contributes to environmental destruction as well as other environmental crimes. Environmental damage can also occur as a consequence of armed conflict, but it is also increasingly used as a method of warfare. The destruction of ecosystems, contamination of water sources, and devastation of agricultural lands can have long-lasting consequences, exacerbating humanitarian crises. Unsafe and unsustainable practices, along with criminal activities, disrupt ecological stability, sometimes triggering extreme weather events and natural disasters. These threats undermine food security, public health, and the essential benefits that nature provides to society, while also jeopardizing human rights, democracy, and the rule of law⁹. Furthermore, environmental degradation disproportionately affects persons in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination, such as women, young people, children, older persons, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged populations, migrants, ethnic and national minorities, Roma and Travellers¹⁰ as well as LGBTI people and people at the intersection of these situations. This in turn increases inequalities and compromises future generations' ability to enjoy human rights and meet their own needs.

8. Thanks to environmental legislation and policies, some progress has been achieved in several fronts. Policy measures targeted at nature protection, sustainable land management or at reducing air pollution have delivered benefits in a number of areas. Examples include the phasing out of chlorofluorocarbons and the preservation and recovery of several endangered species and habitats. Unfortunately, many problems persist, and some are getting worse.

⁶ IPBES (2019): Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

⁷ The Global Resources Outlook 2024, written under the auspices of the International Resource Panel (IRP) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

⁸ European Environment Agency, "State of Europe's Environment", <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/at-a-glance/state-of-europes-environment> [version 16 December 2024]

⁹ Recommendation [CM/Rec \(2022\)20](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on human rights and the protection of the environment (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 27 September 2022 at the 1444th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

¹⁰ The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

9. Human rights and the environment are intertwined. A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is integral part to the full enjoyment of the human rights by present and future generations.

II. THE ROLE OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

10. At their 4th Summit, the Council of Europe Heads of State and Government meeting in Reykjavík on 16 – 17 May 2023, recognised the urgency of additional efforts to protect the environment, as well as to counter the impact of the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss. They also underscored “the role that the Council of Europe may play as an Organisation working not only in the area of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, but with a long-standing and widely acknowledged track record in protecting the environment, environmentally friendly landscape management and planning, and public health. It has both the tools and the structures to address human rights and the environment, in the spirit of co-operation and by sharing experience and promising practice.”¹¹

11. The Council of Europe is indeed uniquely positioned to contribute to these efforts for the following reasons:

- a. Its standards and expertise in complementary fields:
 - i. the preservation of wildlife, natural ecosystems and landscapes;
 - ii. the protection and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law
 - iii. the prevention of and response to major natural and technological hazards
- b. An institutional setting that:
 - i. Mobilises governments, parliaments, and local and regional authorities in 46 member States.
 - ii. Provides platforms to address shared challenges, to share experiences and good practices, and to agree on solutions with the effective participation of national human rights institutions, equality bodies, professional networks, civil society, young people and academia.
 - iii. Can set standards, guide and monitor compliance, and provide technical support to member States through cooperation projects building upon the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights (now counting over 300 environment-related judgements), jurisprudence of the European Committee of Social Rights and the decisions and reports of other relevant monitoring mechanisms, as well as upon the work of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress and the Commissioner for Human Rights.
 - iv. Works in partnership with the EU, the UN system, OECD, OSCE, and other international organisations, supporting the implementation of global treaties and inspiring action within and beyond the European continent. The Council of Europe supports and contributes to many global processes, including the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
 - v. Connects expertise in many relevant areas, including nature and landscape protection, human rights, children’s rights, gender equality, anti-discrimination, social justice, education, youth, health, justice, protection of national minorities, artificial intelligence, democratic governance, and the fight against crime.

12. The 4th Summit committed the Council of Europe to strengthening its work in the field of the Environment, with the aim of making it a visible priority for the Organisation, as laid out in Appendix V of the Reykjavík Declaration on “The Council of Europe and the environment”. As a follow-up, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers established a Multidisciplinary

¹¹ Appendix V to the Reykjavík Declaration

Group on the Environment (GME). including member States as well as Participants and Observers representing a wide range of bodies and institutions, international intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations.

13. The GME was entrusted with the preparation of “a draft Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment and a related Action Plan for its implementation in accordance with the Reykjavik Declaration, focusing on areas where the Council of Europe has a comparative advantage and/or unique legal instruments and expertise, ensuring an inclusive consultation process, and leveraging synergies with partners and stakeholders with a view to provide added value”¹².

14. This Strategy provides guidance to the Council of Europe institutions, bodies, programmes, and administration facilitating the coordination of their work to meet five strategic objectives. It also recalls the values, principles and approaches that should guide their action, identifies working methods and ways to ensure and report on the Strategy’s implementation.

III. Values, Principles and Approaches

15. Council of Europe action in environment-related fields will be guided by the following values, principles and approaches:

- a. A human rights-based approach: ensuring that policies and actions are grounded in the protection, promotion and fulfilment of human rights, creating a framework through which the security, safety, health, well-being, equity, diversity, non-discrimination, dignity, and livelihoods of those most at risk are prioritised.
- b. Good democratic governance principles¹³ ensuring:
 - i. respect for, and protection and promotion of, democracy, human rights and the rule of law;
 - ii. observance of the highest standards of public ethics and integrity in the exercise of power and public responsibilities;
 - iii. the provision of high-quality public services and economic, social and environmental well-being;
 - iv. the practice of good administration.

These principles include democratic participation, public ethics and integrity, accountability, transparency, sustainability, and long-term orientation. Good democratic governance is supported by institutions that are integrated, collaborative and coherent—horizontally across sectors and vertically across governance levels – and with adequate capacity to meet their respective roles in effective, efficient and accountable ways¹⁴.

- c. Environment-related principles and approaches, including:
 - i. The sustainable development principle, the principle of prevention, the no harm, the precautionary, the non-regression and the polluter pays principles, as well protecting the ability of present and future generations to enjoy their rights.

¹²Terms of Reference of the Ad hoc Multidisciplinary Group on the Environment (GME), Council of Europe, 11 July 2024 - [GME\(2024\)1](#)

¹³ Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2023\)5](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the principles of good democratic governance (adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 6 September 2023 at the 1473rd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

¹⁴ Green Economy Coalition *et al*, “Principles, priorities and pathways for inclusive green economies: Economic transformation to deliver the SDGs”, 16 July 2019

- ii. Ecosystem based approaches and adaptation, and Nature-based Solutions¹⁵ based on the best available science for the benefit of all people and nature, including protecting, restoring, maintaining and enhancing ecosystem functions and services and nature's contribution to people.
- d. A One Health approach aiming at sustainably balancing and optimizing the health of people, animals and ecosystems¹⁶.
- e. Mainstreaming gender, youth perspectives, children's rights, the rights of Roma and Travellers, those of persons with a disability and, more generally, equality in the development of environment-related standards, policies and programmes.

IV. Goals and strategic objectives

16. The Council of Europe envisions a future in which human beings fully enjoy their human rights and live in a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. To realise this vision, the Strategy pursues three overarching goals and sets five strategic objectives.

Overarching goals:

- a. GOAL 1: To integrate the Council of Europe core values (human rights, democracy, and the rule of law) into the Council of Europe's environment-related activities and the environmental policies of member States.
- b. GOAL 2: To strengthen existing Council of Europe instruments in the environmental field:
 - i. promoting the implementation of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats and the Council of Europe Landscape Convention.
 - ii. [Supporting the early entry into force of the Convention on the protection of the Environment through criminal law]
- c. GOAL 3: To integrate sustainable development and environment-related objectives and concerns in the Council of Europe operations and governance.

Strategic Objective 1: Integrating human rights considerations in environment-related strategies, legislation, policies and actions.

17. The interconnection between human rights and the environment has been reflected in the evolving case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and in the jurisprudence of the European Committee of Social Rights¹⁷, which has established the link between environmental degradation and some of the rights enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights

¹⁵ According to the United Nations Environment Assembly on 2 March 2022 "Nature-based Solutions are actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems which address social, economic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services, resilience and biodiversity benefits".

¹⁶ Definition developed by the One Health High Level Expert Panel, an advisory panel to the One Health (now) Quadripartite made up of the FAO, WHO, WOA, and UNEP.

¹⁷ Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights (MFHR) v. Greece, Complaint No. 30/2005, decision on the merits of 6 December 2006; International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH) v. Greece, Complaint No. 72/2011, decision on the merits of 23 January 2013.

and the European Social Charter. These, include the right to life¹⁸, the right not to be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment¹⁹, the right to respect for private and family life, and the home²⁰, the rights to fair trial and an effective remedy²¹, the rights to freedom of expression, of association and of peaceful assembly²², the right to property²³, the right to protection of health, the right to just conditions of work, the right to safe and healthy working conditions, and the right to housing.

18. The recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is gaining traction thanks to its inclusion, in various ways, in national constitutions, legislation and policies. Many Council of Europe member States recognise, either explicitly or implicitly, some formulation of the human right to a healthy environment under domestic law²⁴. At international level, it is enshrined in several regional treaties and has recently received an important political backing through the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 48/13 of 8 October 2021²⁵ and the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 76/300 (July 2022)²⁶. Recognising this evolution, the 4th Summit Declaration commits the Council of Europe to strengthening work at the Council of Europe on the human rights aspects of the environment based on the political recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right.

19. Building upon the European Convention on Human Rights and, where applicable²⁷, the European Social Charter and other Council of Europe and United Nations treaties, action will aim at:

- a. Providing guidance for the development of holistic and inclusive strategies that align environmental goals with the realisation of human rights, including ways to assess the impact of the implementation of environmental policies and practices on human rights. The Council of Europe should promote:
 - i. The adoption at national level of comprehensive, consistent, effective and enforceable environmental laws, policies and programs that respect, protect and fulfil human rights.

¹⁸ L.C.B. v. the United Kingdom, judgment of 9 June 1998; Paul and Audrey Edwards v. the United Kingdom, judgment of 14 March 2002; Öneriyıldız v. Turkey [GC], judgment of 30 November 2004; Budayeva and Others v. Russia, judgment of 22 March 2008; Cannavacciuolo and Others v. Italy, judgment of 30 January 2025,

¹⁹ Kudła v. Poland [GC], judgment of 26 October 2000; Elefteriadis v. Romania (French only), judgment of 25 January 2011.

²⁰ Powell and Rayner v. the United Kingdom, judgment of 21 February 1990; Brândușe v. Romania, judgment of 7 April 2009 (in French only), Deés v. Hungary, judgment of 9 November 2010; Cordella and Others v. Italy, judgment of 24 January 2019; Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and others v. Switzerland, judgment of 9 April 2024;

²¹ Balmer-Schafroth and Others v. Switzerland [GC], judgment of 26 August 1997; Hatton and Others v. the United Kingdom, judgment of 8 July 2003; Lemke v. Turkey, judgment 5 June 2007; Karin Andersson and Others v. Sweden, judgment of 25 September 2014.

²² Verein gegen Tierfabriken v. Switzerland, judgment of 28 June 2001; Steel and Morris v. the United Kingdom, judgment of 15 February 2005; Primov and Others v. Russia, judgment of 12 June 2014, Costel Popa v. Romania, judgment of 26 April 2016,

²³ Taşkın and Others v. Turkey, decision of 29 January 2004; Depalle v. France [GC], judgment of 29 March 2010; Beinariovič and Others v. Lithuania, judgment of 12 June 2018.

²⁴ CDDH Study on the need for and feasibility of a further instrument or instruments in the field of human rights and the environment, para 47.

²⁵ UN General Assembly, A/HRC/RES/48/13, The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, 08 October 2021

²⁶ UN General Assembly, A/RES/76/300, The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, 28 July 2022

²⁷ 42 out of the 46 CoE Member States have ratified the European Social Charter

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/signatures-ratifications>

- ii. Processes that guarantee inclusive public participation at all levels of governance and at all stages of environmental decision-making processes.
 - iii. Focus on a just transition²⁸ ensuring that social equity remains at the core of environmental action leaving no one behind.
- b. Fostering the integration of human rights, just resilience and just transition considerations into national, regional and local biodiversity strategies and action plans, environmental laws, policies and programmes, including, inter alia, climate adaptation and mitigation plans for key persons and groups in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination and paying attention to the intersection of these situations.
 - c. Supporting member States in the implementation of human rights standards taking into account their environmental dimension and the need to protect the rights of persons in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination, as laid down in paragraph 7, who face or may face environmental degradation and environment-related harm.
 - d. [Promoting the legal recognition at national and European levels of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as an enforceable human right].

Strategic Objective 2: Strengthening good democratic governance

20. At their 4th Summit, the Council of Europe Heads of State and Government committed to securing and strengthening democracy and good governance at all levels throughout Europe, to prevent and resist democratic backsliding, including in situations of emergency, crisis and armed conflicts, and standing firm against authoritarian tendencies.²⁹ The Summit highlighted the importance of ensuring that everyone is able to play their role in democratic processes, calling for priority to be given to the participation of young persons and ensuring full, equal and meaningful participation in political and public life for all, in particular for women and girls, free from violence, fear, harassment, hate speech and hate crime, as well as discrimination based on any ground.

21. The lack of effective action to end the triple planetary crisis and to achieve climate justice are concerns widely shared in society, with children and young people repeatedly calling for urgent action and leading change through transformative initiatives. At the same time, Democratic backsliding³⁰ is restricting civic space, including by limiting young people's access to their right to advocate for a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and to participate in decision-making processes in environment-related matters³¹.

22. The triple planetary crisis has unequal negative impacts on minority groups who are often more severely affected by environmental stress factors due to urban segregation, unsatisfactory housing conditions, and job precarity. Women are also often disproportionately exposed to the impacts of environmental degradation, including limited access to resources, healthcare, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and decision-making processes in response to environmental crises. Despite this, women are critical leaders and agents of change in the response. Indigenous Peoples are particularly affected due to the dependence

²⁸ "A just transition promotes environmentally sustainable economies in a way that is inclusive, by creating decent work opportunities, reducing inequality and by leaving no one behind." (Resolution adopted by the International Labour Conference on June 16, 2023, concerning a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all, para. 11 (ILC.111/Resolution V))

²⁹ 4th Summit Declaration, Appendix III. Reykjavík Principles for Democracy

³⁰ Reykjavík Declaration, page 6.

³¹ Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2024\)6](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on young people and climate action (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 23 October 2024 at the 1510th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

of their culture and traditional livelihoods on nature. More generally, persons and groups socio-economically disadvantaged, or/and exposed to discrimination tend to experience higher levels of marginalisation and discrimination, disproportionately suffering from the negative effects of the environment's degradation. Therefore, diversity, equality, inclusion and non-discrimination must be promoted within both decision-making processes and their outcomes to ensure that the specific rights and needs of persons in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination are duly taken into account in the context of environmental policies.

23. Access to information is critical to the exercise of other rights, including the right to participate in decision-making processes, to access justice and seek remedies. Yet, access to information in the field of the environment remains a challenge, often exacerbated by the complexity of the issues and processes at stake. Much more needs to be done to guarantee to all the right to access to information, including through awareness raising, education and measures to improve transparency through a timely, wide and easy access to environmental information, including data, processes and decisions.

24. Access to justice is another crucial element of democratic governance, a basic principle of the rule of law and a human right. All persons whose rights are affected by environmental issues must have equal access to justice and to effective legal remedies. For this to be possible, individuals and groups must be empowered: they must have the knowledge, legal tools and support necessary for individuals to exercise their rights, seek remedies, and to hold those responsible for environment-related offences accountable. Specific measures are needed to empower children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. Ensuring children's effective and safe access to justice³², includes access to child-friendly information³³, legal assistance and child safeguarding mechanisms.

25. Holding all actors - both public and private - accountable for human rights violations, abuses and offences on environment-related matters is a critical dimension of both good governance and the rule of law. The Council of Europe monitoring system is designed to enhance accountability, but also provides guidance to improve legislation, policies and practices. The case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, the jurisprudence of the European Committee of Social Rights, and the decisions and reports of other monitoring mechanisms inspire the work of the various intergovernmental committees, outcomes of the work of the Parliamentary Assembly, the, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, reports of the Commissioner for Human Rights and other Council of Europe bodies. This way, governments obtain further guidance to meet their obligations and enhance accountability also at national level.

26. Moreover, the application of human rights and environmental accountability standards in corporate governance must be strengthened as part of this effort, fostering a culture of responsibility within businesses, and requiring them to integrate environmental considerations into their decision-making processes.

27. Under this strategic objective, action will aim at:

³² Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice

³³ In its General Comment No 26 (2023), on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change*, the Committee on the Rights of the Child sustains that children have the right to a healthy, sustainable and clean environment. It also elaborates on measures needed to ensure effective access to justice, information and participation.

*Adopted by the Committee at its ninety-third session (8–26 May 2023).

- a. Fostering the integration of good democratic governance principles³⁴ in environmental governance.
- b. Building upon the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (CETS No. 205), also known as the Tromsø Convention, using existing platforms for exchange of good practices and provide guidance on measures to:
 - i. Enhance transparency, environmental awareness and education, promote participation and effective access to information, combat misinformation and disinformation in environment-related issues.
 - ii. Promote equality and non-discrimination in all environment-related decision-making processes and outcomes. Provide guidance to support and remove obstacles to the participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination in environment-related decision-making processes to ensure that processes and policies are gender-responsive, inclusive and non-discriminatory, and that they actively reflect the rights, needs and perspectives of individuals belonging to marginalised groups.
 - iii. Support meaningful and effective public participation including civil society participation in the design and implementation of legislation, policies and measures, as well as in their impact assessment. Such participation should guarantee rights-holders' free, prior, informed consultation, with due account being taken of the outcome of the public participation.
 - iv. Respect and promote the right of Indigenous Peoples to Free, Prior and Informed Consent.
- c. Strengthening accountability:
 - i. Building upon the Aarhus Convention, provide guidance on measures to guarantee effective access to justice and remedies in environmental issues, in particular in cases where human rights are at stake, exploring legal tools such as public interest litigation and representative action suits, and ways to counter the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs).
 - ii. Provide a platform for exchanges on ways to improve the efficiency of justice in environment-related cases, including to obtain guidance to secure the effective execution of judgments from both domestic and international jurisdictions.
 - iii. Support the reinforcement at national level of systems monitoring environmental impact and holding natural and legal persons accountable for damages to the environment.
 - iv. Support accountability for the damages to the environment in the context of the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine.³⁵

³⁴ Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2023\)5](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the principles of good democratic governance (adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 6 September 2023 at the 1473rd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

³⁵ Damages to the environment is included in the categories of claims eligible for recording in the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine. Hungary's support for this document should be understood in conjunction with its national reservation to the Reykjavik Declaration and in light of the fact that Hungary is not party to the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine as an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe.

Strategic Objective 3: Supporting and protecting Environmental Human Rights Defenders and Whistle blowers

28. Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRD) make an invaluable contribution to the protection of both the environment and human rights, while whistleblowers report or disclose information on a threat or harm to the public interest in environmental-related matters in the context of their work-based relationship, whether it be in the public or private sector³⁶. More and more civil society organisations include the protection of the environment in their activism, denouncing the risks and consequences deriving from actions, inaction and events.

29. Because of their activities, they can be subject to many forms of threats and reprisal, intersectional discrimination, harassment, unfair treatment, unlawful punishment, criminal prosecution, arrest or deprivation of liberty, physical attacks sometimes even resulting in killings. They may also face obstacles to freely express their views and to access justice. As highlighted by the Parliamentary Assembly, women human rights defenders often encounter additional barriers, with gender-based discrimination and violence further exacerbating the challenges they face³⁷. The obligation to protect environmental human rights defenders, whistle blowers and, more generally, those who denounce environment-related offences, has been repeatedly highlighted at the Council of Europe³⁸ and at global level. In 2022, the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention elected a Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, with the mandate of taking measures to protect any person experiencing or at imminent threat of penalization, persecution, or harassment for seeking to exercise their rights under the Aarhus Convention.

30. At their 4th Summit, the Council of Europe Heads of State and Government committed to supporting and maintaining a safe and enabling environment in which civil society, as well as human rights defenders, can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence³⁹. Action under this objective will build upon the relevant UN, EU and Council of Europe frameworks and on the work carried out by the Council of Europe relevant bodies and institutions, including the intergovernmental committees. Action will aim at:

- a. Provision of guidance on measures to create the conditions enabling individuals, groups and associations to freely carry out activities to promote and strive for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in environment-related matters without any restrictions other than those authorised by the European Convention on Human Rights. Those measures should include those necessary to guarantee access to information, participation and justice, legal assistance, and effective remedies.
- b. Supporting the specific empowerment and protection of young people and children who act as environmental defenders, and the provision of targeted support to address the unique challenges faced by women environmental human rights defenders.
- c. Supporting the integration of standards for the protection of environment defenders and whistle blowers into environmental governance and processes.

³⁶ Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2014\)7](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of whistleblowers (adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 30 April 2014 at the 1198th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

³⁷ Protecting women human rights defenders in Europe, Resolution 2554 (2024)

³⁸ Let us make Europe a safe place for environmental human rights defenders. Human Rights Comment by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

³⁹ 4th Summit Declaration, Appendix III. Reykjavík Principles for Democracy

Strategic Objective 4: Preventing and prosecuting environment-related crimes

31. Through criminal law, States can pursue several objectives. They can prevent the commission of offences, fight impunity, enhance accountability and access to remedies. They can also protect the environment as well as the actual and potential victims of environment-related offences. The way in which legal frameworks criminalise acts that harm the environment also reflects the value that they attach to the environment.

32. International cooperation in this field is critical. It helps to harmonise policies and legislation and creates frameworks for the efficient investigation and prosecution of transborder crimes.

33. The Council of Europe's work in the field of criminal law provides unique insights in areas that are very relevant to the prevention and prosecution of environment-related offences. These include treaties and other standards, monitoring bodies and cooperation frameworks focusing on the protection of the environment through criminal law, the fight against corruption, money laundering, cybercrime and the counterfeiting of medical products and similar crimes involving threats to public health. Building upon the existing standards and frameworks, this objective includes:

- a. Promoting the signature, ratification, and implementation of the relevant treaties in this field, in particular the Council of Europe Convention on the protection of the environment through criminal law (CET...).⁴⁰
- b. The provision of guidance for the development of comprehensive policies and national strategies for the prevention and prosecution of environment-related crimes.
- c. Further developing cooperation on the role of judges and prosecutors in environment-related cases.
- d. Exploring measures to enhance corporate accountability, including those allowing the domestic courts of States where business enterprises are not domiciled, to exercise jurisdiction⁴¹.

Strategic Objective 5: Protecting wildlife, ecosystems, habitats and landscapes

34. The Council of Europe is uniquely placed to support States in their efforts to protect wildlife, ecosystems, habitats and landscapes.

35. Since 1979, the Council of Europe Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (ETS No. 104), also known as the Bern Convention is supporting States Parties in the development of legislation, policies and measures to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats. The Convention recognises the intrinsic value of wild flora and fauna, which needs to be preserved and passed to future generations and considers the impact of other policies (such as planning and development) on the natural environment, promoting education and information on conservation, and coordinating research. It gathers

⁴⁰ A new Convention on the Protection on the Environment through criminal law is expected to be adopted/open to signature at the Ministerial Session of the Committee of Ministers in May 2025.

⁴¹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on human rights and business, chapter IV, paragraph i, subparagraph 36.

today 49 countries and the European Union covering most of the European continent natural heritage and extending to some States of Africa.

36. With the adoption in 2000 of its Landscape Convention (ETS No. 176), the Council of Europe recognised landscapes' important public interest role in the cultural, ecological, environmental, economic and social fields, a resource whose protection, management and planning can contribute to social and individual well-being. The Convention counts 40 States Parties.

37. Using the cooperation frameworks and the expertise available through these treaties, the Action will aim at:

- a. Providing policy guidance, technical assistance and capacity building for the adoption of Nature-based Solutions⁴² (NbS) and ecosystem-based approaches embedded in the broader governance structures as means to manage restore, maintain and enhance natural resources and respond to environmental challenges while respecting, protecting, fulfilling and promoting human rights, including gender equality. Encouraging such approaches leverages natural processes and systems to offer sustainable solutions for addressing environmental issues, while integrating the conservation and restoration of high-integrity, and especially carbon-rich ecosystems and the development of safe green technologies and avoiding negative impacts on greenhouse gas-emission reductions, ecosystems and human rights.
- b. Encouraging transboundary cooperation in the management of natural resources.
- c. Harnessing the significant potential for synergies and joint benefits of biodiversity conservation and restoration measures and climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, including ecosystem-based approaches and adaptation, and Nature-based Solutions based on the best available science. This should include guidance for the development of partnerships with local communities, women's and youth organisations as well as with Indigenous Peoples due to their particular knowledge of ecological linkages and fragile ecosystem management.
- d. Promoting resort to innovative, human-rights compliant and sustainable technologies that align with Nature-based Solutions to foster a green and resilient economy while considering the risks of greenwashing and those associated with the use of technologies in accordance with the precautionary principle.
- e. Promoting sustainable landscape management and planning in every place and for every person through multidisciplinary plans and projects - implemented by competent authorities⁴³ in partnership with local communities and stakeholders - to support the integrated and balanced management of land use, environmental preservation and restoration, and societal well-being.

⁴² According to the United Nations Environment Assembly on 2 March 2022 "Nature-based solutions are actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems which address social, economic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services, resilience and biodiversity benefits".

⁴³ The Council of Europe Landscape Convention (ETS No. 176), article 5, paragraphs c and d

- f. Fostering a landscape holistic approach in legal frameworks and policies, and recognise landscape as an essential component of people's surroundings, an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation of their identity.
- g. Within the framework of the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA), fostering cooperation and co-ordination at the various levels⁴⁴ of governance to better prevent and respond to major natural and technological hazards, to assess and reduce risks, and to improve preparedness and post-crisis analysis.

V. Institutional Setting, Working Methods and Resources

38. The Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment builds upon existing processes both within and outside the Council of Europe. The objectives and actions proposed are guided by the willingness to:

- a. Fully harness the Council of Europe potential as an authoritative voice for the protection of the environment and the integration of the human rights dimension in environment-related policies, legislation and governance and vice versa.
- b. Align its actions with the political priorities of the Organisation, taking into account the programming and the budgetary cycles. Resources for the implementation of the Strategy by the Council of Europe will be covered by the Ordinary Budget of the Organisation and extra-budgetary resources. Needs will be assessed, and proposals will be made as appropriate for the biennia concerned in the framework of the Programme and Budget cycle.
- c. Support and, when relevant, complement existing processes in a spirit of cooperation, collaboration and partnership, in particular with the United Nations system and with the European Union.
- d. Adopt working methods that enhance internal coordination and communication, increasing the relevance, impact and visibility of the work in areas where the Council of Europe's work has a clear comparative advantage. This could include:
 - i. Internal coordination through the work of an Inter-secretariat Task Force on the Environment composed of members of the Secretariat serving the various institutions, bodies and programmes that have an interest or impact in environment-related areas.
 - ii. Mobilising specialised existing Committees and bodies around the Strategy's goals and objectives.
 - iii. The creation of an intergovernmental Committee, as encouraged by the 4th Summit, with the mandate to, for example:
 - support and periodically report on progress achieved in the implementation of the Strategy;
 - coordinate the Council of Europe action in environment-related fields;
 - provide a forum for exchange of experiences and promising practices, to discuss existing and emerging challenges and to recommend possible action to address them.

⁴⁴ Local and regional responses to natural disasters and climate hazards: from risk preparedness to resilience. Resolution 500 (2024), Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

The composition of the Committee could reflect the transversal and multidisciplinary nature of its mandate, as well as the commitment to engage in multistakeholder dialogue, in particular with representatives of other intergovernmental organisations and with civil society. The Intergovernmental Committee on the Environment would rely on and engage with other Intergovernmental Committees and bodies, supporting and giving visibility to their work.

VI. Partnerships

39. Calls for urgent action from the scientific community and civil society have greatly contributed to boost the global mobilisation to counter the triple planetary crisis. Several global processes and frameworks have become the gravitational centre of action in this field. Intergovernmental fora are now enriched with the contributions of experts, networks and civil society representatives whose diversity reflects the complexity and the importance of the issues at stake for society, communities, and individuals. Through its work, the Council of Europe supports these global processes⁴⁵ and contributes by identifying measures that help its member States to deliver on their international and national commitments, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

40. When implementing the Strategy, the Council of Europe will aim at strengthening the collaboration and partnerships with key international stakeholders. These include, but are not limited to:

- a. The European Union, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.
- b. The United Nations system (the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, the United Nations Environment Programme, UNODC and other relevant UN agencies, bodies and processes)⁴⁶.
- c. The relevant coalitions, national and other regional human rights institutions and networks, and other civil society organisations.

V. Conclusion

42. By implementing these strategic objectives, the Council of Europe underlines “the urgency of additional efforts to protect the environment, as well as to counter the impact of the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity on human rights, democracy and the rule of law”⁴⁷. The Council of Europe can play a key role in helping member States and communities to build a future that is based on human rights and environmental sustainability. The Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment, backed by an Action Plan with concrete actions, initiatives, and evidenced through successful examples within the Compendium on the Council of Europe’s environmental activities, underlines the Organisation’s unwavering commitment to addressing pressing environmental challenges. Working collaboratively across sectors, the Council of Europe endeavours to lead by example, fostering a greener, more just, and sustainable future for all. This comprehensive approach leverages the strengths, ongoing activities, and successful initiatives, illustrating the

⁴⁵ Ongoing processes to tackle triple planetary crisis on a global level by UN Climate, UN Environment, UN biodiversity, as well as UN Convention to Combat Desertification.

⁴⁶ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Paris Agreement, Convention on Biological Diversity, The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, The Global Framework of Chemicals.

⁴⁷ 4th Summit Declaration, United to meet current and future challenges

Organisation's proactive stance towards effectively mitigating environmental challenges and ensuring respect for human rights, democracy and rule of law.