

First European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders

Palais de l'Europe, Strasbourg, 4 June 2026

Opening Speech by Ms Petra Bayr
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

OPENING — WELCOME

distinguished guests, colleagues — and above all: dear environmental rights defenders.

Welcome to Strasbourg. Welcome to the Palais de l'Europe.

I want to say that clearly, because it matters who this building belongs to. It does not belong to diplomats or ministers. It belongs to every person whose rights it was built to protect.

And today, it belongs to you.

THE STAKES — NAMING THE REALITY

I have spent my entire political life working with civil society. With activists, with campaigners, with people who choose to speak truth to power when silence would be so much safer. So when I say I know what you face — I mean that I have sat across the table from people like you, and I have heard what it costs.

You are harassed. You are surveilled. You are dragged through courts not because you broke the law, but because someone with money and specific interests decided your voice was inconvenient. SLAPPs — Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation — are not legal instruments. They are weapons. And we should call them that.

A state that allows its courts to be used as tools of intimidation against environmental defenders is not upholding the rule of law. It is undermining it.

PACE — NOT A NEWCOMER TO THIS FIGHT

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is not arriving late to this conversation. We have been in it for decades.

We have scrutinised governments. We have passed resolutions. We have stood with defenders when standing with them was politically uncomfortable. Because that is what this institution was built to do. Protecting the people who protect rights — in all their diversity — is not a side function of PACE. It is our core business.

Whether it is a journalist exposing illegal dumping in a river, an Indigenous elder defending ancestral land, or a young climate activist facing a criminal charge for holding a banner — we see them. And we act.

I want you to leave this Forum knowing that PACE is not a place you come to once, present your concerns, and then wait. We are a platform you use. Continuously. Strategically. As partners.

MY PRIORITY: A BINDING CONVENTION

Now let me tell you what keeps me up at night — and what I have made a personal priority as President of this Assembly.

We have extraordinary jurisprudence from the European Court of Human Rights. In *KlimaSeniorinnen* for example, the Court has confirmed what many of you have known in your bones for years: environmental destruction is a human rights violation. States are responsible. And individuals— present and future — have rights.

But case law is not enough. It shifts with each application. It leaves gaps. It places the burden on individuals to litigate what should be a guaranteed floor.

We need a Council of Europe Convention on the Human Right to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment.

Not a declaration. Not a recommendation. A treaty — with obligations, with enforcement, with teeth. A treaty that tells every government across our 46 member states: you do not get to trade people's right to breathe clean air for short-term economic convenience.

And critically — a treaty that does not only protect the environment in the abstract, but that actively protects the people who defend it.

That work is underway. I am pushing it. And I want you in that process — not as witnesses, but as co-authors.

WHAT WE OWE EACH OTHER

Yesterday was your day. You mapped the landscape, named the patterns, built the recommendations. That work is not an input to our deliberations. It is the foundation of them.

Too often, institutions like ours consult civil society and then write their own conclusions. I am not interested in that model. I am interested in the model where you walk out of here having shaped something real.

So here is what I commit to: the Parliamentary Assembly will take the outputs of this Forum seriously. We will use them in our work on the convention. We will bring them to our committees, to our dedicated platform, to our member state governments, to the Committee of Ministers.

Your expertise does not stop at the door of this building. And neither does our responsibility toward you.

CLOSE

We are living in a moment when environmental defenders are needed more urgently than ever — and protected less consistently than ever. That is a failure of political will, not a failure of legal imagination. The legal imagination exists. The will is what we are here to build.

I have been a Social Democrat my entire political life because I believe that rights are only real when they are enforceable, and that the people most exposed to harm deserve the strongest protection. That conviction does not end at the Austrian border, and it does not end at the border of what is politically easy.

Defenders of the environment are defenders of the future. And the future deserves a legal framework worthy of the people fighting for it.

Thank you for your courage. Thank you for your persistence. Let's build something lasting — together.