

134th Session of the Committee of Ministers (Luxembourg, 13-14 May 2025)

Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment

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

1. The environment is facing unprecedented, alarming degradation. Biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change are accelerating at an extremely worrying pace.¹ Resource use has tripled over the last fifty years, and 60 per cent growth in resource use is expected by 2060.² Combined, these trends have led the scientific and international communities to describe the situation as a triple planetary crisis. The European continent continues to consume more resources and contributes more to environmental degradation than many other world regions.³

2. 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 unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, industrial emissions, fossil fuel production and consumption, unsustainable land and water use, depletion and contamination of natural resources and harmful practices in industry, agriculture, forestry, aquaculture and fisheries. Additionally, the 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 occur as a consequence of armed conflict, but it is also increasingly used as a method of warfare. The presence of landmines and explosive remnants of war, which render vast areas uninhabitable and prevent sustainable land use, contributes to soil contamination and degradation, biodiversity loss and environmental harm in the long run. 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 environmental disasters.

3. All these threats undermine food security, public health, and the essential benefits that nature provides to society, while also jeopardising human rights, democracy and the rule of law.⁴ Furthermore, environmental degradation disproportionately affects persons and groups in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination, such as women and girls, young people, children, older persons, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged populations, migrants, refugees, ethnic and national minorities, Roma and Travellers,⁵ as well as LGBTI persons and people at the

¹ IPBES (2019): Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

² The Global Resources Outlook 2024, written under the auspices of the International Resource Panel (IRP) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

³ 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].

⁴ 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).

⁵ 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.

intersections of these situations. This in turn increases inequalities and compromises “the full enjoyment of human rights by present and future generations”.⁶

4. Thanks to environmental legislation and policies, progress has been achieved on 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.

5. Human rights and the environment are intertwined. As stated in the Reykjavík Declaration “a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of human rights by present and future generations”.⁷

II. THE ROLE OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

6. 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.”⁸

7. 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 protection and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law;
 - ii. the preservation of wildlife, natural ecosystems and landscapes;
 - 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 co-operation projects building upon the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights (now counting over 300 environment-related judgements), decisions and conclusions of the European Committee of Social Rights, the decisions and reports of other relevant monitoring mechanisms, as well as upon the work of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Commissioner for Human Rights, the youth sector and other parts of the Council of Europe;
 - iv. works in partnership with the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN) system, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (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.

⁶ Reykjavík Declaration, Appendix V.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

8. The 4th Summit committed the Council of Europe to strengthening its work in the field of the environment, including its human rights aspects, 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 an Ad Hoc Multidisciplinary 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.

9. 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 Reykjavík 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 providing added value”.⁹

10. 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, and identifies working methods and ways to ensure and report on the Strategy’s implementation.

11. An Action Plan for each budgetary cycle will show the concrete initiatives planned and/or undertaken by the various sectors, bodies and institutions to contribute to the achievement of the Strategy’s objectives.

III. VALUES, PRINCIPLES AND APPROACHES

12. The 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 respect, protection, promotion and fulfilment of human rights, including the human rights of those in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination;
- b. good democratic governance principles¹⁰ 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 ways.¹¹

- c. environment-related principles and approaches, including:
 - i. the principle of sustainable development, the principle of prevention, the no harm principle, the precautionary principle, the non-regression principle and the polluter pays principle, as well as protecting the ability of people now and in the future to enjoy their rights;
 - ii. Ecosystem-based approaches and Nature-based Solutions¹² grounded on the best available science for the benefit of all people and the protection of the intrinsic value of nature, including protecting, restoring, maintaining and enhancing ecosystem functions and services and nature’s contribution to people;

⁹ Terms of Reference of the Ad hoc Multidisciplinary Group on the Environment (GME), Council of Europe, 11 July 2024 - GME(2024)1.

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ Green Economy Coalition *et al*, “Principles, priorities and pathways for inclusive green economies: Economic transformation to deliver the SDGs”, 16 July 2019.

¹² 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”.

- d. a One Health approach aiming at sustainably balancing and optimising the health of people, animals and ecosystems;¹³
- e. mainstreaming the gender and youth perspectives, children's rights, the rights of Roma and Travellers, as well as those of persons with disabilities¹⁴ in the development of environment-related standards, policies and programmes.

IV. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

13. 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, and in line with the directions of the Reykjavik Declaration, the Strategy pursues five Strategic Objectives firmly anchored in the Organisation's core values and capitalising on its unique expertise. The pursuit of these objectives is complemented with a) efforts aiming at mainstreaming sustainable development¹⁵ and environment-related objectives and concerns in the Council of Europe work and operations, and b) coordination, streamlining and communication efforts.

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

14. A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of human rights by present and future generations. 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 decisions and conclusions of the European Committee of Social Rights,¹⁶ which have established the link between environmental degradation and some of the rights enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights and the European Social Charter. These include the right to life,¹⁷ the right not to be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment,¹⁸ the right to respect for private and family life, and the home,¹⁹ the right to a fair trial and the right to an effective remedy,²⁰ the rights to freedom of expression, of association and of peaceful assembly,²¹ the right to property,²² the right to protection of health,²³ the right to just conditions of work,²⁴ the right to safe and healthy working conditions,²⁵ and the right to housing.²⁶

15. The recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is gaining traction. Many member States of the Council of Europe recognise, either explicitly or implicitly, some formulation of the human right to a healthy environment under domestic law.²⁷ At the international level, it is enshrined in various forms in several regional treaties and has recently been recognised in the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 48/13 (8 October 2021)²⁸ and the United Nations General Assembly Resolution

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ By decision of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, these perspectives are to be mainstreamed in Council of Europe work.

¹⁵ "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.", Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987).

¹⁶ For an overview of the caselaw of the ECHR and decisions of ECSR before 2021: CDDH Manual on Human Rights and the Environment (3rd Edition, adopted in 2021) - <https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-intergovernmental-cooperation/-/manual-on-human-rights-and-the-environment>.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Kudła v. Poland [GC], judgment of 26 October 2000; Eleftheriadis v. Romania (French only), judgment of 25 January 2011.

¹⁹ Powell and Rayner v. the United Kingdom, judgment of 21 February 1990; Brândușe v. Romania, judgment of 7 April 2009 (in French only); **Taşkın and Others v. Turkey, decision of 29 January 2004**; Deés v. Hungary, judgment of 9 November 2010; Cordella and Others v. Italy, judgment of 24 January 2019; Pavlov and others v. Russia, judgment of 11 January 2023; Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and others v. Switzerland, judgment of 9 April 2024.

²⁰ 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 of 5 June 2007; Karin Andersson and Others v. Sweden, judgment of 25 September 2014.

²¹ 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.

²² **Taşkın and Others v. Turkey, decision of 29 January 2004**; Depalle v. France [GC], judgment of 29 March 2010; Beinarovič and Others v. Lithuania, judgment of 12 June 2018.

²³ 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.

²⁴ Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights (MFHR) v. Greece, Complaint No. 30/2005, decision on the merits of 6 December 2006.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Médecins du Monde - International v. France, Complaint No. 67/2011, decision on the merits of 11 September 2012.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/RES/48/13, The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, 8 October 2021.

76/300 (28 July 2022).²⁹ Acknowledging this evolution, the Council of Europe is committed by the Reykjavík Declaration to strengthening work on the human rights aspects of the environment based on its political recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right in line with the above-mentioned United Nations Resolutions.

16. Building upon the European Convention on Human Rights and, where applicable,³⁰ the European Social Charter, other Council of Europe and United Nations treaties, and any relevant legal and political developments, the Council of Europe's 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 and advising on ways to assess the impact of the implementation of environmental policies and practices on human rights, including through:
 - i. the adoption at national level of comprehensive, consistent, effective and enforceable environmental laws, policies and programs that respect, protect and fulfil human rights;
 - ii. processes that guarantee inclusive, meaningful and effective public participation at all levels of governance and at all stages of environmental decision-making processes;
 - iii. a just transition³¹ 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 environmental laws, policies and programmes, including in the context of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution. Due consideration should be given to the human rights of persons belonging to groups in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination, and to the intersection of these situations;
- c. integrating sustainable development and environment-related objectives and concerns into Council of Europe activities;
- d. supporting member States in the implementation of human rights standards taking into account their environmental dimension and the need to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of persons in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination, as laid out in paragraph 3, who face or may face environmental degradation and environment-related harm;
- e. strengthening work "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, in line with United Nations General Assembly Resolution 76/300 "The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment", and by pursuing the implementation of Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)20 on human rights and the protection of the environment".³²

Strategic Objective 2: Strengthening good democratic governance

17. 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.³³ 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.

²⁹ UN General Assembly, A/RES/76/300, The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, 28 July 2022.

³⁰ 42 out of the 46 Council of Europe Member States have ratified the European Social Charter: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/signatures-ratifications>.

³¹ "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).

³² Reykjavík Declaration, Appendix V.

³³ Reykjavík Declaration, Appendix III. Reykjavík Principles for Democracy.

18. 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 backsliding³⁴ is restricting civic space, including by limiting children's and young people's access to their right to advocate for a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes in environment-related matters.³⁵

19. Environmental degradation 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 and girls are also often disproportionately exposed to the impacts of environmental degradation, including limited access to resources, healthcare, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH),³⁶ and decision-making processes in response to environmental crises. Despite this, women and girls are critical leaders and agents of change in the response. Indigenous Peoples are particularly affected due to the dependence 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 and persons belonging to groups in vulnerable situations and/or exposed to discrimination are duly taken into account in the context of environmental policies.

20. 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 timely, wide and easy access to environmental information, including data, processes and decisions.

21. 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 without discrimination. For this to be possible, they must be empowered: they must have the knowledge, legal tools and support necessary to exercise their rights, and to seek remedies. Specific measures are needed to empower, among others, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. This includes ensuring children's effective access to justice in line with Council of Europe guidelines on child-friendly justice.

22. 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 work of the various intergovernmental committees is indeed inspired by the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, the decisions and conclusions of the European Committee of Social Rights, the decisions and reports of other monitoring mechanisms, as well as by the outcomes of the work of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 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 the national level.

³⁴ Reykjavík Declaration, page 6.

³⁵ 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).

³⁶ The right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation is recognised as a human right "that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights" by UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/64/292: The human right to water and sanitation (28 July 2010).

23. 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. In line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, this should be done *inter alia* through a smart mix of voluntary and binding measures both at the national and international level including legislation and support measures for companies.

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

- a. fostering the integration of good democratic governance principles³⁷ in environmental governance and encouraging the implementation of governance models that recognise and respect the intrinsic value of nature in order to protect and restore natural ecosystems and that avoid unsustainable activities compromising the effective enjoyment of human rights for present and future generations;
- b. building upon the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (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. This includes providing 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 in marginalised situations;
 - 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, with due account being taken of the outcome of the public participation;
- 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, including due to business-related adverse human rights impacts. This includes 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.³⁸

³⁷ 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).

³⁸ Damages to the environment are included in the categories of claims eligible for recording in the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine.

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

25. Human Rights Defenders working on environmental issues, hereafter environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs), 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 sector.³⁹ 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.

26. Because of their activities, they can be subject to many forms of threats and reprisals, intimidation, discrimination, including its intersectional forms, harassment, unfair treatment, 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 face.⁴⁰ Children and young people who act as human rights defenders face similar challenges. The obligation to protect, regardless of their affiliation or background, environmental human rights defenders, environmental defenders, whistle blowers and, more generally, those who denounce environment-related offences, has been repeatedly highlighted at the Council of Europe⁴¹ and at the 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 penalisation, persecution, or harassment for seeking to exercise their rights under the Aarhus Convention.

27. 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, including human rights defenders, can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence”.⁴² 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. providing 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. Such 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 human rights defenders, as stipulated by Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on young people and climate action, 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 environmental human rights defenders, environmental defenders and whistle blowers into environmental governance and processes.

Strategic Objective 4: Preventing and prosecuting environment-related crimes

28. 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.

³⁹ 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).

⁴⁰ Protecting women human rights defenders in Europe, Resolution 2554 (2024), Parliamentary Assembly.

⁴¹ Let us make Europe a safe place for environmental human rights defenders. Human Rights Comment by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights.

⁴² Reykjavík Declaration, Appendix III. Reykjavík Principles for Democracy.

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

30. 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 co-operation 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;⁴³
- 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 co-operation between competent national authorities while prosecuting and judging environment related cases;
- d. exploring measures to enhance corporate environmental accountability.

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

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

32. 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, has been supporting 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 today 49 countries and the European Union, covering most of the European continent's natural heritage and extending to some States of Africa.

33. 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.

34. Using the co-operation 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 Solutions⁴⁴ 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, especially carbon-rich ecosystems. Nature-based Solutions and ecosystem-based approaches should be complementary and not in lieu of greenhouse gas-emission reductions;
- b. encouraging transboundary co-operation in the management of natural resources;

⁴³ A new Convention on the Protection on the Environment through criminal law is expected to be adopted at the Ministerial Session of the Committee of Ministers in May 2025.

⁴⁴ 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".

- 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 founded 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 authorities⁴⁵ in partnership with local communities and stakeholders - to support integrated and balanced land use management, environmental preservation and restoration, and societal well-being;
- 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. This includes acknowledging and considering diverse value systems and concepts embodying nature including, for those countries that recognise them, rights of nature, as being an integral part of a successful implementation of environmental strategies;
- g. within the framework of the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA),⁴⁶ fostering co-operation and co-ordination at the various levels⁴⁷ 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

35. The Council of Europe's 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's 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 co-operation, collaboration and partnership, in particular with the United Nations system and with the European Union.

36. The working methods proposed aim at facilitating the mainstreaming of the environmental perspective in the Council of Europe operations and governance, as well as at enhancing internal coordination and communication increasing the relevance, impact and visibility of the work in areas where the Council of Europe has a clear comparative advantage. This could include:

- a. 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;

⁴⁵ The Council of Europe Landscape Convention (ETS No. 176), article 5, paragraphs c and d.

⁴⁶ The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, adopted at the 3rd United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in March 2015, constitutes a global reference for the Agreement's action.

⁴⁷ Local and regional responses to natural disasters and climate hazards: from risk preparedness to resilience. Resolution 500 (2024), Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

- b. through the Action Plan, mobilising existing specialised Committees and bodies around the Strategy's objectives and facilitating joint action;
- c. investing in communication to facilitate access to information on Council of Europe action in this field and its results;
- d. given the complexity of the issues at stake and the need for a transversal and integrated approach, in line with the Reykjavík Declaration, considering the creation of an intergovernmental multidisciplinary committee within the existing programmatic and budgetary framework.

VI. PARTNERSHIPS

37. Calls for urgent action from the scientific community and civil society have greatly contributed to boosting global mobilisation to counter the triple planetary crisis. Several global processes and frameworks have become gravitational centres 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 processes⁴⁸ 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.

38. 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 EU, the OSCE, the OECD;
- b. the United Nations system (the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and other relevant UN agencies, bodies and processes);⁴⁹
- c. the relevant coalitions, national and other regional human rights institutions and networks, and other civil society organisations.

VII. CONCLUSION

39. By implementing these strategic objectives, the Council of Europe contributes to the development of common responses to the triple planetary crisis as requested by the leaders in Reykjavík and provides "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".⁵⁰ 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 Organisation's proactive stance towards effectively mitigating the impact of environmental challenges on human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

⁴⁸ Ongoing processes to tackle triple planetary crisis on a global level by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, United Nations Environment Programme, Convention on Biological Diversity, as well as United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

⁴⁹ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Paris Agreement, Convention on Biological Diversity, The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Addis Ababa Principles and Guidelines for the Sustainable use of Biodiversity, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, The Global Framework of Chemicals.

⁵⁰ Reykjavík Declaration, United to meet current and future challenges.