



ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES AND NATIONAL MINORITIES

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Introduction

Today, the connection between the environment and human rights is widely recognised and discussed in international organisations, including by the Council of Europe. The 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, held in Reykjavik on 16-17 May 2023, was a key moment, recognising “the urgency of additional efforts to protect the environment and to encounter the impact of the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss on human rights, democracy and the rule of law”. It committed the Council of Europe to strengthen its work on the human rights aspects of the environment, as set out in Appendix V of the [Reykjavik Declaration - United around our values](#), “The Council of Europe and the Environment”, which later led to the adoption of the Council of Europe’s first-ever [Strategy on the Environment](#) and [Action Plan](#) on 14 May 2025.

Since its first monitoring cycle, the [Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities \(ACFC\)](#) has addressed environmental issues and is increasingly doing so, in particular through its recent findings on the adverse impact of environmental degradation and climate change on the lives of persons belonging to national minorities, including indigenous people such as Sami. This factsheet provides an overview of key concerns and recommended actions to address the impact of environment affecting these communities.

Key Issues and Findings

Environmental issues are linked to Article 5 of the [Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities \(FCNM\)](#), which emphasises the promotion and preservation of minority cultures. On several occasions, the Advisory Committee found that the extraction of natural resources, large-scale industrial projects, or tourism can threaten the preservation of cultural identity of national minorities and their traditional way of living. Furthermore, such considerations are usually linked to the right to effective participation in decision-making enshrined in Article 15 of the FCNM, requiring that national minorities have substantial influence over decisions taken which may, ultimately, negatively affect the conditions necessary for them to maintain and develop their cultures, and to preserve the essential elements of their identities.

The Advisory Committee also emphasised that emerging challenges arising from climate change and other environmental issues have a significant impact on national minorities and indigenous peoples, and thereby putting these communities in a vulnerable position. It also underlined that measures to combat climate change can, in turn, negatively affect economic activities that are traditional for certain communities of national minorities and indigenous peoples, who live in close connection to the natural environment.

Examples from the ACFC’s monitoring findings include:*

- ▶ Damaging effect of exploitation of natural resources, such as through mining, on the traditional cultures and religion of indigenous peoples;¹
- ▶ Destruction of Sorbian villages due to lignite mining;²

1. [ACFC Fourth Opinion on the Russian Federation](#), 2018, §§ 58-60.
2. [ACFC Fourth Opinion on Germany](#), 2015, § 50-51.

- ▶ Environmental threats to Sami fishing and reindeer herding in Nordic countries³ and the intergenerational impact of such measures on Sami people;⁴
- ▶ Socio-economic challenges for persons belonging to national minorities due to the curbing of economic activities as part of transition to a green economy, including job losses and limitations on the use of traditional lands (e.g., wind farms affecting reindeer herding territories);⁵
- ▶ Destruction of property owned by national minorities, to develop construction projects, especially in coastal areas where tourism demand is high;⁶
- ▶ Disproportionate exposure of Roma communities to environmental hazards such as pollution from industrial plants and landfills.⁷

ACFC recommendations include:

- ▶ Provide assistance to certain communities of national minorities and indigenous peoples to adapt their economic activity to new situations, such as climate change, to keep their community life, culture and language;
- ▶ Ensure that persons belonging to national minorities have the possibility to effectively participate in all decisions affecting them and that such decisions do not adversely affect their ability to preserve and develop their cultures, languages and identities, including their traditional ways of life;
- ▶ Address the economic, social, cultural and other consequences of climate change and its potential negative impacts on national minorities;
- ▶ Protect the right of national minorities to preserve their culture in traditional settlement areas by safeguarding their property rights and providing effective protection from harmful urban development practices;
- ▶ Pay particular attention to ensuring safe living conditions also in light of the risks posed by environmental pollution and climate change.

Conclusion

Environmental degradation and climate change disproportionately impact national minorities. Addressing these issues requires urgent policy reforms, improved living conditions, and inclusive decision-making processes. Governments must take proactive measures to safeguard the rights and dignity of affected communities while ensuring their meaningful participation in environmental governance.

**For further details, please refer to the Opinions adopted by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC) and its other work (See HUDOC-FCNM)*

3. [ACFC Third Opinion on Sweden](#), 2017, § 57; [ACFC Fifth Opinion on Sweden](#), 2023, §§ 83-96.

4. [ACFC Sixth Opinion on Finland](#), 2025 [forthcoming], §§ 85-90.

5. [ACFC Fifth Opinion on Estonia](#), 2022, § 177, 181; [ACFC Fifth Opinion on Norway](#), 2022, §§ 96-101.

6. [ACFC Fifth Opinion Albania](#), 2023, §§ 82-83, 86.

7. [ACFC Fifth Opinion on Romania](#), 2023; § 199; [ACFC Fifth Opinion Albania](#), 2023, §§ 182-185.

The protection of national minorities is a core issue for the Council of Europe, and one of the major achievements in this field is the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The entry into force of the Framework Convention on 1 February 1998 was indeed an event of universal stature, for it is the first ever legally binding multilateral instrument devoted to the protection of national minorities in general.



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