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**Remarks at the Roundtable on Environmental Defenders
Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, June 2022**

24 June 2022

Excellencies, dear Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Ms Dunja Mijatović, who regrets not being able to be present in-person.

The Commissioner very much welcomed the decision of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention to set up a Rapid Response Mechanism in the form of the independent Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders. She wishes the new Special Rapporteur, Mr Michel Forst, best of luck in making this new, much-needed mechanism fully operational and effective as soon as possible. The Commissioner encourages all Parties, most of whom are also members of the Council of Europe, to provide the new mandate with all it needs to succeed, including funding, cooperation, and political commitment. We at the Commissioner's Office very much look forward to engaging with the new Rapporteur.

Support for and protection of [human rights defenders](#), including environmental defenders, are among the core elements of the Commissioner's mandate, and we see many areas for potential synergies with the new Rapporteur. The Commissioner regularly raises issues related to the work of human rights defenders and tries to protect those who are at risk through her dialogue with governments as well as publicly. Last year, she filed [observations](#) to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg in support of a climate change case filed by young environmental defenders. She also held a roundtable with environmental human rights defenders from across Europe and published a [report](#) on it last year. And more recently, she referenced many examples of how standing up for the environment carries heavy risks, and how environmental defenders can and should be protected, in her human rights [comment](#) entitled "Let us make Europe a safe place for environmental human rights defenders", published last year.

Please allow me to briefly give you five of the Commissioner's main recommendations and lines of action as far as support for environmental defenders is concerned:

First – states should create a safe and enabling environment for environmental defenders, including environmental journalists, and put in place a zero-tolerance policy on human rights violations against them.

Second – an end should be put to the stigmatisation of environmental defenders, including by non-state actors and taking place online.

Third – uphold the right to public protest and campaigning in defence of the environment. This is one of the most effective -- and sometimes indeed indispensable -- environmental tools for raising public awareness and effecting change.

Fourth – defend the defenders but also defend their cause, which is indeed our common cause. We need genuine and transparent participation of environmental organisations, communities and affected people in decision-making on policies and projects so that their work and voices can have real impact.

And *five* – we need to give more attention to the youngest environmental human rights defenders. They must be part of policymaking from the youngest age, as early as possible. They need to be given concrete tools for that and must be protected from harm. In many countries, young activists, including young children, are smeared and cyber-bullied. Some receive offensive comments and hate speech from high-profile figures, politicians. They must be shielded from it and empowered to deal with it.

If European governments are serious about fighting for the environment, they should begin by protecting and empowering environmental defenders and by making Europe a safe place for their engagement.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to the discussions.