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OSCE Chairpersonship Event – Resilient Together in a Changing Climate

Side Event Presentation - Helsinki+50 From Below? Building Bottom-Up Approaches for Climate Resilience

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the internal challenges faced by climate activists and civil society organizations, particularly those that work at the intersection of human rights and environmental protection, a topic that is both urgent and often overlooked.

We gather at a time of growing geopolitical instability, where the shift away from a value-driven foreign policy toward more transactional policies based on short-term self-interest and defense is profoundly reshaping the environment for civil society organizations. This narrowing, security-only lens is dangerously short-sighted. It disregards the comprehensive understanding of security that the OSCE was founded on—one that embraces democracy, human rights, and environmental sustainability as fundamental pillars of peace and stability. It is those at the forefront of defending democracy, human rights, and the climate who are paying the price for this shift.

The Netherlands Helsinki Committee is a growing non-governmental organization that promotes human rights, the rule of law and justice in all countries of wider Europe, including Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia as well as the European Union. When civic actors are empowered to participate, to organize, and to speak truth to power, societies become more just, more stable, and more capable of responding to existential challenges like the climate crisis. Building on our track record of 35 years, we aim to promote open, just, and democratic societies that uphold human rights and the rule of law. We want our governments to be accountable to their citizens, and we see civic space, fair justice systems, and the fight against impunity as the cornerstones of our work.

Environmental defenders, in particular, face increasing pressure—everywhere, including in Western Europe and the Netherlands. These are the very allies we need to mitigate the climate crisis. The CSP Malta Declaration offers valuable and concrete recommendations that the OSCE should take into account to better protect civil society and environmental defenders. I restate the importance of implementation of the Malta recommendations.

During our work across Europe and the Eastern Partnership region, we have seen clearly how climate justice and democratic resilience are fundamentally intertwined. Civil society isn't just a stakeholder, it's a system of accountability, a source of innovation,

and a trusted link between people and governments, and international community. When we neglect it, we weaken the entire framework for climate resilience. Climate policy, by its nature, demands consistency and coordination—yet we ask civil society to deliver that with sporadic funding and short timelines.

Additionally, our partner CSOs in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia, as well as in the South Caucasus face significant challenges, including legal manipulation, public harassment, and funding obstacles. Legislation often undermines environmental protections, allowing developments in protected areas without proper assessments. Activists are subjected to smear campaigns and public accusations, while funding remains scarce due to limited national support and complex donor requirements. The Azerbaijani government's intensified crackdown on civil society and independent media running up to COP29 and afterwards once again showed that without rule of law, human rights, and democratic institutions, “climate action” is only a phrase on a paper.

Many of our civil society partners operate with very limited resources, relying on project-based grants that prioritize deliverables over long-term engagement. This fragility is now further compounded by the withdrawal of major U.S. funding sources, which once provided critical flexible support for human rights and environmental organizations. Simultaneously, the European Commission has imposed new restrictions on the use of LIFE programme funds, prohibiting their allocation for advocacy and lobbying activities. This policy shift, driven by political pressure from conservative and far-right factions, undermines the very purpose of these grants—to empower civil society to participate meaningfully in shaping EU environmental policy. Moreover, national governments across the region are increasingly shrinking civic funding, redirecting available resources toward politically aligned actors or using bureaucratic hurdles to sideline independent voices. The result is a triple blow to civil society: reduced international support, hollowed-out national mechanisms, and a policy environment that calls for advocacy but fails to protect or empower those doing it.

Despite the pressure and challenges they face, the energy and creativity we've seen through our projects are extraordinary. In the countries that the NHC works, youth-led campaigns use music, art, and social media to inspire climate action. In Eastern Europe, grassroots coalitions are shaping policy, pushing for greener laws, and holding polluters accountable. These aren't side projects; they are central to our shared future.

First, we need to recognize that protecting the environment must include protecting those who defend it. That means safeguarding civic space—not just in principle, but in practice. It means reforming funding mechanisms to prioritize long-term impact over short-term output. And it means using platforms like the OSCE to not only discuss climate security, but to uphold the rights of those advancing it from the ground up.

Additionally, today the climate action is inherently political—because it questions economic models, redefines power structures, and demands accountability. But in

many places, that politicization makes environmental defenders targets. They are caught in a double bind: compelled to act, yet punished for doing so. This disconnect between ambition and support is a serious weakness in our collective climate response. Civil society isn't just a stakeholder—it's a system of accountability, a source of innovation, and a trusted link between people and power. When we neglect it, we weaken the entire framework for climate resilience.

And this brings me to the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security—spanning the politico-military, economic and environmental, and human dimensions—offers a unique and powerful framework for responding to climate challenges. Environmental security cannot be separated from political and human rights realities. By integrating climate action into each pillar—promoting good governance and accountability in the economic dimension, defending civic space in the human dimension, and fostering cross-border cooperation in the politico-military space—we make climate responses not only more effective, but more democratic and resilient.

The legacy of the Helsinki Principles teaches us that security is not only about borders or arms—it is about people, participation, and the right to shape one's future. Today, that principle must extend to climate activism. Reviving the “conscience of Helsinki” today means recognizing that environmental defenders are not simply advocates—they are the architects of a more democratic, sustainable future. Their protection must be a core tenet of our security policy. The OSCE, with its comprehensive approach spanning the political, economic, and human dimensions, is uniquely positioned to lead this charge. So where do we go from here? What can we, as an international community and as the OSCE, do to strengthen the link between climate justice and democratic resilience?

1. We must revive the “conscience of Helsinki.” This means amplifying the voices of environmental defenders and civil society organizations—not just those with institutional power, but grassroots movements, youth-led initiatives, and marginalized communities who are already leading the change we need. These are the voices that define the future of democracy, justice, and security in the face of the climate crisis.
2. We ask the OSCE to fully activate its economic and environmental dimension—not as an afterthought, but as a core arena for engagement and action.
3. We must recognize that advocacy is not a threat—it is a democratic necessity. We urge the OSCE to advocate for the reversal of these trends and to champion a vision of climate security that centers human rights and democratic participation.
4. We must reform the way we fund climate and human rights work. It is no longer enough to fund projects—we must fund institutions, movements, and long-term strategies. Civil society cannot be expected to address systemic crises with

temporary solutions. We call on the OSCE participating states and international donors to rethink funding mechanisms

Thank you very much for your attention.