

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



Consultative meeting

Safeguarding and Empowering Young Human Rights Defenders: Research, Dialogue, and Action

1-2 June 2026

European Youth Centre Strasbourg, room 3.1

Context / rationale

Young people are often at the forefront of movements and initiatives defending human rights in a broad sense, particularly, but not exclusively, in the field of environmental protection, human rights, minority rights, gender and racial equality, student and migrant rights and peace demonstrations, acting at local, national, and international levels. They navigate a shrinking civic space and face increasing challenges, threats, and attacks. Their initiatives and opinions are frequently belittled or dismissed by adults due to persistent biases and social norms that underestimate young people's agency. Young human rights defenders who are female, from minority groups, or otherwise in vulnerable situations face additional risks and are disproportionately affected. Yet, there is a lack of consistent research and knowledge on young human rights defenders, which is needed for policy action.

The Council of Europe and the European Commission have consistently reaffirmed the responsibility to safeguard human rights defenders, regardless of background, affiliation or age, as reflected in key strategic frameworks and policy instruments:

- Council of Europe: [Youth Sector Strategy 2030](#); [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2022\)6 on young people and climate action](#); [Strategy on the Environment](#); the work of the [Commissioner for Human Rights](#); the [Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 2522 \(2024\) on protecting women human rights defenders in Europe](#); the [New Democratic Pact](#), etc.

- European Commission: [Civil Society Strategy](#) (2025); [EU Youth Strategy](#) (2019–2027); and broader policy work on youth civic engagement, rights, and democratic participation. The EP also adopted a [report](#) calling for stronger EU action against transnational repression of human rights defenders by authoritarian regime.

This consultative meeting and upcoming research on the topic builds upon the Youth Partnership’s prior research and initiatives on [democracy and civic space](#) and [youth \(political\) participation](#), including the study [Meaningful youth political participation in Europe: concepts, patterns and policy implications](#), [Insights into meaningful youth political participation](#) and Youth Knowledge Book #29 on [youth political participation](#) (2023). This is complemented by analytical papers and studies on [gender, digitalisation, new forms of participation, participation in climate movements](#), [EU Youth Dialogue](#), and [impact of Covid-19 on youth spaces](#), and the work on youth climate activism through 2024 Symposium: [Young people, democracy and climate action](#), and the publication of the [Youth Knowledge Book Youth and democracy in the climate crisis](#), [Young people and climate litigation: situation mapping and recommendations for the youth sector](#) and [Youth action for climate: compendium of practices](#)

Objectives

The Youth Partnership will commission a new research study, collaborating with universities, research institutes and other relevant research actors to examine the situation of young human rights defenders in Europe. The study aims to raise awareness and inform the work of the Council of Europe, the European Commission, and member States in their efforts to better empower and protect young human rights defenders, while also exploring how youth work can support their engagement.

Specifically, the study will aim to:

- Provide a better understanding of who young human rights defenders are, their situation, their areas of engagement (including, but not limited to environmental protection, human rights, minority rights, gender and racial equality, student and migrant rights and peace demonstrations), the actions they are leading, etc.
- Identify the threats, violence, reprisals, and other obstacles that hinder their ability to freely express their views and access justice.
- Assess their needs for support, including access to information, legal assistance, networks, resources, education or training, etc.
- Map international and European legal instruments related to young human rights defenders.
- Map existing national and European measures, programmes, and initiatives that aim to empower and protect young people who stand up against human rights violations.
- Contribute to capacity-building and the empowerment of young human rights defenders, including through the development of concrete materials and tools based on the study’s findings.

Objectives and expected outcomes of the meeting:

The meeting aims to:

- Prepare the launch of Youth Partnership's new research initiative examining the situation of young human rights defenders in Europe, while already gathering initial information and insights on YHRDs, including who they are, their situation, activities, and the obstacles they face
- Discuss the key thematic areas to be covered by the research
- Share expectations regarding the scope and purpose of the research
- Map existing support mechanisms, legal instruments, and policy measures at national and European level, and identify gaps, as you mention
- Discuss needs and exchange views on the study and development of a practical tool for young human rights defenders, offering support and guidance for their work

Participants

- Majority of participants will be young human rights defenders from diverse backgrounds and areas of engagement, including, but not limited to:
 - environmental protection
 - human rights
 - minority rights
 - gender
 - racial equality
 - student rights
 - refugee and migrant rights
 - peace demonstrations
 - digital rights
- Youth workers and civil society organisations.
- Policymakers and representatives from the Council of Europe, European Commission, and national and local authorities
- Academics and researchers in youth, human rights, and related fields.
- Other stakeholders interested in youth policy, democracy, civic engagement, and human rights.

Indicative project timeline

- 1-2 June 2026 - consultative meeting with young Human Rights defenders
- August 2026 - finalising the concept note
- Autumn 2026 - call for tender for research institutions
- Finalised first full draft of the study (Spring 2027)
- Dissemination event (Autumn / end of 2027)
- Launch the practical tool for young human rights defenders (May 2027)