



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS  
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

## Opening session

### 2025 World Law Congress

Speech by Marko Bošnjak

*Santo Domingo, 4 May 2025*

Excellencies,  
Distinguished colleagues,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is both a privilege and a pleasure to address you today at the opening of the 2025 World Law Congress. This global gathering of legal minds is a testament to our shared belief in the basic legal values, in particular the rule of law. It serves as a vital platform for dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas that transcend borders and legal systems.

Let me begin by extending my sincere gratitude to our hosts, and to the organizers of this important event.

The Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo – standing on the foundations of this hemisphere’s oldest university – and the Universidad del Caribe offer a fitting setting for reflection on this year’s underlying theme: *“New Generations & the Rule of Law.”*

The mission of our organisers, the World Jurist Association and its executive branch, the World Law Foundation, is to promote peace through law. This vision behind it, captured in the motto “A world ruled by law, not force”, aligns with the enduring tradition of irenic thought that also underpins the Council of Europe. It also resonates deeply with the work and spirit of the European Court of Human Rights, which I have the honour to lead.

The Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights were conceived as peace projects rooted in the belief that the core values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are not just noble aspirations but essential pillars of human coexistence. Together, these values safeguard human dignity, equality, and freedom, and in doing so, ensure the possibility of genuine and lasting peace.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Convention. Adopted in 1950, it was the first internationally binding instrument to transform the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into binding law.

While human rights lie at its heart, the Convention also enshrines democracy and the rule of law. This is no coincidence. These values are intrinsically linked in a mutually reinforcing triangle. Each one depends on the others to thrive, while also serving to sustain and balance them in return. That is why the Council of Europe has made their realisation its single, core objective.<sup>1</sup> It also explains why the European Court of Human Rights, has held that the rule of law is inherent in all the Articles of the Convention and that the Convention is therefore, essentially, a rule-of-law instrument.<sup>2</sup>

The rule of law is not merely a legal principle but a cornerstone of civilised society. Throughout history, it has been instrumental in tempering State authority, ensuring equality before the law and guaranteeing individual freedoms.

From ancient legal traditions to the Enlightenment's embrace of constitutionalism, this principle has evolved into a global ideal that underpins democratic governance and the protection of human rights.

Guided by the principle of the rule of law as a lodestar in its interpretation of the Convention, the European Court of Human Rights has over the years reinforced the importance of this principle in numerous cases, for example those concerning secret surveillance<sup>3</sup>, judicial independence<sup>4</sup>, and even climate change.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, through the exercise of its residual jurisdiction, the Court is currently the only forum holding the Russian Federation accountable for its human rights violations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In today's world, marked by geopolitical tensions, climate crisis, technological upheaval, and an increasing erosion of trust in public institutions, the rule of law is under unprecedented strain.

We are witnessing the resurgence of authoritarianism; the independence of judiciaries threatened; and human rights often cast aside in the name of populism. Meanwhile, the digital age – driven by artificial intelligence and mass surveillance – challenges our very conception of privacy and autonomy.

These developments are deeply concerning. As I have noted, the rule of law, democracy, and human rights do not exist in isolation. They stand – or fall – together.

Yet we must not be disheartened. We must resist despair with determination. At moments of crisis, it is our shared responsibility to reinforce democratic resilience. Lawyers, judges, and legal scholars working across borders and legal systems are essential to this effort.

At the European Court of Human Rights, we see firsthand what happens when the rule of law is eroded – when courts are politicised, when dissent is silenced, and when human rights are violated. But we also see its enduring strength – upheld by courageous individuals, principled judges, independent lawyers, and vibrant civil societies. The rule of law has always required defenders.

Ideals do not enforce themselves. They survive through action, not just good intentions. They must be understood, believed in, and fought for – generation after generation.

The Court was born from the ashes of World War II, forged by the conviction that never again should humanity suffer the horrors of unchecked power. That conviction must still guide us today.

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<sup>1</sup> Rule of Law Checklist adopted by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe at its 106th Plenary Session (Venice, 11-12 March 2016).

<sup>2</sup> *Grzęda v. Poland* [GC], no. 43572/18, § 339, 15 March 2022

<sup>3</sup> *Big Brother Watch and Others v. the United Kingdom* [GC], nos. 58170/13 and 2 others, 25 May 2021, and *Pietrzak and Bychawska-Siniarska and Others v. Poland*, nos. 72038/17 and 25237/18, 28 May 2024

<sup>4</sup> *Grzęda v. Poland* [GC], no. 43572/18, §§ 339-340, 15 March 2022

<sup>5</sup> *Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland* [GC], no. 53600/20, 9 April 2024

We must have “confidence in tomorrow.” That was the message conveyed by young people during a recent Council of Europe youth event. They spoke with clarity and urgency emphasising that they are the ones most severely affected by the challenges of our time: armed conflicts, austerity measures, and the negative consequences of artificial intelligence. They seek hope, but they are calling on us to act – on their behalf, and with them.

Let us rise to that call. Let us embrace the challenges that lie ahead with courage, integrity, and unwavering commitment to the rule of law, democracy and human rights. The law is not passive. It is a living, evolving force, shaped by those who dare to uphold it. It adapts, it responds, and it endures but only when we choose to commit to it.

It is a shared responsibility that rests on the shoulders of each generation which must, in its own way, renew the legal and moral commitments that underpin our democracies.

Let this Congress be a space of encounter, reflection, and ambition. I am confident that the discussions, debates and the forging of new connections that will take place tomorrow will enrich our understanding of the law and strengthen our collective resolve to protect the rule of law not as a slogan, but as a lived reality.

Thank you, and I wish you all a productive and inspiring Congress!