



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

Meeting with NGOs and litigators

Opening remarks by Mattias Guyomar

Strasbourg, 20 March 2026

Dear Judges of the Court,

Dear Registrar,

Dear Registrars, dear Jurisconsult,

Dear participants, both those in the room and those on-line,

On behalf of all the judges, welcome to the European Court of Human Rights.

It is a great pleasure to host you at our Human Rights Building for our biennial meeting.

We have a very interesting programme prepared for today, with discussions centred around the Court's approach to case-processing, communications with applicants and third parties, case-law developments, and matters of procedure.

Let me thank Judge Lavapuro, for your active role as the Court's judicial focal point on civil society, as well as Vice-President Jelić and Judge Adamska-Gallant, for your involvement in today's panels, and Valérie Schwartz from the Registry for their precious help with the organisation.

Last but not least, my thanks to the Registrars and members of the Registry for being present today.

The Court's last meeting with NGOs was in October 2023, a little over two years ago. It has taken us a bit longer to prepare this edition, but it now has a more inclusive format to attract a broader range of civil society representatives. I am very glad to see that almost 80 NGO representatives are in attendance, as well as more than a hundred online. This demonstrates the real interest in this type of dialogue with the Court.

Civil society is the lifeblood of a pluralist democracy. A vibrant civil society is a reliable marker of its health and confidence. As civil society actors, you act as powerful levers in the implementation of the Convention at the domestic level, contributing to respect for the principle of subsidiarity, the guiding principle of the Convention system.

Before the Court, civil society actors contribute to all stages of the proceedings:

Firstly, as applicants: some of the most emblematic cases brought before the Court have been litigated by non-government organisations.

For example, the historic case *Verein Klimaseniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland* [GC, 2024] on climate change; or *Big Brother Watch and Others v. The United Kingdom* (GC, 2021) on mass surveillance and data protection.

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As applicants, civil society organisations often provide the first impulse for mapping out new frontiers in human rights, through the Court's interpretive dynamism and in keeping with its 'living instrument' doctrine.

Secondly, as third-party interveners: the Convention system relies on the Court's judicial pragmatism – its ability to interpret the Convention's text within a given context. As civil society actors, you help to ensure that the Court's assessment is solidly grounded in the local and social context.

This is particularly important for the Court's legitimacy, at a time when the Convention system is being openly called into question. You help our Court to live up to its ambition of being a Court for everyone – a Court for all.

Thirdly, as the Court's advocates: civil society plays a key role in disseminating the Court's case-law and supporting its execution, including by bringing its voice and perspective into the process of execution of the Court's judgments.

Here I wish to highlight, among others, the work done by the European Implementation Network (EIN).

However, it would be remiss of me not to take a step back and consider a crucial fourth point: the broader role of civil society in defending democracy and the rule of law.

Modern liberal democracy rests on the principle of separation of powers, or checks and balances. While it is for parliaments and government to define public policy, "[t]he remit of domestic courts and the Court is (...) complementary to those democratic processes." (*Verein Klimaseniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland* [GC, 2024, §412]). The role of judges lies in safeguarding the constitutional order, human rights, and the rule of law.

But protecting the rule of law is a task that goes beyond the sole remit and capabilities of the judiciary. Regardless of our office and role in society, human rights are our shared asset and we must all keep democracy and the rule of law alive. To protect these values, it is necessary to nurture synergies between all democratic actors, both judicial and non-judicial ones.

Exactly one week ago, we welcomed in this very room a gathering of National Human Rights and Ombuds institutions – non-judicial actors crucial to protecting democracy and addressing the erosion of checks and balances. Today, we meet with you, actors of the civil society. Next year we will meet national bar associations. All three groups, in your own respective ways, serve as non-judicial counter-powers (*contre-pouvoirs*) that work together in safeguarding and developing human rights.

Democracy is, at its core, an exercise in dialectics: a marketplace of ideas and competing narratives. This is especially true in today's world, with its myriad platforms and channels through which ideas and narratives are spread. On the one hand, rapid technological advances and the prevalence of the social media have made the democratic discourse more horizontal and participative. On the other hand, algorithms and lack of oversight have made it vulnerable to abuse.

At a time of rising populism, authoritarian tendencies, disinformation campaigns, and a growing backlash against human rights, civil society actors provide a crucial counterweight, helping to rebalance the pluralist democratic discourse. By calling out and challenging actions that undermine democratic processes, judicial independence and the rule of law, by speaking out in defence of the Convention system and the values it seeks to protect – the principled voice of the civil society cuts through the noise.

The Court has long recognised this, and it has played its part in protecting civil society actors. I would like to draw in particular on the case-law on freedom of expression, protected by Article 10 of the Convention. A prerequisite for pluralism, tolerance and open-mindedness, freedom of expression is a right protected at the individual level but, through the means by which it is exercised, radiates out towards the collective framework of social cohesion.

To illustrate this, the Court has come to the defence of civil society actors in cases concerning, for example:

- journalists, whom it has described as “watchdogs of democracy” (*Dupuis v. France*, 2007, § 46), with countless examples, as e.g. in *Milashina and Others v. Russia* (2025), a case concerning journalists targeted for exposing a violent public campaign against sexual minorities.

- non-governmental organisations, finding that, “when an NGO draws attention to matters of public interest, it is exercising a public watchdog role of similar importance to that of the press” (*Vides Aizsardzības Klubs v. Latvia*, no. 57829/00, § 42, 27 May 2004; *Animal Defenders International v. the United Kingdom [GC]*, 2013, §103),

- whistleblowers, as in the case of a nurse dismissed for signalling shortcomings in the care provided by an old-age home (*Heinisch v. Germany*, 2011), or of an employee who disclosed confidential documents exposing tax practices of multinational companies (*Halet v. Luxembourg [GC]*, 2023),

- bloggers and other popular social media users, often assimilated to “public watchdogs” by the Court (*Străisteanu v. the Republic of Moldova*, 2025, § 71; *Magyar Helsinki Bizottság v. Hungary [GC]*, § 168, 2016),

- and lawyers, who, in their role as “protagonists in the justice system” (*Morice v. France [GC]*, 2015, §148) play a fundamental role in ensuring public confidence in the action of the courts.

Here, I want to also welcome the recent adoption by the Council of Europe of the new Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer, in a tribute to “the fundamental role that lawyers and their professional associations play in upholding the rule of law.”

All the above examples are an acknowledgement of the importance of your individual and collective role, as civil society actors, within the legal ecosystem brought about by the Convention.

The voices of civil society organisations that embody and uphold humanist values of respect, tolerance and broad-mindedness – actors whose ‘hearts hold no hatred—save for hatred itself’¹ – need to be protected and given prominence.

I hope we can use today’s meeting to give your voices increased prominence within the walls of our Human Rights Building – and that, in this way, they can resonate more widely through the Court’s case law.

With this, I would like to hand over to the Registrar, *Marialena Tsirli*.

¹ Jean Cocteau, “*Ne haïr que la haine*”, *Poésie critique* (1959); also, « Le malheur ne m'a pas changé, je ne hais que la haine. », attributed to Tristan Bernard.