



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

HELP Annual Network Conference

The common frame of reference

Speech by Mattias Guyomar

2 July 2026

Ms OVEY,

Ms GRÉTARSDÓTTIR,

Ambassador KOS,

Professor STRICKLER,

HELP Team, Network members, and partners

Dear Friends,

It is a real pleasure to be invited to speak to you, as President of the European Court of Human Rights, at the opening of this year's Annual Conference of the HELP Network.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Last week, I was received by President Emmanuel Macron in Paris and, a few days later, by Prince Albert of Monaco.

Both these meetings served to seek support – not only for the crucial work of the Court, but for all those who support the Convention system.

Our discussions revolved around the need for a common frame of reference in today's troubled world.

Our European democracies are bustling marketplaces of ideas and competing narratives.

Thanks to technology and the social media, the democratic narrative has become more horizontal and more participative than ever.

At the same time, it is vulnerable to abuse.

Misinformation and disinformation impair the quality of public debate and pose a direct threat to democratic life.

At a time where the international legal order is being weakened, and as we are being removed further away from the fundamental values and principles that have defined the post-War world order – it is easy to experience a loss of orientation.

Democratic discourse cannot take place in a vacuum. There must be some centre of gravity.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

A shared legal and ethical foundation.

Something that we can all agree on.

The question we asked ourselves was this:

What is this common frame of reference in today's Europe?

The Convention as a 'common frame of reference'

My answer is – the European Convention.

This humanistic treaty, shared by 700 million people in the 46 states of the Council of Europe, in all of our rich diversity.

Motivated by a desire to foster "greater unity" on our continent and "a common understanding" of human rights.

An instrument which took universal values – expressed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – and transformed them into binding international law, at the regional level.

Built out of the ashes of the world wars, the Convention served as a foundation stone for the construction of a new rules-based international order.

"A just and solid European order", in the words of one of its founders, Pierre-Henri Teitgen.

Let me speak about three different ways in which the Convention serves as Europe's common frame of reference.

First, as a constitutional instrument of the European public order.

Second, as an instrument for promoting judicial truth.

And *third*, as an instrument for protecting peace through law.

The Convention as a 'constitutional instrument of European public order'

In its judgments, the Court has repeatedly described the Convention as a 'constitutional instrument of the European public order (*ordre public*) for the protection of individual human beings"¹.

A constitutional order which does not conflict with national constitutional identities of the member States.

On the contrary, it encompasses them. It draws its substance and inspiration from Europe's 'common heritage of political traditions, ideals, freedom and the rule of law'.

It is precisely this common foundation that enables the Court to promote the development of a European *ius commune*:

The Convention, interpreted by the Court, constitutes a "European common law of human rights", shared by all those within the jurisdiction of the member States of the Council of Europe.

The Convention as an instrument for promoting judicial truth

A second way in which the Convention system plays a role, especially at a time when even basic facts are often called into question, is in establishing judicial truth.

¹ *Loizidou v. Turkey* (merits), 18 December 1996, *Reports of Judgments and Decisions* 1996-VI

The Court's judgments are a touchstone for confirming objective reality.

Truth is an important element of justice.

The Court has done this, for example, in its landmark climate ruling *Verein KlimaSeniorinnen*, decided by the Grand Chamber in 2024.

In that case, the Court took the existence of climate change, and the threat that it poses to human rights, to be "a matter of fact"².

Another example is the Court's historic and unanimous ruling in the inter-State case *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*, delivered in July last year.³

In that judgment, the Grand Chamber has not only held Russia responsible for gross and widespread human rights violations committed in Ukraine. It also retraced, in detail, the chronology of the conflict, and held Russia accountable for the downing of Flight MH17.

The Court has similarly given historical facts a legal stamp in countless other judgments.

Recording truth in more than 1,100,000 cases decided since its creation in 1959.

Each of them with a concrete impact – in the context of a given dispute, and, at the same time, on the lives of everyone – of all of us.

We share the Convention and the Court is a Court for all.

The Convention as an instrument for protecting peace through law

A third example of the Convention's role is in promoting peace through law and justice.

By upholding the European public order, by applying the Convention, the Court protects the elements for a peaceful European society – democracy, tolerance and pluralism.

It puts in place safeguards, so that these basic fundamentals of peace are not easily undermined.

In the words of Angelika Nußberger, a former Judge and Vice-President of the Court, it "creates a climate in which the escalation of conflicts is less likely."⁴

One example of that is the role played by Convention in solidifying peace in conflict-affected parts of Europe.

For example, in Northern Ireland.

The Convention has been explicitly embedded in the text of the Good Friday Agreement, which is today considered the bedrock of the Northern Ireland peace process.

The communities affected by the legacy of conflict may disagree on many things, but they all agree on the importance of the Convention as a stabilising factor.

The Court's work also promotes peace by ensuring accountability, especially in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Through its adjudication of inter-State cases and through its findings of violations of individual rights the Court continues its mission of holding Russia accountable.

I will quote here René Cassin: "There will never be peace on this planet as long as Human Rights are violated in any part of the world".

² *Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland* [GC], no. 53600/20, § 436, 9 April 2024

³ *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* [GC], nos. 8019/16 and 3 others, 9 July 2025

⁴ Nußberger, A., 'Promoting Peace and Integration among States' (70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights Conference, Strasbourg, 18 September 2020, https://echr.coe.int/Documents/Speech_20200918_Nussberger_Conference_70_years_Convention_ENG.pdf)

These are just some examples of how the Convention provides a common frame of reference on human rights, at the European level.

But how do its standards translate to the domestic level – where they are actually supposed to be applied?

The organisers of today’s conference argue that “the real test of human rights standards is their application in daily legal practice.”

I couldn’t agree more.

To make a difference, Convention standards must first of all be known, understood, and owned.

At the national, regional, and local level. In the environments that shape each person’s world.

The “Strasbourg Court” may be a household name in many member States.

But its role and jurisprudence are often misunderstood or misrepresented.

The Court is well aware of this.

To give a better account of its activity and case-law, over the past several years the Court has increased efforts to increase its visibility.

We are reaching out more to our partners – the authorities and courts of the member States, legal professionals, media, and the general public.

We have developed the Court’s Knowledge Sharing Platform. In addition to being available in both official languages, it has been translated into three non-official languages⁵, and plans are made for more languages to be added, to make Convention standards more readily accessible to even more people.

We have opened the doors of our Human Rights Building. In September, for the first time in 6 years, we held an Open-Door event, with almost 4,000 visitors.

Starting tomorrow, with the presence of the Mayor of Strasbourg, Ms Catherine Trautmann, we will be holding open doors at the Court in the afternoon of every first Friday of the month.

We received visits of legal practitioners, litigators, bar associations, and national human rights and ombuds institutions.

Judges of our Court have taken part in countless seminars and events across the member States, spreading the knowledge of the Court’s case-law and giving it wider exposure.

But making the Convention better known and explaining the Court’s case-law is a task that cannot, and does not, rest solely on the shoulders of the Court’s judges and Registry.

Each year, the Court delivers around a thousand judgments.

Even for dedicated legal practitioners, this amount of jurisprudence is difficult to follow and to digest, let alone to apply.

This is why human rights education, provided by the HELP, is so absolutely crucial.

⁵ Romanian, Turkish and Ukrainian. See [ECHR-KS | European Court of Human Rights Knowledge Sharing Platform - ECHR-KS - Knowledge Sharing](#)

HELP's courses, developed by the HELP Team and the entire Network, jointly with the Court's internal expertise, are windows into our Court's judicial work.

Allow me to say a few words now to properly acknowledge the significance of your collective work, from the perspective of the Court.

I can think of at least three different aspects in which the work of the HELP Network reflects and supports the Court's judicial work and the Convention system:

Firstly, by developing courses on the Convention and the Court's case-law, you provide the Court's partners with tools to apply the standards at the national, regional, and local levels.

You increase the reach of the Court's judgments and enable their effective implementation.

This is a practical expression of the principle of **subsidiarity**, which is based on the belief that human rights issues are dealt with most effectively 'at home'.

Secondly, by developing national versions of HELP courses, you adapt them to national legislation and context, and enrich them with relevant domestic case-law and perspective.

I have already mentioned earlier how the Convention system embraces national legal identities.

This contextualisation of the HELP human rights learning reflects the Court's own **judicial pragmatism**, which consists of interpreting and applying the Convention in a specific context, recognising that there is no single, uniform way of protecting human rights.

Thirdly, by disseminating reliable knowledge about human rights, you help to uphold the objective truth about the Court's work.

In this way, you contribute to the Court's **legitimacy** and protect its **reputation**.

Factchecking and debunking myths about human rights often happens too late, once damage has already been done.

This is why human rights education, and its preventive role in "pre-bunking" misconceptions, is so important.

I note that the fight against disinformation, especially relating to young people, is one of Monaco's presidency priorities and previously also Moldova's.

Finally, I want to recognise how HELP makes its human rights education so widely accessible to all.

Nombreuses sont les personnes qui, même à Strasbourg, passent devant le Palais des droits de l'homme sans savoir exactement quel est le rôle de la Cour.

Qu'elle compte parmi les institutions qui les protègent, qui nous protègent du retour de l'épouvante alors que la guerre est revenue et que l'État de droit est attaqué.

Comme a dit René Cassin : « L'essentiel c'est que l'être humain le plus humble sache que la communauté universelle n'est pas une abstraction mais une unité vivante ».

While legal professionals – judges, lawyers, law enforcement officials, prosecutors – remain your core audience, your courses are also directed at academics, students, and indeed anyone with an interest in human rights.

You help to embed human rights education in school curricula. This makes it available to educators – not only in law, but also in other fields, like political studies, international relations, or journalism.

All of your courses are easily available, not only in the Council of Europe legal space, but also beyond.

And all this, at no cost to the users.

In an era of paid-for on-line education, and the increasingly monetised Internet, this is extraordinary.

And always, you are up to speed with the latest developments and trends.

With brand new and regularly updated courses on the big issues of the day, like Artificial Intelligence, or Access to Justice in the Digital Environment.

Or, on technology-facilitated violence against women and girls, reflecting the Court's attention to the issue of cyberviolence and domestic violence, for example, in its judgments *Volodina v. Russia (no. 2)*⁶ or *Buturugă v. Romania*.⁷

Or – your new course on the “Abolition of the Death Penalty”. A particularly timely issue, as I can attest, having attended the 9th World Congress Against the Death Penalty in Paris just the day before yesterday.

To conclude, I would like to return to the Convention's role as a European common frame of reference.

It is the Convention's common foundation that enables the Court to promote a “joint European development of fundamental rights.”

Through its judicial work, the Court acts as a constitutional court at the European level.

In the spirit of shared responsibility, its role is to set standards, which the HELP Network helps to disseminate among the Court's partners in the member States.

Words of recognition are in order.

Allow me to thank all my fellow Judges and members of the Registry for their contributions to the work of the HELP programme.

And, on behalf of the entire Court, express my gratitude to Ana-Maria Telbis, the HELP Team, and each of you, members of the HELP Network present today, for your engagement in spreading the knowledge of the Court's case-law.

And to each of you for your contribution in making the Convention the common legal frame of reference that it is today.

You are true ambassadors for the Convention and its values.

I wish you all very fruitful discussions and a very inspiring conference.

Thank you.

⁶ *Volodina v. Russia (no. 2)*, no. 40419/19, 14 September 2021

⁷ *Buturugă v. Romania*, no. 56867/15, 11 February 2020