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

Conference

Marking 30 years of Croatia's membership in the Council of Europe and the signing of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

Welcome address

Speech by Mattias Guyomar

Zagreb, 5 November 2026

Dear Prime Minister,
Minister of Foreign and European Affairs,
Minister of justice,
Presidents of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts,
Secretary General,
Dear Judges and guests,

First of all, I would like to thank the Croatian authorities for organising this important conference. And to express once again my gratitude to Mr Prime Minister for the constant support of Croatia to the Court and the Convention system.

On behalf of all Judges of the European Court of Human Rights, I wish to extend my sincere congratulations on the 30th anniversary of Croatia's membership of the Council of Europe and signing of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Convention is the treaty of legal humanism, the legal tool of the political project of democracy, peace and justice carried out by the Council of Europe.

We celebrate today two events which are the two sides of the same coin. Signing the ECHR is a prerequisite for accession to the Council of Europe. Indeed, there is no democracy without the Rule of Law and the effective protection of human rights. Such an anniversary is the most impactful opportunity to recall how much the Council of Europe and the European Convention are intertwined and inseparable.

I am delighted to be here together with a number of Judges of the Court: Vice-President Ivana Jelić; Judge Gilberto Felici; and Judge Davor Derenčinović, your national Judge, to whom I would like to give a special mention for playing a crucial role in organising today's event and his constant commitment to the Court. We are joined also by the Court's Deputy Registrar Abel Campos and senior lawyers from the Registry.

Thank you all for kindly contributing to the panels as speakers and participants.

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The European Convention is not only an instrument of protection (safeguarding human rights) but also an instrument of change (responsible for their further realisation).

Its transformative impact can be understood through three distinctive features that allow it to adapt its standards to the evolving requirements of the present day.

The first is its collective enforcement - the novelty of the European Convention, adopted in 1950, was that it brought “like-minded” European states together in a network of mutual undertakings and obligations.

The second is the “living instrument” doctrine which has been one of the main engines of legal transformation across Europe. Rather than a sign of judicial activism, such evolving and dynamic interpretation marks the Court’s respect for the intention of the drafters of the Convention, which was to make it capable of addressing contemporary issues and providing appropriate responses by defining the articles in a very broad fashion.

And the third feature of the Convention I would like to highlight is that it is based on “a common understanding” of human rights, drawing inspiration and substance from the political and legal traditions of the member States. Indeed, the European public order must be understood as embracing, not excluding, national constitutional identities.

Interpreting the Convention in an evolutive and dynamic manner in order to respond to contemporary human rights challenges, the Court remains the cornerstone of the Council of Europe, understood as a peace project rooted in the conviction that democracy, rule of law and human rights are the necessary foundations of peaceful human coexistence.

However, the Convention’s transformative impact would not have been possible without the active involvement of national authorities, notably domestic superior courts. The primary responsibility for interpreting and applying the Convention lies with domestic courts. Our shared responsibility is based on judicial dialogue: our Court draws on the position of national courts which, in turn, benefit from the Court’s jurisprudence in developing their own human rights standards.

Beyond such a cross fertilization at the service of the dissemination of an appropriate and efficient human rights based approach, the shared responsibility applies also the effective execution of the Court’s judgments under the supervision of the Committee of ministers, the political body of the Council of Europe. The full implementation of the Court’s judgments not only ensures justice for applicants but also promotes structural reforms at the national level, making it an essential tool for the prevention of future human rights violations and for the long-term effectiveness of the Convention mechanism.

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Today, we celebrate not only an important historical milestone but also a continuing commitment to the values that unite us.

The success of the Convention system over these three decades in Croatia, as elsewhere in Europe, is based on a genuine partnership between Strasbourg and your national institutions.

It is through that partnership fed by mutual respect and trust that the Convention will continue to meet the challenges of the future and remain a living guarantee for generations to come.

I look forward to our discussions.

Thank you.