

75th Anniversary of the European Convention of Human Rights

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When Paul Valéry once asked Albert Einstein, “Do you carry a notebook around to record your ideas?” the great scientist—usually unflappable—seemed surprised. “No,” he replied. “There is no need for that. You see, I rarely have new ideas.”

This small exchange is a gentle warning to all those who claim, each day, to bring new ideas just for saying that they are doing something. I am talking of course about our Convention. Most of these so-called new ideas are not new at all. In my opinion, they are, too often, attempts to impress voters or to manipulate people for short-term political gain.

The reason is well known. Migration. But out of more than one million Court’s decisions only 250 are about immigrants.

One hundred years ago the New York City police announced that the most dangerous immigrants were the Greeks, the Italians and the Irish. Imagine if these three communities would have been deported from the States then. Who would support such a totalitarian solution today?

The Convention should not be a refuge for criminals and even more it should not be a scapegoat of our own failure -us politicians- to face problems or to find political solutions. For 75 years solutions were found and immigration was always there, in Europe and globally.

Today, 75 years after the signing of the European Convention on Human Rights, some political voices in Europe question its authority, threaten to renegotiate it—or even to withdraw from it. Sorry, but this is not about improving our institutions. It is about eroding them.

If there are new ideas to be pursued, they should concern how to better protect democracy, not how to retreat from our achievements. And if changes are ever needed, they must be discussed calmly, thoroughly, and democratically — never under the pressure of populism.

The Convention was born out of fire and sorrow, drafted by politicians bigger than history, who had seen what happens when power is unchecked, and human dignity has no defender. It was not written in stone, of course, but it was written with conscience. To question its independence today is not a legal debate; it is a political temptation — the temptation to imitate the extremes in order to defeat them. But when you imitate the extremes, you legitimise them. And then Europe ceases to be the cradle of humanism and becomes the laboratory of fear.

Let us, then, imagine the opposite world: A Europe without the Convention.

A continent that rebuilt its homes and parliaments after the war — but not its moral architecture. In that Europe, minorities might have remained invisible. Victims of torture would have had no voice. Love between people of the same sex would still be a crime.

Do we all remember Alan Turing? One of the hidden heroes of the Second World War forced to chemical castration and then committed suicide, because of shame he felt against the society just because he was a homosexual. Children born out of wedlock would still bear the mark of shame. Domestic

violence would be a private tragedy, not a public wrong. And journalists — those who speak truth to power — would have fewer words left to speak.

Without the Convention, we would still have progress, but not the same protection. We would still have institutions, but not the same trust. We would still have Europe, but not the same soul.

Fortunately, the Convention has been there — whispering to every government: remember your promise. 75 years on, the European Convention on Human Rights remains the most powerful act of imagination in our continent's history: the belief that law can protect the dignity of life and that justice can unite nations more strongly than fear ever divided them.

Let us never reach a day when we will have to admit — this was a defeat for our imagination.

Thank you.