

03022025 - Avocats.be Keynote speech

Good evening everyone,

I am very pleased to be with you tonight at the - nearly - beginning of this year but also at the beginning of the legislative term. 7 months after the election, I am very happy legislative work will resume shortly.

It is an honor to stand before you today at this prestigious annual reception of lawyers. As a member of the European Parliament, I recognize the critical role that you play in our democratic society—not only as advocates for justice but as protectors of the fundamental rights that underpin our freedoms.

I would like to thank the Belgian bar for their invitation to give this speech, with a special mention for Anne Jonlet and her colleagues. I believe this invitation tonight reflects the good cooperation and strong links we built over the last five years. In my work as parliamentarian in charge of issues related to European justice and police cooperation, and criminal law, your organisation has always been a very reliable partner and your expertise as lawyers and law practitioners is crucial.

A changing context

The creation and development of the area of freedom, security and justice in the EU is a great achievement of our continent. It ensures citizens and companies rights, allows transborder implementation of obligations and duties, ensures protection for the most vulnerable but also mainstream respect for fundamental rights and rule of law.

In Europe and even more since the last year European elections, we are witnessing challenging times. In a world increasingly marked by polarization, the rule of law stands as a beacon of hope, reminding us of the values that unite us. But we also know that these values are fragile. Democracy is not something we can take for granted—it must be defended every day. And this is where you, the legal professionals, come in.

In the field of justice cooperation, using the words of the former president of Eurojust “we went from a blind trust based cooperation, to check and verify attitude”. What we may have taken for granted in a space of freedom, security and justice has been severely put under pressure in many Member States. Legal profession has in many countries also been attacked either by governments but also through legislation that endanger the role of lawyers in the justice chain. As documented in the recent CCBE report, the lawyer profession is also at many risks including threats and aggression. It is crucial to strongly act and react to those attacks. It is also key to understand that when politicians disrespect the profession or when laws question its role, it normalizes impunity and allows for the worst behaviors.

Justice cooperation & tension internal security/justice

Justice cooperation in the European Union is one of the cornerstones of our shared legal framework. It ensures that justice does not stop at the borders of one country but is something that unites us. The EU is founded on the idea that our laws and legal systems

should not only serve the needs of individual states but should work together for the common good. This vision is reflected in the various EU instruments and initiatives designed to improve cooperation, from the European Arrest Warrant to cross-border civil justice mechanisms or rights of persons accused of crime.

But let us be clear: cooperation is not always straightforward. It requires trust, mutual respect, and shared commitment to the principles of fairness, equality, and human dignity. The European Union's justice and home affairs policy—while a vital part of the Union's legal framework—has sometimes struggled to navigate the balance between security and individual rights. These challenges are even more evident when we think about issues like cross-border data sharing, privacy protection, and the protection of fundamental rights.

Developments in the field of police cooperation in the EU have, in my opinion, undermined this necessary balance. We see how difficult it can be to implement defence rights when evidence has not been collected by the books, and the effect EU operations may have on procedures, where judges do not assess legality of evidence as thoroughly as they would for a national investigation. In this regard, and I will take the opportunity of your presence Mr Commissioner for justice, your role is crucial.

Legislation in the field of internal security will be paramount over the coming years, including in the fight against drug trafficking and organised crime. We strongly need you to ensure the balance of powers between justice and police is respected and that fundamental rights including rights of defence are strongly embedded in every proposal. This also means holding Member States accountable for the proper application of EU law, ensuring that all legal proceedings, whether civil, criminal, or administrative, adhere to the highest standards of fairness.

Future

The need to hold MS accountable for the implementation of EU law will be even more crucial in the coming years as we just adopted many legislations in the field of criminal law. While we welcome the many texts adopted, including on gender based violence, environmental crime, fight against trafficking or the violation of union restrictive measures, it will create an important workload on administration and services. Political will be key.

The current negotiations on the victims' rights directive and the child sexual abuse directive for which I am responsible, are very important texts, which I hope will allow for real change in society. Here again we need strong commitments from the European Commission but also the legal profession to ensure a very high level of ambition. We owe it to the many victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation in Europe.

Thanks a lot for your attention.