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100

The Voice of Maria Dolens

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Centenary of the Bell

The Chinese victory

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has recently been at the centre of two events that, thanks in part to extensive media coverage, have once again drawn the attention of global leaders and public opinion to the "Asian dragon," the world's second-largest country in terms of population and economic power.

In chronological order, at the end of August, the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), established in 2001 through a joint initiative by China, the Russian Federation, and four Central Asian countries, was held in the city of Tianjin.

Originally a purely regional entity, it has now 'risen' to become a fully-fledged multilateral entity, with some 30 participants, including full members (with India, Iran and Pakistan among the new entries) and observers, almost all of whom were represented at the highest level at this important Chinese event.

In absolute terms, the SCO accounts for roughly 40% of the global population and 25% of the world economy. On closer examination, these figures are not far off those of better-known and more established international fora, such as the G7 and G20.

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Seminar at the Bell

The protection of human rights and world disorder: the Council of Europe's response

Democratic erosion and the Ukrainian crisis

Editor
Marcello Filotei
marcello.filotei@fondazionecampanadeicaduti.org

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journalists specializing in Communications n. 35952

PEACE BELL FOUNDATION OF
ROVERETO

Colle di Miravalle - 38068 Rovereto
T. +39 0464.434412 - F. +39 0464.434084
info@fondazioneoperacampana.it
www.fondazioneoperacampana.it

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OGP srl
Agenzia di pubblicità
www.ogp.it

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The second event took place in Beijing just a few days later (3 September), on the 80th anniversary of China's victory in the war of liberation against Japan, and consisted of an impressive military parade, skilfully orchestrated by President Xi Jinping, in which the most modern weapon systems of the country's armed forces were proudly displayed. Alongside thousands of military personnel, the most sophisticated means of attack, such as intercontinental nuclear missiles and stealth fighters, were part of the choreography.

While foreign participation in the two mega-events was nearly identical in terms of numbers (around 30 countries present), there were significant differences in the composition of participants at the two locations. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who attended the Tianjin summit, notably refrained from participating in the military parade on Chang'an Avenue. In contrast, North Korean "Respected Marshal" Kim Jong-un made a conspicuous appearance, having travelled to Beijing on his famously slow—but, crucially, indestructible—armoured train, accompanied by his Iranian counterpart Pezeshkjan.

The aspects of the SCO summit that are likely to be remembered historically will certainly not be the modest concrete outcomes of the working meetings, which can be summarised in a few joint statements on Iran and Gaza, the establishment of a joint development bank, and several agreements on military cooperation, trade, and agriculture. On the other hand, those that will remain etched in the collective memory for a long time will be, on the one hand, the Russian/Chinese bilateral energy agreement, which resulted in the construction of a new gas pipeline called 'Power of Siberia 2', intended to double the annual volume of Russian supplies to Beijing, which will approach 100 billion cubic metres. On the other hand, the images of Xi Jinping, Narendra Modi and Vladimir Putin engaged in what at least appears to be a relaxed three-way conversation on the sidelines of the proceedings, relayed by the world media and carefully analysed by experts have garnered attention. These are peppered with undoubtedly unusual diplomatic 'details', such as the prolonged conversation between the 'Tsar' and the Indian Prime Minister that did not take place in a conference room in the presence of their respective delegates, but one-to-one, in the former's armoured limousine.

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION



Obviously, many aspects that came to light in Tianjin and Beijing may be worthy of further investigation. As for our analysis, we will limit ourselves to a few observations, focusing on the trio of leaders mentioned above and the 'notable absentee', US President Donald Trump.

Starting from the hosts, China's role and, in particular, Xi Jinping's own leadership, emerge clearly strengthened, since it has gathered around it a significant number of representatives from the 'Global South', the geographical area China aspires to lead as soon as possible, in a distinctly anti-Western capacity, including through progressively controlling the key UN agencies. With the signing of the above-mentioned energy agreement, whose terms are widely seen as disadvantageous for Moscow and advantageous for China, Xi Jinping has also increased the asymmetry in the relationship with the Russian Federation effectively pushing the latter increasingly, and some might say, inexorably, into China's orbit.

Oblivious (intentionally or not) to this threat, Vladimir Putin can in turn take satisfaction in having emerged, perhaps definitively, from the isolation that had characterised the period immediately following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. By comparison, the chilly demeanour of both Xi Jinping and Modi at the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2022 is clearly visible in the archival footage. The unexpected ceremonial welcome—with red carpet and a vigorous handshake—extended to him by the US President at the Anchorage meeting in August undoubtedly served to reopen a series of doors for the Kremlin leader that had previously been hanging by a hinge.

Narendra Modi, for his part, openly wished to demonstrate that a policy of tariffs as aggressive as the one adopted by the US administration towards his country would not bend India, which makes its autonomy in decision-making one of the hallmarks of its international action. Hence the Indian PM's decision to make a trip to China, a full seven years after the previous one, not surprisingly limited to the multilateral segment of the SCO. On this basis, any hypothesis of a Sino-Indian rapprochement appears decidedly misplaced, given the competing interests of the two capitals across the Asian continent and the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the unresolved border disputes, which occasionally flare into armed conflict (most recently in 2020 in the Gaiwan Valley, part of disputed Kashmir).

In our comments, we have saved for last, not by chance, the "stone guest," Donald Trump, whom we consider the true loser across the board.



None of the goals the tycoon had set from the White House (or the golf courses of Mar-o-Lago...) seem close to being realised. Certainly not the reduction of China's global influence, which, on the contrary, appears set to expand further; certainly not the prolonged international isolation of Putin, who has now been reinstated among the world's powerful, thanks in part to the aforementioned resounding "own goal" in Anchorage; and finally, certainly not India's renunciation of Russian oil purchases at highly advantageous prices, a vital resource for sustaining its rapidly growing economy, now the fifth-largest in the world.

Since, however, in politics nothing should be taken for granted or considered definitive, the American President's 'star' could shine again, and brightly too, if, as most hope, the agreement he has strongly pursued which has so far led to the ceasefire in Gaza, the release of the hostages still in the hands of Hamas and the withdrawal of the Israeli army from a large part of the Strip should, within a 'reasonable' timeframe, so to speak, lead to a real Peace agreement, a necessary premise also to give substance to the objective of 'two peoples, two States'. If this is indeed the case, and even if he does so on a course marked by highly questionable behaviour and decisions, we will have to acknowledge that the tycoon has done everything in his power to pursue, on the international stage, one of the objectives he had always declared a priority since his inauguration in the White House. President Zelensky's invitation to him to focus, at this point, as a priority, on the Russian/Ukrainian dossier appears in fact not to be a rhetorical invocation but rather a qualified acknowledgement of his mediation skills.

Reggente Marco Marsilli, Foundation President

SEMINAR AT THE BELL

THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND WORLD DISORDER: THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S RESPONSE

On 19 September, the Fondazione Campana dei Caduti organised an international seminar on human rights in Europe, in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the University of Trento.

The Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Bjørn Berge, sent a speech, which was read out on the Miravalle Hill by Giuseppe Zafuto, spokesman for the secretary general and acting head of the Media Department. Berge's speech is presented below and on the following pages we will publish excerpts from the contribution made to the seminar by Guido Raimondi, judge of the European Court of Human Rights from 2010 to 2019 and president of the same body from 2015 to 2019.

SEMINAR AT THE BELL

THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND WORLD DISORDER: THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S RESPONSE

A beacon of hope

We celebrate Maria Dolens, the Bell of Peace, cast a century ago with bronze from the nineteen countries that fought in the First World War. I speak of celebration: a celebration of a bell that tolls for Peace, yet this bell also tolls in memory of the war and those who lost their lives in it. Apart from two periods when it had to be recast, Maria Dolens has rung at sunset, 100 chimes, every day since 1925.

If it had chimed every single day, there would have been more than three and a half million chimes. But it would take another six centuries - yes, another 600 years - before the Peace Bell had rung for every fallen soldier in the First World War. If it continues to toll for every person killed in World War II, it will ring for another twenty centuries.

And if Maria Dolens rang just once for every man, woman and child killed by all wars, this bell would ring for eternity.

What a waste.

A waste of talent and opportunity.

Of love and laughter.

Of life.

When it rings, this beautiful bell mourns the dead and warns us that Peace is fragile. Maria Dolens reminds us

that we are part of a greater whole, that every death in every war echoes across the planet, touching us all.

Let me remind everyone of the beginning of the most famous poem by the English poet John Donne:

*No man is an island,
entire of itself.*

The First World War was to be the first and the last, the 'war that would have ended all wars'. Our soldiers were sacrificed so that no more blood would be shed. At least, that was the theory. But since then, what has happened?

Twenty years later, another world war took place, lasting six long years and killing more people than any other war in history. Was the world destined to stay trapped in this cycle of death and destruction?

While Europe was reeling, wounded and tested by the flames of war, there were many who swore that this would not happen. From the ashes, the Council of Europe was born, with the aim of uniting nations and working to maintain Peace. The Council lit a beacon of hope and, over the years, consolidated its strength as more and more Member States joined our mission of an international order based on rules. Today, the Council brings together 46 Member States with our shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.



Giuseppe Zaffuto reads the speech of the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Bjørn Berge

For decades we have managed - despite being shaken countless times - to preserve our fragile Peace in much of Europe. Yet, in the hundred years since the first casting of the Bell of Peace, there has never been a day when our world has not experienced war. And in 2025 we find ourselves under attack, with enemies - who may not even know that they are enemies - using every weapon at their disposal to sow mistrust and disunity. They would like to divide us, deliberately creating and feeding the rifts that the Council of Europe was created to counteract.

The countless formidable global challenges we face are being instrumentalised to become hotbeds of division and hatred. Technology and artificial intelligence are being used to generate waves of malicious disinformation, cybercrime and even cyberterrorism. Then the weakening of press freedom, gender equality and diversity are added to the list.

Climate change is causing extreme weather conditions and natural disasters, bringing tragedy, chaos and fear. Global threats to water and food security are shaking us to our core. Geopolitics is not just experiencing tremors, but veritable earthquakes - and the resulting rifts seem almost impossible to bridge.

*If a clod be washed away by the sea
Europe is the less*

Any attack, of any kind, on the national integrity of any of our Member States is an attack on all of us. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was not simply about a strip of land being dragged away, but a gigantic boulder being destroyed in the very foundations of Europe. We need those foundations. Europe must stand firm on the foundations that still support us: the shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

The Council of Europe has stood by Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict, not only because it was right to do so for Ukraine, but also because it was right to do so for Europe. For Europe and for international order based on rules.

*Every man's death diminishes me
for I am involved in mankind*

Each of us is a citizen of a nation that is part of Europe. Just as the chimes of Maria Dolens spread throughout the valley, so too do our actions resonate throughout the world. Russia's attack on Ukraine seems to have no end. The Council of Europe has supported Ukraine since the beginning of the war. We have implemented the most ambitious action plan in history and are currently working on more than 30 projects related to resilience, recovery and reconstruction, in

close cooperation with the Ukrainian authorities. On 25 June 2025, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Secretary General Alain Berset signed an agreement on the establishment of a special court for the crime of aggression against Ukraine. Accountability is fundamental in the path to justice. The same goes for the compensation and the ability of Ukrainian citizens to rebuild their lives and their country. This is why we set up the Damage Register, which has already received over 55,000 claims in the 11 categories currently open. We hope that our Complaints Commission will be operational early next year.

The Secretary-General also appointed a special envoy on the situation of children in Ukraine. The Council of Europe will continue to work for fair and lasting Peace in Ukraine. Fair and lasting Peace in Ukraine would be a new milestone in the foundations of Peace and democracy throughout Europe. Our leaders must continue to heed the bells of Peace, because none of us can afford the bitter price of war. It is up to us to create and amplify new chimes of hope. But as we listen to Maria Dolens, there is no need to wonder for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for all of us.

Bjørn Berge



Seminar speakers visit the Maria Dolens centenary exhibition guided by curator Chiara Moser

SEMINAR AT THE BELL

THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
AND WORLD DISORDER: THE COUNCIL OF
EUROPE'S RESPONSE

Democratic erosion and the Ukrainian crisis

The European system of human rights protection, created by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), is facing a convergence of crises that threaten its effectiveness and legitimacy. Two developments are emerging as particularly worrying: the systematic erosion of democratic principles in several European states and the profound impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on the European human rights architecture.

The most visible manifestation of democratic erosion in Europe has been the weakening of liberal-democratic institutions, especially in Hungary and Poland. Both countries have experienced what is known as the 'exaltation of the Executive', i.e. a tendency towards the concentration of power in the executive at the expense of democratic checks and balances.

These experiences are part of a broader trend throughout Europe. The European Parliament expressed deep concern, sounding the alarm in a Resolution of 28 February 2024 about 'a democratic backwardness in many Member States' and identified specific threats including problems with the independence

of the judiciary, corruption, media freedom and the independence of supervisory authorities.

This democratic erosion poses direct challenges to the ECHR system in several ways. Firstly, it undermines the principle of subsidiarity that underlies the Convention system, i.e. the idea that national authorities should be the primary guarantors of human rights. The weakening of national guarantee institutions reduces the effectiveness of remedies at national level, so that individuals have to turn more frequently to Strasbourg, thus increasing the Court's workload and creating tensions with national governments.

Second, populist governments have increasingly used attacks on the Court as part of their broader narrative against international institutions and so-called 'corrupt elites'. These attacks often invoke the 'will of the people' to justify violations of minority rights and international obligations. The Court faces the challenge of maintaining its authority while operating in a context where its legitimacy is systematically questioned by some of the very states it is supposed to supervise.

In addition to the concerns related to the erosion of the democratic principle, there are also those related to the worrying geo-political context, most notably the gravity of the Ukrainian crisis, which ultimately led to Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe. The most dramatic institutional change in the Council of Europe's 75-year history occurred on 16 March 2022, when the Committee of Ministers decided that Russia would "cease to be a member of the Council of Europe," following its large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 — a decision without precedent since the organisation's founding in 1949. Russia's expulsion had immediate repercussions for the ECHR system, resulting in the country's withdrawal from the Convention itself from 16 September 2022.



Guido Raimondi during his speech at the seminar



On 9 July 2025, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights issued one of the most significant judgments in its history in the case of Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia.

This unanimous decision found Russia responsible for widespread and flagrant human rights violations committed over a period of more than eight years, from 2014 to 2022. The range of violations for which the Court held Russia accountable is extensive. These included indiscriminate military attacks; summary executions; acts of torture, including the use of rape as a weapon of war; unlawful and arbitrary detentions; intimidation and persecution of journalists and religious groups; looting and destruction of private property; and the organised transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia, followed by their adoption there. The judgment is also important from a jurisprudential point of view with regard to the issues of jurisdiction and attribution. The Court ruled that Russia exercised jurisdiction and was therefore obliged to comply with its obligations under the Convention with respect to the territory it occupied in Ukraine.

It is against this challenging backdrop that we must consider the future of the Convention system. A backdrop made even more complex by renewed political pressure on the Strasbourg Court.

In May 2025, a coalition of nine EU Member States - Italy, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Austria - published an open letter criticising the interpretation of the Convention by the European Court of Human Rights, in particular with regard to migration cases. The petitioners argued that the Court had 'excessively broadened the scope of the Convention compared to the Convention's original intentions, thereby altering the balance between the interests that should be protected'. They criticised in particular the Court's jurisprudence on the expulsion of criminal foreign nationals, arguing that it prevents effective migration management. The letter was widely criticised by human rights organisations and legal experts. Nevertheless, it remains a relevant fact that must be duly taken into account.

The European Convention on Human Rights system faces an unprecedented convergence of challenges that threaten its effectiveness and legitimacy. These challenges intersect with emerging pressures that will shape the future of human rights protection in Europe. The Court's groundbreaking jurisprudence on climate change has opened up new frontiers for the protection of rights, while at the same time generating a political reaction from the States concerned about excessive judicial

power. The rise of artificial intelligence and algorithmic decision-making presents technical challenges that will require new interpretative frameworks. Climate-induced migration threatens to overwhelm existing protection systems while highlighting gaps in international law.

Looking to the future, the ECHR system must adapt to remain effective while preserving its fundamental mission of protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. This requires an institutional approach that improves transparency and accountability while maintaining the independence of the Strasbourg Court. The challenges facing the Convention are not only technical or legal problems, but reflect wider tensions in European society regarding identity, sovereignty and values. The way forward requires the recognition that the ECHR system, like the democratic societies it serves, is not a fixed entity, but a living institution that must evolve to remain relevant. However, this evolution must be guided by the fundamental values that inspired the creation of the Convention: namely, the conviction that human dignity transcends national boundaries and that international cooperation is essential for the protection of the rights and freedoms that make democratic life possible.

Guido Raimondi

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

No man is an island,
entire of itself;
Each is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were,
as well as if a manor of thine own
or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
for I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls:
It tolls for thee.

(John Donne, 1572-1631)



The speakers and the Regent under the Bell after the seminar