



OFFICIAL CORPORATE
SUPPORTERS

Harvey



SCANDINAVIAN TRUST
CORPORATE MANAGEMENT SERVICES

Opening Ceremony

IBA Annual Conference 2026

Bella Center, Copenhagen, Denmark

Sunday 4 October 2026

Claudio Visco

President

International Bar Association



Speech

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, dear colleagues and friends,

It is a great honour and a profound privilege to welcome you all to the 2026 Annual Conference of the International Bar Association, here in the wonderful city of Copenhagen.

Italy and Denmark have **a lot in common** notwithstanding different latitudes! The first windfarms built in Italy used Danish-made turbines. Good cuisine migrated north and produced incredible results which, those of you who are faithful enough to stay until Friday, will have the chance to taste at our Closing Party.

But, I think that what we also have in common is hospitality combined, in your case, with efficiency and in our case with fantasy.

My daughter Flavia spent six months in Copenhagen on an Erasmus programme; it was the first semester, and it was quite dark and cold, but when my wife and I came here to bring her home she said "*but do I really have to come back?*"

Well, I am quite sure many of you will feel exactly the same way at the end of this week.

But before I say a few words about the IBA and its ambitions, goals and priorities, let me first express my sincere gratitude to the **Host Committee**, to the **Danish Bar Association**, to our **sponsors**, and to every **delegate** who has travelled across continents to be here.

Over 6,000 participants: a number which confirms the IBA's position as the leading international lawyers' organisation.

I would also like to express special gratitude to the IBA staff for the extraordinary work they do to prepare for the Annual Conference, and for all they do for our Association throughout the year – with special thanks to **Julie Elliott**, our Conference Director.

I want to particularly acknowledge our **Executive Director, Mark Ellis**, whose tireless work and leadership for the IBA are greatly appreciated. And finally, my thanks to all **IBA Officers, Committee Officers, and Council Members**: without their efforts and collaboration, this conference would not have been possible.

The same is true for the Senior Officers of the Association, **Jaime Carey**, with whom I shared my term of presidency, **and Jorg Menzer and Deborah Enix-Ross**, with whom I have worked in an always cooperative and constructive way.

Sharing the Presidency and, before that, the position of Secretary General and Vice President, has been a unique experience. Working with Jaime has always been a pleasure professionally and as a friend.

Thanks to my partners for having supported me in this adventure which took a significant amount of time from my billable hours!

And last but not least, thanks to **my wife Giovanna**, who has accompanied and supported me throughout more than 40 years of my journey with the IBA and who, unfortunately, this evening is not here with us.

Without her patience and her support, I would not be standing here today, and I would never have built the personal relationships and friendships that she and I now treasure with so many of the people I first met professionally and who became our best friends.

With Jaime I have shared the privilege and the responsibility of **guiding the IBA during the most difficult historical period since its foundation** after World War Two.

Never in the past have the core values and mission of the IBA and its members of guardians of the rule of law, the international rule-based order, the independence of the legal profession and of the judiciary, and the freedom of speech, as all embodied in our Constitution, **been under such severe attack and challenge**.

Never as today have violations of human rights, national sovereignty and the basic principles of international law been so widespread – even **in countries we have always considered, and still like to consider, the pillars of democracy and freedom**.

We are living through a period in which the fundamental architecture of the post-war order is under strain **in** multiple places, **by** multiple actors, **for** multiple reasons:

- the **United Nations Charter** itself, with Article 2(4) clear prohibition on the use of force (other than in self-defence);
- the **respect for territorial integrity**; and
- the principle that **sovereignty is not something to be bought, traded or coerced**.

Once sovereignty starts to be treated as an object that can be bargained over, **the risk is that the “might makes right” approach** (namely, the law of the strongest) **becomes the operating principle of international affairs**, with consequences that reach far beyond any single territory.

History has shown us, repeatedly, that when **powerful states are permitted to treat borders as negotiable**, the lesson is learned quickly by others, and the world becomes *measurably less safe* for everyone in it – especially for smaller nations.

All this to the point of having several people having the feeling and arguing that **international law and international order do not exist any longer** or are unable to perform the function which has inspired them and which guaranteed to our society, although with notable exceptions, a period of more than eighty years of relative peace and stability.

Why is this feeling that growing so fast?

There are several factors in my view:

- **Lack of a political willingness:** there is no shared commitment to arrest rogue leaders or physically stop powerful states from committing aggressions;
- **Selective enforcement:** major powers and their allies often escape the consequences of their violations, leading to charges of double standards;
- **Security Council gridlock:** the veto power held by permanent members of the United Nations Security Council often paralyzes collective action during major global crisis.

In a nutshell, the system often struggles to enforce its rules against major powers, leading some voices – often authoritative - to argue that **international law is nowadays more a diplomatic tool than an enforceable law**.

As **United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres** put it bluntly in a recent on-the-record interview with Al Jazeera:

“We are facing a dramatic geopolitical divide, and this dramatic geopolitical divide paralyzes the Security Council which is the body supposed to maintain or help to maintain peace and security around the world.

On the other hand, superpowers themselves engage into wars in some circumstances against international law and that creates an environment of impunity in which midsize powers believe they can do whatever they want because nothing will happen to them and wars are becoming multiplied and more and more complex”

It is very sad to hear these words.

It is true, the rule of law and international law have never experienced such a difficult situation. However, as legal scholars and commentators point out, **the very same fact that a global reaction occurs** when these laws and principles are broken **proves** that the concept of a rules-based order remains deeply compelling and relevant.

Let's be optimistic and forward-looking.

Far from being dead, **the international law system**, although highly contested, is

- **adapting to modern crises, and**
- **operating primarily through the threat of reputational cost, diplomacy, and voluntary compliance.**

It may take time but, I am sure, international law will succeed.

When the United Nations were created in 1945, immediately after the end of World War II, there was a completely **different perception of international order and international law.**

Sometimes it is difficult, eighty years later, to **apply these concepts to the current and fast evolving international situation.**

In 1945, two years before the IBA was established, **there was a feeling that nations, acting in a coordinated way, could defeat what represented a common enemy** not abiding by common principles, even though these were not always codified. Now this common enemy no longer exists or is much more difficult to identify.

What was once the **exception** has, unfortunately, become the **rule.**

Each party seems to find its own good reasons to act as it does.

I am speaking in general terms, but each of you will be able to match this behaviour to situations close at hand.

However, this does not come as a surprise to us.

That the peaceful situation following World War Two could not last forever was a risk somehow expected, and the commitment to protect and defend the Rule of Law has been in Article 1 of our Constitution since its inception.

- *promote the administration of justice under the rule of law among the peoples of the world; and*
- *promote the principles and aims of the United Nations in their legal aspects and to cooperate with, and promote coordination among, international juridical organizations having similar purposes.*

Although we asked whether this was necessary, **we never changed this article in eighty years and we are faithful to it!**

This is still, and will be, the essence of what the IBA represents and wants to achieve.

In this scenario, we **cannot remain passive observers**.

As I said, international law **will have to adapt to this new world** – and it is already doing so – **with lawyers playing a leading role in that process**.

So, **what can we, the legal profession, do today** to remain faithful to the principles our founders set out so clearly?

We can do, at least, three things: **speak-up, create awareness, educate**.

Lawyers should **speak-up and promote** the use of all the tools that international law is offering to us.

This is what we do by taking positions in all the situations in which we perceived that international laws and legal order were broken.

We did it and we keep doing it for **Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, Palestine, US/Iran** but also for situation like **Venezuela** or the **executive orders and sanctions against the ICC, and its judges and prosecutors**, issued by the Trump Administration.

In particular, we have been engaged with **Ukraine** since the beginning of the Russian invasion, providing support to our two Ukrainian Bar Associations (the UNBA and the UBA), the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Office of the Prosecutor, and the Ministry of Defence, in addition to other actors.

Our Executive Director has travelled there on numerous occasions to oversee the IBA's assistance projects organized by our committees (I am myself hoping to be able to do the same before the end of my term of office).

We help collecting evidence through our **eyeWitness to Atrocities App** of the crimes committed by Russian invaders – we reached recently 100,000 videos - and the continuous violations of humanitarian principles, particularly with respect to **children**.

There is an installation in the exhibition area reproducing a room of a deported child, organized by the **Empty Bed**. I invite you to visit look at the images and listen to the stories the Empty Bed people will tell you.

Bringing these children – nobody knows the exact number – back to their families remains one of the priorities of our Human Rights Institute.

With a forward-looking approach, we started talking about **possible models for reconstruction** with our committees and fora highlighting risks and opportunities.

But, more importantly, **we are looking at accountability** to make sure that the crimes committed do not remain unpunished. In 2023, the IBA Council unanimously adopted a resolution in support of establishing a **Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine**.

The IBA will always stand firmly for the principles stated in the UN Charter, and

we remain resolute in our support for Ukraine and for accountability for those responsible for international crimes.

Through our The Hague Office, we have been working with Ukrainian judicial and political representatives, the Council of Europe, bar associations and law societies to build consensus for this project, also outside Europe, and we continue to do so by organising presentations, roundtables and webinars together by participating in meetings with the United Nations and other international bodies.

Along the same line there is Greenland. A small group of us (including me, Jaime Carey, Jorg Menzer, Tim Hughes and our Executive Director Mark Ellis) was there last week to meet with the local legal community and to participate in an international conference the local Bar had organised. We did not want to come here in Copenhagen without having done what we could to support Greenlanders and the Danish Government at this difficult juncture.

When we planned our trip **the situation in Greenland was very different from the one today.**

We went to Greenland this week with a **much lighter pressure on us** but still mindful that the implementation of the Agreement will not be an easy exercise.

[You have just heard from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, to whom I wish to express our gratitude for being here today, a thoughtful analysis of the recent developments and there is nothing I need to add to his words other than our appreciation for the important result Greenland and Danmark have achieved].

The IBA does not take sides in geopolitics. But we do take the side of the law, of the Rule of Law.

Wherever those foundational principles come under pressure whether through invasion, through annexation, through coercive diplomacy, or through the quiet erosion of institutions the legal profession has a duty to raise the hand and to organise itself, across borders and political divides, to hold powers to account.

This means making leaders, authorities or institutions responsible for their actions and to force them to explain or justify their decisions when politics alone cannot.

That is precisely why coalitions of bar associations, judges and legal institutions matter so much right now.

When any single actor lacks the will or the ability to enforce the rules, **it falls to broad, cross-regional coalitions of the Willings to reassert such rules**, and lawyers have an indispensable role to play in building and supporting those coalitions.

That was true in 1947, when our founders first made that wager on law over force and it remains true today.

Independence of the legal profession, including the judiciary, is pivotal to performing this function. The IBA constantly speaks in defence of endangered lawyers or judges, also through our Human Rights Institute that I wish to thank for the tireless work it does every day.

But let's go to the second thing we can do as members of the legal profession.

Create awareness in the public opinion.

Lawyers are uniquely placed to perform this role at any and all levels. We use to define ourselves as “**gatekeepers**” when we talk about our role with respect to protections of those values which are perceived a priority by the public opinion.

There is a lot of discussion about this concept and, while we all agree that governments and public authorities cannot shift on us, the legal profession, their duties and responsibilities, we have to use our leverage to **create, at all levels, the awareness of the need to protect rule of law, international law and international order.**

“Protect the Rule of Law the Rule of Law will protect you”.

With this let's move to the third thing we can do: **educate.**

We look, in particular to **young generations**; luckily my generation and much more our children and teenagers **grew up and lived in a period of relative stability** following World War II, in which, as I mentioned before, with certain notable exceptions, the existence of certain principles, rights, safeguards and expectations were somehow taken for granted.

Protecting the Rule of Law in all its aspects is, of course, a matter for the entire society, and yet it is striking how little we teach our children about it as they prepare to become active citizens.

You have just been brought into the Rule of Law Educational Program we developed together with the Danish Bar and Law Society.

Along this line, I was indeed deeply impressed last June when I participated in a training program, co-organized by the IBA and the Salzburg Global Institute, gathering young lawyers coming from leading law firms worldwide and focusing on the Rule of Law and their perception of the same at this difficult juncture.

Although during the presentations, discussions and drafting sessions I perceived a feeling of **pessimism about the future of the Rule of Law**, the final statement which was issued a couple of weeks ago is indeed a very powerful message to the entire legal profession.

“The rule of law is not sustained by courts, governments, or lawyers alone.

All members of society have a role to play in respecting, protecting, and promoting it in their communities and beyond.

*It depends on **citizens, institutions, communities, businesses, civil society, and public officials** who insist that rules be public, fairly applied, and capable of holding power to account.”*

This shared responsibility of the **entire society** is the message we our Association

wants to convey to all of you without any distinctions. **Only combining efforts, can the Rule of Law resurrect and survive.**

But let's move briefly to another topic which is having and will have significant impact on our young generations. **Artificial Intelligence and which is strictly related to the Rule of Law.**

The impact of Artificial Intelligence is expected to be vast, multi-faceted and difficult to predict, **affecting all of human society.** Its incredibly fast development and adoption is outpacing regulation and the adjustment of laws.

For this reason, one of the defining priorities of our two-year term was to **ensure that the IBA would not simply observe these developments** but would actively help shaping the legal and policy debate around them.

Building on the important work initiated by our Association more than five years ago, including the publication of *The Future is Now: Artificial Intelligence and the Legal Profession*.

The AI Institute is aimed at creating a **permanent institutional platform** through which the Association will examine the ethical and societal implications of artificial intelligence, while supporting the profession in navigating this rapidly evolving environment.

We decided to go for an Institute (the merit for selecting the word "Institute" is of our Vice President Jorg Menzer), also with great assistance from Tim Hughes and Mark Ellis, to stress the expected long-term commitment of the Association and its Senior Leadership in this field.

Jaime and I regard the AI Institute as an important part of our shared legacy. Its creation reflects our conviction that the IBA must look beyond the immediate challenges facing the profession and help anticipating those that lie ahead.

The Institute will provide a means for the IBA to bring together its unparalleled international network and expertise, foster informed debate, develop practical guidance and contribute to the development of legal frameworks that ensure this technological progress remains consistent with the rule of law and fundamental rights.

The AI Institute begun its work with **consultations with major stakeholders including international bodies, governments, civil society, the corporate world, "Big Tech", and recognized experts within the legal profession** – for example, lawyers working in AI governance, compliance and risk, AI-related litigation, disputes and liability or sector-specific work involving AI deployment (financial services, healthcare, employment and beyond).

From these consultations the Institute has identified its first priorities and expected contributions.

The EU's AI Act, the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on AI, and the erratic evolving US federal policy illustrate the breadth of approaches already in place, with further divergence likely as other jurisdictions develop their own frameworks.

The recent speech Mario Draghi, former ECB President, delivered at the Swiss National Bank in a lecture in memory of Karl Brunner is very illuminating. **Europe accounts for 5% of the AI capacity currently needed and utilized.**

Europe should invest 100 billion euro to promote AI projects so as to remain part of the game and not simply paying the price in terms of interest rates increase of an economic growth that is benefitting only the US without being able to influence the regulation process.

The IBA is uniquely well placed, given its widely recognized standing and the international reach of its membership, to provide inputs and support growth and regulatory coherence.

When meeting big players like Microsoft, Meta, Google and Anthropic, to check whether there was room in this arena for **a player like the IBA**, we got an unexpected positive feedback which has reinforced our commitment to this new project.

On the other hand, we were told: *“There are very few key-players in this market. At the moment, they are all respecting unwritten rules but, if one of them decides to go in a different direction, the others will not be able to prevent them from doing so.”*

It is probably fair to say that big players still self-regulate. This is what our keynote speaker at the Annual Conference in Miami in 2022, Zack Kaas, used to define as *“alignment”*. For how long this alignment will continue, unfortunately, we do not know.

The real risk lies in **agents, often machines** capable of working on their own, taking decisions and commitments, and creating obligations. Regulating AI agents is the most immediate challenge for our society and the first priority of our AI Institute.

This will be the focus of the ring-fenced session on Monday morning at 9.30, to which I already referred to you, where we will have Mr. Dr Nicklas Lundblad former Head of government policies for Google as Keynote speaker together with our new AI Institute Director, Farzana Dudhwala.

Rule of Law and Artificial Intelligence remain the first two priorities of our presidencies, but there are other, no less important subjects included in the list of the areas on which we have been and we will remain active.

Taking responsibility as gatekeepers, advocating diversity and inclusion, promoting access to justice are indispensable tools to achieve our goal: protecting and reinstating the Rule of Law

And the Statement issued by the Law Fellows at the summer's Salzburg Global Rule of Law Seminar I referred to is the perfect synthesis of what I have tried to convey to you this evening.

This firm commitment of the young generation to the Rule of Law is **the positive message I want to share with you** this evening and encourage you to keep in mind

this coming week!

Enjoy Copenhagen and, I trust, a very successful conference.