No one expects their phone calls to be monitored or their emails to be read by government spies. Yet, if Edward Snowden's revelations over the last seven months have shown anything, it is that we need to accept the fact that they very well might be. For most people, these activities seem to be no reason for great alarm, but for lawyers, this new-found truth basically means that the work they do for their clients has been seriously undermined. We therefore call for immediate steps by all national governments of the EU, the European Commission, as well as the US government, to restore the rule of law.

A lawyer’s client needs confidentiality – in all European countries this is a right, and correctly so. Lawyers are as a result bound by professional secrecy and cannot break the trust given to them by their clients. Only if those clients are certain that they are free to speak their minds in confidence, and that whatever they say to their lawyer will not be used against them, can they exercise their right to legal counsel effectively - a right recognized by the European courts as necessary for a fair trial and the proper administration of justice. This basic safeguard against the abuse of power by states has now disappeared. If the NSA, the GCHQ and other intelligence agencies have the power to listen into any phone call, monitor virtually all email, and even hack into the computer systems of lawyers without detection, the rule of law cannot be said to exist.

This may sound to many people like an exaggeration, but there are very real situations in which anyone might one day need this fundamental protection. The line between a dictatorship and a democracy has always been defined by the safeguards built into our legal system, of which one is lawyer-client confidentiality. Many people stand wrongly accused every year. The only thing between them and a criminal conviction is all too often their lawyer. This system has worked well over the years. But if we continue on this path of mass surveillance, we can expect more and more innocent people to be deprived of a fair trial. This must be prevented.

And this issue does not end with criminal law. Client confidentiality is equally important in civil courts. Businesses defending themselves against wrongdoing; ordinary people who need a court to help sort out their troubles: many people at some point in their lives rely on the work of competent lawyers and on their total confidentiality. This can no longer be guaranteed. One of the basic ingredients of our free society has been damaged.

As President of the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE) and as a Member of the European Parliament for the Greens, we stand united on this issue. Our governments need to roll back mass surveillance and implement a security organization redesign, so that innocent people no longer become collateral damage. We demand more transparency, meaningful oversight and new protections from foreign surveillance. And all of this is needed sooner rather than later.