European Committee on Legal Co-operation (CDCJ)

Strengthening Judicial Independence: Career and training of judges

Launch conference of the report on the first thematic review
under the Sofia Action Plan

Strasbourg, 17 November 2026

CLOSING SESSION

16.15 p.m. to 17.00 p.m

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Distinguished speakers, dear colleagues,

As we come to the end of this conference, I would like to thank all our speakers and participants for the rich and thought-provoking discussions we had today.

Our discussions have highlighted both the progress achieved in strengthening judicial independence across Europe and the challenges that remain. They have also reminded us that judicial independence is a principle that must be continuously protected, reinforced especially in a fast-changing world.

I want to focus on the key messages that have emerged from today's exchanges:

- Judicial independence must be safeguarded throughout the entire career of a judge

As we have heard from judge Sessa, the guarantees of independence cannot be limited to the moment of appointment. They are equally important for promotion, professional evaluation, transfers, disciplinary proceedings and security of tenure. Decisions on career advancements should never become instruments of pressure or influence, whether from outside or within the judiciary.

This requires clear legal frameworks, transparent procedures, independent decision-making bodies and effective safeguards against arbitrary decisions, and these safeguards do not exist to protect the personal interests of judges. Their ultimate purpose is to protect the rights of individuals and to ensure public confidence in justice.

- Merit-based selection and appointment remain fundamental guarantees of an independent and competent judiciary

The discussions today have also confirmed that, although member states have different judicial traditions and appointment systems, there are common principles that should guide all of them. Judge Giovagnoli has reminded us that selection and promotion must be based on objective, transparent and clearly defined criteria, including professional competence, experience and

integrity. The Venice Commission's standards remind us that there is not a single institutional model suitable for every country. What matters is that the procedures effectively prevent undue political influence, arbitrary discretion and risks of corporatism.

It is therefore essential not only to establish appropriate rules, but also to ensure that they are implemented, applied consistently and decisions can be properly scrutinised.

- Gender equality is an integral part of an independent, credible and representative judiciary

As highlighted in the thematic review and today's discussions, significant progress has been achieved in improving women's representation in the judiciary. However, inequalities persist, particularly in senior judicial positions and leadership roles.

Achieving gender balance is not simply a question of numbers. It strengthens the legitimacy of the judiciary, enhances public confidence and ensures equal opportunities for women to participate in judicial decision-making at all levels.

Judge Jelić has also identified several areas requiring further attention: transparent and gender-sensitive appointment and promotion procedures, institutional support to overcome structural barriers, and equal access to career development opportunities.

Equally important is the need for cultural change, supported by systematic training to address gender stereotypes and unconscious bias. We all concur that genuine gender equality requires not only fair rules, but also an institutional culture that enables women and men to advance on equal terms throughout their judicial careers.

- Judicial training must be recognised as a continuous and essential safeguard of judicial independence

The thematic review notes that member states have developed different approaches to initial and in-service judicial training. While these differences reflect national traditions, there is a shared understanding that judges need opportunities to maintain and develop their professional competences throughout their careers. And training should go beyond developing legal knowledge. It must equip judges with the skills to apply European human rights standards in practice, uphold ethical principles and respond to emerging challenges.

Ms Telbis has spoken about the Council of Europe's HELP Programme provides an excellent example of how European standards can be translated into practical judicial training. Through accessible, flexible and nationally adapted courses, HELP supports both initial and continuous training, addressing issues ranging from judicial ethics and integrity to gender equality, non-discrimination, digital justice and artificial intelligence. The growing integration of HELP courses into national judicial training programmes also demonstrates the importance of co-operation and sharing good practices across member states.

Ultimately, judicial training is not simply a matter of professional development. It is a means of strengthening judicial competence, independence and public confidence in justice.

- Technology should support the administration of justice, it should never replace independent judicial judgment

Professor Sorabji spoke about a very important issue today, that is on everybody’s mind - artificial intelligence and emerging technological challenges. AI is already transforming the environment in which judges work. It presents opportunities to improve efficiency and access to information, but

also creates new risks. Just to name a few, as we have heard today that judges increasingly need to identify AI-generated content or fabricated inaccuracies, manipulated evidence or potential biases embedded in algorithmic systems.

Judges must also be equipped to recognise the risks of excessive reliance on AI-generated solutions and to ensure that human judicial reasoning and responsibility remain at the centre of decision-making.

Judicial training must be continuously developed, covering not only legal questions but also issues such as digital literacy, data protection, confidentiality and the responsible use of new technologies.

I think we can all agree that these challenges concern not only individual judges but also the institutional independence of the judiciary, and judicial authorities must have the knowledge and capacity to participate meaningfully in decisions about the introduction, governance and oversight of AI tools to be used by the judiciary.

- Finally, there can be no genuine judicial independence without ethics and integrity, they are inseparable.

Judge Vatikalou has noted that as GRECO's Fourth Evaluation Round has demonstrated, judicial independence depends not only on institutional safeguards but also on the individual conduct and integrity of judges. Public confidence requires that justice not only be done, but also be seen to be done. GRECO's findings underline the importance of clear ethical standards, regular practical training and access to confidential ethical advice. Good practices across member states include dilemma-based training, peer-to-peer exchanges and independent advisory mechanisms that help judges identify and manage conflicts of interest and other ethical risks.

Such training is particularly important in responding to emerging challenges, including artificial intelligence, social media and new forms of pressure on judicial impartiality. Judicial training therefore strengthens independence at three levels: individual independence, by equipping judges to recognise and resist improper influence; institutional independence, by reinforcing a shared culture of integrity; and public confidence, by demonstrating that judges exercise their responsibilities impartially and ethically.

Dear colleagues, my overarching conclusion from today's discussions is that legal safeguards are indispensable, but they must be accompanied by a genuine institutional commitment to independence, transparent and fair career systems, continued professional development and a strong culture of integrity.

The thematic review offers a basis for further reflection and exchange. And todays discuss also concur with its findings – there is a progress, but there are also persistent challenges and areas where continued co-operation and the sharing of good practices/experiences can make a difference.

Ten years after the adoption of the Sofia Action Plan, its objectives remain as relevant as ever. Indeed, in a context of growing pressures on democratic institutions and rapid technological change, the need to protect independent and impartial justice is perhaps more pressing than ever.

I would like once again to thank our distinguished speakers and all participants for their engagement and contributions.

Thank you very much.