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

SESSION II: JUDICIAL TRAINING

16.15 p.m. to 17.00 p.m

Ethics and integrity in judicial training

Panagiota Vatikalou

Member of the Bureau of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO); Judge, Court of Appeal of Athens

Ethics and Integrity of Judges: The Role of Training

Exploring the role of judicial training in strengthening independence, resilience, and judges' capacity to respond to emerging challenges.

Distinguished participants,

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to address you today on a subject that lies at the very heart of the rule of law: The role of judicial training on judges' integrity and on their independence.

Judicial independence is often discussed in terms of constitutional guarantees, appointment procedures, and protection against political interference. These safeguards are indispensable. However, judicial independence also has an "internal" dimension. A judge's behaviour and conduct must reinforce the public's faith in the integrity of the judiciary. Justice must not only be done; it must also be seen to be done[1].

GRECO's Fourth Evaluation Round, launched in 2012, examined the prevention of corruption among members of parliament, judges, and prosecutors. GRECO's findings provide comprehensive

[1] Judge Lord Hewart in the case of *Rex v. Sussex Justices,* [1924] 1 KB 256.

information on the independence of judges in member states, including issues related to the rules of conduct, training on these rules as an essential element to strengthen their integrity and the role of self-governing bodies in these areas.

In this speech, I would like to address three issues: What have we learned from GRECO's Fourth Evaluation Round? What good practices can we identify across Council of Europe member states? And how can judicial training prepare judges to respond to emerging challenges while reinforcing their independence?

1. What GRECO has taught us

In its early findings from the Fourth Evaluation Round, GRECO repeatedly noted that many member states lacked explicit, tailored, and easily accessible codes of conduct for judges. As a result, judges were left to navigate ethical grey areas relying solely on oaths or general laws. The findings highlighted a fundamental point: judicial integrity cannot be secured through legislation alone.

Almost all member states received a recommendation to establish a clear set of professional conduct standards or a code, accompanied by explanatory comments and/or practical examples, covering all judges (Slovenia, Denmark, Spain, and Greece), or to update existing codes of conduct and provide regular guidance on their provisions (Germany, Latvia, Finland, the Slovak Republic, Sweden, and Georgia).

In some member states, an ethics council is responsible for overseeing compliance with the code of conduct (Portugal). Alleged breaches of the code of conduct may lead to disciplinary proceedings (San Marino and Andorra).

In Sweden the "Good Judicial Practice" a document of guidance on ethical questions, together with dedicated instructors for "The Role of Judges", is also a welcome development [Sweden RC-IV(2015)9E para33]. In France the Compendium of the Judiciary's Ethical Obligations is in force since June 2010 [France Eval.IV(Rep)(2013)3E para 100].

2. Good practices: from ethical principles to professional habits

What can we learn from practices across member states?

Let me highlight three approaches.

The first good practice is that Member States integrated ethics into both initial and continuing judicial training.

Forty (40) member states have specialized training institutions, and almost all these institutions offer both initial and in-service training. Most member states provide mandatory initial training for judges. Initial training is optional only in Cyprus, Finland, Malta, Serbia, Sweden, and Switzerland.

At the same time, mandatory training should be carefully designed and justified, with due respect for judicial independence and the principle that continuing training should normally be voluntary, except

where specific requirements are warranted[2]. In Greece, in-service training, which includes judicial ethics, is mandatory by law [2nd Addendum to the 2nd RC4(2023)19 para.41].

The second good practice is the use of practical, context-based learning.

Ethics training cannot be a box-ticking exercise completed upon initial appointment. Nor should it consist merely of "a few ad hoc training events on judges' ethics"; rather, regular, annual training programmes should be established. Since the Fourth Evaluation Round, member states have substantially changed how training is delivered, moving away from abstract lectures towards practical, dilemma-based learning through interactive workshops. Knowing the relevant rules is essential. Judges must also be able to recognise risks, identify appropriate responses, understand when disclosure or recusal may be necessary, and act consistently with the applicable standards.

In Estonia, the training model includes group work and discussion of practical cases [Estonia RC-IV(2015)1E para.67], while instructional videos and online learning are used in Finland [Finland 2ndRC4(2017)11 para 15-16] and Ukraine [Ukraine RC4(2019)28 para 121].

Monthly Court Web broadcasts such as "Ethics After 5 PM: Understanding How the Judicial Codes of Conduct Apply to Your Personal Life", and "The Ethics of Social Media and Politics" are available for USA judges [USA RC4(2019)10 para 68]. In the United Kingdom, a pioneering module entitled "Judicial Conduct and Ethics" uses professional actors to present in-court and out-of-court scenarios designed to raise ethical and conduct-related dilemmas [UK RC4(2014)3E, para. 57]. A systematic, and concrete approach to promoting integrity and preventing corruption within the judiciary has been adopted in Italy. Its measures are organised around four pillars: (i) dissemination of case law on disciplinary and deontological provisions; (ii) peer-to-peer discussion and mentoring schemes; (iii) practical training on ethics and corruption prevention, and (iv) centralisation and supervision of the experience gathered [Italy RC-IV(2018)13 para 54-55].

In Spain, the Commission on Judicial Ethics issues reports and opinions on several challenging emerging areas, including the use of social networks, impartiality and neutrality, mediation and incompatibility, conflicts of interest, and nepotism [Spain-Second Interim RC4(2019)12 para 47].

The third good practice concerns the relationship between ethical training and independence of judges, especially via confidential counselling.

Perhaps the most innovative development identified in GRECO's Fourth Evaluation Round is the establishment of confidential counselling services and independent advisory bodies for judges. GRECO considers that confidential counselling should preferably be provided by a body separate from any disciplinary mechanisms [Interim RC4(2021)15, Armenia, para. 54]. In GRECO's view, it is particularly important that counselling must be strictly confidential and effectively available to judges across all courts [Interim RC4(2020)7, Austria, para. 45]. As a result we have the appointment:

a) of a confidential advisor by the High Judicial Council in Serbia [Serbia Second Interim RC4(2022)6 para 40].

b) an expert counselling body of experienced judges in Azerbaijan and Moldova [Azerbaijan-RC4(2016)11, para. 49-51] [Moldova RC-4(2018)10 para 69].

[2] https://rm.coe.int/general-activity-report-2023-greco-060424-gbr-web/1680afd7f2 (p.10)

c) a panel of 20 retired judges in Ireland [Ireland—Addendum to the 2nd RC(2023)18 para 34].

All these are available to advise judges confidentially on conflicts of interest and other integrity-related matters.

3. How Judicial training strengthens judicial independence

Why is judicial training important?

First of all, training helps judges deal with emerging challenges:

a) of digitalization and artificial intelligence

b) of social media comments

Training should help judges understand professional boundaries online, protect confidential information, communicate appropriately with the media and ensure that judges can continue to decide cases impartially, without intimidation or undue influence from public pressure.

c) of corruption risks and conflict of interests.

Judges must be prepared to recognise not only obvious forms of corruption, but also situations that may compromise—or reasonably appear to compromise—their impartiality.

These examples lead to a broader conclusion: judicial training strengthens independence through at least three interconnected mechanisms.

First, it strengthens individual independence. Judges who understand ethical standards and have practised responding to difficult situations are better equipped to resist pressure, recognise conflicts of interest, and justify their decisions on the basis of law and evidence.

Second, it strengthens institutional independence. Training fosters a shared professional understanding of ethical standards, while making the judiciary more resilient to external interference.

Third, it strengthens public confidence. Citizens must have confidence not only that judges are independent, but also that they exercise their duties impartially, competently, and responsibly.

Conclusion

GRECO's Fourth Evaluation Round has helped us recognize both progress and continuing vulnerabilities in protecting judicial integrity.

Ultimately, ethics and integrity are not supplementary subjects in judicial education; they are essential conditions for the exercise of judicial power.

In the last two General Activity Reports of 2024 and 2025, GRECO remained concerned by persistent risks to judicial independence[3].

Judicial independence is truly tested when powerful interests are at stake. The real test of our commitment to judicial independence is not what we say when it is threatened, but what we are prepared to do to defend it.

As an answer to that, an independent judge certainly has the courage to decide in accordance with the law, the integrity to recognise and manage ethical risks, and the professional competence to respond to new challenges without surrendering independent judgment.

Judicial training is one of the most effective ways to support these choices.

Thank you.

Panagiota VATIKALOU

Judge, Athens Court of Appeal, GREECE

GRECO Bureau member

[3] https://www.coe.int/en/web/greco/documents/general-activity-reports