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

OPENING SESSION

14.30 p.m. to 14.50 p.m

Jose Igreja Matos (Portugal)

President of the CCJE

Madam Chair of the European Committee on Legal Co-operation,

Madam Vice-President of the European Court of Human Rights,

Mister President of the European Commission on the Efficiency of Justice

Madam Special Rapporteur, my esteemed friend,

Mister Head of the Human Rights and Justice Standard Department, dear Daniele

Distinguished speakers and participants,

It is an honour to address you on behalf of the Consultative Council of European Judges.

The CDCJ plays an important role for judicial independence not only as the committee that prepared Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)12 of the Committee of Ministers on the independence of judges but also for being responsible for the follow-up to the Sofia Action Plan, as was underlined right now by the chair of the CDCJ. As to the report being launched today on the career and training of judges, the CCJE members were honoured to contribute to it by sharing their practical knowledge and experience as serving judges from across Europe.

This report on judicial independence comes as we face very challenging times. In a world in crisis, with war on our continent, democratic backsliding and disinformation on the rise, the rule of law is under intense pressure the scale of which we have not known for decades. Attacks on judicial independence have reached unprecedented levels. Judges are targeted for their decisions, judicial councils are reshaped under various pretexts, however with political interests

behind the scenes. The media, including social media, use increasingly sharp, sometimes insulting, words criticising judges, often exposing their private and family lives.

Judicial independence is under threat.

The rule of law is not open to discussion. It is not a political preference, to be revisited at every election. It constitutes one of the cornerstones of our democracies, consolidated over decades by the Council of Europe and by the constitutional traditions of our member States. It is one of the three pillars of the organisation, alongside democracy and human rights, which must guide all Member States.

This is why the New Democratic Pact for Europe launched by the Secretary General matters a lot. The Secretary General has called it a reset: a common answer to backsliding, disinformation, impunity and authoritarianism, built on the principles agreed at the Reykjavík Summit. Among those principles stands an independent, impartial and effective judiciary. Let me say it plainly: there is no democratic pact without independent judges.

In this context, ten years after its adoption, the Sofia Action Plan remains the Council of Europe's compass for judicial independence and impartiality. The first thematic review under the Action Plan, adopted by the CDCJ in June 2026, now moves the cursor to the very heart of the judicial profession: the career and the training of judges.

The review shows some real progress: more formal appointment systems, greater weight for objective criteria, stronger self-governing bodies. But it is equally clear about what remains: safeguards applied unevenly across the career, judicial irremovability and transfers exposed, evaluation that can weaken independence, and training that differs widely from state to state.

One message I wish to underline is that independence is not secured only through appointment and security of tenure. It must be protected at every step of a judge's career, from selection to promotion, from evaluation to their very last day in court.

For the CCJE, these findings are familiar ground, because they echo the recommendations which have featured in our Opinions for almost thirty years.

The review also looks ahead to emerging challenges, and artificial intelligence is probably the first among them. The CCJE will address this directly in its upcoming Opinion No. 29 on artificial intelligence in the judicial process.

I therefore wish to state clearly, on behalf of the CCJE, that we fully support the findings and the guidelines of this thematic review. They are highly consistent and based on all relevant European standards. We acknowledge with gratitude the work of the CDCJ, of its secretariat, and of all those who have contributed to it. And we stand ready to help turning these guidelines into practice. The CCJE remains firmly at your side.