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

Signe Öhman (Sweden)

Chair of the CDCJ

Focus: Framing the conference within the Sofia Action Plan and highlighting its contribution to strengthening judicial independence and to the New Democratic Pact.

Dear President of the Consultative Council of European Judges,

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

Dear President of the European Commission on the Efficiency of Justice,

Dear Head of the Human Rights and Justice Standards Department, dear Daniele,

Dear UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers

Distinguished speakers,

Dear participants,

It gives me great pleasure as Chair of the CDCJ to open this conference which presents substantial work of this committee in support of judicial independence.

Most of you are already familiar with the CDCJ. For more than sixty years, this intergovernmental committee has contributed to the adoption of over 200 legal instruments in a wide range of areas. Most recently, it was responsible for the drafting of the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer, acknowledging the role to the legal profession in our justice systems. Indeed, the proper functioning of justice in Europe has always been at the heart of CDCJ's work. Of course, the committee has also long defended judicial independence as a requisite to any judicial system in states governed by the rule of law.

Back in 2010, the CDCJ prepared a Committee of Ministers Recommendation dealing with judges' independence, efficiency and responsibilities. The 2016 Council of Europe Plan of Action on Strengthening the Independence and Impartiality of Judges, known as the Sofia Action Plan, built on it, and the CDCJ was therefore entrusted with its follow-up. The Plan sets out a series of expected outcomes: access to an independent and impartial court, institutional and individual safeguards against interference by the executive and legislative branches, and, we were just reminded few minutes ago, restoring citizens' trust in justice. On this last point, allow me to make one observation. Criticising judicial decisions is legitimate and protected by freedom of expression. But, seeking to discredit the judiciary as an institution is something completely different. Guarantees of independence are essential to maintain the trust of citizens in our justice systems. Making these guarantees visible is also part of restoring confidence in justice, and it is one of the purposes of the work we will speak about today.

The CDCJ has approached its follow-up in two stages. In 2022, it published a general review of the implementation of the Sofia Action Plan. Not only did that review take stock of the measures adopted by member states to support judicial independence, but it also shed light on emerging negative trends. It showed that many member states are working to better protect judges and prosecutors from internal and external influence, but that further progress is needed, particularly to bring legal frameworks into line with practice.

As a second step, the CDCJ decided to examine specific themes of the Sofia Action Plan in greater detail. We chose to begin with the career and training of judges for a simple reason: whilst judges' independence may be secured at their appointment, it can be eroded later on, through opaque promotion, transfer or reappointment procedures, or through training that does not consolidate independence throughout their career.

At its June plenary meeting, the CDCJ adopted its report on this first thematic review. Based on responses from our member states, it offers a comparative overview of how judges are selected, appointed and promoted; how long they serve; how they may be removed, transferred or reappointed; and which safeguards protect these processes from undue influence, threat or interference. It also maps out the institutions responsible for judicial training and how ethics are built into it. Alongside this overview, the report provides guidance to member states, drawing on the relevant standards of different European bodies, including several represented today.

This report is only one step in the process and the CDCJ will keep under review the implementation of the Sofia Action Plan, exploring new aspects relevant to the independence of the judiciary.

Before closing, I wish to thank the member states that contributed to this report, and the CDCJ is really grateful to the Consultative Council of European Judges for the insights of its members based on their experience as serving judges.

I am looking forward to the contributions of the distinguished speakers of the programme today as well as welcome the engagement of participants here in the room and online.

Thank you.