Strasbourg, 10 April 2025

EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR THE EFFICIENCY OF JUSTICE (CEPEJ)

CEPEJ NETWORK OF PILOT COURTS

KEY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE WORKSHOPS

18th plenary meeting

France, Strasbourg, 10 April 2025

The aim of this meeting was three-fold:

1. **inform pilot courts about the CEPEJ tools recently adopted**

2. **gather feedback from pilot courts on the ongoing work of the CEPEJ**

3. **exchange of experiences among pilot courts on their practices**

INTRODUCTION

The 18th plenary meeting of the CEPEJ Network of Pilot Courts was held in Strasbourg on 10 April 2025, with 36 pilot courts from Member and Observer States in attendance. Participants took part in plenary sessions as well as four thematic workshops. The workshop topics were selected based on themes relevant to the work of the CEPEJ. Pilot courts were invited to share their practices and specific needs, which will support the CEPEJ in developing its various tools.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

WORKSHOP 1: *How best to ensure work-life balance in the judiciary?*

1. Participants acknowledged that an increasing number of Member States recognise work-life balance as a key element in ensuring both the effectiveness and sustainability of the justice system, as well as the attractiveness of the judges' profession. Various measures have been already implemented across countries to help judges successfully manage their professional duties alongside family and personal responsibilities. Nevertheless, the necessity to raise awareness within the judiciary was highlighted, as work-life balance is often overlooked or given minimal consideration due to legal culture and constant mental engagement, was highlighted.

2. Effectively managing workload is a crucial aspect of the efforts to ensure the work-life balance within the judiciary. Though, it was mentioned that tackling the issue of work-life balance in the judiciary should not be done through the prism of heavy workload only. Different tools and measures have been adopted to ensure reasonable caseload for judges. One of the measures is the introduction of assistants to judges that help handle cases more efficiently, reducing the pressure on judges.

3. Judges benefit from the option to work from home and attend meetings online, allowing for greater flexibility in managing their professional obligations and family responsibilities. However, this could also contribute to creating a feeling of isolation of judges and even bigger workload.

4. Psychological support and regular psychological checkups also help to support judicial well-being. These are complemented by a range of supportive practices, including access to mental health services, promotion of physical activity, opportunities for peer dialogue, and structured return-to-work policies. All these measures help build resilience and foster long-term mental health within the judiciary.

WORKSHOP 2: *What are the essentials for effective court management?*

1. Participants agreed that court management is key for the efficient functioning of courts and deserves increased attention from the judiciary and other relevant stakeholders. Court management policies and strategies at the national and court level play a crucial role in setting strategic objectives, enabling long-term planning, and driving change by adapting to new circumstances and newly developed tools for courts.

2. While closely linked, it is important to distinguish between court management and case management. Case management tools can significantly support evidence-based court management. Case management systems and dashboards can be important resources for court presidents and court managers in helping them to guide court operations toward greater efficiency. Considering continuously increasing workloads in courts, participants advocated for the need to introduce workload measurement tools that may help to ensure more equal allocation of cases and resources.

3. Judicial systems vary across countries, and court management models reflect these differences. In many judicial systems, judges and court staff operate under separate authorities. Additionally, court management must take into account the independence of the judiciary, which may add a layer of complexity to how courts are managed.

4. Beyond technical tools, successful court management also depends on soft skills, particularly those related to people management. Regular meetings were highlighted as a key aspect of internal coordination, requiring strong diplomatic and persuasive competences and skills that may not always come naturally to court presidents with purely judicial backgrounds. Therefore, targeted training in leadership and management is essential for court presidents as well as for court managers.

WORKSHOP 3: *What are the skills and competences for the digital workplace?*

1. Participants agreed that there is a need to enhance digital skills and competencies among judges. While specific requirements vary depending on specific digital tools used and the degree of integration in daily judicial work, there is a consensus that digital literacy is becoming increasingly important in the judicial systems. A guiding model curriculum could be helpful, also including proposals for methodology.

2. Promoting a culture that values digital competences and skills is essential for the successful integration of new technologies in the judiciary. Digital skills should be perceived as relevant to judicial work and should be introduced in accessible, engaging ways that encourage their use in practice. The level of support judges receive in the use of digital tools influences the extent of required digital skills.

3. Training is a critical factor in acquiring digital competences. It should be continuous and on-demand while tailored to the tools judges are expected to use in their duties. This includes building practical competencies in conducting and participating in remote hearings. Judges should be supported in such a way that they can focus on their core judicial functions, while technical tasks, such as troubleshooting, should be handled by dedicated IT personnel.

4. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to positively change the perception on the need for digital skills of the judiciary, creating real incentives for judges to improve their digital skills. Its integration could provide significant added value not only for administrative staff and legal assistants, who have been the primary focus of digitalisation so far, but also for judges themselves. Several Member States have already implemented successful practices in developing judicial digital literacy. These should be shared and promoted to support their use in judicial systems.

WORKSHOP 4: *What are the steps to ensure access to justice?*

1. Participants acknowledged that progress has been made in improving access to justice, with digitalisation playing a crucial role in enhancing its accessibility. Many States have implemented tools such as digital applications, websites, online help desks and platforms to facilitate public access to justice. However, the digital divide remains a challenge, with less digitally agile people still relying on paper-based processes and in-person support.

2. Financial considerations also play an important role in ensuring access to justice and may have an effect on the principle of equality before the law. To address this issue, some States have introduced measures, such as reduced fees for civil procedures, exemptions from court fees for low-income or vulnerable individuals, and the provision of publicly funded legal aid.

3. Physical accessibility is another essential component of ensuring equal access to justice, especially for individuals with disabilities or mobility challenges. Some States have taken steps such as providing designated parking near court buildings and signs to facilitate orientation within court premises. The establishment of centralised service desks also enhances user accessibility by offering a single point of contact for information and services.