

The president of the Judicial Council of the Slovak Republic, Lenka Praženková, on 5 November 2019 met with a representative of the European Commission from the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. Representatives of the European Commission regularly visit the Slovak Republic to meet with representatives of the Slovak justice system as part of the European Semester. The European Semester is the European Union's annual cycle of economic policy coordination. This includes also looking at the efficiency, quality and independence of national justice systems. Discussions with representatives of the national justice system, including the Judicial Council of the Slovak Republic form an important part of the European Commission's analysis and this is reflected in the annual Country Reports for Slovakia, usually published at the end of February of each year. The findings may also lead to proposals by the European Commission for so-called country specific recommendations to address specific policy challenges. The effective functioning of justice systems and the quality of public institutions are among the important aspects to be taken into account for the sound economic development. For this reason, the Judicial Council of the Slovak Republic considers the annual exchange and discussion with a representative of the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers as particularly relevant to inform about key developments in the Slovak justice system. The EC representative in particular took note of the judgment of the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic of 30 January 2019, which ruled that the provisions on security clearance for judges and candidate judges introduced in 2014 were unconstitutional. The EC representative also noted that this decision had taken into account earlier concerns by the European Commission and that it in its reasoning took a broad comparative European perspective. The president of the Judicial Council during the discussion also informed about legislative changes and relevant developments in the Slovak justice system. One key development mentioned are the recent legislative changes which introduce the new institute of the so-called - flying judge. The president also informed on the situation of judicial trainees as this institute has been underutilized for a long time, despite the fact that it has significant importance in training the candidates for the post of judge.

The second major topic in the debate was the participation of the Judicial Council in the working groups that have been set up following a functional review of the Slovak justice system by the Council of Europe's Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) in 2017. The president of the Judicial Council reported on the tasks of the different working groups, the areas they deal with and their focus at taking the necessary measures to make the justice system work better. These include the fair and efficient allocation of resources for the judiciary, the setting of rules for the specialization of courts and judges with regard to the family law agenda, the setting of the court map and the setting of timeframes for deciding cases. The EC representative positively noted that the ongoing work is conducted with the active participation of the Judicial Council, as well as the judges themselves, whose views and experience form an integral part of the reform process. The discussion also focused on the issue of widely reported integrity concerns of a number of Slovak judges as well as the questions raised by reported meetings between judges, attorneys and private individuals during various professional or social events. It is common that such meetings take place and

the EC representative also explained that the Commission is regularly meeting stakeholders from national justice systems in different fora and events, including social events. The president of the Judicial Council also drew attention to the fact that Slovakia is one of the smaller countries in Europe and that interaction between professions in judicial practice is important and should not be excluded as such events offer an opportunity where practitioners can express themselves and discuss professional topics and share their knowledge. As regards the current challenges, the EC representative explained that it would appear that the Slovak safeguards at national level to deal with the reported integrity concerns are functioning, but stressed the importance of also focusing efforts on training all judges, the judiciary as well as professional judicial staff on the ethical principles and ethical limits of the conduct of judges. The President of the Judicial Council agreed to always support efforts and projects to educate judges on ethical principles, as she believes that such instruments can prevent behaviour that could be contrary to the Code of Ethics. At the end of the debate, the President of the Judicial Council declared her firm and categorical position against any form of corruption in the judiciary. She also stressed that this is primarily the failure of individuals and so the professional and lay public should not condemn the entire judicial system.