

MEDEL's 40th Anniversary Conference - 3rd June 2025, Palace of Europe, Strasbourg

Opening Speech by Dr Jonathan Attard, Minister for Justice and Reform of the Construction Sector

**Mr President of the European Court of Human Rights,
Excellencies,
Esteemed Colleagues,
Members of the Judiciary, Prosecutors, and Legal
Professionals,
Distinguished guests,**

It is a privilege and an honour to address you today on the occasion of MEDEL's 40th anniversary, a remarkable milestone for an organisation.

A network that, since 1985, has united judges and prosecutors across borders in a common cause, that has stood as a guardian of democracy, a defender of the rule of law, and a voice for judicial independence across Europe.

Allow me, first and foremost, to extend Malta's sincere appreciation for MEDEL's work over the past four decades.

Since its establishment MEDEL has become a vital platform for fostering dialogue, solidarity, and a shared commitment to democratic values.

Your advocacy, particularly during difficult times in our shared European history, has reminded us all that judicial independence is not just a principle on paper, but it is a living cornerstone of free societies.

Over the years, MEDEL has given a voice to judges and prosecutors who have faced threats, intimidation, or political interference.

This was done with courage and clarity, always guided by the values of tolerance.

In my capacity as Minister for Justice, on behalf of the Government and the people of Malta, I thank you and extend my heartfelt congratulations to MEDEL for four decades of leadership.

Let us not ignore the scale of today's challenge.

Across our continent, we are witnessing democratic backsliding.

The judiciary is being politicised; the rule of law is being undermined; and citizens are losing faith – not only in the fairness of systems, but in democracy itself.

This crisis of trust is perhaps our greatest challenge.

Rebuilding it cannot be done with words alone. It requires strong institutions; independent courts transparent governance; and above all, it requires the courage to stand up, as MEDEL has done, when those principles are under threat.

In Malta, we've taken this challenge seriously.

We are firmly convinced that an independent, impartial and effective judiciary is the bedrock of democracy.

It is the guarantee of equality before the law, the guardian of rights and liberties and the ultimate arbiter of justice.

In recent years, Malta has undertaken significant reforms to strengthen our justice system, driven by both internal reflection and constructive engagement with European institutions.

Following the recommendations of the Venice Commission in 2018 and 2020, Malta launched an ambitious programme of Constitutional and institutional reforms.

These reforms were rooted in a genuine desire to improve transparency, increase accountability and ensure the full independence of the judiciary.

In 2019, we established the Court Services Agency, an important step that has further supported the judicial system in Malta.

This Agency was created with the purpose of assisting the Bench, and today it stands as a crucial administrative backbone to the courts.

From courtroom management to digitisation initiatives, the Agency provides comprehensive support, allowing members of the judiciary to focus solely on their Constitutional role.

Between 2023 to date, the number of administrative staff within the Agency grew by more than 15%, reaching over 570 individuals. Around 100 of them are legal professionals assisting the judiciary as Court Attorneys and Judicial Assistants.

Premises management has also been prioritised as have victim-support facilities.

In parallel, there has been a drastic increase in the number of members of the judiciary.

Over the past five years, we have seen a steady annual rise, from 43 members in 2020 to 59 this year. An overall increase of over 37 percent.

In fact, just weeks ago, two newly appointed Magistrates have been sworn in, and in the previous year, four new Magistrates were assigned specifically to undertake magisterial inquiries, supported by dedicated resources and premises.

These structural improvements have been matched by reforms in remuneration.

Recently, we introduced a new agreement for the judiciary to significantly improve the compensation and conditions of service for Judges and Magistrates, [as well as for the Attorney General, and the State Advocate].

This reflects our belief that proper remuneration is a necessary element of judicial independence and integrity.

One of the most important steps we took was reforming the process of judicial appointments. The Judicial Appointments Committee has been strengthened and made more independent, ensuring merit-based selection.

Furthermore, the role of the President of Malta in appointing judges was redefined to reinforce separation of powers.

As for the appointment of the Chief Justice, we are currently discussing in Parliament a constitutional amendment that will

formally require consultations with the current Chief Justice before any new appointment is made.

This is a reflection of our continued efforts to enhance judicial independence and transparency.

Importantly, as part of our reform efforts we maintain regular and constructive dialogue with the Judiciary Association, the independent body representing Judges and Magistrates in Malta.

This ongoing engagement ensures that reforms are informed by the experience and perspectives of the judiciary itself.

Finally, let me take a moment to acknowledge the recently announced package of constitutional amendments, tabled in Parliament, aimed at further improving efficiency and strengthening standards in the justice sector.

These amendments include, among others introducing a Commissioner for Standards of the Judiciary.

The Commissioner will be appointed by the Commission for the Administration of Justice, which is chaired by the President of the Republic and the majority of members are members of the judiciary.

Thus, the Commissioner will be an independent body, with no control from the Government or influence from any politician.

These proposals are the product of long-standing consultations with the Judiciary, which resulted in an agreement on the principles in relation to disciplinary and ethics standards.

This is a testament to our government's belief that judicial independence must go hand-in-hand with transparency, accountability, and public trust.

Our reform process has not taken place in isolation.

Malta has worked closely with various European institutions, including the Venice Commission, the European Commission [and GRECO] whose guidance and oversight have been invaluable.

We remain committed to open dialogue [and peer review] as essential tools to build better justice systems.

As we look forward, Malta stands fully in support of judicial integrity and ongoing training, particularly in digital justice, human rights and the rule of law.

MEDEL's role in promoting cross-border dialogue and peer support remains invaluable in these efforts.

Let us continue to work together, to stand firm in the face of threats to judicial independence, be it from within or beyond our borders, and to reaffirm our collective commitment to the values that bind us as Europeans.

Once again, I congratulate MEDEL on this remarkable 40-year journey. May your voice continue to inspire, to challenge and to defend democracy.

Thank you.