

Key points

- The [European Convention on Human Rights](#) (ECHR) was first signed by fourteen mainly western European governments in November 1950; it now covers over 820 million people in 47 countries across the continent
- The convention and the system behind it – including the [European Court of Human Rights](#) (ECtHR) in Strasbourg – have evolved over time, notably following the rapid growth in the Council of Europe’s membership after 1989
- Significant reforms have been agreed at a series of high-level conferences in [Interlaken](#) (in 2010), [Izmir](#) (2011) and [Brighton](#) (2012); a further high-level conference in Brussels on 26-27th March 2015 will continue this process
- Changes agreed so far have streamlined the court’s work and drastically cut the number of pending cases; aspects of the legal relationship between the ECtHR and the national authorities have also been clarified
- In Brussels, the main focus will be on the shared responsibility for implementing the convention, notably by making sure that ECtHR judgments are quickly and effectively put into practice

Questions and Answers

Why reform?

The ECHR system is widely regarded as the most advanced and effective system of international human rights protection anywhere in the world.

Its strength lies in the fact that any individual can bring a case before the ECtHR, the court’s judgments are legally binding and they are backed up by a political system in which Council of Europe member states work together to make sure that judgments are put into practice.

This has led to important progress in human rights protection across the continent.

The convention and the court have adapted to changing circumstances over time, including the rapid growth in the Council of Europe’s membership after 1989 which meant that millions more people were able to bring cases before the court.

The most recent reforms have focused on improving the efficiency of the court and clarifying aspects of the relationship between the ECHR and national legal systems.

These have led to significant improvements, but there is still work to be done.

What has been achieved so far?

A number of recent measures – such as allowing a single judge or a committee of three judges to take decisions on relatively simple or repetitive cases – have helped to reduce the number of cases pending at the court from over 150,000 in 2011 to less than 70,000 by 1 January 2015, following several years of rapid growth.

There have also been important changes to working methods within both the ECtHR itself and the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, which oversees the implementation of judgments, to improve efficiency.

Two new protocols to the convention were agreed at the Brighton conference in 2012. The first will help to clarify certain aspects of the legal relationship between the ECtHR and the member states and further to increase the court's efficiency; the second will enable the ECtHR to give advisory opinions to high-level national courts.

What remains to be done?

Despite recent progress, there are still a large number of cases pending at the ECtHR – and some 50% of those (around 35,000 applications) are repetitive cases raising issues which have already been considered by the court and which are likely to result in further judgments finding violations of the convention.

As well as ensuring that justice is done for the applicants, making sure that ECtHR judgments highlighting problems at national level are put into practice quickly and effectively reduces the need for repetitive applications to be made.

This would enable the court, and all those who are involved in making sure that its judgments are put into practice, to devote more attention to the most serious cases and those which raise new human rights issues.

Who is responsible for implementing judgments from the court?

Human rights are best protected at the national level. However, responsibility for implementing the ECHR system – and putting into practice the judgments from the Strasbourg court – is shared between the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, the ECtHR and the member states.

The Brussels conference is expected to result in a political commitment from the 47 Council of Europe member states to take measures to improve the execution of the court's judgments both in Strasbourg and at national level.

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