European Case Law Identifier (ECLI)

The European Case Law Identifier (ECLI) has been developed to facilitate the correct and unequivocal citation of judgments from European and national courts. A set of uniform metadata will help to improve search facilities for case law.

Before ECLI, it was difficult and time-consuming to find relevant case law. Take, for example, a case where a ruling of the Supreme Court of Member State A was known to be of interest for a specific legal debate. The case was registered in various national and cross-border case law databases, but in each database the ruling had a different identifier. All these identifiers – if known at all – had to be cited to enable readers of the citation to find the case in the database of their preference. Different citation rules and styles complicated the search. Moreover, users had to go to all the databases to find out whether this Supreme Court case was available – summarised, translated or annotated. With the ECLI system one search via one search interface using just one identifier will suffice to find all occurrences of the ruling in all participating national and cross-border databases.

Easy access to judicial decisions of other Member States is of growing importance in reinforcing the role of the national judge in applying and upholding EU law. Searching for, and citation of judgments from other Member States is seriously hampered by differences in national case law identification systems, citation rules and technical fields describing the characteristics of a judgment.

To overcome these differences and to facilitate easy access to - and citation of - national, foreign and European case law, the Council of the European Union invited Member States and EU institutions to introduce the European Case Law Identifier (ECLI) and a minimum set of uniform metadata for case law.

Main characteristics of ECLI

ECLI is a uniform identifier that has the same recognizable format for all Member States and EU courts. It is composed of five, mandatory, elements:

‘ECLI’: to identify the identifier as being a European Case Law Identifier;

the country code;

the code of the court that rendered the judgment;

the year the judgment was rendered;

an ordinal number, up to 25 alphanumeric characters, in a format that is decided upon by each Member State. Dots are allowed, but not other punctuation marks.

The elements are separated by a colon. A (non-existent) example of an ECLI could be:

ECLI:NL:HR:2009:384425, which could be decision 384425 of the Supreme Court (‘HR’) of the Netherlands (‘NL’) from the year 2009.

Metadata

To make it easier to understand and find case law, each document containing a judicial decision should have a set of metadata as described in this paragraph. These metadata should be described according to the standards set by the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative.

The Council Conclusions on ECLI give a description of the metadata that can be used.

ECLI coordinator

Every Member State using ECLI must appoint a governmental or judicial organisation as the national ECLI coordinator. The National ECLI coordinator is responsible for establishing the list of codes for the participating courts, the publication of the way the ordinal number is made up, and all other information that is relevant for the functioning of the ECLI system. The ECLI co-ordinator for the EU is the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Each Member State decides whether, and to what extent - it will use the ECLI system, e.g. if it will apply it retroactively to historical records or the number of courts participating, for example only at supreme court level, all courts, etc.

European and international dimension

By clicking on the EU and international flags available at the right hand side, you will find information on implementation of ECLI by the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Patent Office.

In accordance with the Council conclusions the European Commission has developed a multi-lingual ECLI search engine which allows users to find judicial decisions from the databases of those case law publishers who have implemented the ECLI standard and provided us with access to their data.

An ECLI resolver is also available at https://e-justice.europa.eu/ecli/ - any ECLI typed after this path will display the relevant ECLI metadata (if available). For example https://e-justice.europa.eu/ecli/ECLI:NL:HR:2016:764 would directly display the metadata of decision ECLI:NL:HR:2016:764.

Member State pages

On the Member State pages you can find information on:

whether the Member State has already introduced ECLI and metadata;

if not: whether it is planning to do so;

if yes: information on court codes, formatting rules, metadata and so on;

the national ECLI coordinator.

Please select the relevant country's flag to obtain detailed national information.

Last update: 17/11/2021

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