



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

The Grand Chamber

When does the Grand Chamber hear a case?

The initiation of proceedings before the Grand Chamber takes two different forms: referral and relinquishment.

After a Chamber judgment has been delivered, the parties may request referral of the case to the Grand Chamber and such requests are accepted on an exceptional basis. A panel of judges of the Grand Chamber decides whether or not the case should be referred to the Grand Chamber for fresh consideration.

Cases are also sent to the Grand Chamber when relinquished by a Chamber, although this is also exceptional. The Chamber to which a case is assigned can relinquish it to the Grand Chamber if the case raises a serious question affecting the interpretation of the Convention or if there is a risk of inconsistency with a previous judgment of the Court.

How are Chambers and Grand Chambers formed?

A Chamber is composed of the President of the Section to which the case was assigned, the "national judge" (the judge elected in respect of the State against which the application was lodged) and five other judges designated by the Section President in rotation.

The Grand Chamber is made up of the Court's President and Vice-Presidents, the Section Presidents and the national judge, together with other judges selected by drawing of lots. When it hears a case on referral, it does not include any judges who previously sat in the Chamber which first examined the case.

What are the different stages of the proceedings before the Court?

There are two main stages in the consideration of cases brought before the Court: the admissibility stage and the merits stage (i.e. the examination of the complaints). The processing of an application also goes through different phases.

A Committee finding that an application is not admissible will declare the case inadmissible, by a unanimous vote, and its decision cannot be appealed against. Otherwise a Chamber will give notice of the case to the respondent Government for their observations. Written observations are submitted by both parties. The Court then decides if it is appropriate to hold a public hearing in the case, but this remains exceptional in relation to the number of applications examined.

Ultimately, the Chamber delivers a judgment that will become final only after the expiry of a three-month period during which the applicant or Government may request the referral of the case to the Grand Chamber for fresh consideration.

How long do proceedings before the Court usually last?

It is impossible to indicate the length of proceedings before the Court.

The Court endeavours to deal with cases within three years after they are brought, but the examination of some cases can take longer and some can be processed more rapidly.

The length of the proceedings before the Court obviously varies depending on the case, the formation to which it is assigned, the diligence of the parties in providing the Court with information and many other factors, such as the holding of a hearing or referral to the Grand Chamber.

Some applications may be classified as urgent and handled on a priority basis, especially in cases where the applicant is alleged to be facing an imminent threat of physical harm.

Do judges sit in cases concerning their own country?

The composition of the bench always includes the “national judge”, whether it is a Chamber of 7 judges or a Grand Chamber of 17.

Can judgments be appealed against?

Whilst inadmissibility decisions by Committees and Grand Chamber judgments are final and cannot be appealed against, the parties have three months following the delivery of a Chamber judgment to request referral of the case to the Grand Chamber for fresh consideration.

Requests for referral are examined by a panel of judges which decides whether or not referral is appropriate.

Does the Court hold public hearings?

The Court basically has a written procedure but occasionally decides to hold public hearings in specific cases. Hearings take place in the Human Rights Building in Strasbourg. They are public unless otherwise decided by the President of the Chamber or Grand Chamber, as the case may be.

The press and the public are thus usually authorised to attend; they just need to show their press or identity card at the reception. All hearings are filmed and broadcast on the Court’s website on the day itself, from 2.30 p.m. (local time).

 [The ECHR in 50 questions](#) (complete document)