IAOLE 2026 · BERLIN CONFERENCE

THE LEGAL PROFESSIONS IN TIMES OF RULE OF LAW AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

DATE
June 25–26, 2026

LOCATION
Berlin, Germany

VENUE
Deutscher Anwaltverein
German Bar Association
Littenstraße 11 · 10179 Berlin

ORGANIZED BY
IAOLE
International Association
of Legal Ethics

iaole2026.jura.uni-koeln.de

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

The Legal Professions in Times of Rule of Law and Democratic Backsliding

Recent years have seen significant changes in the relationship between legal professions and political institutions across Europe, the Americas, and other regions. Lawyers, judges, and legal academics increasingly work in environments where judicial independence, professional autonomy, and the proper role of law in democratic governance have become contested. These developments present important challenges for understanding how legal institutions function under varying degrees of political pressure and what resources legal professionals can draw upon to maintain their constitutional roles.

This two-day conference brings together practitioners, scholars, and professional leaders to examine these developments and their implications for the legal profession. The programme begins by surveying contemporary challenges facing lawyers, including both threats from non-state actors and governmental measures affecting professional practice. It examines the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer and professional advocacy mechanisms such as intervention letters, and it explores how regulatory frameworks and ethical rules shape professional capacity to maintain independence — considering admission standards, training requirements, and disciplinary systems, while remaining attentive to constitutional protections of speech and occupational freedom.

Education features prominently in the discussions. Sessions address public legal education initiatives aimed at sustaining civic understanding of legal institutions and principles and examine whether and how legal education might evolve to better prepare future professionals for practice in changing political environments. The conference analyses experiences of legal mobilization across various jurisdictions, assessing strategies, institutional capacities, and practical constraints, and considers the role and potential of bar associations and law societies in maintaining professional standards and supporting members facing difficult circumstances.

Throughout, the conference emphasizes practical analysis and comparative perspectives. Sessions bring together legal practitioners with direct experience navigating complex professional environments, bar association leaders addressing contemporary governance questions, scholars providing comparative and empirical analysis, and representatives of professional organizations working on institutional responses.

Programme at a Glance

Day One — Thursday, 25 June 2026

08:30–09:00	*Registration*
09:00–09:15	**Welcome**
09:15–10:30	**Session 1 · Mapping the Threats: Endangered Lawyers and Institutional Responses**
10:30–10:50	*Coffee break*
10:50–12:20	**Session 2 · Legal Mobilization to Save Democracy and the Rule of Law in the United States**
12:20–13:15	*Light Lunch*
13:15–14:45	**Session 3 · Legal Mobilizations to Save Democracy and the Rule of Law — Lessons Learned**
14:45–15:15	*Coffee break*
15:15–16:45	**Session 4 · Legal Services Regulation, Constitutional Guarantees and a Resilient Legal Profession**
16:45–17:00	*Coffee Break*
17:00–17:45	**Session 5 · Public Legal Education and the Rule of Law**
18:00	*Drinks reception, hosted by NOvA*

Day Two — Friday, 26 June 2026

08:30–09:00	*Registration*
09:00–10:30	**Session 6 · Law Firms and the Rule of Law in Europe and the US**
10:30–10:50	*Coffee break*
10:50–12:30	**Session 7 · The Resilient Institutional Lawyer: Government and In-House Lawyers**
12:30–13:15	*Light Lunch*
13:15–14:45	**Session 8 · The Role of Bars and Law Societies**
14:45–15:00	*Coffee break*
15:00–16:30	**Session 9 · The Role of Law Schools in Fostering Resilient Democracies**
16:30–17:00	**Session 10: Closing Keynote**

DAY ONE

Thursday, 25 June 2026

08:30–09:00 Registration

09:00–09:15 Welcome

Matthias Kilian, President of the International Association of Legal Ethics

09:15–10:30 Session 1

Mapping the Threats — Endangered Lawyers and Institutional Responses

The opening session sets the stage for the conference by examining a range of contemporary challenges confronting legal professionals across different jurisdictions. Participants will explore how political developments, social change, and institutional transformations affect the position of lawyers, judges, and professional organizations, and how these dynamics shape the conditions under which the legal profession operates.

The discussion will draw on recent reports and comparative research documenting increased pressure on lawyers, including harassment, threats, and political interference with professional independence. At the same time, the session will examine responses developed by professional organizations, international bodies, and civil society groups, including new regulatory instruments, advocacy strategies, and forms of professional solidarity.

Rather than advancing a single explanatory framework, the session invites participants to consider multiple perspectives on the sources, forms, and consequences of these developments. By situating later sessions within this broader empirical and institutional context, the opening discussion provides a shared foundation for exploring how legal professions navigate periods of political and democratic stress.

KEYNOTE LECTURES

"Legal Professionals Under Pressure: A Global Survey of Threats and Institutional Responses"
Stefan von Raumer, President, German Bar Association

"Democracy in Legal Jeopardy: What Attacks on the American Bar Teach about Professional Resistance"
Scott Cummings, UCLA School of Law

10:30 – 10:50 Coffee break

10:50–12:20 Session 2

Legal Mobilization to Save Democracy and the Rule of Law in the United States

The United States offers a particularly complex setting in which to examine contemporary pressures on legal institutions. Recent developments — including challenges to judicial authority, tensions within professional organizations, and contested uses of legal processes — have prompted renewed debate about the capacity of the legal profession to respond effectively to political and institutional strain. This session brings together different perspectives on how American lawyers, courts, and professional bodies are navigating these challenges.

The discussion will explore forms of legal mobilization ranging from litigation and professional advocacy to internal resistance within government and private institutions. Participants will reflect on the opportunities and constraints created by the U.S. constitutional structure, federalism, professional regulation, and legal market dynamics, as well as the ways in which polarization and economic pressures shape professional choices.

Rather than assuming any single model of success or failure, the session invites examination of practical experience: which strategies appear to have been effective in particular contexts, which have proven difficult to sustain, and why. The session will also consider the longer-term implications for professional independence and institutional resilience, and what the American experience may suggest for other legal systems facing related forms of democratic stress.

PANELISTS

— **Renee Knake Jefferson**, Professor of Law, Doherty Chair in Legal Ethics, University of Houston
— **Skye Perryman**, President and CEO, Democracy Forward, Washington
— **Stacey Young**, Founder and Director, Justice Connection, Washington
— **Wallace B. Jefferson**, President, American Law Institute and former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas

MODERATOR

— **Scott Cummings**, Robert Henigson Professor of Legal Ethics, UCLA School of Law

12:20–13:15 Light Lunch

13:15–14:45 Session 3

Legal Mobilizations to Save Democracy and the Rule of Law — Lessons Learned

Countries like Poland, Hungary and Israel provide important case studies for examining how democratic institutions come under pressure and how legal professionals and civil society actors have responded. In each country, governments have introduced far-reaching changes to judicial and legal institutions, while lawyers, judges, and professional organizations have sought in different ways to defend legal autonomy and constitutional principles. This session invites participants to explore these experiences and to reflect on what they may reveal about both the possibilities and limits of legal mobilization.

Poland, Hungary and Israel illustrate distinct trajectories of institutional change and professional response. In Poland, judicial reforms since 2015 have generated sustained engagement by judges, lawyers, and civil society, including domestic and European litigation. In Hungary, constitutional transformation has proceeded more gradually but deeply, raising questions about the timing and effectiveness of legal resistance.

The session will consider a range of questions: under what conditions does strategic litigation contribute to preserving judicial independence, and when does it risk legitimizing compromised processes? How do legal actors navigate the tension between working within existing legal frameworks and recognizing their possible erosion? What role have international and regional mechanisms played, and where have their limits become apparent?

Attention will also be given to the professional and personal consequences of legal resistance. Participants will discuss the risks faced by lawyers and judges, the role of professional organizations and international networks in providing support, and the resources — legal, institutional, and human — that appear most important in sustaining such efforts over time.

PANELISTS

— **Sophie de Graaf**, Executive Director, Lawyers for Lawyers, The Netherlands
— **Herman van Harten**, Judges for Judges, The Netherlands
— **Limor Zer-Gutman**, Weiner Center for Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility, Israel
— **Vera Alpár**, Associate Professor, Metropolitan University of Budapest, Hungary
— **Bartosz Marcinkowski**, Partner, DZP, Warsaw, Poland

MODERATOR

— **Iris van Domselaar**, Professor of Legal Philosophy and Legal Ethics, University of Amsterdam

14:45–15:15 Coffee break

15:15–16:45 Session 4

The Role of Legal Services Regulation and Constitutional Guarantees in Guaranteeing a Resilient Legal Profession

This session examines how constitutional guarantees and professional regulation shape the capacity of the legal profession to function under conditions of political and institutional strain. The focus is on what parliaments can accomplish through their legislative powers by establishing statutory protections for lawyers who resist unlawful directives, creating institutional safeguards against political interference with professional judgment, and defining the profession's role in ways that emphasize accountability to law rather than to government.

The session explores how legislative frameworks governing ethical duties, admission standards and professional structures can reinforce professional independence while addressing contemporary challenges. Participants will consider when statutory frameworks provide meaningful protection and when they prove inadequate to address emerging threats, including situations where governments seek to instrumentalize the profession for anti-democratic purposes. The European Convention on the Protection of Lawyers offers important guidance here, establishing standards for professional independence, freedom from improper interference, and protection against harassment or intimidation.

The session will also consider how constitutional principles undergird these legislative efforts. A robust legal framework recognizes that an independent profession is essential to the rule of law and creates mechanisms that shield lawyers from governmental overreach while enabling them to fulfill their constitutional role as guardians of legal rights and constraints on power.

PANELISTS

— **Fiona McLeay**, Commissioner, Victorian Legal Services Board, Melbourne, Australia
— **Margaret Tarkington**, Samuel R. Rosen Professor of Law, Indiana University, Indianapolis
— **Steven Vaughan**, Dean, Faculty of Law, Monash University, Melbourne
— **Dirk Uwer**, Partner, Hengeler Mueller, Düsseldorf/London; Member, Legal Ethics Committee, German Bar Association

MODERATOR

— **Matthias Kilian**, Hans Soldan Professor for Legal Ethics, University of Cologne

16:45–17:00 Coffee Break

17:00–17:45 Session 5

Public Legal Education and the Rule of Law

This session turns to the relationship between legal institutions and the wider public. It explores how public legal education initiatives seek to promote understanding of the rule of law, legal processes, and the role of legal institutions in democratic societies.

We examine a range of approaches, including formal education, civil society programmes, bar association initiatives, and media-based outreach. The session will consider both the potential impact and the practical challenges of such efforts, particularly in polarized political environments where trust in legal institutions may be contested.

Attention will also be given to the limits of public legal education. How far can such initiatives realistically influence public attitudes and behaviour? What kinds of partnerships and institutional support appear most promising? How is the relationship between legal knowledge, civic culture, and democratic resilience?

KEYNOTE

— **Cord Brügmann**, Director, Stiftung Forum Recht (German federal foundation for law and the rule of law), Karlsruhe/Leipzig

18:00–19:00 Reception

Hosted by the Nederlandse Orde van Advocaten (NoVA)

Welcome Address

— **Jeroen Soeteman**, President of the Nederlandse Orde van Advocaten

Some brief remarks about Hans Litten

— **Cord Brügmann**, Director, Stiftung Forum Recht (German federal foundation for law and the rule of law), Karlsruhe/Leipzig

DAY TWO
Friday, 26 June 2026

08:30–09:00 Registration

09:00–10:30 Session 6

Law Firms and the Rule of Law in Europe and the US

This session explores how law firms — particularly large commercial practices serving corporate and governmental clients — navigate professional responsibilities when rule of law principles are contested, and what structural features of legal practice shape these responses. The discussion examines law firms as organizational actors whose business models, client relationships, and internal cultures create specific incentives and constraints. When powerful clients — whether corporations or governments — seek legal services that may facilitate erosion of democratic norms, how do firms balance professional obligations against commercial interests?

The session will explore concrete dilemmas facing law firms: representing governments in litigation that challenges judicial independence; advising on transactions or policies that exploit legal ambiguities for anti-democratic ends; responding to client demands for legal opinions that provide cover for questionable conduct; and managing internal dissent when associates or partners object to particular engagements. Participants will consider whether existing ethical frameworks adequately address these organizational dynamics, or whether they remain rooted in individualist conceptions of lawyer responsibility that fail to capture how decisions are actually made within firms.

The session will examine how firms in various jurisdictions have responded to political pressure — through public statements, client selection policies, or pro bono commitments — and what these responses reveal about the profession's relationship to democracy. The discussion will also consider potential reforms: could changes to professional regulation, client acceptance protocols, or internal governance structures better position firms to defend rule of law principles?

PANELISTS

— **Rachel Cohen**, Lowell & Associates, Chicago (Lawyer of the Year 2025)
— **Richard Moorhead OBE**, Professor of Law and Professional Ethics, University of Exeter
— **Mitt Regan**, McDevitt Professor of Jurisprudence, Georgetown University, Washington
— **Neyah van der Aa**, Partner, Van Doorne, Amsterdam

MODERATOR

— **David Luban**, Distinguished University Professor, Georgetown University, Washington

10:30–10:50 Coffee break

10:50–12:30 **Session 7**

The Resilient Institutional Lawyer in Europe and the US: Challenges Faced by Government and In-House Lawyers

Lawyers in corporations, government agencies, and public institutions occupy a precarious position. Unlike private practitioners who can decline clients, institutional lawyers work within hierarchies where their professional judgment may conflict with employer directives or organizational interests. When democratic norms erode, these lawyers face acute dilemmas: their insider positions give them knowledge of wrongdoing, yet their roles constrain their capacity to resist or expose it.

Recent mass dismissals and resignations of government lawyers illustrate the stakes. Those who remain face impossible choices: comply with directives they consider unlawful, engage in internal resistance risking their careers, or resign and abandon their posts. Corporate counsel face parallel pressures when employers demand legal cover for politically motivated practices or expect lawyers to facilitate rather than constrain governmental overreach.

The session examines whether professional ethics adequately address institutional practice. Traditional models assume arm's-length attorney-client relationships, but institutional lawyers are employees whose livelihoods depend on organizational loyalty. When does zealous representation become complicity in undermining rule of law? Professional codes address whistleblowing ambiguously, emphasizing confidentiality while creating narrow exceptions for preventing serious harm. Are these frameworks sufficient? The session also considers collective responses. Can lawyer associations provide support for members facing ethical dilemmas? What protections exist — or should exist — against retaliation for refusing unlawful directives? Can institutional practice be structured to better support professional independence, through ethics officers, protection for dissent, or cultures valuing legal constraint over political expedience?

KEYNOTE

— **Sandra Palmen**, Minister for Benefits Redress, The Hague, Netherlands

PANELISTS

— **Erica Newland**, Counsel, Separation of Powers Project, Protect Democracy, Washington
— **Anne Marie King**, Visiting Fellow, Exeter College and Faculty of Law, Oxford University, Former Senior Ethics Attorney Advisor, US Department of the Interior, Washington DC / Oxford
— **Max Groening**, Director, German Bar Association, Berlin
— **Marco Langendoen**, Head of Legal Affairs, Ministry of the Interior & Kingdom Relations, The Hague

MODERATOR

— **Niels Graaf**, Professor of Constitutional Law, University of Amsterdam

12:30–13:15 Light Lunch

13:15–14:45 Session 8

The Role of Bars and Law Societies Amidst Rule of Law and Democracy Backsliding in Europe and the United States

Bar associations and law societies occupy a distinctive position as self-governing institutions of the legal profession. This session explores how these organizations have responded in different jurisdictions to political and institutional pressures on the rule of law, and what these experiences suggest about both the potential and the limits of professional self-governance.

Participants will examine the strategies bars and law societies have adopted, ranging from public statements and advocacy to regulatory and disciplinary interventions, as well as quieter forms of engagement with governmental actors. The session will consider how internal diversity within the profession, economic dependencies, statutory frameworks, and political context shape what such organizations are able or willing to do.

The discussion also invites reflection on broader questions of institutional legitimacy and authority. When do bars and law societies speak convincingly for the profession as a whole? How do they navigate deep internal disagreements while seeking to defend shared professional values? And how do these organizations respond when they themselves become the target of political pressure or structural reform?

KEYNOTE

— **Jeroen Soeteman**, President, Nederlandse Orde van Advocaten (Netherlands Bar)

PANELISTS

— **Lauren Stiller Rikleen**, Lawyers Defending American Democracy, Former President, Boston Bar Association

— **Richard Moorhead OBE**, Professor of Law and Professional Ethics, University of Exeter

— **Dirk Uwer**, Partner, Hengeler Mueller, Düsseldorf/London; Member, Legal Ethics Committee, German Bar Association

MODERATOR

— **Jan Broekhuizen**, Partner, Kennedy Van der Laan, Amsterdam

14:45–15:00 Coffee break

15:00–16:30 Session 9

The Role of Law Schools in Fostering Resilient Democracies and Safeguarding the Rule of Law

This session focuses on the place of legal education in shaping professional identity and institutional culture at a time of increasing political and legal uncertainty. Law schools influence how future lawyers understand professional responsibility, institutional loyalty, and the relationship between law and democratic governance.

Speakers will explore how legal education addresses these questions in practice, including through curriculum design, pedagogical methods, and the broader academic environment. The discussion will consider whether existing models of legal education remain adequate for contemporary challenges, or whether they require adaptation in light of changing political conditions and professional expectations.

The session will also reflect on the position of law schools themselves as institutions that may face external pressures concerning funding, accreditation, governance, and academic freedom. Comparative perspectives will help illuminate how different educational systems navigate these constraints and what this means for the longer-term development of the legal profession.

PANELISTS

— **Iris van Domselaar**, Professor of Legal Philosophy and Legal Ethics, University of Amsterdam
— **Karen Nokes**, Lecturer in Law, UCL Faculty of Laws, London
— **Sonia Mittal**, Clinical Lecturer in Law, Yale Law School, New Haven *(tbc)*
— **Lauren Robel**, Association of American Law Schools (AALS), Washington
— **Mateusz Stępień**, Vice-Dean for Teaching, Faculty of Law, Jagiellonian University, Cracow

MODERATOR

— **Steven Vaughan**, Dean, Faculty of Law, Monash University, Melbourne

16:30–17:00 Session 10

Lawyers as Trustees of the Rule of Law

The closing keynote reflects on the themes developed throughout the conference from the perspective of legal ethics. Drawing on theory and practice, the address will consider how ethical frameworks help lawyers navigate professional responsibility in periods of institutional uncertainty and political pressure. The lecture aims to synthesize insights from the preceding discussions and to identify open questions and directions for future inquiry and professional reflection.

KEYNOTE

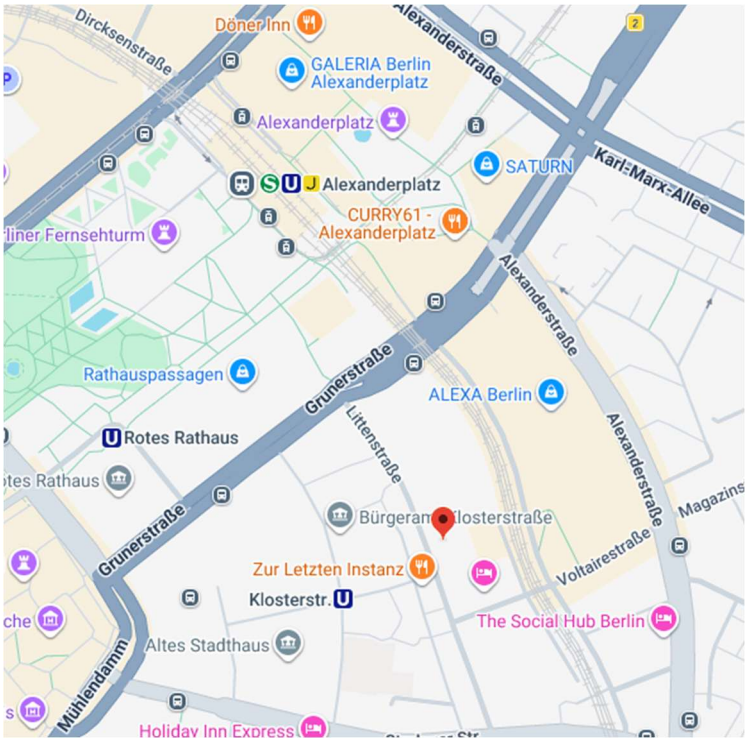
— **David Luban**, Distinguished University Professor, Georgetown University Law Center, Washington

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Conference Venue

Deutscher Anwaltverein (German Bar Association), Littenstraße 11, 10179 Berlin.

The building is located in the „Mitte“ district, just a short distance from the major transport hub Alexanderplatz.



Getting there by public transport

- U-Bahn (subway): Take line U2 to Klosterstraße; from there it is a 2-minute walk (approx. 180 m) via Littenstraße.
- S-Bahn / regional train: Arrive at Alexanderplatz station (also served by subway lines and trams); from there it is a 7–10 minute walk via Grunerstraße/B1, turning into Littenstraße past the historic court building.

About the Venue — Hans Litten

The conference takes place in a building and street bearing the name of Hans Litten. A young German lawyer in his twenties, Litten became an icon of legal resistance against rising Nazism in the early 1930s. He fearlessly represented opponents of the Nazi movement at important political trials, most famously subpoenaing Adolf Hitler himself as a witness in 1931 and subjecting him to a withering cross-examination that exposed the violent nature of the Nazi programme. For this courage, Litten paid the ultimate price: arrested immediately after Hitler came to power in 1933, he endured five years of brutal concentration camp imprisonment before his death in 1938 at the age of 34.

Litten's legacy reminds us that lawyers can choose resistance even when the costs are devastating, and that legal advocacy — conducted with skill, courage, and moral clarity — can expose authoritarian movements even when it cannot stop them. His story also embodies a darker truth: that legal resistance alone proved insufficient against determined authoritarianism, and that the broader failure of legal institutions and the legal profession to defend democracy enabled the catastrophe that followed.

As we gather in this place, we honour Litten's memory not merely through commemoration but by confronting the urgent questions his life and death pose for our own time: What does it mean to defend the rule of law when legal systems themselves come under assault? What does the profession owe to democracy, and what price are lawyers prepared to pay? These questions will guide our work throughout the conference.

See also: https://www.hans-litten.de

Conference Committee

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