

Regulating Legal Ethics in Vietnam: Institutional Challenges, Normative Frameworks, and Reform Imperatives*

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[10.15408/jch.v13i3.46850](https://doi.org/10.15408/jch.v13i3.46850)

Abstract

This article analyzes Vietnam's regulatory mechanisms for legal ethics using institutional theory and comparative legal analysis. It explores how ethical standards can move beyond aspirational guidelines to become enforceable norms within a modern rule-of-law system. Applying a normative-analytical approach and case studies from Germany, the UK, the US, and Australia, the study identifies four core pillars of an effective mechanism: (i) ethical standards, (ii) independent supervisory institutions, (iii) transparent disciplinary procedures, and (iv) public accountability. Findings show Vietnam's framework remains fragmented, administratively dependent, and lacks independent oversight and public participation. Ethical codes are non-binding, while enforcement is internalized, compromising transparency and trust. The article proposes five reforms: interdisciplinary ethical codes, partial legal codification, independent ethics committees, public feedback mechanisms, and situational ethics education. Together, these aim to build a dynamic governance system supporting integrity and accountability in legal practice. This research contributes to debates on regulatory governance in transitional legal systems and offers insights for designing context-sensitive, enforceable ethical frameworks.

Keywords: Legal Ethics; Regulatory Governance, Disciplinary Systems, Institutional Accountability, Comparative Law

* Received: June 20, 2025, revised: July 23, 2025, accepted: July 29, 2025, published: December 30, 2025.

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A. INTRODUCTION

What are the consequences when a lawyer succumbs to external pressures and accepts a case contrary to professional conscience? How should the legal system respond when judges engage in misconduct outside the courtroom? Are existing codes of ethics in Vietnam's legal profession robust enough to safeguard integrity, or do they remain aspirational? Most critically, how can legal practitioners—entrusted with pursuing justice—uphold ethical standards in a rapidly transforming legal landscape?

This paper argues that these challenges reflect systemic issues within Vietnam's legal profession, particularly in ongoing judicial reforms and increasing international integration. While ethical codes exist, the absence of an effective regulatory mechanism renders them insufficient to influence actual professional conduct. This study conceptualizes a “regulatory mechanism for legal ethics” as a framework to operationalize ethical norms, ensuring they are not merely symbolic, but enforceable in practice. The analysis identifies four essential components of such a mechanism: (i) well-defined ethical standards, (ii) independent oversight bodies, (iii) transparent and consistent disciplinary procedures, and (iv) accountability mechanisms for the public. By examining the current institutional landscape in Vietnam, this article highlights structural bottlenecks and proposes actionable reforms aimed at fostering a more accountable, fair, and trusted legal profession.

Literature Review

The regulation of legal ethics has long been a critical focus in comparative legal scholarship, particularly in jurisdictions adhering to either Civil law or Common law traditions. Across systems, diverse institutional arrangements have developed to monitor and enforce ethical standards within the legal profession.

In Common law jurisdictions, notably the United Kingdom and the United States, self-regulation traditionally dominated, with bar associations and law societies serving as the primary entities for developing, implementing, and enforcing codes of ethics (Rhode, 2003; Hazard & Dondi, 2004). However, critiques of insularity and conflicts of interest led to reforms such as the establishment of the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) in England and Wales under the Legal Services Act 2007. The SRA represents a shift toward hybrid models that combine professional autonomy with external oversight and public accountability. In the United States, ethical codes such as the ABA Model Rules

of Professional Conduct are enforced by state supreme courts, ensuring legal validity and independence from professional associations.

Conversely, Civil law jurisdictions often adopt a more centralized approach. In Germany, the Federal Lawyers' Act (Bundesrechtsanwaltsordnung – BRAO) and the Professional Code of the Federal Bar Association (Berufsordnung für Rechtsanwälte – BORA) establish a dual system of statutory regulation and professional codes. Regional bar associations (Rechtsanwaltskammern) and disciplinary courts (Anwaltsgericht) operate with delegated authority, reflecting a balance between state oversight and professional self-regulation (Ahrens, 2017). In contrast, China exemplifies a highly centralized administrative model where ethical governance is directly controlled by the Ministry of Justice, with limited professional autonomy (Liu & Halliday, 2016).

Despite these comparative insights, literature on Vietnam's legal ethics regulatory framework remains sparse. Existing studies (Binh, 2018; Dinh & Cuong, 2022) focus on descriptive accounts of ethical codes or general calls for improved professional standards. Few studies engage critically with institutional design or the interaction between administrative legacy and ethical governance. There is a notable absence of empirical research analyzing how current ethical frameworks in Vietnam function, particularly regarding independence, enforcement, and public accountability.

This gap is significant, given Vietnam's ongoing judicial and legal reforms within the context of global integration. As Hazard and Dondi (2004) argue, ethical governance is most effective when embedded within broader institutional and cultural frameworks that enable transparency, independence, and societal participation. The present study seeks to address this lacuna by conceptualizing a regulatory mechanism for legal ethics in Vietnam that draws from comparative models and adapts them to local socio-political conditions.

By situating Vietnam's experience within international discourse, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of regulatory governance in transitional legal systems and highlights the challenges of developing enforceable, context-sensitive ethical frameworks.

Despite comparative insights, little attention has been paid to institutional design for legal ethics regulation in transitional systems like Vietnam. This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing a context-sensitive regulatory framework and proposing reform pathways grounded in comparative analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical paradigm of regulatory governance, which redefines regulation as an integrated system of standards, institutions, and processes designed to ensure compliance and accountability (Black, 2008; Baldwin et al., 2012). This perspective moves beyond traditional rule-making to emphasize the dynamic interactions between professional self-regulation, state oversight, and public participation. In legal ethics, regulatory governance offers a lens for analyzing how institutional design influences transparency, independence, and professional integrity (Rhode, 2004; Webb, 2016).

Complementing this, comparative institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996) provides an analytical framework for understanding how different legal systems—such as Germany’s hybrid model, the UK’s reformed oversight structure, and the US’s court-led approach—have developed diverse mechanisms for ethical regulation. This perspective highlights the importance of institutional fit and contextual adaptation when transplanting regulatory models across jurisdictions. Together, these theoretical perspectives underpin this study’s analysis of Vietnam’s fragmented legal ethics system. They guide the conceptualization of a regulatory mechanism based on four interrelated pillars: standard-setting, independent supervision, transparent disciplinary procedures, and accountability. This framework informs the assessment of institutional gaps and supports the design of reforms aligned with international best practices while being sensitive to Vietnam’s socio-legal context.

B. METHODS

This study employs a normative-analytical approach combined with comparative legal analysis to examine regulatory mechanisms for legal ethics in Vietnam. The normative dimension focuses on assessing the alignment of Vietnam’s current framework with international standards and best practices, while the comparative dimension provides a basis for identifying institutional models that balance professional autonomy and public accountability. Primary data sources include statutory instruments, ethical codes (e.g., Germany’s BRAO and BORA, the UK’s SRA Code, the US ABA Model Rules), and disciplinary case reports. Secondary data comprise peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and comparative studies on legal profession governance.

The comparative analysis focuses on five jurisdictions—Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and China. These jurisdictions

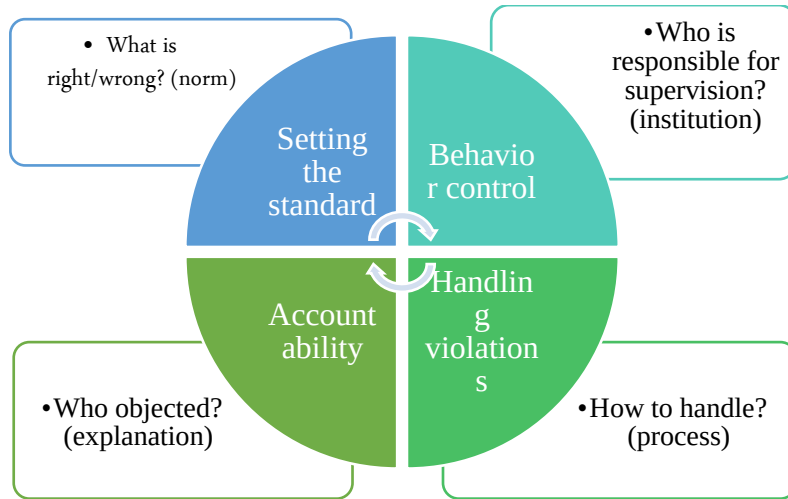
were selected for their diverse regulatory models, offering insights into varying balances between state control and professional self-regulation. Germany represents a hybrid model combining statutory regulation and professional oversight; the UK shows a reformed system with independent supervisory bodies; the US relies on court-enforced ethical rules; Australia integrates national and state-level governance; and China exemplifies centralized state control. This diversity allows for a nuanced analysis of potential institutional designs applicable to Vietnam. A key limitation of this study lies in its reliance on documentary analysis without empirical fieldwork, which constrains insights into practitioners' lived experiences. Future research could incorporate interviews and surveys to validate the conceptual framework.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Concept and elements of the mechanism for regulating legal ethics

In the legal profession increasingly being associated with social responsibility and the demand for greater transparency in judicial power, the concept of a “regulatory mechanism for legal ethics” has emerged as a pivotal component of the reform of modern legal institutions.

Such a mechanism ensures that legal practitioners adhere to ethical standards not merely out of self-awareness, but also because of the existence of an effective system of monitoring and sanctions. Structurally, a regulatory mechanism can function effectively only when it comprises four fundamental elements that align with the stages of the regulatory life cycle: (i) establishing standards, (ii) monitoring behavior, (iii) addressing violations, and (iv) ensuring accountability to society. The legal ethics regulatory mechanism transcends a mere collection of rules; it operates as a multi-layered system. These four elements correspond to the core questions underpinning any regulatory framework: (i) What is right or wrong? (standards); (ii) Who is responsible for oversight? (institutions); (iii) How are violations dealt with? (processes); and (iv) Who may challenge or demand accountability? (accountability). The concurrent presence and coordinated interaction of these four components gives rise to a substantive and effective system for regulating legal ethics.



First element: Standards governing professional ethics

It is impossible to regulate professional behavior effectively without clear standards delineating what is considered “right” and “wrong.” Globally, three principal models of ethical standards governing the legal profession have emerged, reflecting variations in legal systems and degrees of professional autonomy.

+ Centralized administrative model: This model, characterized by the dominance of legal regulations, is exemplified by China, where legal ethics are stringently controlled through the Law on Lawyers and subordinate legal instruments. In this system, professional associations function in a formal capacity and remain dependent on state oversight.

+ Model of near-absolute autonomy: At the opposite end of the spectrum, the United Kingdom prior to 2007 illustrates a model of near-complete autonomy, wherein the Bar Council and the Law Society independently issued and enforced ethical codes without direct state supervision.

+ Combined model: The most prevalent and arguably the most effective contemporary approach is the combined model, integrating statutory regulation with professional ethical codes that hold legal force.

Germany provides a notable example through the Federal Lawyers Act (Bundesrechtsanwaltsordnung – BRAO) and the Professional Code of the Federal Bar Association (Berufsordnung für Rechtsanwälte – BORA), both administered by the German Federal Bar Association (Bundesrechtsanwaltskammer – BRAK)

(Hazard & Dondi, 2004). This system is marked by highly organized professional oversight, where regional bar associations (Rechtsanwaltskammern)—mandatory for all practicing lawyers—possess legally recognized disciplinary powers (Rueschemeyer, 1973). This model exemplifies an “organic” integration of professional self-governance and public oversight to ensure integrity and justice in legal practice.

In the United States, ethics rules developed by state bar associations (Model Rules) are approved by state supreme courts, gaining the same legal force as statutory law (Rhode, 2003). Similarly, Australia employs a coordinated model where the Legal Profession Uniform Law (LPUL) operates alongside state-specific professional conduct rules (Ebejer, 2015). This arrangement balances flexibility for practitioners with rigorous institutional enforcement.

Post-2007, the United Kingdom keeps elements of self-regulation but places significant emphasis on independent oversight. Bodies such as the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) have become instrumental in ensuring objectivity and accountability. Notably, all disciplinary procedures are required to adhere to principles of transparency and independent peer review, fostering a culture of professional ethics that is both autonomous and responsive to societal expectations.

In contrast, India illustrates the challenges of conflated regulatory roles. The Bar Council of India concurrently manages professional development and ethical oversight, a dual mandate that, as Yashomati Ghosh observes, creates inherent conflicts of interest. This structural tension often renders disciplinary actions perfunctory and undermines their deterrent effect. (Ghosh, 2014)

Second element: supervisory institutions

Standards gain practical significance only when accompanied by institutions empowered to monitor and enforce compliance. A robust monitoring mechanism not only guarantees the application of professional ethics but also exerts external pressure to ensure that legal practitioners adhere to established norms. This element is critical in determining both the independence and effectiveness of ethical regulation.

In the United Kingdom, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) exemplifies an independent supervisory body tasked with regulating and overseeing the conduct of solicitors. Originally part of the Law Society, the SRA now functions autonomously, with statutory powers to license practitioners, monitor compliance, impose disciplinary measures, and publicize breaches. This

institutional arrangement reflects a deliberate separation between professional representation (Law Society) and regulatory oversight (SRA), enhancing objectivity and public trust.

Germany offers a distinctive model of legal ethics supervision through a multi-tiered structure. Serious ethical violations by lawyers are adjudicated not merely at the level of the Bar Association (Rechtsanwaltskammer) but within a specialized quasi-judicial body: the Lawyers' Disciplinary Court (Anwaltsgericht). Established under the Federal Lawyers Act (Bundesrechtsanwaltsordnung – BRAO), the Anwaltsgericht operates independently of both administrative authorities and bar associations. Its members—experienced lawyers appointed by state judicial authorities—serve as judges in disciplinary proceedings. In each federal state (Land), these courts are coordinated by the respective State Ministry of Justice but keep full autonomy in adjudication. Appeals from disciplinary decisions are heard by the Senat für Anwaltssachen within the Oberlandesgericht (Higher Regional Court), ensuring procedural safeguards and independent judicial review. (Rueschemeyer, 1973)

The United States and India maintain predominantly self-regulatory models. In the United States, state bar associations, and in India, the Bar Council, simultaneously represent professional interests and oversee ethical compliance. This dual role often gives rise to structural conflicts of interest, diminishing the credibility and effectiveness of ethical regulation. (Ghosh, 2014)

Third element: process for handling violations of professional standards

Beyond monitoring, an effective regulatory system must incorporate a transparent and fair process for identifying breaches of professional standards and imposing proportionate sanctions. This component is critical to ensuring that ethical standards transcend mere recommendations and function as enforceable rules shaping professional conduct. The procedural dimension directly reflects the fairness, legitimacy, and credibility of the regulatory framework.

Australia provides a model example of a modern, multi-tiered system for addressing ethical violations. Complaints are received and assessed by the independent Legal Services Commission, which starts impartial investigations. Subsequent adjudication is conducted by independent disciplinary tribunals, ensuring both objectivity and procedural integrity. (Ebejer, 2015)

In Germany, initial investigations of suspected ethical violations are undertaken by the Regional Bar Association (Rechtsanwaltskammer). Where misconduct is deemed severe, cases are escalated to the Lawyers' Disciplinary Court (Anwaltsgericht), a specialized body that operates independently of both

bar associations and administrative authorities. The *Anwaltsgericht* possesses the authority to impose a spectrum of sanctions, including warnings, monetary fines, temporary suspensions, or disbarment. All proceedings adhere strictly to principles of judicial procedure, with decisions subject to appeal before the Higher Regional Court (*Oberlandesgericht*), safeguarding the rights of both complainants and respondents. (Ahrens & Schmidt, 2017)

The fourth element: accountability

The final, yet equally critical, element is social accountability. This dimension ensures that the development and enforcement of ethical standards do not become instruments for shielding professional privilege. A regulatory mechanism achieves sustainability only when both regulators and the regulated are held answerable to the public or an independent oversight body. As Hazard and Dondi caution, in the absence of public or civil society engagement, accountability mechanisms often prove fragile and ineffective. (Hazard & Dondi, 2004)

In the United Kingdom, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) exemplifies robust transparency by publishing all disciplinary decisions on an accessible online platform. This includes details such as the solicitor's name, nature of the offence, imposed sanctions, and the full judgment of the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal (SDT). Such openness enables clients, the media, and the public to scrutinize regulatory outcomes. (Flenley & Leech, 2020)

The German model similarly embeds accountability at multiple levels. Lawyers subject to complaints must appear before the Lawyers' Disciplinary Court (*Anwaltsgericht*), while the *Rechtsanwaltskammer* (Regional Bar Association) bears institutional responsibility for responding to citizen complaints. If indications of neglect or partiality arise, state judicial authorities are empowered to intervene. Disciplinary court decisions can be appealed and are subject to public review by the Higher Regional Court (*Oberlandesgericht*), reinforcing both procedural integrity and public confidence. (Ahrens, 2017)

In Ontario, Canada, the Law Society Tribunal (LST) represents a hybrid accountability model. It comprises both legal professionals and lay community representatives appointed by the provincial government. All disciplinary decisions are documented in writing and made publicly available via the provincial Bar Association's website. Furthermore, the public keeps the right to lodge complaints, submit responses, and request reviews of decisions, ensuring an inclusive and participatory oversight process. (Moore, 1997)

It is equally important to consider that, beyond the four principal structural elements outlined above, scholarly discourse has highlighted several additional supporting factors such as ethics education, professional culture, and public pressure. While these elements undeniably play a role in shaping and reinforcing ethical behavior, they are, in the view of this article's author, insufficient to make up a comprehensive regulatory mechanism.

As Kauffman emphasizes, ethics education should be embedded from the earliest stages of professional training to "arouse ethical awareness in professional thinking (Kauffman, 2013)." However, this primarily fosters awareness rather than creating enforceable obligations. Similarly, professional culture, as Rhode observes, can "strengthen or weaken ethical behavior depending on the values promoted," yet it remains a byproduct of an effective institutional system rather than a stand-alone regulatory factor (Rhode, 2003). Public pressure, as Julian Webb notes, often functions as a catalyst for reform, generating "an urgent need for a transparent and participatory disciplinary system" (Webb (Ed.), 2023), but it does not, in itself, establish enforceable norms or sanctions. Viewed holistically, Hazard and Dondi conclude that "*education, culture and public influence are important factors, but they only work when they are operated within an institutional framework with clear enforcement and accountability*" (Hazard & Dondi, 2004). These complementary elements should therefore be recognized as supporting and enhancing the regulatory environment, rather than being conflated with the four core structural components that underpin a robust legal ethics regulatory mechanism.

From the preceding analysis, a refined conceptualization of the legal ethics regulatory mechanism can be articulated: "The legal ethics regulatory mechanism is an integrated system of standards and institutional arrangements designed to ensure adherence to professional ethical principles. It operates through a structured framework comprising clear conduct standards, an independent oversight body, a transparent process for addressing violations, and a robust public accountability mechanism." This conceptualization bridges the normative theory of professional ethics with the practical dimensions of legal regulation, while also providing a foundation for tailoring institutional designs to the specific contexts of diverse legal systems.

2. Current Status of the Mechanism for Regulating Legal Ethics in Vietnam

Although professional ethics has long been mentioned in policy documents and in legal training programs in Vietnam, in reality, the mechanism

for regulating legal ethics still has many shortcomings in both content and implementation. The elements that make up an effective regulatory mechanism - as analyzed in the above section - are not yet fully formed, coherent and still formal.

The subject of issuing standards still lacks unity and independence.

The promulgation of professional ethics standards in Vietnam today clearly reveals the lack of unity in the promulgating subject and the lack of independence in the regulatory mechanism, affecting the effectiveness and objectivity of professional ethics supervision in groups of judicial positions.

First, the entities issuing codes of ethics for the legal profession are *clearly dispersed, not following a common mechanism*. For example, the Code of Ethics for Judges is issued by the National Council for Selection and Supervision of Judges (Decision No. 87/QD-HDTC), while the ethical standards for prosecutors are directly issued by the Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Procuracy (Decision No. 21/QD-VKSTC). For lawyers, the code of ethics is issued by a self-governing professional organization, the National Bar Council (Decision No. 201/QD-HDLSTQ), while the standards for bailiffs are issued by the Ministry of Justice, an executive agency, through decisions and circulars, respectively. This design suggests the absence of a unified coordinating mechanism or an independent national body for shaping and controlling professional ethics, leaving the system of standards fragmented and asynchronous.

In addition, most of the issuing entities are administrative agencies or internal management organizations, lacking the independence required to supervise practitioners objectively. Specifically, the Ministry of Justice is both a state management agency and also issues ethical standards and takes part in handling ethical violations of enforcement officers and bailiffs, which leads to potential conflicts of interest, as the management agency is also the "arbitrator" of ethical behavior. Similarly, the Supreme People's Procuracy not only manages the vertical sector but also issues its own ethical codes for its own staff, a model of 'self-monitoring,' which proves ineffective in the absence of independent oversight.

Even in the legal profession, a group with the highest level of autonomy, the code of ethics is still indirectly supervised by the Ministry of Justice through the Charter of the Bar Federation, which somewhat undermines professional independence. The Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Lawyers in Vietnam was issued by the Vietnam Bar Federation in 2011, amended in 2019. This code does not have independent legal effect as in Germany (BORA) or the

US (ABA Model Rules), but is only effective where it is linked to the Law on Lawyers, and disciplinary action is still enforced by the Bar Association according to the Law. The Federation is still an administrative, professional organization, subject to the state management of the Ministry of Justice, lacking institutional independence in the organization of ethics supervision. Despite ethical codes issued by professional organizations, these codes do not have independent legal effect, and enforcement still depends on the legal framework controlled by the State.

The Code of Conduct for Judges (Decision No. 87/QĐ-TANDTC dated March 8, 2018), issued by the Supreme People's Court, is only an internal guideline, not a legal document and does not have an independent sanction mechanism. This is an internal document issued by the Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Court, applied within the people's court system. This is not a legal document according to the Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents 2025. Handling of ethical violations by judges must comply with disciplinary regulations for officials and civil servants in the current legal system. This shows that the mechanism for regulating professional ethics of judges in Vietnam still depends on the general legal framework for state officials, instead of a specialized monitoring system specifically for the judiciary as in the model in some countries following the Civil law tradition.

In short, except for Circular 08/2022/TT-BTP, the only legal document currently in mandatory effect, most of the legal ethics regulations in Vietnam are still as internal decisions and specialized guidelines. Compared to the German model (BRAO combined with BORA) or the independent regulatory agency-led model in the UK (Legal Services Act 2007 with SRA Code), the Vietnamese structure still places all ethical oversight in the administrative agency or professional organization, without establishing an independent, public disciplinary committee with the authority to investigate and publish judgments. Therefore, the current regulatory framework mainly operates as “soft law”, professional recommendations, rather than a system of strict legally binding rules (hard law) according to international practice.

Ethical standards are mainly directional, not coercive, and lack an independent and transparent system for handling violations.

Most of the codes of ethics in the legal profession in Vietnam are of a “soft law” nature, not codified, without a legally binding mechanism or independent sanctions. This results in many obvious ethical violations not being handled promptly or being overlooked, unless they also violate criminal or administrative law.

In terms of content, ethical rules use directional language, without clearly defining sanctions. For example, in the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Lawyers in Vietnam (2019), many provisions use phrases such as: *"Lawyers need to strive to..."*, *"Lawyers aim for..."*, *"Encouraging lawyers to implement..."*. This is language that is more ethically recommended than legally binding, does not specify the consequences of violations, and does not specify the level or form of specific sanctions (compared to the Model Rules of Professional Conduct system of the ABA in the United States—each violation has a sanction provision attached).

In terms of enforcement mechanisms, these codes also lack an independent and transparent system for handling violations. For example, violations of lawyer ethics are mainly considered by the Bar Association's Disciplinary and Reward Council, but there is no independent judicial mechanism, no mandatory public disclosure of disciplinary conclusions, and no clear distinction between legal violations and ethical violations. Therefore, the enforcement of ethical standards is softened, as the code cannot guarantee practical effectiveness but only relies on the self-awareness of practitioners.

For example, the 2018 Code of Judges is more of an ethical declaration than a tool for disciplinary action (Binh, 2018), (Thao, 2014), (Tuan, 2004), (Cam & Chi (Eds.). Meanwhile, the 2019 Code of Lawyers' Ethics shows strong autonomy but has not escaped "internalization", because the National Bar Council is still under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice. The 2021 Code of Conduct for Enforcement Officers lists the qualitative qualities of "respect for the law, objectivity, and skillful public relations", but does not define specific obligations. Circular 08/2022 on the ethics of the Bailiff profession, although a step forward in legal form, has not yet assigned the right to investigate to professional organizations; the handling is mainly done by the Department of Justice - a management model directly under the local government, lacking a professional liability insurance mechanism. Decision 21/QD-VKSTC has a strong political style, heavy on propaganda, light on technicality, and does not specify the relationship with the accused, evidence management, and receiving gifts. This set of rules needs to be further specified to clarify how it is to be implemented. (Cong & Hanh 2023)

For example, Rule 2 of the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Lawyers stipulates: *"Lawyers must be independent, honest, respect objective truth, and not violate the law and professional ethics for material or spiritual benefits or any other pressure."* This provision is highly ethical, but does not include a mechanism to determine what is *"for material or spiritual benefits"* or how to handle violations (Hang & Nhung, 2021). Many cases of lawyers making

inappropriate statements on social networks or violating clients' rights, although reported in the media, are rarely publicly handled by the Reward and Discipline Council. Meanwhile, in countries like Germany or Singapore, ethical violations can lead to removal from the profession without having to wait for the level of legal violation. Although the 2019 Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Lawyers has provisions on conflicts of interest in Rule 15, this content is still "general in nature", lacking specific guidance for lawyers to "identify, analyze and behave properly in increasingly diverse and complex conflict of interest situations" (Nam, 2022). Resolving conflicts of interest often depends on subjective assessments, without a specialized ethical monitoring or consulting mechanism, leading to the risk of ethical violations without an effective control mechanism.

Lawyer Phan Trung Hoai believes that *"the defense function exists independently and is a counterweight to the prosecution function as an objective necessity of criminal proceedings. In reality, when resolving disputes between citizens and state agencies in criminal proceedings, most countries in the world have established three institutions: the prosecutor performs accusing, the court exercises its arbitration function fairly through the trial function, and the lawyer is independent of the prosecution agency and the trial agency. This independence is not only limited to the scope of litigation in court but also extends to areas of social life."* (Hoai & Van 2021) This statement shows that independence is not only a litigation technique but also the core ethical foundation of the legal profession. Lawyers cannot fulfill their role as a counterweight to the prosecution if they are influenced by state agencies or outside interests. That independence governs everything from the relationship with clients, behavior before public opinion, to social obligations. Therefore, the code of professional ethics needs to clearly establish mechanisms to protect and enforce this right of independence. Only then can lawyers truly be defenders of justice in a democratic legal system.

For notaries, there is currently a code of professional ethics issued together with Decision No. 27/QĐ-HĐQT dated December 25, 2015, of the Board of Management of Notary Practice Organizations. However, this code is not a legal document, it is only an internal guideline and does not have an independent enforcement effect. The mechanism for handling violations of professional ethics has not been clearly established beyond administrative measures under the Law on Notarization. This shows that, although the ethical standards of the notary profession have been recognized, they still lack a solid legal foundation. Therefore, it can be assessed that the current code is more of an orientation than an effective regulatory tool. (Dinh & Cuong, 2022)

Similarly, the “Ethical Standards for Enforcement Officers” issued together with Decision No. 1577/QĐ-BTP dated October 20, 2021 contains propaganda-oriented language. Many phrases such as “*loving the profession, being brave*”, “*exemplary, simple*”, “*respecting and proactively building relationships*”... are general ethical guidelines that are difficult to quantify, making it difficult to measure and evaluate the level of compliance in practice. This document also does not describe specific behaviors that need to be performed or avoided to realize each ethical standard, causing enforcement officers to not have a clear “standard of behavior” to reflect on and adjust their behavior. In addition, many contents such as “*not being bureaucratic or arrogant*”, “*organizing the correct and timely execution of judgments*” are part of the legal obligations of enforcement officers, not just ethical requirements. Such regulations cause confusion in the distinction between legal responsibility and professional ethics, leading to unclear handling mechanisms when there are violations.

The ethics monitoring institution is not independent and the violation handling mechanism is not transparent.

Currently, the monitoring and handling of ethical violations in the legal profession is mainly carried out by administrative agencies or internal professional organizations, lacking the participation of independent organizations or the broader legal community. (Oanh, 2021)

The 2012 Law on Lawyers (amended) does not stipulate the obligation to publicly announce decisions on handling violations of lawyers' ethics. Article 68 of the Law on Lawyers stipulates lawyers must comply with the rules of ethics and professional conduct for lawyers prescribed by the lawyers' social-professional organizations, under this Law and relevant laws. The Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Vietnamese Lawyers (issued together with Decision No. 201/QĐ-HĐLĐSTQ in 2019) only affirms the obligation that “lawyers must comply”, stipulating no mechanism for the public, the press or civil society organizations to take part in ethics supervision. In the court and prosecution sector, ethical violations are often handled according to the civil servant disciplinary process, lacking a separate and transparent ethical mechanism. This leads to a mentality of “bureaucratization” of professional ethics. The current ethics supervision system operates almost vertically and closed, lacking an effective social feedback mechanism. When the supervisory agency and the supervised person are in the same professional community, the risk of “leniency”, “avoidance,” or “closed handling” is very high. Similarly, the “Ethical Standards for Enforcement Officers” issued together with Decision No. 1577/QĐ-BTP dated October 20, 2021 also does not mention any independent agency or institution

responsible for monitoring compliance with ethical standards. The responsibility for implementation is assigned to units under the Ministry of Justice, which both enforce and self-monitor, leading to functional conflicts. There is no specific process for receiving and handling reports of ethical violations from outside the system. Failing to publicize the monitoring mechanism makes the entire inspection process lack transparency. This shows that the ethical monitoring institution is still internal and does not ensure objectivity.

In short, the current self-management mechanism helps protect professional independence, but without an independent, transparent, and public supervisory body, it will create an ethical vacuum, causing conflicts between internal interests and the need for social responsibility. This is a weakness that needs to be reformed if Vietnam wants to approach modern professional ethics control models in the world. The current mechanism for regulating legal ethics in Vietnam is still at the level of “sporadic existence” of several separate elements, without forming a tight operating system. Orientation still dominates enforcement; formality overwhelms practical regulatory effectiveness; and internality lacks the participation of the broader legal community. In a rapidly changing society, with strong media development and increasing demands for professional transparency, this situation poses a serious challenge to public trust and the sustainable development of the legal profession in Vietnam.

3. Causes of limitations in the mechanism of regulating legal ethics in Vietnam

The above limitations are not random phenomena or local technical errors, but reflect structural, historical, and institutional problems of the legal profession system in Vietnam. The causes can be analyzed into five major groups as follows:

Legal legacy: bureaucratizing professional ethics

An important reason is that the current thinking in legal training is still heavily administrative and lacks innovation. Vietnam is deeply influenced by the administrative-command model of state management, in which professional conduct is controlled mainly by legal norms and public service regulations. In this framework, professional ethics are often “administrativeized”, that is, viewed as a form of internal regulations and handling according to the disciplinary process for officials, instead of being an independent, self-regulating system of standards of the professional community.

A typical example of the legacy of legalization and administrativeization of professional ethics is the Code of Ethics and Conduct for Judges (Decision 87/QĐ-HĐTC in 2018), issued and supervised by the agency in the court system itself. The regulation of ethical standards embedded in the mechanism of cadre management makes the legalization of ethics a formality. Professional standards are therefore not supervised by an independent institution, but extend administrative discipline.

Another example is Decision No. 21/QĐ-VKSTC dated 2023 of the Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Procuracy, promulgating the Code of Professional Ethics for Procuracy Officers. This document was developed and implemented entirely within the Procuracy sector, lacking an independent external review mechanism. This shows that professional ethics are still closely tied to the traditional model of public service discipline.

Not fully aware of the role of professional ethics

In popular perception, professional ethics is often considered a “supplementary” part of the law, a matter of personal awareness, rather than a component of professional competence. This causes the development and application of ethical standards to be overlooked, or only implemented formally in training and practice. For example, the training program at the Judicial Academy only allocates 1/36 credits for the content of “Ethics and professional conduct of the law profession” in the subject “Lawyers and professional ethics” (3 credits). According to Decision 2105/QĐ-BTP on the framework program for training lawyers (October 2022), the total duration is 36 credits, but the part for “Professional ethics” only accounts for 1 credit. Therefore, the scope and time for training in professional ethics of lawyers is still tiny compared to other specialized subjects.

Even within the profession, many people still confuse illegal behavior with unethical behavior, leading to only handling clear legal violations while ignoring unethical behaviors that do not yet warrant legal sanctions. For example, some cases of lawyers advertising falsely, causing misunderstanding about personal influence but not being handled because ‘they did not violate specific legal regulations’, have been discussed internally by the profession many times at seminars on professional ethics.

Lack of independent and transparent institutions to enforce professional ethics

An effective ethics system requires independent, transparent, and critical monitoring and handling of violations. However, in Vietnam, professional ethics monitoring organizations are mainly located within agencies or professional

organizations, without independent external mechanisms (such as interdisciplinary ethics councils, independent professional organizations, or civil society organizations taking part in monitoring).

A notable example is the Vietnam Bar Federation, an organization considered representing the self-governing mechanism of lawyers and has the authority to issue and supervise the implementation of the Code of Professional Ethics (Decision No. 201/QĐ-HĐLĐSTQ in 2019). But can an organization that both creates ethical standards and internally monitors and handles violations ensure objectivity and transparency? When all disciplinary activities are handled by the Executive Board of Bar Associations and the Federation's Disciplinary and Reward Council, who will monitor them? Why is there no independent mechanism from the outside - such as an independent ethics council, civil society organization or reporting agency? Why are the conclusions of handling ethical violations not made public? There are no annual reports, no official statistics, no data analyzing the causes - is the entire lawyer disciplinary process operating in a "closed loop"? And if so, how can society trust that the legal profession is seriously self-regulating, rather than protecting itself?

Lack of academic foundation, theory, and a system of solutions to handle dilemmas in legal ethics

To date, Vietnam has not yet formed a specialized field of research on legal ethics, separate from ethics. For example, ethical codes often repeat slogans such as "integrity", "objectivity", "protecting justice" with no quantifiable criteria, not linked to specific situations or ethical dilemmas. This makes the codes abstract, difficult to apply, and difficult to monitor. For example, Rule 2 of the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Lawyers states: " *Lawyers must be independent, honest, respect objective truth, and not violate the law and professional ethics for material or spiritual benefits or any other pressure .* " These are slogans with guiding value, but are completely without clear definitions, quantifiable criteria, or specific application situations. For example, what does "respect for objective truth" mean in a case where a client admits guilt, but still asks the lawyer to refute all charges? Or does "integrity" include refusing to defend in a case where the lawyer knows the client has obstructed justice? Using abstract concepts such as " independence, honesty, respect for objective truth, not for material or spiritual benefits " without placing them in specific ethical situations, without constructing illustrative examples or techniques for handling situations, shows that Vietnam has not yet formed a field of legal ethics research as a specialized field (legal ethics as an academic field), separate from general ethics. In addition,

In countries such as the United States, Australia, England and Germany, the teaching of legal ethics has formed a relatively complete system of theory and practice. The teaching of legal ethics in these countries does not stop at "slogans" but is designed around three pillars: (1) dilemma situations to stimulate ethical thinking; (2) legalized standards of conduct (Model Rules, SRA Code, BORA...); (3) disciplinary judgments/judicial decisions to help learners feel the practical consequences. For example, in the United States, law schools following the Carnegie Foundation's recommendations have adopted a case-based learning model, requiring students to confront hypothetical ethical conflicts and apply the ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct and disciplinary precedents to reason and decide (Ghosh, 2014). In Australia, training typically begins with real-life cases, then requires students to compare options with the Australian Solicitors' Conduct Rules and decisions of the Legal Services Commissioner (Ebejer, 2015). In England and Wales, students are introduced to the SRA Code of Conduct through hypothetical ethical exercises and are required to study case studies of the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal (Boon & Levin 2008). Meanwhile, in Germany, professional ethics training is integrated into the "Berufsrecht" module, where students are required to analyze conflict of interest situations, apply the rules of the BORA 1996 and refer to the decision of the Anwaltsgerichtshof (State Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal) (Hazard & Dondi, 2004). Thus, the outstanding common point in the model of teaching legal ethics in these countries is the combination of theory and practice, standards and jurisdiction, creating a learning mechanism associated with specific professional behavior and the ability to take clear legal responsibility.

There is not enough social pressure from the people, press, and media.

In many countries, the development of professional ethics regulation mechanisms has been strongly driven by pressure from civil society, investigative journalism, client networks and legal service users' rights organizations. For example, in the UK, the BBC Panorama series (2019) exposed a good deal of immigration law firms selling "fake asylum scripts." Just three months later, the Solicitors Regulation Authority suspended the two lawyers involved, and the disciplinary decisions were made public and updated annually on the SRA website. Pressure from investigative journalism, client networks and consumer protection organisations has forced the legal profession to clean up its act to maintain its reputation.

In contrast, in Vietnam, the relationship between legal practitioners and clients remains asymmetrical in terms of information; awareness of ethical violations is weak; legal communication is thin and rarely creates enough

pressure to force the profession to adjust its behavior. In addition, the fear of “damaging the image of the profession” causes many ethical violations to be hidden or handled internally. For example, the Ho Chi Minh City Bar Association has decided to suspend, warn, and even remove lawyers who violate professional ethics, but a series of questions still arise: how many people know about these decisions? Why do such important announcements only appear on internal websites such as hcmcbar.org, dlsdongnai.com, or luatsuhanoi.vn? Why is there no public statistics system, no annual report summarizing violations and handling cases? If the public cannot access information, is that disciplinary mechanism strong enough to deter? And if everything revolves around internal channels, is the legal profession really protecting ethical standards or just protecting itself?

4. Solutions to perfect the mechanism for regulating legal ethics in Vietnam

To overcome the limitations in the legal ethics regulation mechanism analyzed above, it is necessary not only to add a few rules or reorganize some internal departments, but to redesign the entire regulation mechanism in a synchronous, workable, and cohesive direction between ethical values, institutional capacity, and social feedback.

The mechanism for regulating legal ethics should be viewed as a system – in which standards, monitoring institutions, sanctions, training and social criticism must all be closely connected. On that basis, some key solutions can be proposed:

Firstly, it is necessary to develop a framework Code of ethics for the legal profession that applies in multiple sectors, as a foundation for developing detailed ethical standards in each specific field of practice.

This Code should be designed not just as a set of ethical slogans, but as a systematic normative structure—with core values, fundamental principles and typical illustrative situations. The Ministry of Justice can play a coordinating role in drafting, in collaboration with the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuracy, the Vietnam Bar Federation and other legal professional associations. More importantly, the development process needs to mobilize the broad participation of the professional community, academia and civil society organizations to ensure its reflection of reality and wide acceptance. The promulgation of the Framework Code of Ethics will not only help standardize the system of ethical values of the legal profession, but also create the premise for the formation of a healthier and more professional legal professional culture.

The solution to build an interdisciplinary code of ethics for the legal profession aims to overcome: The lack of unity and bindingness of current rules. The state of administrativeization and slogan-like expression of ethics. The lack of solid theoretical foundation and lack of multi-dimensional participation in the process of building standards. This is an important first step to create a common regulatory framework, laying the foundation for deeper reforms in supervision, sanctions and accountability that the following solutions in the article will continue to propose.

Second, for the code of ethics to be practically effective, it is necessary to attach it to a minimum legal mechanism, through the codification of some basic principles of professional ethics in specialized laws.

This does not mean “criminalizing ethics” or enforcing ethics by administrative orders, but recognizing the legal role of ethical standards in the professional structure. Specifically, laws such as the Law on Lawyers, the Law on Notaries, the Law on the Organization of People’s Courts, etc. need to add specific provisions on the obligation to comply with professional ethics and sanctions for violations, with a level of flexibility appropriate to each profession. Forms such as suspension from practice, warnings, and reprimands—if established based on ethical violations—will create the weight for standards and deterrence in practice.

Third, an effective institutional design cannot lack independent and specialized enforcement actors.

The establishment of independent ethics committees in each legal profession is an important step in translating standards into practical behavior. These committees should not depend on an internal administrative apparatus, but should be composed of members with professional authority, social prestige, and not directly related to management interests. The function of the committees is not only to review and handle ethical violations, but also to advise, warn, and propose amendments to ethical standards to suit practice. To ensure effectiveness and transparency, the handling conclusions should be made public in an appropriate form, both to protect personal honor and to strengthen society’s trust in self-regulation in the legal profession.

Fourth, professional ethics cannot be effectively regulated without social feedback and public communication.

In the legal profession becoming increasingly closer to the public and digital media developing strongly, establishing channels to reflect ethical violations from clients, citizens, and the press is a prerequisite to create pressure

to regulate professional behavior (Oanh, 2021). Legal profession organizations should develop online platforms for accepting ethics complaints, ensuring anonymity and protecting whistleblowers. They should publish annual ethics reports—outlining the number of cases, the manner in which they were handled, and ethical trends to watch out for—as responsible self-monitoring. This would not only provide incentives for improvement, but also enhance public confidence in the ethical standards of the legal profession.

Fifth, professional ethics training needs to be strongly reformed both in the initial training stage and in periodic practice training.

Current ethics courses are mostly abstract in theory, lack situational depth, and do not assess specific ethical behavior capacity. Currently, one of the major limitations in law training institutions is that the teaching of professional ethics is not considered a compulsory subject (except for the Judicial Academy as analyzed above), and there is no framework for evaluating the output of ethical capacity (Kien, 2023). Professional ethics training in law schools is currently still heavy on theory, has little access to real-life situations, and is not linked to specific professional behavior. Assessment of learning outcomes is mainly achieved through written exams, and there is no mechanism to test the ability to handle specific ethical situations. Therefore, designing learning modules based on real-life ethical dilemmas and enhancing ethical debates should be prioritized. This proposal also coincides with the strategic orientation in lawyer training , focusing on legal ethics, building a program with many rich practice situations and having specific criteria for assessing ethical capacity. (Hang, 2022)

D. CONCLUSION

This study arrives at several key conclusions that underscore both theoretical and practical imperatives for strengthening legal ethics regulation:

1. Legal ethics must strengthen beyond static rules to function as a dynamic and enforceable system. When ethical standards exist merely as declarative statements, devoid of binding sanctions and independent oversight, they risk becoming obsolete. The current Vietnamese framework illustrates this challenge: regulation remains largely internalized, disconnected from practical training, and insufficiently responsive to societal demands for accountability.

2. The four pillars—standards, supervision, violation of handling, and accountability—constitute an indispensable framework for effective regulation. This article has conceptualized these elements as the structural core of a robust

legal ethics regulatory mechanism. Building upon this framework, it proposes five actionable strategies: (i) developing an interdisciplinary Code of Conduct, (ii) codifying minimum ethical standards into legislation, (iii) establishing independent ethics committees, (iv) expanding channels for public feedback and oversight, and (v) innovating ethics education through contextualized, practice-oriented methods. These initiatives aim to transform professional ethics from aspirational ideals into operational systems of responsibility and enforcement.

3. Distinguishing professional ethics from administrative discipline and public service obligations is vital. Professional ethics embody normative values established by the legal community to uphold integrity, independence, and social responsibility. In contrast, administrative discipline governs compliance within public institutions and is reactive, often addressing misconduct only after legal violations occur. Blurring these domains diminishes early intervention and weakens preventive mechanisms. Independent ethical standards and sanctions allow for early detection and correction of deviant behavior, fostering a culture of professional self-governance where ethics functions as a “soft infrastructure” complementing the “hard boundaries” of law.

4. This study opens avenues for future research. Areas warranting further exploration include: the relationship between ethical enforcement and the quality of legal services; comparative analyses of independent ethics oversight models in Civil Law and Common Law jurisdictions; and the impact of emerging technologies (e.g., AI, blockchain) on monitoring and reporting ethical breaches. The roles of civil society and investigative journalism in enforcing professional accountability also merit rigorous investigation.

5. Ultimately, this article contributes to advancing a professional culture grounded in integrity, accountability, and justice. Such a culture is foundational to building a modern rule-of-law society in Vietnam, where legal practitioners not only serve the law but embody its highest ethical aspirations.

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