



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

## Guide on Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights

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Right to a fair trial  
(civil limb)

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## Note to readers

This Guide is part of the series of Guides on the Convention published by the European Court of Human Rights (hereafter “the Court”, “the European Court” or “the Strasbourg Court”) to inform legal practitioners about the fundamental judgments delivered by the Strasbourg Court. This particular Guide analyses and sums up the case-law under Article 6 (civil limb) of the European Convention on Human Rights (hereafter “the Convention” or “the European Convention”) until 30 April 2013. Readers will find the key principles in this area and the relevant precedents.

The case-law cited has been selected among the leading, major, and/or recent judgments and decisions.\*

The Court’s judgments serve not only to decide those cases brought before the Court but, more generally, to elucidate, safeguard and develop the rules instituted by the Convention, thereby contributing to the observance by the States of the engagements undertaken by them as Contracting Parties (*Ireland v. the United Kingdom*, § 154, 18 January 1978, Series A no. 25.). The mission of the system set up by the Convention is thus to determine, in the general interest, issues of public policy, thereby raising the standards of protection of human rights and extending human rights jurisprudence throughout the community of the Convention States (*Konstantin Markin v. Russia* [GC], § 89, 30078/06, ECHR 2012).

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\* The hyperlinks to the cases cited in the electronic version of the Guide refer to the original text in English or French (the two official languages of the Court) of the judgment or decision delivered by the Court and to the decisions or reports of the European Commission of Human Rights (hereafter “the Commission”). Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to a judgment on the merits delivered by a Chamber of the Court. The abbreviation “(dec.)” indicates that the citation is of a decision of the Court and “[GC]” that the case was heard by the Grand Chamber.

### Article 6 of the Convention – Right to a fair trial

“1. In the determination of his civil rights and obligations or of any criminal charge against him, everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law. Judgment shall be pronounced publicly but the press and public may be excluded from all or part of the trial in the interests of morals, public order or national security in a democratic society, where the interests of juveniles or the protection of the private life of the parties so require, or to the extent strictly necessary in the opinion of the court in special circumstances where publicity would prejudice the interests of justice.

2. Everyone charged with a criminal offence shall be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law.

3. Everyone charged with a criminal offence has the following minimum rights:

(a) to be informed promptly, in a language which he understands and in detail, of the nature and cause of the accusation against him;

(b) to have adequate time and facilities for the preparation of his defence;

(c) to defend himself in person or through legal assistance of his own choosing or, if he has not sufficient means to pay for legal assistance, to be given it free when the interests of justice so require;

(d) to examine or have examined witnesses against him and to obtain the attendance and examination of witnesses on his behalf under the same conditions as witnesses against him;

(e) to have the free assistance of an interpreter if he cannot understand or speak the language used in court.”

## I. Scope: the concept of “civil rights and obligations”

### Article 6 § 1 of the Convention

“1. In the determination of his civil rights and obligations ..., everyone is entitled to a ... hearing ... by [a] tribunal ...”

### A. General requirements for applicability of Article 6 § 1

1. The concept of “civil rights and obligations” cannot be interpreted solely by reference to the respondent State’s domestic law; it is an “autonomous” concept deriving from the Convention. Article 6 § 1 of the Convention applies irrespective of the parties’ status, the character of the legislation which governs how the “dispute” is to be determined, and the character of the authority which has jurisdiction in the matter (*Georgiadis v. Greece*, § 34).

2. However, the principle that the autonomous concepts contained in the Convention must be interpreted in the light of present-day conditions does not give the Court power to interpret Article 6 § 1 as though the adjective “civil” (with the restrictions which the adjective necessarily places on the category of “rights and obligations” to which that Article applies) were not present in the text (*Ferrazzini v. Italy* [GC], § 30).

3. The applicability of Article 6 § 1 in civil matters firstly depends on the existence of a “dispute” (in French, “*contestation*”). Secondly the dispute must relate to “rights and obligations” which, arguably at least, can be said to be recognised under domestic law. Lastly these “rights and obligations” must

be “civil” ones within the meaning of the Convention, although Article 6 does not itself assign any specific content to them in the Contracting States’ legal systems (*James and Others v. the United Kingdom*, § 81).

## 1. The term “dispute”

4. The word “dispute” must be given a substantive meaning rather than a formal one (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 45). It is necessary to look beyond the appearances and the language used and concentrate on the realities of the situation according to the circumstances of each case (*Gorou v. Greece (no. 2)* [GC], § 29; *Boulois v. Luxembourg* [GC], § 92). Article 6 does not apply to a non-contentious and unilateral procedure which does not involve opposing parties and which is available only where there is no dispute over rights (*Alaverdyan v. Armenia* (dec.), § 35).

5. The “dispute” must be genuine and of a serious nature (*Sporrong and Lönnroth v. Sweden*, § 81). This rules out, for example, civil proceedings taken against prison authorities on account of the mere presence in the prison of HIV-infected prisoners (*Skorobogatykh v. Russia* (dec.)). For example, the Court held a “dispute” to be real in a case concerning a request to the public prosecutor to lodge an appeal on points of law, as it formed an integral part of the whole of the proceedings that the applicant had joined as a civil party with a view to obtaining compensation (*Gorou v. Greece (no. 2)* [GC], § 35).

6. The dispute may relate not only to the actual existence of a right but also to its scope or the manner in which it is to be exercised (*Bentham v. the Netherlands*, § 32). It may also concern matters of fact.

7. The result of the proceedings must be directly decisive for the right in question (*Ulyanov v. Ukraine* (dec.)). Consequently, a tenuous connection or remote consequences are not enough to bring Article 6 § 1 into play (*Boulois v. Luxembourg* [GC], § 90). For example, the Court found that proceedings challenging the legality of extending a nuclear power station’s operating licence did not fall within the scope of Article 6 § 1 because the connection between the extension decision and the right to protection of life, physical integrity and property was “too tenuous and remote”, the applicants having failed to show that they personally were exposed to a danger that was not only specific but above all imminent (*Balmer-Schafroth and Others v. Switzerland*, § 40; *Athanassoglou and Others v. Switzerland* [GC], §§ 46-55; *Sdružení Jihočeské Matky v. the Czech Republic* (dec.)). For a case concerning limited noise pollution at a factory, see *Zapletal v. the Czech Republic* (dec.). For the hypothetical environmental impact of a plant for treatment of mining waste, see *Ivan Atanasov v. Bulgaria*, §§ 90-95. Similarly, proceedings which two public-sector employees brought to challenge one of their colleagues’ appointment to a post could have only remote effects on their civil rights, specifically, their own right to appointment (*Revel and Mora v. France* (dec.)).

8. In contrast, the Court found Article 6 § 1 to be applicable to a case concerning the building of a dam which would have flooded the applicants’ village (*Gorraiz Lizarraga and Others v. Spain*, § 46) and to a case about the operating permit for a gold mine using cyanidation leaching near the applicants’ villages (*Taşkın and Others v. Turkey*, § 133; see also *Zander v. Sweden*, §§ 24-25). More recently, in a case regarding the appeal submitted by a local environmental-protection association for judicial review of a planning permission, the Court found that there was a sufficient link between the dispute and the right claimed by the legal entity, in particular in view of the status of the association and its founders, and the fact that the aim it pursued was limited in space and in substance (*L’Érablière A.S.B.L. v. Belgium*, §§ 28-30). Furthermore, proceedings for the restoration of a person’s legal capacity are directly decisive for his or her civil rights and obligations (*Stanev v. Bulgaria* [GC], § 233).

## 2. Existence of an arguable right in domestic law

9. The applicant must be able to claim, on arguable grounds, a right recognised in domestic law (*Masson and Van Zon v. the Netherlands*, § 48; *Gutfreund v. France*, § 41; *Boulois v. Luxembourg* [GC], §§ 90-94). Article 6 does not lay down any specific content for a “right” in Contracting States’ domestic law, and in principle the Court must refer to domestic law in determining whether a right exists. Whether or not the authorities enjoyed discretion in deciding whether to grant the measure requested by a particular applicant may be taken into consideration and may even be decisive. Nevertheless, the mere fact that the wording of a legal provision affords an element of discretion does not in itself rule out the existence of a right. Other criteria which may be taken into consideration by the Court include the recognition of the alleged right in similar circumstances by the domestic courts or the fact that the latter examined the merits of the applicant’s request (*ibid.*, §§ 91-101).

10. The Court may decide that rights such as the right to life, to health, to a healthy environment and to respect for property are recognised in domestic law (*Athanassoglou and Others v. Switzerland* [GC], § 44).

11. The right in question has to have a legal basis in domestic law (*Szücs v. Austria*, § 33).

12. However, it is important to point out that whether a person has an actionable domestic claim may depend not only on the content, properly speaking, of the relevant civil right as defined in national law but also on the existence of procedural bars preventing or limiting the possibilities of bringing potential claims to court. In the latter category of cases, Article 6 § 1 of the Convention may apply (*Al-Adsani v. the United Kingdom* [GC], §§ 47; *McElhinney v. Ireland* [GC], § 25). In principle, though, it cannot have any application to substantive limitations on a right existing under domestic law (*Roche v. the United Kingdom* [GC], § 119). The Convention institutions may not create through the interpretation of Article 6 § 1 a substantive civil right which has no legal basis in the State concerned (*ibid.*, § 117).

13. In deciding whether there is a civil “right” and whether to classify a restriction as substantive or procedural, regard must first be had to the relevant provisions of national law and how the domestic courts interpret them (*Masson and Van Zon v. the Netherlands*, § 49). It is necessary to look beyond the appearances, examine how domestic law classifies the particular restriction and concentrate on the realities (*Van Droogenbroeck v. Belgium*, § 38). Lastly, a final court decision does not necessarily retrospectively deprive applicants’ complaints of their arguability (*Le Calvez v. France*, § 56). For instance, the limited scope of the judicial review of an act of foreign policy (NATO air strikes on Serbia) cannot make the applicants’ claims against the State retrospectively unarguable, since the domestic courts were called upon to decide for the first time on this issue (*Markovic and Others v. Italy* [GC], §§ 100-02).

14. Applying the distinction between substantive limitations and procedural bars in the light of these criteria, the Court has, for example, recognised as falling under Article 6 § 1 civil actions for negligence against the police (*Osman v. the United Kingdom*) or against local authorities (*Z and Others v. the United Kingdom* [GC]) and has considered whether a particular limitation (exemption from prosecution or non-liability) was proportionate from the standpoint of Article 6 § 1. On the other hand it held that the Crown’s exemption from civil liability *vis-à-vis* members of the armed forces derived from a substantive restriction and that domestic law consequently did not recognise a “right” within the meaning of Article 6 § 1 of the Convention (*Roche v. the United Kingdom* [GC], § 124; see also *Hotter v. Austria* (dec.) and *Andronikashvili v. Georgia* (dec.)).

15. The Court has accepted that associations also qualify for protection under Article 6 § 1 if they seek recognition of specific rights and interests of their members (*Gorraiz Lizarraga and Others v. Spain*, § 45) or even of particular rights to which they have a claim as legal persons (such as the right of the “public” to information and to take part in decisions regarding the environment (*Collectif*

*national d'information et d'opposition à l'usine Melox – Collectif Stop Melox and Mox v. France* (dec.)), or when the association's action cannot be regarded as an *actio popularis* (*L'Érablière A.S.B.L. v. Belgium*).

16. Where legislation lays down conditions for admission to an occupation or profession, a candidate who satisfies them has a right to be admitted to the occupation or profession (*De Moor v. Belgium*, § 43). For example, if the applicant has an arguable case that he or she meets the legal requirements for registration as a doctor, Article 6 applies (*Chevrol v. France*, § 55; see, conversely, *Bouilloc v. France* (dec.)). At all events, when the legality of proceedings concerning a civil right is challengeable by a judicial remedy of which the applicant has made use, it has to be concluded that there was a “dispute” concerning a “civil right” even if the eventual finding was that the applicant did not meet the legal requirements (right to continue practising the medical specialisation which the applicant had taken up abroad: see *Kök v. Turkey*, § 37).

### 3. “Civil” nature of the right

17. Whether or not a right is to be regarded as civil in the light of the Convention must be determined by reference to the substantive content and effects of the right – and not its legal classification – under the domestic law of the State concerned. In the exercise of its supervisory functions, the Court must also take into account the Convention's object and purpose and the national legal systems of the other Contracting States (*König v. Germany*, § 89).

18. In principle the applicability of Article 6 § 1 to disputes between private individuals which are classified as civil in domestic law is uncontested before the Court (for a judicial separation case, see *Airey v. Ireland*, § 21).

### 4. Private rights: the pecuniary dimension

19. The Court regards as falling within the scope of Article 6 § 1 proceedings which, in domestic law, come under “public law” and whose result is decisive for private rights and obligations. Such proceedings may, *inter alia*, have to do with permission to sell land (*Ringeisen v. Austria*, § 94), running a private clinic (*König v. Germany*, §§ 94-95), building permission (see, *inter alia*, *Sporrong and Lönnroth v. Sweden*, § 79), the ownership and use of a religious building (*Sâmbata Bihor Greco-Catholic Parish v. Romania*, § 65), administrative permission in connection with requirements for carrying on an occupation (*Bentham v. the Netherlands*, § 36), a licence for serving alcoholic beverages (*Tre Traktörer Aktiebolag v. Sweden*, § 43), or a dispute concerning the payment of compensation for a work-related illness or accident (*Chaudet v. France*, § 30).

20. On the same basis Article 6 is applicable to disciplinary proceedings before professional bodies where the right to practise the profession is at stake (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*; *Philis v. Greece (no. 2)*, § 45), a negligence claim against the State (*X v. France*), an action for cancellation of an administrative decision harming the applicant's rights (*De Geouffre de la Pradelle v. France*), administrative proceedings concerning a ban on fishing in the applicants' waters (*Alatulkila and Others v. Finland*, § 49) and proceedings for awarding a tender in which a civil right – such as the right not to be discriminated against on grounds of religious belief or political opinion when bidding for public-works contracts – is at stake (*Tinnelly & Sons Ltd and Others and McElduff and Others v. the United Kingdom*, § 61; contrast *I.T.C. Ltd v. Malta* (dec.)).

21. Article 6 § 1 is applicable to a civil-party complaint in criminal proceedings (*Perez v. France* [GC], §§ 70-71), except in the case of a civil action brought purely to obtain private vengeance or for punitive purposes (*Sigalas v. Greece*, § 29; *Mihova v. Italy* (dec.)). The Convention does not confer any right, as such, to have third parties prosecuted or sentenced for a criminal offence. To fall within the scope of the Convention, such right must be indissociable from the victim's exercise of a right to bring civil proceedings in domestic law, even if only to secure symbolic reparation or to protect a

civil right such as the right to a “good reputation” (*Perez v. France* [GC], § 70; see also, regarding a symbolic award, *Gorou v. Greece (no. 2)* [GC], § 24). Therefore, Article 6 applies to proceedings involving civil-party complaints from the moment the complainant is joined as a civil party, unless he or she has waived the right to reparation in an unequivocal manner.

22. Article 6 § 1 is also applicable to a civil action seeking compensation for ill-treatment allegedly committed by agents of the State (*Aksoy v. Turkey*, § 92).

## B. Extension to other types of dispute

23. The Court has held that Article 6 § 1 is applicable to disputes concerning social matters, including proceedings relating to an employee’s dismissal by a private firm (*Buchholz v. Germany*), proceedings concerning social-security benefits (*Feldbrugge v. the Netherlands*), even on a non-contributory basis (*Salesi v. Italy*), and also proceedings concerning compulsory social-security contributions (*Schouten and Meldrum v. the Netherlands*). (For the challenging by an employer of the finding that an employee’s illness was occupation-related, see *Eternit v. France* (dec.), § 32). In these cases the Court took the view that the private-law aspects predominated over the public-law ones. In addition, it has held that there were similarities between entitlement to a welfare allowance and entitlement to receive compensation for Nazi persecution from a private-law foundation (*Woś v. Poland*, § 76).

24. Disputes concerning public servants fall in principle within the scope of Article 6 § 1. In *Pellegrin v. France* [GC], §§ 64-71, the Court had adopted a “functional” criterion. In its judgment in *Vilho Eskelinen and Others v. Finland* [GC], §§ 50-62, it decided to adopt a new approach. The principle is now that there will be a presumption that Article 6 applies, and it will be for the respondent government to demonstrate, firstly, that a civil-servant applicant does not have a right of access to a court under national law and, secondly, that the exclusion of the rights under Article 6 for the civil servant is justified (§ 62 in particular). If the applicant had access to a court under national law, Article 6 applies (even to active army officers and their claims before the military courts: see *Pridatchenko and Others v. Russia*, § 47). A non-judicial body under domestic law may be qualified as a “court”, in the substantive sense of the term, if it quite clearly performs judicial functions (*Oleksandr Volkov v. Ukraine*, §§ 88-91). With regard to the second criterion, the exclusion must be justified on “objective grounds in the State’s interest”; this obliges the State to show that the subject matter of the dispute in issue is related to the exercise of State power or that it has called into question the special bond between the civil servant and the State. Thus, there can in principle be no justification for the exclusion from the guarantees of Article 6 of ordinary labour disputes, such as those relating to salaries, allowances or similar entitlements, on the basis of the special nature of the relationship between the particular civil servant and the State in question (see, for instance, a dispute regarding police personnel’s entitlement to a special allowance in *Vilho Eskelinen and Others v. Finland* [GC]). In the light of the criteria laid down in the *Vilho Eskelinen and Others* judgment, the Court declared Article 6 § 1 to be applicable to proceedings for unfair dismissal instituted by an embassy employee (a secretary and switchboard operator in the Polish embassy: *Cudak v. Lithuania* [GC], §§ 44-47; and, to similar effect, a head accountant: *Sabeh El Leil v. France* [GC], § 39), a senior police officer (*Šikić v. Croatia*, §§ 18-20) or an army officer in the military courts (*Vasilchenko v. Russia*, §§ 34-36), to proceedings regarding the right to obtain the post of parliamentary assistant (*Savino and Others v. Italy*), to disciplinary proceedings against a judge (*Olujić v. Croatia*), to an appeal by a prosecutor against a presidential decree ordering his transfer (*Zalli v. Albania* (dec.) and the other references cited therein), and to proceedings concerning the professional career of a customs officer (right to apply for an internal promotion: *Fiume v. Italy*, §§ 33-36).

25. Constitutional disputes may also come within the ambit of Article 6 if the constitutional proceedings have a decisive bearing on the outcome of the dispute (about a “civil” right) in the ordinary courts (*Ruiz-Mateos v. Spain*). This does not apply in the case of disputes relating to a

presidential decree granting citizenship to an individual as an exceptional measure, or to the determination of whether the President has breached his constitutional oath (*Paksas v. Lithuania* [GC], §§ 65-66). The criteria governing the application of Article 6 § 1 to an interim measure extend to the Constitutional Court (*Kübler v. Germany*, §§ 47-48).

26. Lastly, Article 6 is also applicable to other not strictly pecuniary matters such as the environment, where disputes may arise involving the right to life, to health or to a healthy environment (*Taşkın and Others v. Turkey*); the fostering of children (*McMichael v. the United Kingdom*); children’s schooling arrangements (*Ellès and Others v. Switzerland*, §§ 21-23); the right to have paternity established (*Alaverdyan v. Armenia* (dec.), § 33); the right to liberty (*Laidin v. France* (no. 2)); prisoners’ detention arrangements (for instance, disputes concerning the restrictions to which prisoners are subjected as a result of being placed in a high-security unit (*Enea v. Italy* [GC], §§ 97-107) or in a high-security cell (*Stegarescu and Bahrin v. Portugal*)), or disciplinary proceedings resulting in restrictions on family visits to prison (*Gülmez v. Turkey*, § 30) or other similar restrictions (*Ganci v. Italy*, § 25); the right to a good reputation (*Helmers v. Sweden*); the right of access to administrative documents (*Loiseau v. France* (dec.)), or an appeal against an entry in a police file affecting the right to a reputation, the right to protection of property and the possibility of finding employment and hence earning a living (*Pocius v. Lithuania*, §§ 38-46; *Užkauskas v. Lithuania*, §§ 32-40); the right to be a member of an association (*Sakellaropoulos v. Greece* (dec.) – similarly, proceedings concerning the lawful existence of an association concern the association’s civil rights, even if under domestic legislation the question of freedom of association belongs to the field of public law: see *APEH Üldözötteinek Szövetsége and Others v. Hungary*, §§ 34-35); and, lastly, the right to continue higher education studies (*Emine Araç v. Turkey*, §§ 18-25), a position which applies *a fortiori* in the context of primary education (*Oršuš and Others v. Croatia* [GC], § 104). Thus, Article 6 extends to proceedings which may unquestionably have a direct and significant impact on the individual’s private life (*Alexandre v. Portugal*, §§ 51 and 54).

### C. Applicability of Article 6 to proceedings other than main proceedings

27. Preliminary proceedings, like those concerned with the grant of an interim measure such as an injunction, were not normally considered to “determine” civil rights and obligations and did not therefore normally fall within the protection of Article 6 (see, *inter alia*, *Verlagsgruppe News GmbH v. Austria* (dec.) and *Libert v. Belgium* (dec.)). However, the Court has recently departed from its previous case-law and taken a new approach.

28. In *Micallef v. Malta* ([GC], §§ 83-86), the Court established that the applicability of Article 6 to interim measures will depend on whether certain conditions are fulfilled. Firstly, the right at stake in both the main and the injunction proceedings should be “civil” within the meaning of the Convention. Secondly, the nature of the interim measure, its object and purpose as well as its effects on the right in question should be scrutinised. Whenever an interim measure can be considered effectively to determine the civil right or obligation at stake, notwithstanding the length of time it is in force, Article 6 will be applicable.

29. An interlocutory judgment can be equated to interim or provisional measures and proceedings, and the same criteria are thus relevant to determine whether Article 6 is applicable under its civil head (*Mercieca and Others v. Malta*, § 35).

30. Again with reference to the principles established in *Micallef v. Malta* [GC], Article 6 may apply to the stay of execution proceedings in accordance with the above-mentioned criteria (*Central Mediterranean Development Corporation Limited v. Malta* (no. 2), §§ 21-23).

31. Article 6 is applicable to interim proceedings which pursue the same purpose as the pending main proceedings, where the interim injunction is immediately enforceable and entails a ruling on the same right (*RTBF v. Belgium*, §§ 64-65).

32. As regards consecutive criminal and civil proceedings, if a State’s domestic law provides for proceedings consisting of two stages – the first where the court rules on whether there is entitlement to damages and the second where it fixes the amount – it is reasonable, for the purposes of Article 6 § 1, to regard the civil right as not having been “determined” until the precise amount has been decided: determining a right entails ruling not only on the right’s existence, but also on its scope or the manner in which it may be exercised, which of course includes assessing the damages (*Torri v. Italy*, § 19).

33. With regard to the execution of court decisions, Article 6 § 1 applies to all stages of legal proceedings for the “determination of ... civil rights and obligations”, not excluding stages subsequent to judgment on the merits. Execution of a judgment given by any court must therefore be regarded as an integral part of the “trial” for the purposes of Article 6 (*Hornsby v. Greece*, § 40; *Romańczyk v. France*, § 53, concerning the execution of a judgment authorising the recovery of maintenance debts). Regardless of whether Article 6 is applicable to the initial proceedings, an enforcement title determining civil rights does not necessarily have to result from proceedings to which Article 6 is applicable (*Buj v. Croatia*, § 19). The *exequatur* of a foreign court’s forfeiture order falls within the ambit of Article 6, under its civil head only (*Saccoccia v. Austria* (dec.))

34. Applications to have proceedings reopened: Article 6 is not applicable to proceedings concerning an application for the reopening of civil proceedings which have been terminated by a final decision (*Sablon v. Belgium*, § 86). This reasoning also applies to an application to reopen proceedings after the Court has found a violation of the Convention (*Verein gegen Tierfabriken Schweiz (VgT) v. Switzerland (no. 2)*, § 24). There was one highly exceptional case, however, in which a procedure denoted in the domestic legal system as an application for the reopening of proceedings was the only legal means of seeking redress in respect of civil claims, and its outcome was thus held to be decisive for the applicant’s “civil rights and obligations” (*Melis v. Greece*, §§ 19-20).

35. Article 6 has also been declared applicable to a third-party appeal which had a direct impact on the applicants’ civil rights and obligations (*Kakamoukas and Others v. Greece* [GC], § 32).

## D. Excluded matters

36. Merely showing that a dispute is “pecuniary” in nature is not in itself sufficient to attract the applicability of Article 6 § 1 under its civil head (*Ferrazzini v. Italy* [GC], § 25).

37. Matters outside the scope of Article 6 include tax proceedings: tax matters still form part of the hard core of public-authority prerogatives, with the public nature of the relationship between the taxpayer and the community remaining predominant (*ibid.*, § 29). Similarly excluded are summary injunction proceedings concerning customs duties or charges (*Emesa Sugar N.V. v. the Netherlands* (dec.)).

38. The same applies, in the immigration field, to the entry, residence and removal of aliens, in relation to proceedings concerning the granting of political asylum or deportation (application for an order quashing a deportation order: see *Maaouia v. France* [GC], § 38; extradition: see *Peñafiel Salgado v. Spain* (dec.); *Mamatkulov and Askarov v. Turkey* [GC], §§ 81-83; and an action in damages by an asylum-seeker on account of the refusal to grant asylum: see *Panjeheighalehei v. Denmark* (dec.)), despite the possibly serious implications for private or family life or employment prospects. This inapplicability extends to the inclusion of an alien in the Schengen Information System (*Dalea v. France* (dec.)). The right to hold a passport and the right to nationality are not civil rights for the purposes of Article 6 (*Smirnov v. Russia* (dec.)). However, a foreigner’s right to apply for a work permit may come under Article 6, both for the employer and the employee, even if, under domestic

law, the employee has no *locus standi* to apply for it, provided that what is involved is simply a procedural bar that does not affect the substance of the right (*Jurisc and Collegium Mehrerau v. Austria*, §§ 54-62).

39. According to *Vilho Eskelinen and Others v. Finland* [GC], disputes relating to public servants do not fall within the scope of Article 6 when two criteria are met: the State in its national law must have expressly excluded access to a court for the post or category of staff in question, and the exclusion must be justified on objective grounds in the State's interest (§ 62). That was the case of a soldier discharged from the army for breaches of discipline who was unable to challenge his discharge before the courts and whose "special bond of trust and loyalty" with the State had been called into question (*Suküt v. Turkey* (dec.)). In order for the exclusion to be justified, it is not enough for the State to establish that the civil servant in question participates in the exercise of public power or that there exists, to use the words of the Court in *Pellegrin*, a "special bond of trust and loyalty" between the civil servant and the State, as employer. It is also for the State to show that the subject matter of the dispute in issue is related to the exercise of State power or that it has called into question the special bond. There can in principle be no justification for the exclusion from the guarantees of Article 6 of ordinary labour disputes, such as those relating to salaries, allowances or similar entitlements, on the basis of the special nature of the relationship between the particular civil servant and the State in question (*Vilho Eskelinen and Others v. Finland* [GC], § 62).

40. Lastly, political rights such as the right to stand for election and retain one's seat (electoral dispute: see *Pierre-Bloch v. France*, § 50), the right to a pension as a former member of Parliament (*Papon v. France* (dec.)), or a political party's right to carry on its political activities (for a case concerning the dissolution of a party, see *Refah Partisi (The Welfare Party) and Others v. Turkey* (dec.)) cannot be regarded as civil rights within the meaning of Article 6 § 1. Similarly, proceedings in which a non-governmental organisation conducting parliamentary-election observations was refused access to documents not containing information relating to the applicant itself fell outside the scope of Article 6 § 1 (*Geraguyn Khorhurd Patgamavorakan Akumb v. Armenia* (dec.)).

41. In addition, the Court recently reaffirmed that the right to report matters stated in open court is not a civil right (*Mackay and BBC Scotland v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 20-22).

42. Conclusion: Where there exists a "dispute" concerning "civil rights and obligations", as defined according to the above-mentioned criteria, Article 6 § 1 secures to the person concerned the right to have any claim relating to his civil rights and obligations brought before a court or tribunal. In this way the Article embodies the "right to a court", of which the right of access, that is the right to institute proceedings before courts in civil matters, constitutes one aspect. To this are added the guarantees laid down by Article 6 § 1 as regards both the organisation and composition of the court and the conduct of the proceedings. In sum, the whole makes up the right to a "fair hearing" (*Golder v. the United Kingdom*, § 36).

## II. Right to a court

### Article 6 § 1 of the Convention

“1. In the determination of his civil rights and obligations ..., everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law. ...”

### A. Right and access to a court

43. The right to a fair trial, as guaranteed by Article 6 § 1, must be construed in the light of the rule of law, which requires that litigants should have an effective judicial remedy enabling them to assert their civil rights (*Běleš and Others v. the Czech Republic*, § 49).

Everyone has the right to have any claim relating to his “civil rights and obligations” brought before a court or tribunal. In this way Article 6 § 1 embodies the “right to a court”, of which the right of access, that is, the right to institute proceedings before courts in civil matters, constitutes one aspect (*Golder v. the United Kingdom*, § 36). The “right to a court” and the right of access are not absolute. They may be subject to limitations, but these must not restrict or reduce the access left to the individual in such a way or to such an extent that the very essence of the right is impaired (*Philis v. Greece (no. 1)*, § 59; *De Geouffre de la Pradelle v. France*, § 28; *Stanev v. Bulgaria* [GC], § 229).<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. A right that is practical and effective

44. The right of access to a court must be “practical and effective” (*Bellet v. France*, § 38). For the right of access to be effective, an individual must “have a clear, practical opportunity to challenge an act that is an interference with his rights” (*ibid.*, § 36; *Nunes Dias v. Portugal* (dec.) regarding the rules governing notice to appear). The rules governing the formal steps to be taken and the time-limits to be complied with in lodging an appeal or an application for judicial review are aimed at ensuring a proper administration of justice and compliance, in particular, with the principle of legal certainty (*Cañete de Goñi v. Spain*, § 36). That being so, the rules in question, or their application, should not prevent litigants from using an available remedy (*Miragall Escolano v. Spain*; *Zvolský and Zvolská v. the Czech Republic*, § 51).

45. In the specific circumstances of a case, the practical and effective nature of this right may be impaired, for instance:

- by the prohibitive cost of the proceedings in view of the individual’s financial capacity:
  - the excessive amount of security for costs in the context of an application to join criminal proceedings as a civil party (*Aït-Mouhoub v. France*, §§ 57-58; *García Manibardo v. Spain*, §§ 38-45);
  - excessive court fees (*Kreuz v. Poland*, §§ 60-67); *Podbielski and PPU Polpure v. Poland*, §§ 65-66; *Weissman and Others v. Romania*, § 42; and, conversely, *Reuther v. Germany* (dec.));
- by issues relating to time-limits:
  - the time taken to hear an appeal leading to its being declared inadmissible (*Melnyk v. Ukraine*, § 26);
  - where “the fact that the applicants were told that their action was statute-barred at such a late stage of the proceedings, which they had been conducting in good faith and

1. See also the section on “Fairness”.

with sufficient diligence, deprived them once and for all of any possibility of asserting their right” (*Yagtzilar and Others v. Greece*, § 27);

- by the existence of procedural bars preventing or limiting the possibilities of applying to a court:
  - a particularly strict interpretation by the domestic courts of a procedural rule (excessive formalism) may deprive applicants of their right of access to a court (*Pérez de Rada Cavanilles v. Spain*, § 49; *Miragall Escolano v. Spain*, § 38; *Sotiris and Nikos Koutras ATTEE v. Greece*, § 20; *Běleš and Others v. the Czech Republic*, § 50; *RTBF v. Belgium*, §§ 71-72 and 74);
  - the requirements linked to execution of an earlier ruling may impair the right of access to a court, for instance where the applicant’s lack of funds makes it impossible for him even to begin to comply with the earlier judgment (*Annoni di Gussola and Others v. France*, § 56; compare with *Arvanitakis v. France* (dec.));
  - procedural rules barring certain subjects of law from taking court proceedings (*The Holy Monasteries v. Greece*, § 83; *Philis v. Greece (no. 1)*, § 65; *Lupaş and Others v. Romania*, §§ 64-67; and, regarding minors lacking capacity, *Stanev v. Bulgaria* [GC], §§ 241-45).<sup>2</sup>

However, again on the subject of formalism, the conditions of admissibility of an appeal on points of law may quite legitimately be stricter than for an ordinary appeal. Given the special nature of the Court of Cassation’s role, the procedure followed in the Court of Cassation may be more formal, especially where the proceedings before it follow the hearing of the case by a first-instance court and then a court of appeal, each with full jurisdiction (*Levages Prestations Services v. France*, §§ 44-48; *Brualla Gómez de la Torre v. Spain*, §§ 34-39).

46. Furthermore, the right to a court includes not only the right to institute proceedings but also the right to obtain a determination of the dispute by a court (*Kutić v. Croatia*, §§ 25 and 32 regarding the staying of proceedings; *Aćimović v. Croatia*, § 41; *Beneficio Cappella Paolini v. San Marino*, § 29 concerning a denial of justice). The right to a court may also be infringed where a court fails to comply with the statutory time-limit in ruling on appeals against a series of decisions of limited duration (*Musumeci v. Italy*, §§ 41-43) or in the absence of a decision (*Ganci v. Italy*, § 31). The “right to a court” also encompasses the execution of judgments.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Limitations

47. The right of access to the courts is not absolute but may be subject to limitations permitted by implication (*Golder v. the United Kingdom*, § 38; *Stanev v. Bulgaria* [GC], § 230). This applies in particular where the conditions of admissibility of an appeal are concerned, since by its very nature it calls for regulation by the State, which enjoys a certain margin of appreciation in this regard (*Luordo v. Italy*, § 85).

48. Nonetheless, the limitations applied must not restrict or reduce the access left to the individual in such a way or to such an extent that the very essence of the right is impaired. Furthermore, a limitation will not be compatible with Article 6 § 1 if it does not pursue a “legitimate aim” and if there is not a “reasonable relationship of proportionality between the means employed and the aim sought to be achieved” (*Ashingdane v. the United Kingdom*, § 57; *Fayed v. the United Kingdom*, § 65; *Markovic and Others v. Italy* [GC], § 99).

49. The right of access to a court may also be subject, in certain circumstances, to legitimate restrictions, such as statutory limitation periods (*Stubblings and Others v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 51-

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2. See also the section on “Legal aid”.

3. See the section on “Execution”.

52), security for costs orders (*Tolstoy Miloslavsky v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 62-67) or a legal representation requirement (*R.P. and Others v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 63-67).

50. Where access to a court is restricted by law or in practice, the Court examines whether the restriction affects the substance of the right and, in particular, whether it pursues a legitimate aim and whether there is a reasonable relationship of proportionality between the means employed and the aim sought to be achieved: *Ashingdane v. the United Kingdom*, § 57. No violation of Article 6 § 1 can be found if the restriction is compatible with the principles established by the Court.

51. International organisations' immunity from national jurisdiction: this treaty-based rule – which pursues a legitimate aim (*Waite and Kennedy v. Germany* [GC], § 63) – is permissible from the standpoint of Article 6 § 1 only if the restriction stemming from it is not disproportionate. Hence, it will be compatible with Article 6 § 1 if the persons concerned have available to them reasonable alternative means to protect effectively their rights under the Convention (*ibid.*, §§ 68-74; *Prince Hans-Adam II of Liechtenstein v. Germany* [GC], § 48; *Chapman v. Belgium* (dec.), §§ 51-56).

52. State immunity: the doctrine of State immunity is generally accepted by the community of nations. Measures taken by a member State which reflect generally recognised rules of public international law on State immunity do not automatically constitute a disproportionate restriction on the right of access to court (*Fogarty v. the United Kingdom* [GC], § 36; *McElhinney v. Ireland* [GC], § 37; *Sabeh El Leil v. France* [GC], § 49).

- State immunity from jurisdiction: In cases where the application of the principle of State immunity from jurisdiction restricts the exercise of the right of access to a court, it must be ascertained whether the circumstances of the case justify such restriction. The restriction must pursue a legitimate aim and be proportionate to that aim (*ibid.*, §§ 51-54; *Cudak v. Lithuania* [GC], § 59). The grant of sovereign immunity to a State in civil proceedings pursues the “legitimate aim” of complying with international law to promote comity and good relations between States (*Fogarty v. the United Kingdom* [GC], § 34; *Al-Adsani v. the United Kingdom* [GC], § 54; *Treska v. Albania and Italy* (dec.)). As to whether the measure taken is proportionate, it may in some cases impair the very essence of the individual's right of access to a court (*Cudak v. Lithuania* [GC], § 74; *Sabeh El Leil v. France* [GC], § 49) while in other cases it may not (*Al-Adsani v. the United Kingdom* [GC], § 67; *Fogarty v. the United Kingdom* [GC], § 39; *McElhinney v. Ireland* [GC], § 38).

State immunity from jurisdiction has been circumscribed by developments in customary international law: for instance, the immunity rule does not apply to a State's employment contracts with the staff of its diplomatic missions abroad, except in situations that are exhaustively enumerated (*Sabeh El Leil v. France* [GC], §§ 53-54 and 57-58). A restrictive approach to immunity may also be taken in relation to commercial transactions between the State and foreign private individuals (*Oleynikov v. Russia*, §§ 61 and 66). On the other hand, the Court noted in 2001 that, while there appeared to be a trend in international and comparative law towards limiting State immunity in respect of personal injury caused by an act or omission within the forum State, that practice was by no means universal (*McElhinney v. Ireland* [GC], § 38).

- State immunity from execution is not in itself contrary to Article 6 § 1. The Court noted in 2005 that all the international legal instruments governing State immunity set forth the general principle that, subject to certain strictly delimited exceptions, foreign States enjoyed immunity from execution in the territory of the forum State (*Manoilescu and Dobrescu v. Romania and Russia* (dec.), § 73). By way of illustration, the Court held in 2002 that “although the Greek courts ordered the German State to pay damages to the applicants, this did not necessarily oblige the Greek State to ensure that the applicants could recover their debt through enforcement proceedings in Greece” (*Kalogeropoulou and Others v. Greece and Germany* (dec.)). These decisions are valid in relation to the state

of international law at the relevant time and do not preclude future developments in that law.

53. Parliamentary immunity: it is a long-standing practice for States generally to confer varying degrees of immunity on parliamentarians, with the aim of allowing free speech for representatives of the people and preventing partisan complaints from interfering with parliamentary functions (*C.G.I.L. and Cofferati v. Italy (no. 2)*, § 44). Hence, parliamentary immunity may be compatible with Article 6, provided that it:

- pursues legitimate aims: protecting free speech in Parliament and maintaining the separation of powers between the legislature and the judiciary (*A. v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 75-77 and 79);
- is not disproportionate to the aims sought to be achieved (if the person concerned has reasonable alternative means to protect effectively his or her rights (*ibid.*, § 86) and immunity attaches only to the exercise of parliamentary functions (*ibid.*, § 84; *Zollmann v. the United Kingdom* (dec.)). A lack of any clear connection with parliamentary activity calls for a narrow interpretation of the concept of proportionality between the aim sought to be achieved and the means employed (*Cordova v. Italy (no. 2)*, § 64; *Syngelidis v. Greece*, § 44). Individuals' right of access to a court cannot be restricted in a manner incompatible with Article 6 § 1 whenever the impugned remarks were made by a member of Parliament (*Cordova v. Italy (no. 1)*, § 63; *C.G.I.L. and Cofferati v. Italy (no. 2)*, §§ 46-50, where, in addition, the victims did not have any reasonable alternative means to protect their rights).

54. Judges' exemption from jurisdiction is likewise not incompatible with Article 6 § 1 if it pursues a legitimate aim, namely the proper administration of justice (*Ernst and Others v. Belgium*, § 50), and observes the principle of proportionality in the sense that the applicants have reasonable alternative means to protect effectively their rights under the Convention (*Ernst and Others v. Belgium*, § 53-55).

55. Immunities enjoyed by civil servants: limitations on the ability of individuals to take legal proceedings to challenge statements and findings made by civil servants which damage their reputation may pursue a legitimate aim in the public interest (*Fayed v. the United Kingdom*, § 70); however, there must be a relationship of proportionality between the means employed and that legitimate aim (*ibid.*, §§ 75-82).

56. Limits to immunity: it would not be consistent with the rule of law in a democratic society or with the basic principle underlying Article 6 § 1 – namely that civil claims must be capable of being submitted to a judge for adjudication – if a State could, without restraint or control by the Convention enforcement bodies, remove from the jurisdiction of the courts a whole range of civil claims or confer immunities from civil liability on large groups or categories of persons (*ibid.*, § 65; *McElhinney v. Ireland* [GC], §§ 23-26; *Sabeh El Leil v. France* [GC], § 50).

## B. Waiver

### 1. Principle

57. In the Contracting States' domestic legal systems a waiver of a person's right to have his or case heard by a court or tribunal is frequently encountered in civil matters, notably in the shape of arbitration clauses in contracts. The waiver, which has undeniable advantages for the individual concerned as well as for the administration of justice, does not in principle offend against the Convention (*Deweere v. Belgium*, § 49).

## 2. Conditions

58. Persons may waive their right to a court in favour of arbitration, provided that such waiver is permissible and is established freely and unequivocally (*Suda v. the Czech Republic*, §§ 48-49). In a democratic society too great an importance attaches to the right to a court for its benefit to be forfeited solely by reason of the fact that an individual is a party to a settlement reached in the course of a procedure ancillary to court proceedings (*ibid.*)<sup>4</sup>.

## C. Legal aid

### 1. Granting of legal aid

59. Article 6 § 1 does not imply that the State must provide free legal aid for every dispute relating to a “civil right” (*Airey v. Ireland*, § 26). There is a clear distinction between Article 6 § 3 (c) – which guarantees the right to free legal aid in criminal proceedings subject to certain conditions – and Article 6 § 1, which makes no reference to legal aid (*Essaadi v. France*, § 30).

60. However, the Convention is intended to safeguard rights which are practical and effective, in particular the right of access to a court. Hence, Article 6 § 1 may sometimes compel the State to provide for the assistance of a lawyer when such assistance proves indispensable for an effective access to court (*Airey v. Ireland*, § 26).

61. The question whether or not Article 6 requires the provision of legal representation to an individual litigant will depend upon the specific circumstances of the case (*ibid.*; *Steel and Morris v. the United Kingdom*, § 61; *McVicar v. the United Kingdom*, § 48). What has to be ascertained is whether, in the light of all the circumstances, the lack of legal aid would deprive the applicant of a fair hearing (*ibid.*, § 51).

62. The question whether Article 6 implies a requirement to provide legal aid will depend, among other factors, on:

- the importance of what is at stake for the applicant (*Steel and Morris v. the United Kingdom*, § 61; *P., C. and S. v. the United Kingdom*, § 100);
- the complexity of the relevant law or procedure (*Airey v. Ireland*, § 24);
- the applicant’s capacity to represent him or herself effectively (*McVicar v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 48-62; *Steel and Morris v. the United Kingdom*, § 61);
- the existence of a statutory requirement to have legal representation (*Airey v. Ireland*, § 26; *Gnahoré v. France*, § 41 *in fine*).

63. However, the right in question is not absolute and it may therefore be permissible to impose conditions on the grant of legal aid based in particular on the following considerations, in addition to those cited in the preceding paragraph:

- the financial situation of the litigant (*Steel and Morris v. the United Kingdom*, § 62);
- his or her prospects of success in the proceedings (*ibid.*).

Hence, a legal aid system may exist which selects the cases which qualify for it. However, the system established by the legislature must offer individuals substantial guarantees to protect them from arbitrariness (*Gnahoré v. France*, § 41; *Essaadi v. France*, § 36; *Del Sol v. France*, § 26; *Bakan v. Turkey*, §§ 75-76 with a reference to the judgment in *Aerts v. Belgium* concerning an impairment of the very essence of the right to a court). It is therefore important to have due regard to the quality of a legal aid scheme within a State (*Essaadi v. France*, § 35) and to verify whether the

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4. See also the section on “Public hearing”.

method chosen by the authorities is compatible with the Convention (*Santambrogio v. Italy*, § 52; *Bakan v. Turkey*, §§ 74-78; *Pedro Ramos v. Switzerland*, §§ 41-45).

64. It is essential for the court to give reasons for refusing legal aid and to handle requests for legal aid with diligence (*Tabor v. Poland*, §§ 45-46; *Saoud v. France*, §§ 133-36).

65. Furthermore, the refusal of legal aid to foreign legal persons is not contrary to Article 6 (*Granos Organicos Nacionales S.A. v. Germany*, §§ 48-53).

## 2. Effectiveness of the legal aid granted

66. The State is not accountable for the actions of an officially appointed lawyer. It follows from the independence of the legal profession from the State (*Staroszczyk v. Poland*, § 133), that the conduct of the defence is essentially a matter between the defendant and his counsel, whether counsel is appointed under a legal aid scheme or is privately financed. The conduct of the defence as such cannot, other than in special circumstances, incur the State's liability under the Convention (*Tuziński v. Poland* (dec.)).

67. However, assigning a lawyer to represent a party does not in itself guarantee effective assistance (*Siałkowska v. Poland*, §§ 110 and 116). The lawyer appointed for legal aid purposes may be prevented for a protracted period from acting or may shirk his duties. If they are notified of the situation, the competent national authorities must replace him; should they fail to do so, the litigant would be deprived of effective assistance in practice despite the provision of free legal aid (*Bertuzzi v. France*, § 30).

68. It is above all the responsibility of the State to ensure the requisite balance between the effective enjoyment of access to justice on the one hand and the independence of the legal profession on the other. The Court has clearly stressed that any refusal by a legal aid lawyer to act must meet certain quality requirements. Those requirements will not be met where the shortcomings in the legal aid system deprive individuals of the "practical and effective" access to a court to which they are entitled (*Staroszczyk v. Poland*, § 135; *Siałkowska v. Poland*, § 114 - violation).

## III. Institutional requirements

### Article 6 § 1 of the Convention

"1. In the determination of his civil rights and obligations ..., everyone is entitled to a ... hearing ... by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law. ..."

### A. Concept of a "tribunal"

#### 1. Autonomous concept

69. An authority not classified as one of the courts of a State may nonetheless, for the purposes of Article 6 § 1, come within the concept of a "tribunal" in the substantive sense of the term (*Sramek v. Austria*, § 36).

70. A court or tribunal is characterised in the substantive sense of the term by its judicial function, that is to say determining matters within its competence on the basis of rules of law and after proceedings conducted in a prescribed manner (*ibid.*, § 36; *Cyprus v. Turkey* [GC], § 233).

71. A power of decision is inherent in the very notion of “tribunal”. The proceedings must provide the “determination by a tribunal of the matters in dispute” which is required by Article 6 § 1 (*Bentham v. the Netherlands*, § 40).

72. The power simply to issue advisory opinions without binding force is therefore not sufficient, even if those opinions are followed in the great majority of cases (*ibid.*).

73. For the purposes of Article 6 § 1 a “tribunal” need not be a court of law integrated within the standard judicial machinery of the country concerned. It may be set up to deal with a specific subject matter which can be appropriately administered outside the ordinary court system. What is important to ensure compliance with Article 6 § 1 are the guarantees, both substantive and procedural, which are in place (*Rolf Gustafson v. Sweden*, § 45).

74. Hence, a “tribunal” may comprise a body set up to determine a limited number of specific issues, provided always that it offers the appropriate guarantees (*Lithgow and Others v. the United Kingdom*, § 201, in the context of an arbitration tribunal).

75. The fact that it performs many functions (administrative, regulatory, adjudicative, advisory and disciplinary) cannot *in itself* preclude an institution from being a “tribunal” (*H. v. Belgium*, § 50).

76. The power to give a binding decision which may not be altered by a non-judicial authority to the detriment of an individual party is inherent in the very notion of a “tribunal” (*Van de Hurk v. the Netherlands*, § 45). One of the fundamental aspects of the rule of law is the principle of legal certainty, which requires, *inter alia*, that where the courts have finally determined an issue their ruling should not be called into question (similarly, in the case of applications for leave to appeal: *Brumărescu v. Romania* [GC], § 61).<sup>5</sup>

77. A “tribunal” must also satisfy a series of further requirements – independence, in particular of the executive; impartiality; duration of its members’ terms of office; guarantees afforded by its procedure – several of which appear in the text of Article 6 § 1 (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 55; *Cyprus v. Turkey* [GC], § 233). Indeed, both independence and impartiality are key components of the concept of a “tribunal”.<sup>6</sup>

78. Examples of bodies recognised as having the status of a “tribunal” within the meaning of Article 6 § 1 of the Convention include:

- a regional real-property transactions authority (*Sramek v. Austria*, § 36);
- a criminal damage compensation board (*Rolf Gustafson v. Sweden*, § 48);
- a forestry disputes resolution committee (*Argyrou and Others v. Greece*, § 27).

## 2. Level of jurisdiction

79. While Article 6 § 1 does not compel the Contracting States to set up courts of appeal or of cassation, a State which does institute such courts is required to ensure that persons amenable to the law shall enjoy before these courts the fundamental guarantees contained in Article 6 § 1 (*Platakou v. Greece*, § 38):

- Assessment *in concreto*: The manner in which Article 6 § 1 applies to courts of appeal or of cassation will, however, depend on the special features of the proceedings concerned. The conditions of admissibility of an appeal on points of law may be stricter than for an ordinary appeal (*Levages Prestations Services v. France*, § 45).
- Assessment *in globo*: Account must be taken of the entirety of the proceedings conducted in the domestic legal order (*ibid.*). Consequently, a higher or the highest court may, in

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5. See also the section on “Execution of judgments”.

6. See the section on “Independence and impartiality”.

some circumstances, make reparation for an initial violation of one of the Convention's provisions (*De Haan v. the Netherlands*, § 54).

80. Demands of flexibility and efficiency, which are fully compatible with the protection of human rights, may justify the prior intervention of administrative or professional bodies and, *a fortiori*, of judicial bodies which do not satisfy the requirements of Article 6 in every respect (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 51). No violation of the Convention can be found if the proceedings before those bodies are “subject to subsequent control by a judicial body that has full jurisdiction” and does provide the guarantees of Article 6 (*Zumtobel v. Austria*, §§ 29-32; *Bryan v. the United Kingdom*, § 40).

81. Likewise, the fact that the duty of adjudicating is conferred on professional disciplinary bodies does not in itself infringe the Convention. Nonetheless, in such circumstances the Convention calls for at least one of the following two systems: either the professional disciplinary bodies themselves comply with the requirements of that Article, or they do not so comply but are subject to subsequent review by “a judicial body that has full jurisdiction” and does provide the guarantees of Article 6 § 1 (*Albert and Le Compte v. Belgium*, § 29; *Gautrin and Others v. France*, § 57).

82. Accordingly, the Court has consistently reiterated that under Article 6 § 1 it is necessary that the decisions of administrative authorities which do not themselves satisfy the requirements of that Article should be subject to subsequent control by “a judicial body that has full jurisdiction” (*Ortenberg v. Austria*, § 31).<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Review by a court having full jurisdiction

83. Only an institution that has full jurisdiction merits the designation “tribunal” within the meaning of Article 6 § 1 (*Beaumartin v. France*, § 38). Article 6 § 1 requires the courts to carry out an effective judicial review (*Obermeier v. Austria*, § 70). The principle that a court should exercise full jurisdiction requires it not to abandon any of the elements of its judicial function (*Chevrol v. France*, § 63).

84. The “tribunal” in question must have jurisdiction to examine all questions of fact and law relevant to the dispute before it (*Terra Woningen B.V. v. the Netherlands*, § 52).

85. However, there are some specialised areas of the law (for instance, in the sphere of town and country planning) where the courts have limited jurisdiction as to the facts, but may overturn the administrative authorities' decision if it was based on an inference from facts which was perverse or irrational. More generally, this raises the issue of the scope of review of administrative decisions (*Bryan v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 44-47; *Crompton v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 70-73).

86. The case-law has established certain criteria for assessing whether the review was conducted by a body with “full jurisdiction” for the purposes of the Convention (*Sigma Radio Television Ltd v. Cyprus*, §§ 151-157). Thus, in order to determine whether the judicial body in question provided a sufficient review, the following three criteria must be considered in combination:

- The subject matter of the decision appealed against:
  - if the administrative decision concerned a simple question of fact the court's scrutiny will need to be more intense than if it concerned a specialised field requiring specific technical knowledge;
  - the systems existing in Europe usually limit the courts' power to review factual issues, while not preventing them from overturning the decision on various grounds. This is not called into question by the case-law.
- The manner in which that decision was arrived at: what procedural safeguards were in place before the administrative authority concerned?

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7. See also the section on “Fairness”.

- If the complainant enjoyed procedural safeguards satisfying many of the requirements of Article 6 during the prior administrative procedure, this may justify a lighter form of subsequent judicial control (*Bryan v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 46-47; *Holding and Barnes PLC v. the United Kingdom* (dec.)).
- The content of the dispute, including the desired and actual grounds of appeal (*Bryan v. the United Kingdom*, § 45):
  - the judgment must be able to examine all the complainant's submissions on their merits, point by point, without declining to examine any of them, and to give clear reasons for rejecting them. As to the facts, the court must be empowered to re-examine those which are central to the complainant's case. Hence, if the complainant makes only procedural submissions, he or she cannot subsequently criticise the court for not having ruled on the facts (*Potocka and Others v. Poland*, § 57).

87. For example, the refusal of a court to rule independently on certain issues of fact which are crucial to the settlement of the dispute before it may amount to a violation of Article 6 § 1 (*Terra Woningen B.V. v. the Netherlands*, §§ 53-55). The same applies if the court does not have jurisdiction to determine the central issue in the dispute (*Tsfayo v. the United Kingdom*, § 48). In such cases the matter which is decisive for the outcome of the case is not subjected to independent judicial scrutiny.

88. If a ground of appeal is upheld, the reviewing court must have the power to quash the impugned decision and to either take a fresh decision itself or remit the case for decision by the same or a different body (*Kingsley v. the United Kingdom* [GC], §§ 32 and 34).

89. Where the facts have already been established by the administrative authority in the course of a quasi-judicial procedure satisfying many of the requirements laid down by Article 6 § 1, where there is no dispute as to the facts thus established or the inferences drawn from them by the administrative authority, and where the court has dealt point by point with the litigant's other grounds of appeal, the scope of the review conducted by the appellate court will be held to be sufficient to comply with Article 6 § 1 (*Bryan v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 44-47).

90. Below are some examples of judicial bodies that have not been considered to have "full jurisdiction":

- an administrative court which was empowered only to determine whether the discretion enjoyed by the administrative authorities was used in a manner compatible with the object and purpose of the law (*Obermeier v. Austria*, § 70);
- a court which heard appeals on points of law from decisions of the disciplinary sections of professional associations, without having the power to assess whether the penalty was proportionate to the misconduct (*Diennet v. France*, § 34, in the context of a medical association; *Mérigaud v. France*, § 69, in the context of an association of surveyors);
- a Constitutional Court which could inquire into the contested proceedings solely from the point of view of their conformity with the Constitution, thus preventing it from examining all the relevant facts (*Zumtobel v. Austria*, §§ 29-30);
- the *Conseil d'État* which, in accordance with its own case-law, was obliged, in resolving the issue before it concerning the applicability of treaties, to abide by the opinion of the minister – an external authority who was also a representative of the executive – without subjecting that opinion to any criticism or discussion by the parties. The minister's involvement, which was decisive for the outcome of the legal proceedings, was not open to challenge by the applicant, who was, moreover, not afforded any opportunity to have the basis of her own reply to the minister examined (*Chevol v. France*, §§ 81-82).

91. By contrast:

- *Chaudet v. France*: the *Conseil d'État* determined an application for judicial review as the court of first and last instance. In this case the *Conseil d'État* did not have “full jurisdiction”, which would have had the effect of substituting its decision for that of the civil aviation medical board. However, it was clear from the case file that it had nonetheless addressed all of the submissions made by the applicant, on factual and legal grounds, and assessed all of the evidence in the medical file, having regard to the conclusions of all the medical reports discussed before it by the parties. The Court therefore held that the applicant’s case had been examined in compliance with the requirements of Article 6 § 1 (§§ 37-38).
- *Zumtobel v. Austria*: the Court held that the Austrian Administrative Court had met the requirements of Article 6 § 1 in relation to matters not exclusively within the discretion of the administrative authorities, and that it had considered the submissions on their merits, point by point, without ever having to decline jurisdiction in replying to them or in ascertaining various facts (§§ 31-32 – also *Ortenberg v. Austria*, §§ 33-34; *Fischer v. Austria*, § 34).
- *McMichael v. the United Kingdom*: in this case, an order of the *Sheriff Court* freeing a child for adoption was subject to appeal to the Court of Session. The latter had full jurisdiction in that regard; it normally proceeded on the basis of the Sheriff’s findings of fact but was not obliged to do so. It could, where appropriate, take evidence itself or remit the case to the Sheriff with instructions as to how he should proceed (§ 66). Furthermore, the Sheriff Court, in determining appeals against the decisions of children’s hearings, also had full jurisdiction, being empowered to examine both the merits and alleged procedural irregularities (§ 82).
- *Potocka and Others v. Poland*: the scope of the Supreme Administrative Court’s jurisdiction as determined by the Code of Administrative Procedure was limited to the assessment of the lawfulness of contested administrative decisions. However, the court was also empowered to set aside a decision wholly or in part if it was established that procedural requirements of fairness had not been met in the proceedings which had led to its adoption. The reasoning of the Supreme Administrative Court showed that in fact it had examined the expediency aspect of the case. Even though the court could have limited its analysis to finding that the contested decisions had to be upheld in the light of the procedural and substantive flaws in the applicants’ application, it had considered all their submissions on their merits, point by point, without ever having to decline jurisdiction in replying to them or in ascertaining the relevant facts. It had delivered a judgment which was carefully reasoned, and the applicants’ arguments relevant to the outcome of the case had been dealt with thoroughly. Accordingly, the scope of review of the Supreme Administrative Court had been sufficient to comply with Article 6 § 1 (§§ 56-59).

## 4. Execution of judgments

### a. Right to prompt implementation of a final and binding judicial decision

92. Article 6 § 1 protects the implementation of final, binding judicial decisions (as distinct from the implementation of decisions which may be subject to review by a higher court) (*Ouzounis and Others v. Greece*, § 21).

93. The right to execution of such decisions, given by any court, is an integral part of the “right to a court” (*Hornsby v. Greece*, § 40; *Scordino v. Italy (no. 1)* [GC], § 196). Otherwise, the provisions of Article 6 § 1 would be deprived of all useful effect (*Burdov v. Russia*, §§ 34 and 37).

94. This is of even greater importance in the context of administrative proceedings. By lodging an application for judicial review with the State's highest administrative court, the litigant seeks not only annulment of the impugned decision but also and above all the removal of its effects.

95. The effective protection of the litigant and the restoration of legality therefore presuppose an obligation on the administrative authorities' part to comply with the judgment (*Hornsby v. Greece*, § 41; *Kyrtatos v. Greece*, §§ 31-32).

96. Thus, while some delay in the execution of a judgment may be justified in particular circumstances, the delay may not be such as to impair the litigant's right to enforcement of the judgment (*Burdov v. Russia*, §§ 35-37).

97. Understood in this way, execution must be full and exhaustive and not just partial (*Matheus v. France*, § 58; *Sabin Popescu v. Romania*, §§ 68-76), and may not be prevented, invalidated or unduly delayed (*Immobiliare Saffi v. Italy* [GC], § 74).

98. The refusal of an authority to take account of a ruling given by a higher court – leading potentially to a series of judgments in the context of the same set of proceedings, repeatedly setting aside the decisions given – is also contrary to Article 6 § 1 (*Turczanik v. Poland*, §§ 49-51).

99. An unreasonably long delay in enforcement of a binding judgment may breach the Convention. The reasonableness of such delay is to be determined having regard in particular to the complexity of the enforcement proceedings, the applicant's own behaviour and that of the competent authorities, and the amount and nature of the court award (*Raylyan v. Russia*, § 31).

100. For example, the Court held that by refraining for more than five years from taking the necessary measures to comply with a final, enforceable judicial decision the national authorities had deprived the provisions of Article 6 § 1 of all useful effect (*Hornsby v. Greece*, § 45).

101. In another case, the overall period of nine months taken by the authorities to enforce a judgment was found not to be unreasonable in view of the circumstances (*Moroko v. Russia*, §§ 43-45).

102. The Court has found the right to a court under Article 6 § 1 to have been breached on account of the authorities' refusal, over a period of approximately four years, to use police assistance to enforce an order for possession against a tenant (*Lunari v. Italy*, §§ 38-42), and on account of a stay of execution – for over six years – resulting from the intervention of the legislature calling into question a court order for a tenant's eviction, which was accordingly deprived of all useful effect by the impugned legislative provisions (*Immobiliare Saffi v. Italy* [GC], §§ 70 and 74).

103. A person who has obtained judgment against the State at the end of legal proceedings may not be expected to bring separate enforcement proceedings (*Burdov v. Russia (no. 2)*, § 68). The burden to ensure compliance with a judgment against the State lies with the State authorities (*Yavorivskaya v. Russia*, § 25), starting from the date on which the judgment becomes binding and enforceable (*Burdov v. Russia (no. 2)*, § 69).

104. A successful litigant may be required to undertake certain procedural steps in order to allow or speed up the execution of a judgment. The requirement of the creditor's cooperation must not, however, go beyond what is strictly necessary and does not relieve the authorities of their obligations (*ibid.*).

105. It follows that the late payment, following enforcement proceedings, of amounts owing to the applicant cannot cure the national authorities' long-standing failure to comply with a judgment and does not afford adequate redress (*Scordino v. Italy (no. 1)* [GC], § 198).

106. The Court has also held that the authorities' stance of holding the applicant responsible for the initiation of execution proceedings in respect of an enforceable decision in his favour, coupled with

the disregard for his financial situation, constituted an excessive burden and restricted his right of access to a court to the extent of impairing the very essence of that right (*Apostol v. Georgia*, § 65).

107. A litigant may not be deprived of the benefit, within a reasonable time, of a final decision awarding him compensation for damage (*Burdov v. Russia*, § 35), or housing (*Teteriny v. Russia*, §§ 41-42), regardless of the complexity of the domestic enforcement procedure or of the State budgetary system. It is not open to a State authority to cite lack of funds or other resources as an excuse for not honouring a judgment debt (*Burdov v. Russia*, § 35; *Amat-G Ltd and Mebaghishvili v. Georgia*, § 47; *Scordino v. Italy (no. 1)* [GC], § 199). Nor may it cite a lack of alternative accommodation as an excuse for not honouring a judgment (*Prodan v. Moldova*, § 53).

108. A distinction has to be made between debts *owed by the State* (*Burdov v. Russia (no. 2)*, §§ 68-69, 72 et seq.) and those *owed by an individual*: the responsibility of the State cannot be engaged on account of non-payment of an enforceable debt as a result of the insolvency of a “private” debtor (*Sanglier v. France*, § 39; *Ciprová v. the Czech Republic* (dec.); *Cubanit v. Romania* (dec.)). Nevertheless, the State has a positive obligation to organise a system for enforcement of final decisions in disputes between private persons that is effective both in law and in practice (*Fuklev v. Ukraine*, § 84). The State’s responsibility may therefore be engaged if the public authorities involved in enforcement proceedings fail to display the necessary diligence, or even prevent enforcement (*ibid.*, § 67). The measures taken by the national authorities to secure enforcement must be adequate and sufficient for that purpose (*Ruianu v. Romania*, § 66), in view of their obligations in the matter of execution, since it is they who exercise public authority (*ibid.*, §§ 72-73).

109. Thus, for example, the Court held that, by refraining from taking sanctions in respect of the failure of a (private) third party to cooperate with the authorities empowered to enforce final enforceable decisions, the national authorities deprived the provisions of Article 6 § 1 of all useful effect (*Pini and Others v. Romania*, §§ 186-88, where the private institution where two children were living had prevented the execution for over three years of the orders for the children’s adoption).

110. Nevertheless, where the State has taken all the steps envisaged by the law to ensure that a private individual complies with a decision, the State cannot be held responsible for the debtor’s refusal to comply with his obligations (*Fociac v. Romania*, §§ 74 and 78).

111. Lastly, the right to a court likewise protects the right of access to enforcement proceedings, that is, the right to have enforcement proceedings initiated (*Apostol v. Georgia*, § 56).

## **b. Right not to have a final judicial decision called into question**

112. Furthermore, the right to a fair hearing must be interpreted in the light of the rule of law. One of the fundamental aspects of the rule of law is the principle of legal certainty (*Okyay and Others v. Turkey*, § 73), which requires, *inter alia*, that where the courts have finally determined an issue their ruling should not be called into question (*Brumărescu v. Romania* [GC], § 61; *Agrokompleks v. Ukraine*, § 148).

113. Judicial systems characterised by final judgments that are liable to review indefinitely and at risk of being set aside repeatedly are in breach of Article 6 § 1 (*Sovtransavto Holding v. Ukraine*, §§ 74, 77 and 82, concerning the protest procedure whereby the President of the Supreme Arbitration Tribunal, the Attorney-General and their deputies had discretionary power to challenge final judgments under the supervisory review procedure by lodging an objection).

114. The calling into question of decisions in this manner is not acceptable, whether it be by judges and members of the executive (*Tregubenko v. Ukraine*, § 36) or by non-judicial authorities (*Agrokompleks v. Ukraine*, §§ 150-51).

115. A final decision may be called into question only when this is made necessary by circumstances of a substantial and compelling character such as a judicial error (*Ryabykh v. Russia*, § 52).

## B. Establishment by law

116. In the light of the principle of the rule of law, inherent in the Convention system, the Court considers that a “tribunal” must always be “established by law”, as it would otherwise lack the legitimacy required in a democratic society to hear individual cases (*Lavents v. Latvia*, § 81).

117. The phrase “established by law” covers not only the legal basis for the very existence of a “tribunal”, but also compliance by the tribunal with the particular rules that govern it (*Sokurenko and Strygun v. Ukraine*, § 24). The lawfulness of a court or tribunal must by definition also encompass its composition (*Buscarini v. San Marino* (dec.)). The practice of tacitly renewing judges’ terms of office for an indefinite period after their statutory term of office had expired and pending their reappointment was held to be contrary to the principle of a “tribunal established by law” (*Oleksandr Volkov v. Ukraine*, § 151). The procedures governing the appointment of judges could not be relegated to the status of internal practice (*ibid.*, §§ 154-56).

118. “Law”, within the meaning of Article 6 § 1, thus comprises not only legislation providing for the establishment and competence of judicial organs, but also any other provision of domestic law which, if breached, would render the participation of one or more judges in the examination of a case irregular (*DMD Group, A.S., v. Slovakia*, § 59). This includes, in particular, provisions concerning the independence of the members of a “tribunal”, the length of their term of office, impartiality and the existence of procedural safeguards (*Gurov v. Moldova*, § 36).

119. In principle, a breach by a court of these domestic legal provisions gives rise to a violation of Article 6 § 1 (*DMD Group, A.S., v. Slovakia*, § 61). The Court may therefore examine whether the domestic law has been complied with in this respect. However, having regard to the general principle that it is, in the first place, for the national courts themselves to interpret the provisions of domestic law, the Court finds that it may not question their interpretation unless there has been a flagrant violation of the legislation (*ibid.*). A court which, without any explanation, oversteps the usual limits of its jurisdiction in deliberate breach of the law is not a “tribunal established by law” in the proceedings in question (*Sokurenko and Strygun v. Ukraine*, §§ 27-28).

120. The object of the term “established by law” in Article 6 § 1 is to ensure that the organisation of the judicial system does not depend on the discretion of the executive but is regulated by law emanating from Parliament (*Savino and Others v. Italy*, § 94).

121. Nor, in countries where the law is codified, can organisation of the judicial system be left to the discretion of the judicial authorities, although this does not mean that the courts do not have some latitude to interpret the relevant national legislation (*ibid.*).

122. Furthermore, delegating powers in matters concerning the organisation of the judicial system is permissible provided that this possibility is enshrined in the domestic law of the State, including the relevant provisions of the Constitution (*ibid.*).

## C. Independence and impartiality

### 1. General considerations

123. The right to a fair hearing under Article 6 § 1 requires that a case be heard by an “independent and impartial tribunal”. There is a close inter-relationship between the guarantees of an “independent” and an “impartial” tribunal. For this reason the Court commonly considers the two requirements together (*Kleyn and Others v. the Netherlands* [GC], § 192).

124. The participation of lay judges in a case is not, as such, contrary to Article 6 § 1. The existence of a panel with mixed membership comprising, under the presidency of a judge, civil servants and representatives of interested bodies does not in itself constitute evidence of bias (*Le Compte, Van*

*Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, §§ 57-58), nor is there any objection *per se* to expert lay members participating in the decision-making in a court (*Pabla Ky v. Finland*, § 32).

125. The principles established in the case-law concerning impartiality apply to lay judges as to professional judges (*Langborger v. Sweden*, §§ 34-35; *Cooper v. the United Kingdom* [GC], § 123).

126. As a matter of principle, a violation of Article 6 § 1 cannot be grounded on the lack of independence or impartiality of a decision-making tribunal or the breach of an essential procedural guarantee by that tribunal, if the decision taken was subject to subsequent control by a judicial body that has “full jurisdiction” and ensures respect for the relevant guarantees by curing the failing in question (*De Haan v. the Netherlands*, §§ 52-55).<sup>8</sup>

127. The Court has consistently stressed that the scope of the State’s obligation to ensure a trial by an “independent and impartial tribunal” under Article 6 § 1 of the Convention is not limited to the judiciary. It also implies obligations on the executive, the legislature and any other State authority, regardless of its level, to respect and abide by the judgments and decisions of the courts, even when they do not agree with them. Thus, the State’s respecting the authority of the courts is an indispensable precondition for public confidence in the courts and, more broadly, for the rule of law. For this to be the case, the constitutional safeguards of the independence and impartiality of the judiciary do not suffice. They must be effectively incorporated into everyday administrative attitudes and practices (*Agrokompleks v. Ukraine*, § 136).

## 2. An independent tribunal

128. The term “independent” refers to independence *vis-à-vis the other powers* (the executive and the Parliament) (*Beaumont v. France*, § 38) and also *vis-à-vis the parties* (*Sramek v. Austria*, § 42).

129. Although the notion of the separation of powers between the political organs of government and the judiciary has assumed growing importance in the Court’s case-law, neither Article 6 nor any other provision of the Convention requires States to comply with any theoretical constitutional concepts regarding the permissible limits of the powers’ interaction. The question is always whether, in a given case, the requirements of the Convention are met (*Kleyn and Others v. the Netherlands* [GC], § 193). Indeed, the notion of independence of a tribunal entails the existence of procedural safeguards to separate the judiciary from other powers.

### a. Independence *vis-à-vis* the executive

130. The independence of judges will be undermined where the executive intervenes in a case pending before the courts with a view to influencing the outcome (*Sovtransavto Holding v. Ukraine*, § 80; *Mosteanu and Others v. Romania*, § 42).

131. The fact that judges are appointed by the executive and are removable does not *per se* amount to a violation of Article 6 § 1 (*Clarke v. the United Kingdom* (dec.)). The appointment of judges by the executive is permissible provided that the appointees are free from influence or pressure when carrying out their adjudicatory role (*Flux v. Moldova (no. 2)*, § 27).

132. The fact that the President of the Court of Cassation is appointed by the executive does not in itself undermine his independence provided that, once appointed, he is not subject to any pressure, does not receive any instructions and performs his duties with complete independence (*Zolotas v. Greece*, § 24).

133. Likewise, the mere fact that judges of the Council of Administrative Law are appointed by the regional administrative authority is not capable of casting doubt on their independence or impartiality provided that, once appointed, they are not subject to any pressure, do not receive any

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8. See also the sections on “Review by a court having full jurisdiction” and “Fairness”.

instructions and exercise their judicial activity with complete independence (*Majorana v. Italy* (dec.)).

### **b. Independence *vis-à-vis* Parliament**

134. The fact that judges are appointed by Parliament does not by itself render them subordinate to the authorities if, once appointed, they receive no pressure or instructions in the performance of their judicial duties (*Sacilor-Lormines v. France*, § 67). Furthermore, the fact that one of the expert members of the Court of Appeal, comprising mainly professional judges, was also a member of Parliament did not *per se* breach the right to an independent and impartial tribunal (*Pabla Ky v. Finland*, §§ 31-35).

### **c. Independence *vis-à-vis* the parties**

135. Where a tribunal's members include a person who is in a subordinate position, in terms of his duties and the organisation of his service, *vis-à-vis* one of the parties, litigants may entertain a legitimate doubt about that person's independence. Such a situation seriously affects the confidence which the courts must inspire in a democratic society (*Sramek v. Austria*, § 42).

### **d. Criteria for assessing independence**

136. In determining whether a body can be considered to be "independent", the Court has had regard, *inter alia*, to the following criteria (*Langborger v. Sweden*, § 32; *Kleyn and Others v. the Netherlands* [GC], § 190):

- i. the manner of appointment of its members and
- ii. the duration of their term of office;
- iii. the existence of guarantees against outside pressures; and
- iv. whether the body presents an appearance of independence.

#### **i. Manner of appointment of a body's members**

137. Questions have been raised as to the intervention of the Minister of Justice in the appointment and/or removal from office of members of a decision-making body (*Sramek v. Austria*, § 38; *Brudnicka and Others v. Poland*, § 41; *Clarke v. the United Kingdom* (dec.)).

138. Although the assignment of a case to a particular judge or court falls within the margin of appreciation enjoyed by the domestic authorities in such matters, the Court must be satisfied that it was compatible with Article 6 § 1, and, in particular, with the requirements of independence and impartiality (*Bochan v. Ukraine*, § 71).

#### **ii. Duration of appointment of a body's members**

139. The Court has not specified any particular term of office for the members of a decision-making body, although their irremovability during their term of office must in general be considered as a corollary of their independence. However, the absence of a formal recognition of this irremovability in the law does not in itself imply lack of independence provided that it is recognised in fact and that other necessary guarantees are present (*Sacilor-Lormines v. France*, § 67; *Luka v. Romania*, § 44).

#### **iii. Guarantees against outside pressure**

140. Judicial independence demands that individual judges be free from undue influence outside the judiciary, and from within. Internal judicial independence requires that they be free from directives or pressures from fellow judges or those who have administrative responsibilities in the court such as the president of the court or the president of a division in the court. The absence of

sufficient safeguards securing the independence of judges within the judiciary and, in particular, *vis-à-vis* their judicial superiors, may lead the Court to conclude that an applicant's doubts as to the independence and impartiality of a court can be said to have been objectively justified (*Agrokompleks v. Ukraine*, § 137; *Parlov-Tkalčić v. Croatia*, § 86).

141. The judges of a County Court were found to be sufficiently independent of that court's president since court presidents performed only administrative (managerial and organisational) functions, which were strictly separated from the judicial function. The legal system provided for adequate safeguards against the arbitrary exercise of court presidents' duty to (re)assign cases to judges (*ibid.*, §§ 88-95).

#### iv. Appearance of independence

142. In order to determine whether a tribunal can be considered to be independent as required by Article 6 § 1, appearances may also be of importance (*Sramek v. Austria*, § 42). As to the appearance of independence, the standpoint of a party is important but not decisive; what is decisive is whether the fear of the party concerned can be held to be "objectively justified" (*Sacilor-Lormines v. France*, § 63). Therefore, no problem arises as regards independence when the Court is of the view that an "objective observer" would see no cause for concern about it in the circumstances of the case at hand (*Clarke v. the United Kingdom* (dec.)).

### 3. An impartial tribunal

143. Article 6 § 1 requires a tribunal falling within its scope to be impartial. Impartiality normally denotes the absence of prejudice or bias and its existence or otherwise can be tested in various ways (*Wettstein v. Switzerland*, § 43; *Micallef v. Malta* [GC], § 93). The concepts of independence and impartiality are closely linked and, depending on the circumstances, may require joint examination (*Sacilor-Lormines v. France*, § 62; *Oleksandr Volkov v. Ukraine*, § 107).

#### a. Criteria for assessing impartiality

144. The existence of impartiality must be determined on the basis of the following (*Micallef v. Malta* [GC], § 93):

- i. a *subjective test*, where regard must be had to the personal conviction and behaviour of a particular judge, that is, whether the judge held any personal prejudice or bias in a given case; and also
- ii. an *objective test*, that is to say by ascertaining whether the tribunal itself and, among other aspects, its composition, offered sufficient guarantees to exclude any legitimate doubt in respect of its impartiality.

145. However, there is no watertight division between subjective and objective impartiality since the conduct of a judge may not only prompt objectively held misgivings as to impartiality from the point of view of the external observer (objective test) but may also go to the issue of his or her personal conviction (subjective test).

146. Thus, in some cases where it may be difficult to procure evidence with which to rebut the presumption of the judge's subjective impartiality, the requirement of objective impartiality provides a further important guarantee (*ibid.*, §§ 95 and 101).

#### i. Subjective approach

147. In applying the subjective test, the Court has consistently held that "the personal impartiality of a judge must be presumed until there is proof to the contrary" (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 58 *in fine*; *Micallef v. Malta* [GC], § 94). As regards the type of proof required,

the Court has, for example, sought to ascertain whether a judge has displayed hostility (*Buscemi v. Italy*, §§ 67-68). The fact that a judge did not withdraw from dealing with a civil action on appeal following his earlier participation in another related set of civil proceedings did not constitute the required proof to rebut the presumption (*Golubović v. Croatia*, § 52).

148. The principle that a tribunal shall be presumed to be free of personal prejudice or partiality is long-established in the case-law of the Court (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 58; *Driza v. Albania*, § 75).

## ii. Objective approach

149. It must be determined whether, quite apart from the judge's conduct, there are ascertainable facts which may raise doubts as to his impartiality. When applied to a body sitting as a bench, it means determining whether, quite apart from the personal conduct of any of the members of that body, there are ascertainable facts which may raise doubts as to the impartiality of the body itself. This implies that, in deciding whether in a given case there is a legitimate reason to fear that a particular judge (*Morel v. France*, §§ 45-50; *Pescador Valero v. Spain*, § 23) or a body sitting as a bench (*Luka v. Romania*, § 40) lacks impartiality, the standpoint of the person concerned is important but not decisive. What is decisive is whether this fear can be held to be objectively justified (*Wettstein v. Switzerland*, § 44; *Pabla Ky v. Finland*, § 30; *Micallef v. Malta* [GC], § 96).

150. The objective test mostly concerns hierarchical or other links between the judge and other actors in the proceedings (see cases regarding the dual role of a judge, for example *Mežnarić v. Croatia*, § 36; and *Wettstein v. Switzerland*, § 47, where the lawyer representing the applicant's opponents subsequently judged the applicant in a single set of proceedings and overlapping proceedings respectively) which objectively justify misgivings as to the impartiality of the tribunal, and thus fail to meet the Convention standard under the objective test.

151. Therefore, it must be decided in each individual case whether the relationship in question is of such a nature and degree as to indicate a lack of impartiality on the part of the tribunal (*Micallef v. Malta* [GC], §§ 97 and 102).

152. In this respect even appearances may be of a certain importance or, in other words, "justice must not only be done, it must also be seen to be done". What is at stake is the confidence which the courts in a democratic society must inspire in the public. Thus, any judge in respect of whom there is a legitimate reason to fear a lack of impartiality must withdraw (*ibid.*, § 98).

153. In order that the courts may inspire in the public the confidence which is indispensable, account must also be taken of questions of internal organisation. The existence of national procedures for ensuring impartiality, namely rules regulating the withdrawal of judges, is a relevant factor (see the specific provisions regarding the challenging of judges, *Micallef v. Malta* [GC], §§ 99-100). Such rules manifest the national legislature's concern to remove all reasonable doubts as to the impartiality of the judge or court concerned and constitute an attempt to ensure impartiality by eliminating the causes of such concerns. In addition to ensuring the absence of actual bias, they are directed at removing any appearance of partiality and so serve to promote the confidence which the courts in a democratic society must inspire in the public (*Mežnarić v. Croatia*, § 27).

## b. Situations in which the question of a lack of judicial impartiality may arise

154. There are two possible situations in which the question of a lack of judicial impartiality may arise:

- i. The first is *functional in nature* and concerns, for instance, the exercise of different functions within the judicial process by the same person, or hierarchical or other links with another actor in the proceedings.

- ii. The second is *of a personal character* and derives from the conduct of the judges in a given case.

### **i. Situations of a functional nature**

#### ***α. The exercise of both advisory and judicial functions in the same case***

155. The consecutive exercise of advisory and judicial functions within one body may, in certain circumstances, raise an issue under Article 6 § 1 as regards the impartiality of the body seen from the objective viewpoint (*Procola v. Luxembourg*, § 45 – violation).

156. The issue is whether there has been an exercise of judicial and advisory functions concerning “the same case”, “the same decision” or “analogous issues” (*Kleyn and Others v. the Netherlands* [GC], § 200; *Sacilor-Lormines v. France*, § 74 – no violation).

#### ***β. The exercise of both judicial and extra-judicial functions in the same case***

157. When determining the objective justification for the applicant’s fear, such factors as the judge’s dual role in the proceedings, the time which elapsed between the two occasions on which he participated and the extent to which he was involved in the proceedings may be taken into consideration (*McGonnell v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 52-57).

158. Any direct involvement in the passage of legislation, or of executive rules, is likely to be sufficient to cast doubt on the judicial impartiality of a person subsequently called on to determine a dispute over whether reasons exist to permit a variation from the wording of the legislation or rules at issue (*ibid.*, §§ 55-58, where the Court found a violation of Article 6 § 1 on account of the direct involvement of a judge in the adoption of the development plan at issue in the proceedings; compare with *Pabla Ky v. Finland*, § 34 – no violation).

159. When there are two parallel sets of proceedings with the same person in the dual role of judge on the one hand and legal representative of the opposing party on the other, an applicant could have reason for concern that the judge would continue to regard him as the opposing party (*Wettstein v. Switzerland*, §§ 44-47).

160. The hearing of a constitutional complaint by a judge who had acted as counsel for the applicant’s opponent at the start of the proceedings led to a finding of a violation of Article 6 § 1 (*Mežnarić v. Croatia*, § 36). As to the impartiality of a Constitutional Court judge who had acted as legal expert for the applicant’s opponent in the civil proceedings at first instance, see *Švarc and Kavnik v. Slovenia*, § 44.

#### ***χ. The exercise of different judicial functions***

161. The assessment of whether the participation of the same judge in different stages of a civil case complies with the requirement of impartiality laid down by Article 6 § 1 is to be made on a case-by-case basis, regard being had to the circumstances of the individual case.

162. The mere fact that a judge has already taken pre-trial decisions cannot by itself be regarded as justifying concerns about his impartiality. What matters is the scope and nature of the measures taken by the judge before the trial. Likewise, the fact that the judge has detailed knowledge of the case file does not entail any prejudice on his part that would prevent his being regarded as impartial when the decision on the merits is taken. Nor does a preliminary analysis of the available information mean that the final analysis has been prejudged. What is important is for that analysis to be carried out when judgment is delivered and to be based on the evidence produced and argument heard at the hearing (*Morel v. France*, § 45).

163. It is necessary to consider whether the link between substantive issues determined at various stages of the proceedings is so close as to cast doubt on the impartiality of the judge participating in the decision-making at these stages (*Toziczka v. Poland*, § 36).

For example:

- It cannot be stated as a general rule resulting from the obligation to be impartial, that a superior court which sets aside an administrative or judicial decision is bound to send the case back to a different jurisdictional authority or to a differently composed branch of that authority (*Ringeisen v. Austria*, § 97 *in fine*).
- An issue may arise if a judge takes part in two sets of proceedings relating to the same sets of facts (*Indra v. Slovakia*, §§ 51-53).
- A judge who is the presiding judge of an appeals tribunal assisted by two lay judges should not hear an appeal from his own decision (*De Haan v. the Netherlands*, § 51).
- A Court of Appeal in which the trial judges are called upon to ascertain whether or not they themselves committed an error of legal interpretation or application in their previous decision can raise doubts as to impartiality (*San Leonard Band Club v. Malta*, § 64).
- It is not *prima facie* incompatible with the requirements of impartiality if the same judge is involved, first, in a decision on the merits of a case and, subsequently, in proceedings in which the admissibility of an appeal against that decision is examined (*Warsicka v. Poland*, §§ 38-47).
- A judge having a dual role, as counsel representing the party opposing the applicants' company in the first set of proceedings and as a Court of Appeal judge in the second set of proceedings: having regard in particular to the remoteness in time and the different subject matter of the first set of proceedings in relation to the second set and to the fact that the functions as counsel and judge did not overlap in time, the Court found that the applicants could not have entertained any objectively justified doubts as to the judge's impartiality (*Puolitaival and Pirttiaho v. Finland*, §§ 46-54).
- The Court found a violation of the principle of impartiality in a case where some judges who had already ruled on the case were required to decide whether or not they had erred in their earlier decision and where another three judges had already expressed their opinions on the matter (*Driza v. Albania*, §§ 78-83 – violation).
- One of the judges involved in the proceedings concerning an appeal on points of law had prior involvement in the case as a judge of the Higher Court (*Peruš v. Slovenia*, §§ 38-39).

## ii. Situations of a personal nature

164. The principle of impartiality will also be infringed where the judge has a personal interest in the case (*Langborger v. Sweden*, § 35; *Gautrin and Others v. France*, § 59).

165. Professional or personal links between a judge and a party to a case, or the party's advocate, may also raise questions of impartiality (*Pescador Valero v. Spain*, § 27; *Tocono and Profesorii Prometeiști v. Moldova*, § 31; *Micallef v. Malta* [GC], § 102). Even indirect factors may be taken into account (*Pétur Thór Sigurðsson v. Iceland*, § 45).

## IV. Procedural requirements

### A. Fairness

#### Article 6 § 1 of the Convention

“1. In the determination of his civil rights and obligations ..., everyone is entitled to a fair ... hearing by [a] tribunal ...”

#### 1. General principles

166. A prominent place: the Court has always emphasised the prominent place held in a democratic society by the right to a fair trial (*Airey v. Ireland*, § 24; *Stanev v. Bulgaria* [GC], § 231). This guarantee “is one of the fundamental principles of any democratic society, within the meaning of the Convention” (*Pretto and Others v. Italy*, § 21). There can therefore be no justification for interpreting Article 6§ 1 restrictively (*Moreira de Azevedo v. Portugal*, § 66). The requirement of fairness applies to proceedings in their entirety; it is not confined to hearings *inter partes* (*Stran Greek Refineries and Stratis Andreadis v. Greece*, § 49).

167. Content: civil claims must be capable of being submitted to a judge (*Fayed v. the United Kingdom*, § 65; *Sabeh El Leil v. France* [GC], § 46). Article 6 § 1 describes in detail the procedural guarantees afforded to parties in civil proceedings. It is intended above all to secure the interests of the parties and those of the proper administration of justice (*Nideröst-Huber v. Switzerland*, § 30). Litigants must therefore be able to argue their case with the requisite effectiveness (*H. v. Belgium*, § 53).

168. Role of the national authorities: the Court has always said that the national authorities must ensure in each individual case that the requirements of a “fair hearing” within the meaning of the Convention are met (*Dombo Beheer B.V. v. the Netherlands*, § 33 *in fine*).

169. The litigant’s claims: it is a matter of principle that in the determination of his “civil rights and obligations” – as defined in the case-law of the Strasbourg Court<sup>9</sup> – everyone is entitled to a fair hearing by a tribunal. To this are added the guarantees laid down by Article 6 § 1 as regards both the organisation and the composition of the court, and the conduct of the proceedings. In sum, the whole makes up the right to a fair hearing (*Golder v. the United Kingdom*, § 36).

170. Principles of interpretation:

- The principle whereby a civil claim must be capable of being submitted to a judge ranks as one of the universally recognised fundamental principles of law; the same is true of the principle of international law which forbids the denial of justice. Article 6 § 1 must be read in the light of these principles (*ibid.*, § 35).
- The right to a fair hearing before a tribunal as guaranteed by Article 6 § 1 must be interpreted in the light of the Preamble to the Convention, which declares the rule of law to be part of the common heritage of the Contracting States (*Brumărescu v. Romania*, § 61; *Nejdet Şahin and Perihan Şahin v. Turkey* [GC], § 57).
- The principle of legal certainty constitutes one of the basic elements of the rule of law (*Beian v. Romania (no. 1)*, § 39).

9. See next section “Scope”.

- In a democratic society within the meaning of the Convention, the right to a fair administration of justice holds such a prominent place that a restrictive interpretation of Article 6 § 1 would not correspond to the aim and the purpose of that provision (*Ryakib Biryukov v. Russia*, § 37).
- In addition, the Convention is intended to guarantee not rights that are theoretical or illusory but rights that are practical and effective (*Airey v. Ireland*, § 24).

171. States have greater latitude in civil matters: the Court has acknowledged that the requirements inherent in the concept of a “fair hearing” are not necessarily the same in cases concerning the determination of civil rights and obligations as they are in cases concerning the determination of a criminal charge: “the Contracting States have greater latitude when dealing with civil cases concerning civil rights and obligations than they have when dealing with criminal cases” (*Dombo Beheer B.V. v. the Netherlands*, § 32; *Levages Prestations Services v. France*, § 46). The requirements of Article 6 § 1 as regards cases concerning civil rights are less onerous than they are for criminal charges (*König v. Germany*, § 96).

## 2. Scope

172. An effective right: the parties to the proceedings have the right to present the observations which they regard as relevant to their case. This right can only be seen to be effective if the observations are actually “heard”, that is to say duly considered by the trial court. In other words, the “tribunal” has a duty to conduct a proper examination of the submissions, arguments and evidence adduced by the parties (*Kraska v. Switzerland*, § 30; *Van de Hurk v. the Netherlands*, § 59; *Perez v. France* [GC], § 80). In order for the right guaranteed by this Article to be effective, the authorities must exercise “diligence”: for an appellant not represented by a lawyer, see *Kerojärvi v. Finland*, § 42; *Fretté v. France*, § 49; for an appellant represented by a lawyer, see *Göç v. Turkey* [GC], § 57.

173. Proper participation of the appellant party in the proceedings requires the court, of its own motion, to communicate the documents at its disposal. It is not material, therefore, that the applicant did not complain about the non-communication of the relevant documents or took the initiative to access the case file (*Kerojärvi v. Finland*, § 42). The mere possibility for the appellant to consult the case file and obtain a copy of it is not, of itself, a sufficient safeguard (*Göç v. Turkey* [GC], § 57).

174. Obligation incumbent on the administrative authorities: the appellant must have access to the relevant documents in the possession of the administrative authorities, if necessary via a procedure for the disclosure of documents (*McGinley and Egan v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 86 and 90). Were the respondent State, without good cause, to prevent appellants from gaining access to documents in its possession which would have assisted them in defending their case, or to falsely deny their existence, this would have the effect of denying them a fair hearing, in violation of Article 6 § 1 (*ibid.*).

175. Assessment of the proceedings as a whole: whether or not proceedings are fair is determined by examining them in their entirety (*Ankerl v. Switzerland*, § 38; *Centro Europa 7 S.r.l. and Di Stefano v. Italy* [GC], § 197).

176. That being so, any shortcoming in the fairness of the proceedings may, under certain conditions, be remedied at a later stage, either at the same level (*Helle v. Finland*, § 54) or by a higher court (*Schuler-Zgraggen v. Switzerland*, § 52; contrast *Albert and Le Compte v. Belgium*, § 36; *Feldbrugge v. the Netherlands*, §§ 45-46).

177. In any event, if the defect lies at the level of the highest judicial body – for example because there is no possibility of replying to conclusions submitted to that body – there is an infringement of the right to a fair hearing (*Ruiz-Mateos v. Spain*, §§ 65-67).

178. A procedural flaw can be remedied only if the decision in issue is subject to review by an independent judicial body that has full jurisdiction and itself offers the guarantees required by Article 6 § 1. It is the scope of the appeal court's power of review that matters, and this is examined in the light of the circumstances of the case (*Obermeier v. Austria*, § 70).<sup>10</sup>

179. Previous decisions which do not offer the guarantees of a fair hearing: in such cases no question arises if a remedy was available to the appellant before an independent judicial body which had full jurisdiction and itself provided the safeguards required by Article 6 § 1 (*Oerlemans v. the Netherlands*, §§ 53-58; *British-American Tobacco Company Ltd v. the Netherlands*, § 78). What counts is that such a remedy offering sufficient guarantees exists (*Air Canada v. the United Kingdom*, § 62).

180. Before the appellate courts: Article 6 § 1 does not compel the Contracting States to set up courts of appeal or of cassation, but where such courts do exist the State is required to ensure that litigants before these courts enjoy the fundamental guarantees contained in Article 6 § 1 (*Andrejeva v. Latvia* [GC], § 97). However, the manner of application of Article 6 § 1 to proceedings before courts of appeal depends on the special features of the proceedings involved; account must be taken of the entirety of the proceedings in the domestic legal order and of the role played therein by the appellate court (*Helmers v. Sweden*, § 31) or the court of cassation (*K.D.B. v. the Netherlands*, § 41; *Levages Prestations Services v. France*, §§ 44-45).

181. Given the special nature of the Court of Cassation's role, which is limited to reviewing whether the law has been correctly applied, the procedure followed may be more formal (*ibid.*, § 48). The requirement to be represented by a specialist lawyer before the Court of Cassation is not in itself contrary to Article 6 (*G.L. and S.L. v. France* (dec.); *Tabor v. Poland*, § 42).

182. Limits: as a general rule it is for the national courts to assess the facts: is not the Court's role to substitute its own assessment of the facts for that of the national courts (*Dombo Beheer B.V. v. the Netherlands*, § 31).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, while appellants have the right to present the observations which they regard as relevant to their case, Article 6 § 1 does not guarantee a litigant a favourable outcome (*Andronicou and Constantinou v. Cyprus*, § 201).

183. The theory of appearances: the Court has stressed the importance of appearances in the administration of justice; it is important to make sure the fairness of the proceedings is apparent. The Court has also made it clear, however, that the standpoint of the persons concerned is not in itself decisive; the misgivings of the individuals before the courts with regard to the fairness of the proceedings must in addition be capable of being held to be objectively justified (*Kraska v. Switzerland*, § 32). It is therefore necessary to examine how the courts handled the case.

184. In other cases, before Supreme Courts, the Court has pointed out that the public's increased sensitivity to the fair administration of justice justified the growing importance attached to appearances (*Kress v. France* [GC], § 82; *Martinie v. France* [GC], § 53; *Menchinskaya v. Russia*, § 32). The Court attached importance to appearances in these cases (see also *Vermeulen v. Belgium*, § 34; *Lobo Machado v. Portugal*, § 32).

185. Judicial practice: in order to take the reality of the domestic legal order into account, the Court has always attached a certain importance to judicial practice in examining the compatibility of domestic law with Article 6 § 1 (*Kerojärvi v. Finland*, § 42; *Gorou v. Greece (no. 2)* [GC], § 32). Indeed, the general factual and legal background to the case should not be overlooked in the assessment of whether the litigants had a fair hearing (*Stankiewicz v. Poland*, § 70).

186. The State authorities cannot dispense with effective control by the courts on grounds of national security or terrorism: there are techniques that can be employed which accommodate both

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10. See also the section on "Review by a court having full jurisdiction".

11. See the section on "Fourth instance".

legitimate security concerns and the individual's procedural rights (*Dağtekin and Others v. Turkey*, § 34).

187. A principle independent of the outcome of the proceedings: the procedural guarantees of Article 6 § 1 apply to all litigants, not just those who have not won their cases in the national courts (*Philis v. Greece (no. 2)*, § 45).

### Examples

188. The case-law has covered numerous situations, including:

189. Observations submitted by the court to the appellate court manifestly aimed at influencing its decision: the parties must be able to comment on the observations, irrespective of their actual effect on the court, and even if the observations do not present any fact or argument which has not already appeared in the impugned decision in the opinion of the appellate court (*Nideröst-Huber v. Switzerland*, §§ 26-32) or of the respondent Government before the Strasbourg Court (*APEH Üldözötteinek Szövetsége and Others v. Hungary*, § 42).

190. Preliminary questions: where a preliminary reference mechanism exists, refusal by a domestic court to grant a request for such a referral may, in certain circumstances, infringe the fairness of proceedings (*Ullens de Schooten and Rezabek v. Belgium*, §§ 57-67, with further references). This is so where the refusal proves arbitrary:

- where there has been a refusal even though the applicable rules allow no exception to the principle of preliminary reference or no alternative thereto;
- where the refusal is based on reasons other than those provided for by the rules;
- or where the refusal has not been duly reasoned in accordance with those rules.

191. Article 6 § 1 does not, therefore, guarantee any right to have a case referred by a domestic court to the Court of Justice of the European Union (*Dotta v. Italy* (dec.)). Applying the case-law cited above, the Court examines whether the refusal appears arbitrary (*Canela Santiago v. Spain* (dec.)).

192. Changes in domestic case-law: the requirement of legal certainty and the protection of legitimate expectations do not involve the right to an established jurisprudence (*Unédic v. France*, § 74). Case-law development is not, in itself, contrary to the proper administration of justice since a failure to maintain a dynamic and evolutive approach would prevent any reform or improvement (*Atanasovski v. the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, § 38). In that judgment the Court held that the existence of well-established jurisprudence imposed a duty on the Supreme Court to make a more substantial statement of reasons justifying its departure from the case-law, failing which the individual's right to a duly reasoned decision would be violated. In some cases changes in domestic jurisprudence which affect pending civil proceedings may violate the Convention (*Petko Petkov v. Bulgaria*, §§ 32-34).

193. On the subject of divergences in case-law, the Court has stressed the importance of setting mechanisms in place to ensure consistency in the practice of the courts and uniformity of case-law (*Frimu and Others v. Romania* (dec.), §§ 43-44). However, achieving consistency of the law may take time, and periods of conflicting case-law may therefore be tolerated without undermining legal certainty (*Nejdet Şahin and Perihan Şahin v. Turkey* [GC], § 83; *Albu and Others v. Romania*, §§ 36 and 40-43).<sup>12</sup>

194. Entry into force of a law when a case to which the State is a party is still pending: the Court is especially mindful of the dangers inherent in the use of retrospective legislation which has the effect of influencing the judicial determination of a dispute to which the State is a party, including where the effect is to make pending litigation unwinnable. Any reasons adduced to justify such measures

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12. See also the section on "Fourth instance".

must be closely examined (*National & Provincial Building Society, Leeds Permanent Building Society and Yorkshire Building Society v. the United Kingdom*, § 112). In principle the legislature is not precluded in civil matters from adopting new retrospective provisions to regulate rights arising under existing laws. Article 6 does, however preclude any interference by the legislature with the administration of justice designed to influence the judicial determination of a dispute – except on “compelling grounds of the general interest” (*Zielinski, Pradal, Gonzalez and Others v. France* [GC], § 57; *Scordino v. Italy (no. 1)* [GC], § 126).

The Court found violations, for example, in respect of:

- intervention by the legislature – at a time when proceedings to which the State was party had been pending for nine years and the applicants had a final, enforceable judgment against the State – to influence the imminent outcome of the case in the State’s favour (*Stran Greek Refineries and Stratis Andreadis v. Greece*, §§ 49-50);
- a law which decisively influenced the imminent outcome of a case favour of the State (*Zielinski, Pradal, Gonzalez and Others v. France* [GC], § 59);
- the enactment, at a crucial point in proceedings before the Court of Cassation, of a law which for practical purposes resolved substantive issues and made carrying on with the litigation pointless (*Papageorgiou v. Greece*);
- a decision of an appellate court based, even subsidiarily, on a law enacted in the course of proceedings and which affected the outcome of the proceedings (*Anagnostopoulos and Others v. Greece*, §§ 20-21).

However, Article 6 § 1 cannot be interpreted as preventing any interference by the authorities with pending legal proceedings to which they are party. In other cases the Court has held that the considerations relied on by the respondent State were based on the compelling public-interest motives required to justify the retroactive effect of the law (*National & Provincial Building Society, Leeds Permanent Building Society and Yorkshire Building Society v. the United Kingdom*, § 112; *Forrer-Niedenthal v. Germany*, § 64; *OGIS-Institut Stanislas, OGEC Saint-Pie X and Blanche de Castille and Others v. France*, §§ 71-72; *EEG-Slachthuis Verbist Izegem v. Belgium* (dec.)).

195. This case-law also applies to cases where the State, although not a party, vitiates the proceedings through its legislative powers (*Ducret v. France*, §§ 33-42).

196. Other types of legislative intervention:

- Laws may be enacted before the start of proceedings (*Organisation nationale des syndicats d’infirmiers libéraux (ONSIL) v. France* (dec.)) or once they have ended (*Preda and Dardari v. Italy* (dec.)) without raising an issue under Article 6.
- The enactment of general legislation may prove unfavourable to litigants without actually targeting pending judicial proceedings and thereby circumventing the principle of the rule of law (*Gorraiz Lizarraga and Others v. Spain*, § 72).
- A law may be declared unconstitutional while proceedings are pending without there being any intention of influencing those proceedings (*Dolca and Others v. Romania* (dec.)).

197. Failure to communicate the observations of an “independent member of the national legal service” to litigants before a Supreme Court (members of the public prosecutor’s department: *Vermeulen v. Belgium*, *Van Orshoven v. Belgium*, *K.D.B. v. the Netherlands*; Principal Public Prosecutor/Attorney General: *Göç v. Turkey* [GC], *Lobo Machado v. Portugal*; Government Commissioner: *Kress v. France* [GC], *Martinie v. France* [GC]) and no opportunity to reply to such observations: many respondent States have argued that this category of members of the national legal service was neither party to the proceedings nor the ally or adversary of any party, but the Court has found that regard must be had to the part actually played in the proceedings by the official

concerned, and more particularly to the content and effects of his submissions (*Vermeulen v. Belgium*, § 31; *Kress v. France* [GC], § 71 *in fine*).

198. The Court has stressed the importance of adversarial proceedings in cases where the submissions of an independent member of the national legal service in a civil case were not communicated in advance to the parties, depriving them of an opportunity to reply to them (*ibid.*, § 76; *Lobo Machado v. Portugal*, § 31; *Van Orshoven v. Belgium*, § 41; *Göç v. Turkey* [GC], §§ 55-56; *Immeubles Groupe Kosser v. France*, § 26; *Vermeulen v. Belgium*, § 33).

199. Participation by and even the mere presence of these members of the national legal service in the deliberations, be it “active” or “passive”, after they have publicly expressed their views on the case has been condemned (*ibid.*, § 34; *Lobo Machado v. Portugal*, § 32; *Kress v. France* [GC], § 87). This case-law is largely based on the theory of appearances<sup>13</sup> (*Martinie v. France* [GC], § 53).

200. The conditions in which the proceedings took place must therefore be examined, and in particular whether the proceedings were adversarial and complied with the equality of arms principle (compare *Kress v. France* [GC], § 76; *Göç v. Turkey* [GC], §§ 55-57), in order to determine whether the problem was attributable to the litigant’s conduct or to the attitude of the State or the applicable legislation (*Fretté v. France*, §§ 49-51).

For the procedure before the Court of Justice of the European Communities/of the European Union: *Coöperatieve Producentenorganisatie van de Nederlandse Kokkelvisserij U.A. v. the Netherlands* (dec.).

201. Limits:

- Equality of arms does not entail a party’s right to have disclosed to him or her, before the hearing, submissions which have not been disclosed to the other party to the proceedings or to the reporting judge or the judges of the trial bench (*Kress v. France* [GC], § 73).
- There is no point in recognising a right that has no real reach or substance: that would be the case if the right relied on under the Convention would have had no incidence on the outcome of the case because the legal solution adopted was legally unobjectionable (*Stepinska v. France*, § 18).

### 3. Fourth instance

#### a. General principles

202. One particular category of complaints submitted to the Court comprises what are commonly referred to as “fourth-instance” complaints. This term – which does not feature in the text of the Convention and has become established through the case-law of the Convention institutions (*Kemmache v. France (no. 3)*, § 44) – is somewhat paradoxical, as it places the emphasis on what the Court is not: it is not a court of appeal or a court which can quash rulings given by the courts in the States Parties to the Convention or retry cases heard by them, nor can it re-examine cases in the same way as a Supreme Court. Fourth-instance applications therefore stem from a frequent misapprehension on two levels.

203. Firstly, there is often a widespread misconception on the part of the applicants as to the Court’s role and the nature of the judicial machinery established by the Convention. It is not the Court’s role to substitute itself for the domestic courts; its powers are limited to verifying the Contracting States’ compliance with the human rights engagements they undertook in acceding to the Convention. Furthermore, in the absence of powers to intervene directly in the legal systems of the Contracting States, the Court must respect the autonomy of those legal systems. That means that it is not its task to deal with errors of fact or law allegedly committed by a national court unless

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13. See above.

and in so far as such errors may have infringed rights and freedoms protected by the Convention. It may not itself assess the facts which have led a national court to adopt one decision rather than another. If it were otherwise, the Court would be acting as a court of third or fourth instance, which would be to disregard the limits imposed on its action (*García Ruiz v. Spain* [GC], § 28).

204. Secondly, there is often misunderstanding as to the exact meaning of the term “fair” in Article 6 § 1 of the Convention. The “fairness” required by Article 6 § 1 is not “substantive” fairness (a concept which is part-legal, part-ethical and can only be applied by the trial court), but “procedural” fairness. Article 6 § 1 only guarantees “procedural” fairness, which translates in practical terms into adversarial proceedings in which submissions are heard from the parties and they are placed on an equal footing before the court (*Star Cate Epilekta Gevmata and Others v. Greece* (dec.)). The fairness of proceedings is always assessed by examining them in their entirety, so that an isolated irregularity may not be sufficient to render the proceedings as a whole unfair (*Miroļubovs and Others v. Latvia*, § 103).

205. Furthermore, the Court respects the diversity of Europe’s legal and judicial systems, and it is not the Court’s task to standardise them. Just as it is not its task to examine the wisdom of the domestic courts’ decisions where there is no evidence of arbitrariness (*Nejdet Şahin and Perihan Şahin v. Turkey* [GC], §§ 68, 89 and 94).

## b. Scope and limits of the Court’s supervision

206. The Court has always said that it is generally not its task to deal with errors of fact or law allegedly committed by a national court unless and in so far as such errors are manifest and infringed rights and freedoms protected by the Convention (*García Ruiz v. Spain* [GC], § 28; *Perez v. France* [GC], § 82; in *Dulaurans v. France* (§ 38) the Court found a violation of Article 6 § 1 because of a “manifest error of judgment”; but contrast *Société anonyme d’habitations à loyers modérés Terre et Famille v. France* (dec.)).

207. This means that the Court may not, as a general rule, question the findings and conclusions of the domestic courts as regards:

- The establishment of the facts of the case: the Court cannot challenge the findings of the domestic courts, save where they are flagrantly and manifestly arbitrary (*García Ruiz v. Spain* [GC], §§ 28-29).
- The interpretation and application of domestic law: it is primarily for the domestic courts to resolve problems of interpretation of national legislation (*Perez v. France* [GC], § 82), not for the Strasbourg Court, whose role is to verify whether the effects of such interpretation are compatible with the Convention (*Nejdet Şahin and Perihan Şahin v. Turkey* [GC], § 49). In exceptional cases the Court may draw the appropriate conclusions where a Contracting State’s domestic courts have interpreted a domestic law in a manifestly arbitrary or erroneous manner (*Barać and Others v. Montenegro*, §§ 32-34, with further references; *Anđelković v. Serbia*, §§ 24-27 (denial of justice); *Laskowska v. Poland*, § 61), but it generally does so under other provisions of the Convention rather than under Article 6 § 1 (*Kushoglu v. Bulgaria*, § 50; *Işyar v. Bulgaria*, § 48; *Fabris v. France* [GC], § 60).
- The admissibility and assessment of evidence:<sup>14</sup> the guarantees under Article 6 § 1 only cover the administration of evidence at the procedural level. The admissibility of evidence or the way it should be assessed on the merits are primarily matters for the national courts, whose task it is to weigh the evidence before them (*García Ruiz v. Spain* [GC], § 28; *Farange S.A. v. France* (dec.)).

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14. See also the section on “Administration of evidence”.

208. So Article 6 § 1 does not allow the Court to question the substantive fairness of the outcome of a civil dispute, where more often than not one of the parties wins and the other loses.

209. A fourth-instance complaint under Article 6 § 1 of the Convention will be rejected by the Court on the grounds that the applicant had the benefit of adversarial proceedings; that he was able, at the various stages of those proceedings, to adduce the arguments and evidence he considered relevant to his case; that he had the opportunity of challenging effectively the arguments and evidence adduced by the opposing party; that all his arguments which, viewed objectively, were relevant to the resolution of the case were duly heard and examined by the courts; that the factual and legal reasons for the impugned decision were set out at length; and that, accordingly, the proceedings taken as a whole were fair (*García Ruiz v. Spain* [GC], § 29). The majority of fourth-instance applications are declared inadmissible de plano by a single judge or a three-judge Committee (Articles 27 and 28 of the Convention). By contrast, see, for example, *Donadze v. Georgia*, § 35.

### c. Consistency of domestic case-law

210. Article 6 § 1 does not confer an acquired right to consistency of case-law. Case-law development is not, in itself, contrary to the proper administration of justice since a failure to maintain a dynamic and evolutive approach would risk hindering reform or improvement (*Nejdet Şahin and Perihan Şahin v. Turkey* [GC], § 58).

211. In principle it is not the Court's role, even in cases which at first sight appear comparable or connected, to compare the various decisions pronounced by the domestic courts, whose independence it must respect. The possibility of divergences in case-law is an inherent consequence of any judicial system which is based on a network of trial and appeal courts with authority over the area of their territorial jurisdiction. Such divergences may even arise within the same court. That in itself cannot be considered contrary to the Convention (*Santos Pinto v. Portugal*, § 41). Furthermore, there can be no "divergence" where the factual situations in issue are objectively different (*Uçar v. Turkey* (dec.)).

212. There may, however, be cases where divergences in case-law lead to a finding of a violation of Article 6 § 1. Here the Court's approach differs depending on whether the divergences exist within the same branch of courts or between two different branches of court which are completely independent from one another.

213. In the first case the divergent decisions are pronounced by a single domestic Supreme Court, or by various courts in the same branch of the legal system ruling in the last instance. In such cases the persistence of conflicting judgments can create a state of legal uncertainty likely to reduce public confidence in the judicial system, whereas such confidence is clearly one of the essential components of a State based on the rule of law. The Court determines whether such uncertainty exists case by case, based on three main criteria:

- whether the divergences in the case-law are profound and lasting;
- whether the domestic law provides for mechanisms capable of resolving such inconsistencies; and
- whether those mechanisms were applied and to what effect. The Contracting States have an obligation to organise their legal systems in such a way as to avoid the adoption of divergent judgments and resolve any serious contradictions by appropriate procedural means (*Beian v. Romania (no. 1)*, §§ 37 and 39; *Nejdet Şahin and Perihan Şahin v. Turkey* [GC], §§ 56-57 and 80).

An additional criterion the Court takes into account is whether the inconsistency is an isolated case or affects large numbers of people (*Albu and Others v. Romania*, § 38).

214. In the second hypothesis the conflicting decisions are pronounced at last instance by courts in two different branches of the legal system, each with its own, independent Supreme Court not subject to any common judicial hierarchy. Here Article 6 § 1 does not go as far as to demand the implementation of a vertical review mechanism or a common regulatory authority (such as a jurisdiction disputes court). In a judicial system with several different branches of courts, and where several Supreme Courts exist side by side and are required to give interpretations of the law at the same time and in parallel, achieving consistency of case-law may take time, and periods of conflicting case-law may therefore be tolerated without undermining legal certainty. So two courts, each with its own area of jurisdiction, examining different cases may very well arrive at divergent but nevertheless rational and reasoned conclusions regarding the same legal issue raised by similar factual circumstances without violating Article 6 § 1 (*Nejdet Şahin and Perihan Şahin v. Turkey* [GC], §§ 81-83 and 86).

#### 4. Adversarial proceedings

215. The adversarial principle: the concept of a fair trial comprises the fundamental right to adversarial proceedings.

216. The requirements resulting from the right to adversarial proceedings are in principle the same in both civil and criminal cases (*Werner v. Austria*, § 66).

217. The desire to save time and expedite the proceedings does not justify disregarding such a fundamental principle as the right to adversarial proceedings (*Nideröst-Huber v. Switzerland*, § 30).

218. Content: the right to adversarial proceedings means in principle the opportunity for the parties to a criminal or civil trial to have knowledge of and comment on all evidence adduced or observations filed, even by an independent member of the national legal service, with a view to influencing the court's decision (*Ruiz-Mateos v. Spain*, § 63; *McMichael v. the United Kingdom*, § 80; *Vermeulen v. Belgium*, § 33; *Lobo Machado v. Portugal*, § 31; *Kress v. France* [GC], § 74). This requirement may also apply before a Constitutional Court (*Milatová and Others v. the Czech Republic*, §§ 63-66; *Gaspari v. Slovenia*, § 53).

- The actual effect on the court's decision is of little consequence (*Nideröst-Huber v. Switzerland*, § 27; *Ziegler v. Switzerland*, § 38).
- The right to adversarial proceedings must be capable of being exercised in satisfactory conditions: a party to the proceedings must have the possibility to familiarise itself with the evidence before the court, as well as the possibility to comment on its existence, contents and authenticity in an appropriate form and within an appropriate time (*Krčmář and Others v. the Czech Republic*, § 42; *Immeubles Groupe Kosser v. France*, § 26), if necessary by obtaining an adjournment (*Yvon v. France*, § 39).
- The parties should have the opportunity to make known any evidence needed for their claims to succeed (*Clinique des Acacias and Others v. France*, § 37).
- The court itself must respect the adversarial principle, for example if it rules that the right to appeal on points of law has been forfeited on grounds of inadmissibility which it advances of its own motion (*ibid.*, § 38; compare *Andret and Others v. France* (dec.), inadmissible: in this last case the Court of Cassation had informed the parties that new arguments were envisaged and the applicants had had an opportunity to reply before the Court of Cassation pronounced judgment).
- It is for the parties to a dispute alone to decide whether a document produced by the other party or evidence given by witnesses calls for their comments. Litigants' confidence in the workings of justice is based on the knowledge that they have had the opportunity to express their views on every document in the file (including documents obtained by the

court of its own motion: *K.S. v. Finland*, § 22) (*Nideröst-Huber v. Switzerland*, § 29; *Pellegrini v. Italy*, § 45).

219. Examples of infringement of the right to adversarial proceedings as a result of non-disclosure of the following documents or evidence:

- in proceedings concerning the placement of a child, of reports by the social services containing information about the child and details of the background to the case and making recommendations, even though the parents were informed of their content at the hearing (*McMichael v. the United Kingdom*, § 80);
- evidence adduced by the public prosecutor, irrespective of whether he was or was not regarded as a “party”, since he was in a position, above all by virtue of the authority conferred on him by his functions, to influence the court’s decision in a manner that might be unfavourable to the person concerned (*Ferreira Alves v. Portugal (no. 3)*, §§ 36-39);
- a note from the lower court to the appellate court aimed at influencing the latter court’s decision, even though the note did not set out any new facts or arguments (*ibid.*, § 41);
- documents obtained directly by the judges, containing reasoned opinions on the merits of the case (*K.S. v. Finland*, §§ 23-24).

220. Limit: the right to adversarial proceedings is not absolute and its scope may vary depending on the specific features of the case in question (*Hudáková and Others v. Slovakia*, §§ 26-27). The adversarial principle does not require that each party must transmit to its opponent documents which have not been presented to the court either (*Yvon v. France*, § 38). Nor does it require production of a memorial not capable of affecting the outcome of the case (*Asnar v. France (no. 2)*, § 26).

## 5. Equality of arms

221. The principle of “equality of arms” is inherent in the broader concept of a fair trial. The requirement of “equality of arms”, in the sense of a “fair balance” between the parties, applies in principle to civil as well as to criminal cases (*Feldbrugge v. the Netherlands*, § 44).

222. Content: maintaining a “fair balance” between the parties. Equality of arms implies that each party must be afforded a reasonable opportunity to present his case – including his evidence – under conditions that do not place him at a substantial disadvantage *vis-à-vis* the other party (*Dombo Beheer B.V. v. the Netherlands*, § 33).

- It is inadmissible for one party to make submissions to a court without the knowledge of the other and on which the latter has no opportunity to comment. It is a matter for the parties alone to assess whether a submission deserves a reaction (*APEH Üldözötteinek Szövetsége and Others v. Hungary*, § 42).
- However, if observations submitted to the court are not communicated to either of the parties there will be no infringement of equality of arms as such, but rather of the broader fairness of the proceedings (*Nideröst-Huber v. Switzerland*, §§ 23-24; *Clinique des Acacias and Others v. France*, §§ 36-37).

223. Examples of failure to observe the equality of arms principle: this principle was found to have been breached in the following cases because one of the parties had been placed at a clear disadvantage:

- A party’s appeal was not served on the other party, who therefore had no possibility to respond (*Beer v. Austria*, § 19).
- Time had ceased to run against one of the parties only, placing the other at a substantial disadvantage (*Platakou v. Greece*, § 48; *Wynen and Centre hospitalier interrégional Edith-Cavell v. Belgium*, § 32).

- Only one of the two key witnesses was permitted to be heard (*Dombo Beheer B.V. v. the Netherlands*, §§ 34-35).
- The opposing party enjoyed significant advantages as regards access to relevant information, occupied a dominant position in the proceedings and wielded considerable influence with regard to the court’s assessment (*Yvon v. France*, § 37).
- The opposing party held positions or functions which put them at an advantage and the court made it difficult for the other party to challenge them seriously by not allowing it to adduce relevant documentary or witness evidence (*De Haes and Gijssels v. Belgium*, §§ 54 and 58).
- In administrative proceedings the reasons given by the administrative authority were too summary and general to enable the appellant to mount a reasoned challenge to their assessment; and the tribunals of fact declined to allow the applicant to submit arguments in support of his case (*Hentrich v. France*, § 56).
- The denial of legal aid to one of the parties deprived them of the opportunity to present their case effectively before the court in the face of a far wealthier opponent (*Steel and Morris v. the United Kingdom*, § 72).
- In its *Martinie v. France* judgment ([GC], § 50) the Court considered that there was an imbalance detrimental to litigants on account of State Counsel’s position in the proceedings before the Court of Audit: unlike the other party, he was present at the hearing, was informed beforehand of the reporting judge’s point of view, heard the latter’s submissions at the hearing, fully participated in the proceedings and could express his own point of view orally without being contradicted by the other party, and that imbalance was accentuated by the fact that the hearing was not public.
- The prosecutor intervened in support of the arguments of the applicant’s opponent (*Menchinskaya v. Russia*, §§ 35-39).

224. However, the Court found compatible with Article 6 § 1 a difference of treatment in respect of the hearing of the parties’ witnesses (evidence given under oath for one party and not for the other), as it had not, in practice, influenced the outcome of the proceedings (*Ankerl v. Switzerland*, § 38).

225. Specific case of a civil-party action: the Court has distinguished between the system of a complaint accompanied by a civil-party action and an action brought by the public prosecutor, who is vested with public authority and responsible for defending the general interest (*Guigue and SGEN-CFDT v. France* (dec.)). As a result, different formal conditions and time-limits for lodging an appeal (a shorter time-limit for the private party) did not breach the “equality of arms” principle, provided that meaningful use could be made of that remedy (cf. the special nature of the system concerned).

226. The Court has also found it compatible with the principle of equality of arms for a provision to limit the civil party’s possibilities of appeal without limiting those of the public prosecutor – as their roles and objectives are clearly different (*Berger v. France*, § 38).

227. As regards cases opposing the prosecuting authorities and a private individual, the prosecuting authorities may enjoy a privileged position justified for the protection of the legal order. However, this should not result in a party to civil proceedings being put at an undue disadvantage *vis-à-vis* the prosecuting authorities (*Stankiewicz v. Poland*, § 68).

## 6. Administration of evidence

228. General principles:<sup>15</sup> the Convention does not lay down rules on evidence as such (*Mantovanelli v. France*, § 34). The admissibility of evidence and the way it should be assessed are primarily matters for regulation by national law and the national courts (*García Ruiz v. Spain* [GC],

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15. See also the section on “Fourth instance”.

§ 28). The same applies to the probative value of evidence and the burden of proof (*Tiemann v. France and Germany* (dec.)). It is also for the national courts to assess the relevance of proposed evidence (*Centro Europa 7 S.r.l. and Di Stefano v. Italy* [GC], § 198).

However, the Court’s task under the Convention is to ascertain whether the proceedings as a whole were fair, including the way in which evidence was taken (*Elsholz v. Germany* [GC], § 66). It must therefore establish whether the evidence was presented in such a way as to guarantee a fair trial (*Blücher v. the Czech Republic*, § 65).

It is the duty of the national courts to conduct a proper examination of the submissions, arguments and evidence adduced by the parties (*Van de Hurk v. the Netherlands*, § 59).

### a. Witness evidence

229. Article 6 § 1 does not explicitly guarantee the right to have witnesses called, and the admissibility of witness evidence is in principle a matter of domestic law. However, the proceedings in their entirety, including the way in which evidence was permitted, must be “fair” within the meaning of Article 6 § 1 (*Dombo Beheer B.V. v. the Netherlands*, § 31).

- Where courts refuse requests to have witnesses called, they must give sufficient reasons and the refusal must not be tainted by arbitrariness: it must not amount to a disproportionate restriction of the litigant’s ability to present arguments in support of his case (*Wierzbicki v. Poland*, § 45).
- A difference of treatment in respect of the hearing of the parties’ witnesses may be such as to infringe the “equality of arms” principle (*Ankerl v. Switzerland*, § 38, where the Court found that the difference of treatment had not placed the applicant at a substantial disadvantage *vis-à-vis* his opponent; contrast *Dombo Beheer B.V. v. the Netherlands*, § 35, where only one of the two participants in the events in issue was allowed to give evidence (violation)).

### b. Expert opinions

230. Refusal to order an expert opinion:

- Refusal to order an expert opinion is not, in itself, unfair; the Court must ascertain whether the proceedings as a whole were fair (*H. v. France*, § 61 and 70). The reasons given for the refusal must be reasonable.
- Refusal to order a psychological report in a case concerning child custody and access must also be examined in the light of the particular circumstances of the case (*Elsholz v. Germany* [GC], § 66, and *mutatis mutandis Sommerfeld v. Germany* [GC], § 71).
- In a child abduction case (*Tiemann v. France and Germany* (dec.)) the Court examined whether a Court of Appeal had given sufficient grounds for its refusal to allow the applicant’s request for a second expert opinion, in order to ascertain whether the refusal had been reasonable.

231. Appointment of an expert: just like observance of the other procedural safeguards enshrined in Article 6 § 1, compliance with the adversarial principle relates to proceedings in a “tribunal”; no general, abstract principle may therefore be inferred from this provision that, where an expert has been appointed by a court, the parties must in all instances be able to attend the interviews held by him or be shown the documents he has taken into account.

232. What is essential is that the parties should be able to participate properly in the proceedings (*Mantovanelli v. France*, § 33).

233. Lack of neutrality on the part of an expert, together with his position and role in the proceedings, can tip the balance of the proceedings in favour of one party to the detriment of the

other, in violation of the equality of arms principle (*Sara Lind Eggertsdóttir v. Iceland*, § 53); likewise, the expert may occupy a preponderant position in the proceedings and exert considerable influence on the court's assessment (*Yvon v. France*, § 37).

234. A medical expert report pertaining to a technical field that is not within the judges' knowledge is likely to have a preponderant influence on their assessment of the facts; it is an essential piece of evidence and the parties must be able to comment effectively on it (*Mantovanelli v. France*, § 36; *Storck v. Germany*, § 135).

- In the *Mantovanelli v. France* case the fact that the applicants were not able to comment effectively on the findings of the expert report, which was the main piece of evidence, violated Article 6 § 1.
- In the *Augusto v. France* case the failure to disclose the opinion of an accredited doctor as to whether the applicant met the medical requirements for entitlement to a welfare benefit, which was likely to have a decisive influence on the judgment, violated Article 6 § 1 even though that opinion was not binding on the judge by law.

235. Concerning the parties' rights *vis-à-vis* the expert: compare *Feldbrugge v. the Netherlands*, § 44 (violation), with *Olsson v. Sweden (no. 1)*, §§ 89-91 (no violation). As regards the requirement to disclose an adverse report, see *L. v. the United Kingdom* (dec.).

## 7. Reasoning of judicial decisions

236. The guarantees enshrined in Article 6 § 1 include the obligation for courts to give sufficient reasons for their decisions (*H. v. Belgium*, § 53). A reasoned decision shows the parties that their case has truly been heard.

237. Although a domestic court has a certain margin of appreciation when choosing arguments and admitting evidence, it is obliged to justify its activities by giving reasons for its decisions (*Suominen v. Finland*, § 36).

238. The reasons given must be such as to enable the parties to make effective use of any existing right of appeal (*Hirvisaari v. Finland*, § 30 *in fine*).

239. Article 6 § 1 obliges courts to give reasons for their decisions, but cannot be understood as requiring a detailed answer to every argument (*Van de Hurk v. the Netherlands*, § 61; *García Ruiz v. Spain* [GC], § 26 ; *Jahnke and Lenoble v. France* (déc.); *Perez v. France* [GC], § 81).

240. The extent to which this duty to give reasons applies may vary according to the nature of the decision (*Ruiz Torija v. Spain*, § 29; *Hiro Balani v. Spain*, § 27) and can only be determined in the light of the circumstances of the case: it is necessary to take into account, *inter alia*, the diversity of the submissions that a litigant may bring before the courts and the differences existing in the Contracting States with regard to statutory provisions, customary rules, legal opinion and the presentation and drafting of judgments (*Ruiz Torija v. Spain*, § 29; *Hiro Balani v. Spain*, § 27).

241. However, where a party's submission is decisive for the outcome of the proceedings, it requires a specific and express reply (*Ruiz Torija v. Spain*, § 30; *Hiro Balani v. Spain*, § 28).

242. The courts are therefore required to examine:

- the litigants' main arguments (*Buzescu v. Romania*, § 67; *Donadzé v. Georgia*, §35);
- pleas concerning the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Convention and its Protocols: the national courts are required to examine these with particular rigour and care (*Wagner and J.M.W.L. v. Luxembourg*, § 96).

243. Article 6 § 1 does not require an appellate court to give more detailed reasoning when it simply applies a specific legal provision to dismiss an appeal on points of law as having no prospects of

success, without further explanation (*Burg and Others v. France* (dec.); *Gorou v. Greece (no. 2)* [GC], § 41).

244. Similarly, in the case of an application for leave to appeal, which is the precondition for a hearing of the claims by the superior court and the eventual issuing of a judgment, Article 6 § 1 cannot be interpreted as requiring that the rejection of leave be itself subject to a requirement to give detailed reasons (*Kukkonen v. Finland (no. 2)*, § 24; *Bufferne v. France* (dec.))

245. Furthermore, in dismissing an appeal, an appellate court may, in principle, simply endorse the reasons for the lower court’s decision (*García Ruiz v. Spain* [GC], § 26; contrast *Tatishvili v. Russia*, § 62). However, the notion of a fair procedure requires that a national court which has given sparse reasons for its decisions, whether by incorporating the reasons of a lower court or otherwise, did in fact address the essential issues which were submitted to its jurisdiction and did not merely endorse without further ado the findings reached by a lower court (*Helle v. Finland*, § 60). This requirement is all the more important where a litigant has not been able to present his case orally in the domestic proceedings (*ibid.*).

## B. Public hearing

### Article 6 § 1 of the Convention

“1. In the determination of his civil rights and obligations ..., everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing by [a] tribunal established by law. Judgment shall be pronounced publicly but the press and public may be excluded from all or part of the trial in the interests of morals, public order or national security in a democratic society, where the interests of juveniles or the protection of the private life of the parties so require, or to the extent strictly necessary in the opinion of the court in special circumstances where publicity would prejudice the interests of justice.”

### 1. Hearing

246. General principles: in principle litigants have a right to a public hearing when none of the possible exceptions outlined in the second sentence of Article 6 § 1 applies (see above, and further explanations below). The public hearing protects litigants against the administration of justice in secret with no public scrutiny. Rendering the administration of justice visible contributes to the achievement of the aim of Article 6 § 1, namely a fair trial (*Diennet v. France*, § 33; *Martinie v. France* [GC], § 39).

247. To establish whether a trial complies with the requirement of publicity, it is necessary to consider the proceedings as a whole (*Axen v. Germany*, § 28).

248. In proceedings before a court of first and only instance the right to a “public hearing” under Article 6 § 1 entails an entitlement to an “oral hearing” (*Fredin v. Sweden (no. 2)*, §§ 21-22; *Allan Jacobsson v. Sweden (no. 2)*, § 46; *Göç v. Turkey* [GC], § 47) unless there are exceptional circumstances that justify dispensing with such a hearing (*Hesse-Anger and Hanger v. Germany* (dec.)).

249. The exceptional character of the circumstances that may justify dispensing with an oral hearing essentially comes down to the nature of the issues to be decided by the competent national court, not to the frequency of such situations (*Miller v. Sweden*, § 29; *Martinie v. France* [GC], § 41).

250. The absence of a hearing before a second or third instance may be justified by the special features of the proceedings concerned, provided a hearing has been held at first instance (*Helmers v. Sweden*, § 36, but contrast §§ 38-39). Thus, leave-to-appeal proceedings and proceedings involving only questions of law, as opposed to questions of fact, may comply with the requirements

of Article 6 even though the appellant was not given an opportunity of being heard in person by the appeal or cassation court (*Miller v. Sweden*, § 30).

251. Accordingly, unless there are exceptional circumstances that justify dispensing with a hearing, the right to a public hearing under Article 6 § 1 implies a right to an oral hearing at least before one instance (*Fischer v. Austria*, § 44; *Salomonsson v. Sweden*, § 36).

252. Civil proceedings on the merits which are conducted in private in accordance with a general and absolute principle, without the litigant being able to request a public hearing on the ground that his case presents special features, cannot in principle be regarded as compatible with Article 6 § 1 of the Convention; other than in wholly exceptional circumstances, litigants must at least have the opportunity of requesting a public hearing, though the court may refuse the request and hold the hearing in private on account of the circumstances of the case and for pertinent reasons (*Martinie v. France* [GC], § 42).

253. Lastly, the lack of a hearing at the decisive stage of the proceedings may or may not be sufficiently remedied at a later stage in the proceedings (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, §§ 60-61; *Malhous v. the Czech Republic* [GC], § 62).

254. Specific applications:

- A hearing may not be required where there are no issues of credibility or contested facts which necessitate a hearing and the courts may fairly and reasonably decide the case on the basis of the parties' submissions and other written materials (*Döry v. Sweden*, § 37; *Saccoccia v. Austria*, § 73).
- The Court has also accepted that forgoing a hearing may be justified in cases raising merely legal issues of a limited nature (*Allan Jacobsson v. Sweden (no. 2)*, § 49; *Valová, Slezák and Slezák v. Slovakia*, §§ 65-68) or which present no particular complexity (*Varela Assalino v. Portugal* (dec.); *Speil v. Austria* (dec.)).
- The same also applies to highly technical questions. The Court has had regard to the technical nature of disputes over social-security benefits, which are better dealt with in writing than by means of oral argument. It has repeatedly held that in this sphere the national authorities, having regard to the demands of efficiency and economy, could abstain from holding a hearing since systematically holding hearings could be an obstacle to the particular diligence required in social-security proceedings (*Schuler-Zgraggen v. Switzerland*, § 58; *Döry v. Sweden*, § 41; and contrast *Salomonsson v. Sweden*, §§ 39-40).

255. By contrast, holding an oral hearing will be deemed necessary, for example, when the court's jurisdiction extends to issues of law and important factual questions (*Fischer v. Austria*, § 44), or to the assessment of whether the facts were correctly established by the authorities (*Malhous v. the Czech Republic* [GC], § 60), in circumstances which would require the courts to gain a personal impression of the applicants to afford the applicant the right to explain his personal situation, in person or through his representative (*Miller v. Sweden*, § 34 *in fine*; *Andersson v. Sweden*, § 57) – for example when the applicant should be heard on elements of personal suffering relevant to levels of compensation (*Göç v. Turkey* [GC], § 51; *Lorenzetti v. Italy*, § 33) – or to enable the court to obtain clarifications on certain points, *inter alia* by this means (*Fredin v. Sweden (no. 2)*, § 22; *Lundevall v. Sweden*, § 39).

256. Presence of press and public: The right to a public hearing implies, in principle, a public hearing before the relevant court. Article 6 § 1 does not, however, prohibit courts from deciding, in the light of the special features of the case, to derogate from this principle (*Martinie v. France* [GC], § 40). The wording of Article 6 § 1 provides for several exceptions to this rule.

257. “The press and public may be excluded from all or part of the trial”:

- “in the interests of morals, public order or national security in a democratic society” (*Zagorodnikov v. Russia*, § 26; *B. and P. v. the United Kingdom*, § 39);
- “where the interests of juveniles or the protection of the private life of the parties so require”: the interests of juveniles or the protection of the private life of the parties are in issue, for example, in proceedings concerning the residence of minors following their parents’ separation, or disputes between members of the same family (*ibid.*, § 38); however, in cases involving the transfer of a child to a public institution the reasons for excluding a case from public scrutiny must be subject to careful examination (*Moser v. Austria*, § 97). As for disciplinary proceedings against a doctor, while the need to protect professional confidentiality and the private lives of patients may justify holding proceedings in private, such an occurrence must be strictly required by the circumstances (*Diennet v. France*, § 34; and for an example of proceedings against a lawyer: *Hurter v. Switzerland*, §§ 30-32);
- “or to the extent strictly necessary in the opinion of the court in special circumstances where publicity would prejudice the interests of justice”: it is possible to limit the open and public nature of proceedings in order to protect the safety and privacy of witnesses, or to promote the free exchange of information and opinion in the pursuit of justice (*B. and P. v. the United Kingdom*, § 38; *Osinger v. Austria*, § 45).

258. Waiver of the right to a public hearing: neither the letter nor the spirit of Article 6 § 1 prevents an individual from waiving his right to a public hearing of his own free will, whether expressly or tacitly, but such a waiver must be made in an unequivocal manner and must not run counter to any important public interest (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 59; *Håkansson and Sturesson v. Sweden*, § 66; *Exel v. the Czech Republic*, § 46). The summons to appear must also have been received in good time (*Yakovlev v. Russia*, §§ 20-22).

259. Conditions governing waiver of the right to a public hearing: the person concerned must consent (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 59), of his own free will (*Albert and Le Compte v. Belgium*, § 35). The right may be waived expressly or tacitly (*Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 59). But it must be done in an unequivocal manner (*Albert and Le Compte v. Belgium*, § 35; *Håkansson and Sturesson v. Sweden*, § 67) and it must not run counter to any important public interest (*ibid.*, § 66).

260. Failure to request a public hearing does not necessarily mean the person concerned has waived the right to have one held; regard must be had to the relevant domestic law (*Exel v. the Czech Republic*, § 47; *Göç v. Turkey* [GC], § 48 *in fine*). Whether or not the applicant requested a public hearing is irrelevant if the applicable domestic law expressly excludes that possibility (*Eisenstecken v. Austria*, § 33).

261. Examples: waiver of the right to a public hearing in disciplinary proceedings: *Le Compte, Van Leuven and De Meyere v. Belgium*, § 59; *H. v. Belgium*, § 54. Unequivocal waiver of the right to a public hearing: *Schuler-Zraggen v. Switzerland*, § 58; and contrast *Exel v. the Czech Republic*, §§ 48-53.

## 2. Delivery

262. The public character of proceedings before judicial bodies protects litigants against the administration of justice in secret with no public scrutiny (*Fazliyski v. Bulgaria*, § 69, concerning a case classified secret – violation). It is also a means of maintaining confidence in the courts (*Pretto and Others v. Italy*, § 21).

263. Article 6 § 1 states “Judgment shall be pronounced publicly”, which would seem to suggest that reading out in open court is required. The Court has found, however, that “other means of rendering a judgment public” may also be compatible with Article 6 § 1 (*Moser v. Austria*, § 101).

264. In order to determine whether the forms of publicity provided for under domestic law are compatible with the requirement for judgments to be pronounced publicly within the meaning of Article 6 § 1, “in each case the form of publicity to be given to the judgment under the domestic law ... must be assessed in the light of the special features of the proceedings in question and by reference to the object and purpose of Article 6 § 1” (*Pretto and Others v. Italy*, § 26; *Axen v. Germany*, § 31). The object pursued by Article 6 § 1 in this context – namely, to ensure scrutiny of the judiciary by the public with a view to safeguarding the right to a fair trial – must have been achieved during the course of the proceedings, which must be taken as a whole (*ibid.*, § 32).

265. Where judgment is not pronounced publicly it must be ascertained whether sufficient publicity was achieved by other means.

266. In the following examples sufficient publicity was achieved by means other than public pronouncement:

- Higher courts which did not publicly pronounce decisions rejecting appeals on points of law: in order to determine whether the manner in which a Court of Cassation delivered its judgment met the requirements of Article 6 § 1, account must be taken of the entirety of the proceedings conducted in the domestic legal order and of the role of that court therein (*Pretto and Others v. Italy*, § 27).

In finding no violation of Article 6 § 1 the Court paid particular attention to the stage of the procedure and to the scrutiny effected by these courts – which was limited to points of law – and to the judgments they delivered, upholding the decisions of the lower courts without any change to the consequences for the applicants. In the light of these considerations it found that the requirement for public pronouncement had been complied with where, by being deposited in the court registry, the full text of the judgment had been made available to everyone (*ibid.*, §§ 27-28), or where a judgment upholding that of a lower court which itself had been pronounced publicly had been given without a hearing (*Axen v. Germany*, § 32).

- Trial court: the Court found no violation in a case where an appellate court publicly delivered a judgment summarising and upholding the decision of a first-instance court which had held a hearing but had not delivered its judgment in public (*Lamanna v. Austria*, §§ 33-34).
- Cases concerning the residence of children: while the domestic authorities are justified in conducting these proceedings in chambers in order to protect the privacy of the children and the parties and to avoid prejudicing the interests of justice, and to pronounce the judgment in public would, to a large extent, frustrate these aims, the requirement under Article 6 § 1 concerning the public pronouncement of judgments is satisfied where anyone who can establish an interest may consult or obtain a copy of the full text of the decisions, those of special interest being routinely published, thereby enabling the public to study the manner in which the courts generally approach such cases and the principles applied in deciding them (*B. and P. v. the United Kingdom*, § 47).

267. In the following cases, failure to pronounce the judgment publicly led to the finding of a violation:

- In a child residence case between a parent and a public institution: giving persons who established a legal interest in the case access to the file and publishing decisions of special interest (mostly of the appellate courts or the Supreme Court) did not suffice to comply with the requirements of Article 6 § 1 concerning publicity (*Moser v. Austria*, §§ 102-03).

- When courts of first and second instance examined in chambers a request for compensation for detention without their decisions being pronounced publicly or publicity being sufficiently ensured by other means (*Werner v. Austria*, §§ 56-60).

268. Where only the operative part of the judgment is read out in public: it must be ascertained whether the public had access by other means to the reasoned judgment which was not read out and, if so, the forms of publicity used must be examined in order to subject the judgment to public scrutiny (*Ryakib Biryukov v. Russia*, §§ 38-46 and references cited in §§ 33-36). As the reasons which would have made it possible to understand why the applicant's claims had been rejected were inaccessible to the public, the object pursued by Article 6 § 1 was not achieved (*ibid.*, § 45).

## C. Length of proceedings

### Article 6 § 1 of the Convention

"1. In the determination of his civil rights and obligations ..., everyone is entitled to a ... hearing within a reasonable time by [a] tribunal ..."

269. In requiring cases to be heard within a "reasonable time", the Convention underlines the importance of administering justice without delays which might jeopardise its effectiveness and credibility (*H. v. France*, § 58; *Katte Klitsche de la Grange v. Italy*, § 61). Article 6 § 1 obliges the Contracting States to organise their legal systems so as to enable the courts to comply with its various requirements.

270. The Court has repeatedly stressed the importance of administering justice without delays which might jeopardise its effectiveness and credibility (*Scordino v. Italy (no. 1)* [GC], § 224). An accumulation of breaches by the State constitutes a practice that is incompatible with the Convention (*Bottazzi v. Italy* [GC], § 22).

### 1. Determination of the length of the proceedings

271. As regards the starting-point of the relevant period, time normally begins to run from the moment the action was instituted before the competent court (*Poiss v. Austria*, § 50; *Bock v. Germany*, § 35), unless an application to an administrative authority is a prerequisite for bringing court proceedings, in which case the period may include the mandatory preliminary administrative procedure (*König v. Germany*, § 98; *X v. France*, § 31; *Kress v. France* [GC], § 90).

272. Thus, in some circumstances, the reasonable time may begin to run even before the issue of the writ commencing proceedings before the court to which the claimant submits the dispute (*Golder v. the United Kingdom*, § 32 *in fine*; *Erkner and Hofauer v. Austria*, § 64; *Vilho Eskelinen and Others v. Finland* [GC], § 65). However, this is exceptional and has been accepted where, for example, certain preliminary steps were a necessary preamble to the proceedings (*Blake v. the United Kingdom*, § 40).

273. Article 6 § 1 may also apply to proceedings which, although not wholly judicial in nature, are nonetheless closely linked to supervision by a judicial body. This was the case, for example, with a procedure for the partition of an estate which was conducted on a non-contentious basis before two notaries, but was ordered and approved by a court (*Siegel v. France*, §§ 33-38). The duration of the procedure before the notaries was therefore taken into account in calculating the reasonable time.

274. As to when the period ends, it normally covers the whole of the proceedings in question, including appeal proceedings (*König v. Germany*, § 98 *in fine*) and extends right up to the decision which disposes of the dispute (*Poiss v. Austria*, § 50). Hence, the reasonable-time requirement

applies to all stages of the legal proceedings aimed at settling the dispute, not excluding stages subsequent to judgment on the merits (*Robins v. the United Kingdom*, §§ 28-29).

275. The execution of a judgment, given by any court, is therefore to be considered as an integral part of the proceedings for the purposes of calculating the relevant period (*Martins Moreira v. Portugal*, § 44; *Silva Pontes v. Portugal*, § 33; *Di Pede v. Italy*, § 24). Time does not stop running until the right asserted in the proceedings actually becomes effective (*Estima Jorge v. Portugal*, §§ 36-38).

276. Proceedings before a Constitutional Court are taken into consideration where, although the court has no jurisdiction to rule on the merits, its decision is capable of affecting the outcome of the dispute before the ordinary courts (*Deumeland v. Germany*, § 77; *Pammel v. Germany*, §§ 51-57; *Süßmann v. Germany* [GC], § 39). Nevertheless, the obligation to hear cases within a reasonable time cannot be construed in the same way as for an ordinary court (*ibid.*, § 56; *Oršuš and Others v. Croatia* [GC], § 109).

277. Lastly, as regards the intervention of third parties in civil proceedings, the following distinction should be made: where the applicant has intervened in domestic proceedings only on his or her own behalf the period to be taken into consideration begins to run from that date, whereas if the applicant has declared his or her intention to continue the proceedings as heir he or she can complain of the entire length of the proceedings (*Scordino v. Italy (no. 1)* [GC], § 220).

## 2. Assessment of the reasonable-time requirement

### a. Principles

278. Assessment in the specific case: The reasonableness of the length of proceedings coming within the scope of Article 6 § 1 must be assessed in each case according to the particular circumstances (*Frydlender v. France* [GC], § 43), which may call for a global assessment (*Obermeier v. Austria*, § 72; *Comingersoll S.A. v. Portugal* [GC], § 23).

279. The whole of the proceedings must be taken into account (*König v. Germany*, § 98 *in fine*).

- While different delays may not in themselves give rise to any issue, they may, when viewed together and cumulatively, result in a reasonable time being exceeded (*Deumeland v. Germany*, § 90).
- A delay during a particular phase of the proceedings may be permissible provided that the total duration of the proceedings is not excessive (*Pretto and Others v. Italy*, § 37).
- “Long periods during which the proceedings ... stagnate...” without any explanations being forthcoming are not acceptable (*Beaumartin v. France*, § 33).

280. The applicability of Article 6 § 1 to preliminary proceedings will depend on whether certain conditions are fulfilled (*Micallef v. Malta* [GC], §§ 83-86).<sup>16</sup>

281. Proceedings concerning the referral of a question to the Court of Justice of the European Communities/of the European Union for a preliminary ruling are not taken into consideration (*Pafitis and Others v. Greece*, § 95).

### b. Criteria

282. The reasonableness of the length of proceedings must be assessed in the light of the following criteria established by the Court’s case-law: the complexity of the case, the conduct of the applicant and of the relevant authorities and what was at stake for the applicant in the dispute (*Comingersoll S.A. v. Portugal* [GC]; *Frydlender v. France* [GC], § 43; *Sürmeli v. Germany* [GC], § 128).

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16. See the section on “Scope”.

### i. Complexity of the case

283. The complexity of a case may relate both to the facts and to the law (*Katte Klitsche de la Grange v. Italy*, § 55; *Papachelas v. Greece* [GC], § 39). It may relate, for instance, to the involvement of several parties in the case (*H. v. the United Kingdom*, § 72) or to the various items of evidence that have to be obtained (*Humen v. Poland* [GC], § 63).

284. The complexity of the domestic proceedings may explain their length (*Tierce v. San Marino*, § 31).

### ii. The applicant's conduct

285. Article 6 § 1 does not require applicants actively to cooperate with the judicial authorities, nor can they be blamed for making full use of the remedies available to them under domestic law (*Erkner and Hofauer v. Austria*, § 68).

286. The person concerned is required only to show diligence in carrying out the procedural steps relating to him, to refrain from using delaying tactics and to avail himself of the scope afforded by domestic law for shortening the proceedings (*Unión Alimentaria Sanders S.A. v. Spain*, § 35).

287. Applicants' behaviour constitutes an objective fact which cannot be attributed to the respondent State and which must be taken into account for the purpose of determining whether or not the reasonable time referred to in Article 6 § 1 has been exceeded (*Poiss v. Austria*, § 57; *Wiesinger v. Austria*, § 57; *Humen v. Poland* [GC], § 66). An applicant's conduct cannot by itself be used to justify periods of inactivity.

288. Some examples concerning the applicant's conduct:

- a lack of alacrity by the parties in filing their submissions may contribute decisively to the slowing-down of the proceedings (*Vernillo v. France*, § 34);
- frequent/repeated changes of counsel (*König v. Germany*, § 103);
- requests or omissions which have an impact on the conduct of the proceedings (*Acquaviva v. France*, § 61);
- an attempt to secure a friendly settlement (*Pizzetti v. Italy*, § 18; *Laino v. Italy* [GC], § 22);
- proceedings brought erroneously before a court lacking jurisdiction (*Beaumartin v. France*, § 33).

289. Although the domestic authorities cannot be held responsible for the conduct of a defendant, the delaying tactics used by one of the parties do not absolve the authorities from their duty to ensure that the proceedings are conducted within a reasonable time (*Mincheva v. Bulgaria*, § 68).

### iii. Conduct of the competent authorities

290. Only delays attributable to the State may justify a finding of failure to comply with the "reasonable time" requirement (*Buchholz v. Germany*, § 49; *Papageorgiou v. Greece*, § 40; *Humen v. Poland* [GC], § 66). The State is responsible for all its authorities: not just the judicial organs, but all public institutions (*Martins Moreira v. Portugal*, § 60).

291. Even in legal systems applying the principle that the procedural initiative lies with the parties, the latter's attitude does not absolve the courts from the obligation to ensure the expeditious trial required by Article 6 § 1 (*Pafitis and Others v. Greece*, § 93; *Tierce v. San Marino*, § 31; *Sürmeli v. Germany* [GC], § 129).

292. The same applies where the cooperation of an expert is necessary during the proceedings: responsibility for the preparation of the case and the speedy conduct of the trial lies with the judge (*Capuano v. Italy*, §§ 30-31; *Versini v. France*, § 29; *Sürmeli v. Germany* [GC], § 129).

293. It is for the Contracting States to organise their legal systems in such a way that their courts can guarantee the right of everyone to obtain a final decision on disputes relating to civil rights and obligations within a reasonable time (*ibid.*; *Scordino v. Italy (no. 1)* [GC], § 183).

294. Although this obligation applies also to a Constitutional Court, when so applied it cannot be construed in the same way as for an ordinary court. Its role as guardian of the Constitution makes it particularly necessary for a Constitutional Court sometimes to take into account other considerations than the mere chronological order in which cases are entered on the list, such as the nature of a case and its importance in political and social terms (compare *Süßmann v. Germany* [GC], §§ 56-58; *Voggenreiter v. Germany*, §§ 51-52; *Oršuš and Others v. Croatia* [GC], § 109). Furthermore, while Article 6 requires that judicial proceedings be expeditious, it also lays emphasis on the more general principle of the proper administration of justice (*Von Maltzan and Others v. Germany* (dec.) [GC], § 132). Nevertheless, a chronic overload cannot justify excessive length of proceedings (*Probstmeier v. Germany*, § 64).

295. Since it is for the member States to organise their legal systems in such a way as to guarantee the right to obtain a judicial decision within a reasonable time, an excessive workload cannot be taken into consideration (*Vocaturro v. Italy*, § 17; *Cappello v. Italy*, § 17). Nonetheless, a temporary backlog of business does not involve liability on the part of the State provided the latter has taken reasonably prompt remedial action to deal with an exceptional situation of this kind (*Buchholz v. Germany*, § 51). Methods which may be considered, as a provisional expedient, include choosing to deal with cases in a particular order, based not just on the date when they were brought but on their degree of urgency and importance and, in particular, on what is at stake for the persons concerned. However, if a state of affairs of this kind is prolonged and becomes a matter of structural organisation, such methods are no longer sufficient and the State must ensure the adoption of effective measures (*Zimmermann and Steiner v. Switzerland*, § 29; *Guincho v. Portugal*, § 40). The fact that such backlog situations have become commonplace does not justify the excessive length of proceedings (*Unión Alimentaria Sanders S.A. v. Spain*, § 40).

296. Furthermore, the introduction of a reform designed to speed up the examination of cases cannot justify delays since States are under a duty to organise the entry into force and implementation of such measures in a way that avoids prolonging the examination of pending cases (*Fisanotti v. Italy*, § 22). In that connection, the adequacy or otherwise of the domestic remedies introduced by a member State in order to prevent or provide redress for the problem of excessively long proceedings must be assessed in the light of the principles established by the Court (*Scordino v. Italy (no. 1)* [GC], §§ 178 et seq. and 223).

297. The State was also held to be responsible for the failure to comply with the reasonable-time requirement in a case where there was an excessive amount of judicial activity focusing on the applicant's mental state. The domestic courts continued to have doubts in that regard despite the existence of five reports attesting the applicant's soundness of mind and the dismissal of two guardianship applications; moreover, the litigation lasted for over nine years (*Bock v. Germany*, § 47).

298. A strike by members of the Bar cannot by itself render a Contracting State liable with respect to the "reasonable time" requirement; however, the efforts made by the State to reduce any resultant delay are to be taken into account for the purposes of determining whether the requirement has been complied with (*Papageorgiou v. Greece*, § 47).

299. Where repeated changes of judge slow down the proceedings because each of the judges has to begin by acquainting himself with the case, this cannot absolve the State from its obligations regarding the reasonable-time requirement, since it is the State's task to ensure that the administration of justice is properly organised (*Lechner and Hess v. Austria*, § 58).

#### iv. What is at stake in the dispute

300. Examples of categories of cases which by their nature call for particular expedition:

- Particular diligence is required in cases concerning civil status and capacity (*Bock v. Germany*, § 49; *Laino v. Italy* [GC], § 18; *Mikulić v. Croatia*, § 44).
- Child custody cases must be dealt with speedily (*Hokkanen v. Finland*, § 72; *Niederböster v. Germany*, § 39), all the more so where the passage of time may have irreversible consequences for the parent-child relationship (*Tsikakis v. Germany*, §§ 64 and 68) – likewise, cases concerning parental responsibility and contact rights call for particular expedition (*Paulsen-Medalen and Svensson v. Sweden*, § 39; *Laino v. Italy* [GC], § 22).
- Employment disputes by their nature call for expeditious decision (*Vocaturò v. Italy*, § 17) – whether the issue at stake is access to a liberal profession (*Thlimmenos v. Greece* [GC], §§ 60 and 62), the applicant’s whole professional livelihood (*König v. Germany*, § 111), the continuation of the applicant’s occupation (*Garcia v. France*, § 14), an appeal against dismissal (*Buchholz v. Germany*, § 52; *Frydlender v. France* [GC], § 45), the applicant’s suspension (*Obermeier v. Austria*, § 72), his transfer (*Sartory v. France*, § 34) or his reinstatement (*Ruotolo v. Italy*, § 117), or where an amount claimed is of vital significance to the applicant (*Doustaly v. France*, § 48). This category includes pensions disputes (*Borgese v. Italy*, § 18).
- Exceptional diligence is required from the authorities in the case of an applicant who suffers from an “incurable disease” and has “reduced life expectancy” (*X v. France*, § 47; *A. and Others v. Denmark*, §§ 78-81).

301. Other precedents

- Special diligence was required of the relevant judicial authorities in investigating a complaint lodged by an individual alleging that he had been subjected to violence by police officers (*Caloc v. France*, § 120).
- In a case where the applicant’s disability pension made up the bulk of his resources, the proceedings by which he sought to have that pension increased in view of the deterioration of his health were of particular significance for him, justifying special diligence on the part of the domestic authorities (*Mocié v. France*, § 22).
- In a case concerning an action for damages brought by an applicant who had suffered physical harm and was aged 65 when she applied to join the proceedings as a civil party, the issue at stake called for particular diligence from the domestic authorities (*Codarcea v. Romania*, § 89).
- The issue at stake for the applicant may also be the right to education (*Oršuš and Others v. Croatia* [GC], § 109).

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Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to a judgment on the merits delivered by a Chamber of the Court. The abbreviation “(dec.)” indicates that the citation is of a decision of the Court and “[GC]” that the case was heard by the Grand Chamber.

The hyperlinks to the cases cited in the electronic version of the Guide are directed to the HUDOC database (<<http://hudoc.echr.coe.int>>) which provides access to the case-law of the Court (Grand Chamber, Chamber and Committee judgments, decisions, communicated cases, advisory opinions and legal summaries from the Case-Law Information Note), the Commission (decisions and reports) and the Committee of Ministers (resolutions).

The Court delivers its judgments and decisions in English and/or French, its two official languages. HUDOC also contains translations of many important cases into nearly thirty non-official languages, and links to around one hundred online case-law collections produced by third parties.

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