



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

THIRD SECTION

CASE OF WITMAJER v. SLOVENIA

(Application no. 22235/02)

JUDGMENT

STRASBOURG

13 April 2006

FINAL

13/07/2006

This judgment will become final in the circumstances set out in Article 44 § 2 of the Convention. It may be subject to editorial revision.

In the case of Witmajer v. Slovenia,

The European Court of Human Rights (Third Section), sitting as a Chamber composed of:

Mr J. HEDIGAN, *President*,

Mr B.M. ZUPANČIČ,

Mrs M. TSATSA-NIKOLOVSKA,

Mr V. ZAGREBELSKY,

Mr E. MYJER,

Mr DAVID THÓR BJÖRGVINSSON,

Mrs I. ZIEMELE, *judges*,

and Mr V. BERGER, *Section Registrar*,

Having deliberated in private on 23 March 2006,

Delivers the following judgment, which was adopted on that date:

PROCEDURE

1. The case originated in an application (no. 22235/02) against the Republic of Slovenia lodged with the Court under Article 34 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (“the Convention”) by a Slovenian national, Ms Elvira Wittmajer (“the applicant”), on 5 June 2002.

2. The applicant was represented by the Verstovšek lawyers. The Slovenian Government (“the Government”) were represented by their Agent, Mr L. Bembič, State Attorney-General.

3. The applicant alleged under Article 6 § 1 of the Convention that the length of the proceedings before the domestic courts to which she was a party was excessive. In substance, she also complained about the lack of an effective domestic remedy in respect of the excessive length of the proceedings (Article 13 of the Convention).

4. On 7 September 2004 the Court decided to communicate the complaints concerning the length of the proceedings and the lack of remedies in that respect to the Government. Applying Article 29 § 3 of the Convention, it decided to rule on the admissibility and merits of the application at the same time.

THE FACTS

5. The applicant was born in 1951 and lives in Celje.

6. On 23 May 1988 the applicant was injured in a car accident. On 18 October 1990 the judgement, in which the perpetrator of the accident, who

is at present a Croatian resident, was found guilty of causing the accident, became final.

7. On 24 April 1992 the applicant instituted civil proceedings against the perpetrator of the accident in the Celje Basic Court, Celje Unit (*Temeljno sodišče v Celju, Enota v Celju*) seeking damages in the amount of 3,307,274 tolar (approximately 13,800 euros) for the injuries sustained.

On 1 January 1995 the Celje District Court (*Okrožno sodišče v Celju*) gained jurisdiction in the case due to the reform of the Slovenian court system.

Between 3 November 1995 and 23 December 2003 the applicant lodged thirteen preliminary written submissions and/or adduced evidence.

Between 26 September 1997 and 17 May 2005 she made fourteen requests that a date be set for a hearing.

Of the seven hearings held between 5 July 1994 and 3 October 2002 none was adjourned at the request of the applicant.

During the proceedings the court appointed three medical experts. The court also sought an additional opinion from two of the appointed experts.

The proceedings are still pending.

THE LAW

I. ALLEGED VIOLATION OF ARTICLES 6 § 1 AND 13 OF THE CONVENTION

8. The applicant complained about the excessive length of the proceedings. She relied on Article 6 § 1 of the Convention, which reads as follows:

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

9. In substance, the applicant further complained that the remedies available for excessive legal proceedings in Slovenia were ineffective. Article 13 of the Convention reads as follows:

“Everyone whose rights and freedoms as set forth in [the] Convention are violated shall have an effective remedy before a national authority notwithstanding that the violation has been committed by persons acting in an official capacity.”

A. Admissibility

10. The Government pleaded non-exhaustion of domestic remedies.

11. The applicant contested that argument, claiming that the remedies available were not effective.

12. The Court notes that the present application is similar to the cases of *Belinger* and *Lukenda* (*Belinger v. Slovenia* (dec.), no. 42320/98, 2 October 2001, and *Lukenda v. Slovenia*, no. 23032/02, 6 October 2005). In those cases the Court dismissed the Government's objection of non-exhaustion of domestic remedies because it found that the legal remedies at the applicant's disposal were ineffective. The Court recalls its findings in the *Lukenda* judgment that the violation of the right to a trial within a reasonable time is a systemic problem resulting from inadequate legislation and inefficiency in the administration of justice.

13. As regards the instant case, the Court finds that the Government have not submitted any convincing arguments which would require the Court to distinguish it from its established case-law.

14. The Court further notes that the application is not manifestly ill-founded within the meaning of Article 35 § 3 of the Convention. Nor is it inadmissible on any other grounds. It must therefore be declared admissible.

B. Merits

1. Article 6 § 1

15. The period to be taken into consideration began on 28 June 1994, the day when the Convention entered into force with respect to Slovenia, and has not yet ended. The relevant period has therefore lasted approximately eleven years and seven months for one level of jurisdiction.

16. The Court reiterates that the reasonableness of the length of proceedings must be assessed in the light of the circumstances of the case and with reference to the following criteria: the complexity of the case, the conduct of the applicant and the relevant authorities and what was at stake for the applicant in the dispute (see, among many other authorities, *Frydlender v. France* [GC], no. 30979/96, § 43, ECHR 2000-VII).

17. Having examined all the material submitted to it, and having regard to its case-law on the subject, the Court considers that in the instant case the length of the proceedings was excessive and failed to meet the "reasonable-time" requirement.

There has accordingly been a breach of Article 6 § 1.

2. Article 13

18. The Court reiterates that Article 13 guarantees an effective remedy before a national authority for an alleged breach of the requirement under Article 6 § 1 to hear a case within a reasonable time (see *Kudła v. Poland* [GC], no. 30210/96, § 156, ECHR 2000-XI). It notes that the objections and

arguments put forward by the Government have been rejected in earlier cases (see *Lukenda*, cited above) and sees no reason to reach a different conclusion in the present case.

19. Accordingly, the Court considers that in the present case there has been a violation of Article 13 on account of the lack of a remedy under domestic law whereby the applicant could have obtained a ruling upholding her right to have her case heard within a reasonable time, as set forth in Article 6 § 1.

II. APPLICATION OF ARTICLE 41 OF THE CONVENTION

20. Article 41 of the Convention provides:

“If the Court finds that there has been a violation of the Convention or the Protocols thereto, and if the internal law of the High Contracting Party concerned allows only partial reparation to be made, the Court shall, if necessary, afford just satisfaction to the injured party.”

A. Damage

21. The applicant claimed 20,000 euros (EUR) in respect of non-pecuniary damage.

22. The Government contested the claim.

23. The Court considers that the applicant must have sustained non-pecuniary damage. Ruling on an equitable basis, it awards her EUR 12,800 under that head.

B. Costs and expenses

24. The applicant also claimed approximately EUR 1,440 for the costs and expenses incurred before the Court.

25. The Government argued that the claim was too high.

26. According to the Court's case-law, an applicant is entitled to reimbursement of his costs and expenses only in so far as it has been shown that these have been actually and necessarily incurred and were reasonable as to quantum. The Court also notes that the applicant's lawyers, who also represented the applicant in *Lukenda* (cited above), lodged nearly 400 applications which, apart from the facts, are essentially the same as this one. Accordingly, in the present case, regard being had to the information in its possession and the above criteria, the Court considers it reasonable to award the applicant the sum of EUR 1,000 for the proceedings before the Court.

C. Default interest

27. The Court considers it appropriate that the default interest should be based on the marginal lending rate of the European Central Bank, to which should be added three percentage points.

FOR THESE REASONS, THE COURT UNANIMOUSLY

1. *Declares* the application admissible;
2. *Holds* that there has been a violation of Article 6 § 1 of the Convention;
3. *Holds* that there has been a violation of Article 13 of the Convention;
4. *Holds*
 - (a) that the respondent State is to pay the applicant, within three months from the date on which the judgment becomes final in accordance with Article 44 § 2 of the Convention, EUR 12,800 (twelve thousand eight hundred euros) in respect of non-pecuniary damage and EUR 1,000 (one thousand euros) in respect of costs and expenses, plus any tax that may be chargeable;
 - (b) that from the expiry of the above-mentioned three months until settlement simple interest shall be payable on the above amounts at a rate equal to the marginal lending rate of the European Central Bank during the default period plus three percentage points.
5. *Dismisses* the remainder of the applicant's claim for just satisfaction.

Done in English, and notified in writing on 13 April 2006, pursuant to Rule 77 §§ 2 and 3 of the Rules of Court.

Vincent BERGER
Registrar

John HEDIGAN
President