



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

FIRST SECTION

CASE OF BELLINI v. ITALY (n° 2)

(Application no. 64098/00)

JUDGMENT

This version was rectified on 23 September 2004
under Rule 81 of the Rules of the Court

STRASBOURG

11 March 2004

FINAL

11/06/2004

In the case of Bellini v. Italy (n° 2),

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

Mr C.L. ROZAKIS, *President*,

Mr P. LORENZEN,

Mr G. BONELLO,

Mr A. KOVLER,

Mr V. ZAGREBELSKY,

Mrs E. STEINER,

Mr K. HAJIYEV, *judges*,

and Mr S. NIELSEN, *Section Registrar*,

Having deliberated in private on 19 February 2004,

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

PROCEDURE

1. The case originated in an application (no. 64098/00) against the Italian Republic lodged with the Court under Article 34 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (“the Convention”) by an Italian national, Mr Franco Bellini (“the applicant”), on 10 November 2000.

2. The applicant was represented by Mr A. Brini, a lawyer practising in Florence. The Italian Government (“the Government”) were represented by their successive Agents, respectively Mr U. Leanza and Mr I.M. Braguglia, and by their successive co-Agents, respectively Mr V. Esposito and Mr F. Crisafulli.

3. On 13 June 2002 the Court declared the application admissible.

4. The applicant died on 4 February 2003. On 8 July 2003, the applicant’s heir, Mr Alessandro Bellini¹, expressed the wish to continue the proceedings before the Court.

THE FACTS

I. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CASE

5. The applicant was born in 1926 and lives in Florence.

6. He is the owner of a flat in Florence, which he had let to A.B.

¹ Rectified on 23 September 2004. The previous version reads “Mr. Maurizio Bellini”.

7. In a registered letter of 10 June 1983, the applicant informed the tenant that he intended to terminate the lease on expiry of the term on 31 December 1983 and asked him to vacate the premises by that date.

8. The tenant told the applicant that he would not leave the premises.

9. In a writ served on the tenant on 22 December 1983, the applicant reiterated his intention to terminate the lease and summoned the tenant to appear before the Florence Magistrate.

10. By a decision of 16 January 1984, which was made enforceable on 19 June 1984, the Florence Magistrate upheld the validity of the notice to quit and ordered that the premises be vacated by 31 December 1984.

11. On 17 September 1987, the applicant served notice on the tenant requiring him to vacate the premises.

12. On 23 October 1987, he informed the tenant that the order for possession would be enforced by a bailiff on 15 December 1987.

13. Between 15 December 1987 and 15 March 1999, the bailiff made thirty-two attempts to recover possession. Each attempt proved unsuccessful, as the applicant was not entitled to police assistance in enforcing the order for possession.

14. Pursuant to section 6 of Law no. 431/98, the enforcement proceedings were suspended until 10 September 1999.

15. On 26 March 2001, the tenant agreed to leave the premises on 31 December 2002.

16. On 31 December 2002, the applicant recovered possession of the flat.

II. RELEVANT DOMESTIC LAW

17. Since 1947 the public authorities in Italy have frequently intervened in residential tenancy legislation with the aim of controlling rents. This has been achieved by rent freezes (occasionally relaxed when the Government decreed statutory increases), by the statutory extension of all current leases and by the postponement, suspension or staggering of the enforcement of orders for possession. The relevant domestic law concerning the extension of tenancies, the suspension of enforcement and the staggering of evictions is described in the Court's judgment in the case of *Immobiliare Saffi v. Italy* [GC], no. 22774/93, §§ 18-35, ECHR 1999-V. Lastly, for some cases, a suspension of the enforcement of the orders for possession until 30 June 2004 was introduced by Legislative Decree no. 147 of 24 June 2003, which became Law no. 200 of 1 August 2003.

A. The system of control of the rents

18. As regards the control of the rents, the evolution of the Italian legislation may be summarised as follows.

19. The first relevant measure was the Law no. 392 of 27 July 1978 which provided machinery for “fair rents” (the so-called *equo canone*) on the basis of a number of criteria such as the surface of the flat and its costs of realisation.

20. The second step of the Italian authorities dated August 1992. It was taken in the view of progressive liberalisation of the market of tenancies. Accordingly, a legislation relaxing on rent levels restrictions (the so-called *patti in deroga*) entered into force. Owners and tenants were in principle given the opportunity to derogate from the rent imposed by law and to agree on a different price.

21. Lastly, Law no. 431 of 9 December 1998 reformed the tenancies and liberalised the rents.

B. Obligations of the tenant in the case of late restitution

22. The tenant is under a general obligation to refund the owner any damages caused in the case of late restitution of the flat. In this regard, Article 1591 of the Italian Civil Code provides:

“The tenant who fails to vacate the immovable property is under an obligation to pay the owner the agreed amount until the date when he leaves, together with other remaining damages.”

23. However, Law no. 61 of 1989 set out, *inter alia*, a limit to the compensation claimable by the owner entitling him to a sum equal to the rent paid by the tenant at the time of the expiration of the lease, proportionally increased according to the cost of living (Article 24 of Law no. 392 of 27 July 1978) plus 20%, along the period of inability to dispose of the possession of the flat.

24. In the judgment no. 482 of 2000, the Constitutional Court was called upon to decide whether such a limitation complied with the Constitution. The Constitutional Court held that it was compatible with the Constitution with regard to periods of time during which the suspension of the evictions was determined by law. The Constitutional Court explained that the introduction of that limitation was intended to settle the tenancies of the time of the emergency legislation, when the housing shortage made the suspension of the enforcement necessary. While evictions were suspended *ex lege*, the law predetermined the *quantum* of the reimbursement chargeable to the tenant, both measures being temporary and exceptional. Besides, the interests of the owner were counterbalanced by the exemption for him from the burden to prove the damages.

25. The Constitutional Court declared the limitation to the compensation claimable by the owner unconstitutional with regard to cases where the impossibility for the owner to repossess the flat depended on the conduct of the tenant and was not due to a legislative intervention. Accordingly, it opened the way to owners for the institution of civil proceedings in order to obtain full reparation of the damages caused by the tenant.

THE LAW

I. ALLEGED VIOLATION OF ARTICLE 1 OF PROTOCOL No. 1 AND OF ARTICLE 6 § 1 OF THE CONVENTION

26. The applicant complained of his prolonged inability to recover possession of his flat, owing to the lack of police assistance. He alleged a violation of his right of property, as guaranteed by Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention, which provides:

“Every natural or legal person is entitled to the peaceful enjoyment of his possessions. No one shall be deprived of his possessions except in the public interest and subject to the conditions provided for by law and by the general principles of international law.

The preceding provisions shall not, however, in any way impair the right of a State to enforce such laws as it deems necessary to control the use of property in accordance with the general interest or to secure the payment of taxes or other contributions or penalties.”

27. The applicant also alleged a breach of Article 6 § 1 of the Convention, the relevant part of which provides:

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

28. The Court has previously examined a number of cases raising issues similar to those in the present case and found a violation of Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 and Article 6 § 1 of the Convention (see *Immobiliare Saffi*, cited above, §§ 46-75; *Lunari v. Italy*, no. 21463/93, §§ 34-46, 11 January 2001; *Palumbo v. Italy*, no. 15919/89, §§ 33-48, 30 November 2000).

29. The Court has examined the present case and finds that there are no facts or arguments from the Government which would lead to any different conclusion in this instance. It notes that the applicant had to wait approximately fifteen years after the first attempt of the bailiff before being able to repossess the flat.

Consequently, there has been a violation of Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 and of Article 6 § 1 of the Convention in the present case.

II. APPLICATION OF ARTICLE 41 OF THE CONVENTION

30. 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. Pecuniary damage

31. The applicant claimed 49,546.81 euros (EUR) for the pecuniary damage he had sustained, the sum being the loss of rent for a period of time from 1 August 1992 to 26 March 2001. The applicant proposed this sum as the difference between the market value rent of the flat, EUR 619.75 per month, and the rent imposed by law, EUR 195.48 per month.

The applicant also left the matter to be assessed by the Court in an equitable manner.

32. The Government contested the claim.

33. Since the applicant has failed to submit itemised particulars of his claim, together with the relevant supporting documents or vouchers, as required under Rule 60 of the Rules of Court, the Court decides to make no award under this head.

B. Non-pecuniary damage

34. The applicant claimed EUR 15,000 for the non-pecuniary damage. The applicant also left the matter to the Court's discretion.

35. The Government contested the claim.

36. The Court considers that the applicant must have sustained some non-pecuniary damage. Ruling on an equitable basis, it awards the applicant's heir EUR 3,000 under this head.

C. Costs and expenses

37. The applicant also claimed reimbursement of his legal costs and expenses as follows:

- EUR 5,164.57 for the costs of the enforcement proceedings;
- EUR 8,568 for the costs and expenses before the Court.

38. The Government contested the claims.

39. On the basis of the information in its possession and the Court's case-law, the Court considers it reasonable to award the applicant's heir the sum of EUR 2,500 for the costs and expenses incurred in the domestic proceedings and EUR 2,000 for the proceedings before the Court.

40. The Court awards a total sum of EUR 4,500 for legal costs and expenses.

D. Default interest

41. 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. *Holds* that there has been a violation of Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention;
2. *Holds* that there has been a violation of Article 6 § 1 of the Convention;
3. *Holds*
 - (a) that the respondent State is to pay the applicant's heir, Mr Alessandro Bellini², within three months from the date on which the judgment becomes final according to Article 44 § 2 of the Convention, the following amounts:
 - (i) EUR 3,000 (three thousand euros) for non-pecuniary damage;
 - (ii) EUR 4,500 (four thousand five hundred euros) for legal costs and expenses;
 - (iii) any tax that may be chargeable on the above amounts;
 - (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;
4. *Dismisses* the remainder of the applicant's claim for just satisfaction.

Done in English, and notified in writing on 11 March 2004, pursuant to Rule 77 §§ 2 and 3 of the Rules of Court.

Søren NIELSEN
Registrar

Christos ROZAKIS
President

² Rectified on 23 September 2004. The previous version reads "Mr. Maurizio Bellini".