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

FOURTH SECTION

DECISION

Application no. 41156/06
Regina SZYFNER
against Poland

The European Court of Human Rights (Fourth Section), sitting on 10 September 2013 as a Committee composed of:
David Thór Björgvinsson, *President,*
Vincent A. De Gaetano,
Krzysztof Wojtyczek, *judges,*
and Fatoş Aracı, *Deputy Section Registrar,*
Having deliberated, decides as follows:

THE FACTS

1. The applicant, Ms Regina Szyfner, is a Polish national, who was born in 1958 and lives in Mielec.

2. The Polish Government ("the Government") were represented by their Agent, Mr J. Wołąsiewicz, succeeded by Ms J. Chrzanowska, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A. The circumstances of the case

3. The facts of the case, as submitted by the parties, may be summarised as follows.

4. The applicant is a single mother and has three children. Prior to her application for pension she had been employed.

1. Proceedings concerning the grant and revocation of the EWK pension

5. On 28 December 2000 the applicant filed an application with the Rzeszów Social Security Board *(Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych)* to be granted the right to an early-retirement pension for persons raising children

who, due to the seriousness of their health condition, required constant care, the so-called EWK pension.

6. Along with her application for a pension, the applicant submitted a medical certificate issued on 5 December 2000 by a specialist medical centre. The certificate stated that her daughter (born in 1992) suffered from atopic dermatitis and was in need of the parent's constant care.

7. On 30 January 2001 the Rzeszów Social Security Board ("the SSB") issued a decision granting the applicant the right to an early-retirement pension in the net amount of 572 Polish zlotys (PLN).

8. The SSB initially suspended the payment of the pension due to the fact that the applicant was still working at that time. Shortly afterwards the applicant informed the SSB that her employment had terminated on 31 January 2001. The payment of the pension started on 1 March 2001.

9. In the meantime, throughout February 2001 the applicant had worked on the basis of a freelance contract (*umowa zlecenia*). On 7 March 2001 she resumed her previous full-time employment and has worked there ever since.

10. On an unknown date the SSB requested the Main Social Security Board's doctor (*Główny Lekarz Orzecznik*) to inform it whether the applicant's daughter required the permanent care of a parent. On 5 June 2002 the doctor stated that, on the basis of the medical documents, the child in question could not be considered as ever having required such care.

11. On 7 June 2002 the SSB issued simultaneously two decisions in respect of the applicant. By virtue of the first decision, the payment of the applicant's pension was discontinued with immediate effect (1 June 2002). By virtue of the second decision, the Board revoked the initial decision granting a pension and eventually refused to award the applicant the right to an early-retirement pension under the scheme provided for by the Cabinet's Ordinance of 15 May 1989 on the right to early retirement of employees raising children who require permanent care (*Rozporządzenie Rady Ministrów z dn. 15 maja 1989 w sprawie uprawnień do wcześniejszej emerytury pracowników opiekujących się dziećmi wymagającymi stałej opieki*) ("the 1989 Ordinance").

12. The applicant appealed against the respective decisions divesting her of the right to an early-retirement pension. She submitted that she should receive the benefit because her child required constant care, as confirmed by the medical certificate attached to the applicant's original application for a pension. Moreover, the applicant alleged that the revocation of her retirement pension was contrary to the principle of protection of vested rights.

13. On 28 November 2003 the Tarnobrzeg Regional Court (*Sąd Okręgowy*) modified the 7 June 2002 decision and restored the EWK pension to the applicant. It held that there had been no grounds for re-opening of the pension proceedings.

14. The SSB lodged an appeal against this judgment.

15. On 6 May 2004 the Rzeszów Court of Appeal (*Sąd Apelacyjny*) quashed the first-instance judgment and remitted the case.

16. On 28 June 2005 the Tarnobrzeg Regional Court dismissed the applicant's appeal against the SSB's decision of 7 June 2002. The Regional Court concluded on the basis of the evidence, including expert medical evidence that indeed the applicant's child suffered from skin problems. They also acknowledged that in her early childhood the applicant's daughter had suffered from recurrent respiratory tract infections, bronchitis and meningitis. However, she did not require her mother's permanent care since her health condition did not significantly impair her body functions. The domestic court held that the applicant had been rightfully divested of her right to a pension under the scheme provided by the 1989 Ordinance as she did not satisfy the requirement of necessary permanent care.

17. The applicant again appealed against the first-instance judgment.

18. On 4 November 2005 the Rzeszów Court of Appeal dismissed the appeal. It upheld the findings made by the Regional Court. Moreover, the court considered important the fact that the applicant had worked throughout receipt of the EWK pension.

19. On 6 April 2006 the Supreme Court (*Sąd Najwyższy*) refused to entertain the cassation appeal lodged by the applicant.

2. The applicant's financial situation following the revocation of the EWK pension

20. Following the social security proceedings the applicant was not ordered to return the EWK benefits paid by the SSB, despite the revocation of her right to the early-retirement pension.

21. The applicant submitted in general that her situation after the revocation of the EWK pension had been very difficult.

22. The Government submitted that the applicant had been continuously employed when receiving the EWK pension and after its revocation. She had also received family and nursing allowances and her son had started to work in 2004.

B. Relevant domestic law and practice

23. The legal provisions applicable at the material time and questions of practice are set out in the judgments in the case of *Moskal v. Poland*, no. 10373/05, §§ 31-34, 15 September 2009 and *Antoni Lewandowski v. Poland*, no. 38459/03, §§ 36-43, 2 October 2012).

COMPLAINT

24. The applicant complained under Article 6 of the Convention and Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention about the reopening of the social security proceedings which had resulted in the revocation of her right to the EWK pension.

THE LAW

I. ALLEGED VIOLATION OF ARTICLE 1 OF PROTOCOL No. 1 TO THE CONVENTION

A. Preliminary issues

1. Scope of the case before the Court

25. In the instant case the gist of the applicant's complaints is that the decision to divest her of her early-retirement pension amounted to an unjustified deprivation of property. Consequently, the application falls to be examined under Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention, which reads as follows:

> "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."

2. The Government's objections

26. The Court notes that the Government raised several objections to the admissibility of the case. They submitted that the application constituted an abuse of the right of individual application, that the applicant had failed to exhaust domestic remedies because she had not filed a constitutional complaint, that she had not complied with the six-month rule and, lastly, that she had suffered no significant disadvantage.

The applicant disagreed with the Government.

27. As regards non-compliance with the six-month rule, the Court has already held in other EWK cases that the applicants should not be penalized for having tried to file a cassation appeal with the Supreme Court in order to avoid any risk of having their case rejected by the Court for non-exhaustion

of domestic remedies (see, for example, *Frączek-Potęga v. Poland*, no. 39430/04, § 55, 4 December 2012). Accordingly, the final decision in the case under consideration was given by the Supreme Court on 6 April 2006 whereas the applicant lodged her application with the Court on 4 October 2006. That being so, the applicant complied with the six-month term laid down in Article 35 § 1 and the Government's objection should therefore be dismissed.

28. The Court has already examined identical objections regarding abuse of the right of individual application, non-exhaustion as regards the applicant's failure to lodge a constitutional complaint, and no significant disadvantage and dismissed them, in the follow-up cases to *Moskal* (see, for instance, *Antoni Lewandowski*, cited above, §§ 45–72 and *Lew v. Poland*, no. 34386/04, §§ 35-62, 4 December 2012). The Court sees no reason to depart from its previous findings.

29. Moreover, the Court is not called upon to deal with the remaining admissibility issues as the application is in any event inadmissible for the reasons stated below.

B. Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention

1. The parties' submissions

30. The Government maintained that the application was manifestly ill-founded. They submitted that the interference with the applicant's property rights had been lawful and justified. In particular, divesting the applicant of her right to the early-retirement pension had been provided for by law and was in the public interest. There was also a reasonable relationship of proportionality between the interference and the interests pursued. They further noted that even though the decision to revoke the EWK pension had had a retroactive effect, the applicant had not been required to reimburse the sum of PLN 6,827.68 already paid to her.

31. The Government also underlined that the applicant had stopped working when granted the EWK pension, but then had resumed her full-time employment immediately and had continued it when in receipt of the EWK pension. She had remained employed after the revocation of the pension. In consequence, the revocation of the pension had not caused any significant detriment to the applicant. Moreover, the applicant's real intention of had been to supplement her salary by means of the pension and not to stay at home in order to take care of her daughter.

32. The applicant submitted that divesting her of her acquired right to an early-retirement pension had amounted to an unjustified deprivation of property. She maintained that it had not been forbidden under the domestic law for an individual to work while in receipt of an EWK pension as the child's care could have been provided by another member of the family

or hired help. The applicant asserted that she had borne an excessive burden in that the decision of 7 June 2002 had deprived her of her main source of income with immediate effect.

2. The Court's assessment

33. The relevant general principles are set out in paragraphs 49-52 of the *Moskal* judgment, cited above. The Court would nevertheless reiterate that any interference by a public authority with the peaceful enjoyment of possessions should be lawful, must be in the public interest and pursue a legitimate aim by means reasonably proportionate to the aim sought to be realised (see *Moskal*, cited above, §§ 49 and 50).

It would further reiterate that, as a general principle, public authorities should not be prevented from correcting their mistakes, even those resulting from their own negligence and that, consequently, it was open to them to reassess an applicant's entitlement to a pension (see *Moskal*, cited above, § 73 and *Iwaszkiewicz v. Poland*, no. 30614/06, §§ 53 and 70, 26 July 2011).

34. The Court finds, as it did in previous similar cases, that the decision of the SSB depriving the applicant of the right to receive the EWK pension amounted to an interference with her possessions within the meaning of Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention and that this interference was provided for by law and pursued a legitimate aim, as required by this Article (see *Moskal*, cited above, §§ 56-57 and 61-63).

35. However, in assessing the proportionality of this interference, the Court considers that the present case differs substantially from the cases it examined in which the applicants resigned from gainful employment in order to obtain the EWK pension, the pension was their only income, and its sudden revocation placed an excessive burden on them as they were left without any resources or perspective to find a new job quickly (see, among many other examples, *Moskal*; *Antoni Lewandowski; Frączek-Potęga*; and *Lew,* cited above).

36. In contrast, as a result of the revocation of the pension, the applicant in the instant case was not faced with the total and immediate loss of her only source of income as she retained her salary when in receipt of the pension and after its revocation (compare and contrast *Antoni Lewandowski*, cited above, §§ 81–82). Nor did she permanently resign from her job after her right to the EWK pension had been confirmed by the authorities. Indeed, she quit in order to be eligible for the EWK benefit and resumed full-time employment with the same employer within a mere one month after her resignation – a month during which she took up some freelance job. Moreover, although the applicant was in receipt of both the EWK pension and salary for one year and four months, the State did not require her to return the amount of the pension which had been unduly paid (see paragraphs 7–11, 20 and 30–32 above).

37. The principle of good governance is of particular importance and it is desirable that public authorities act with the utmost care and speediness, in particular when dealing with matters of vital importance to individuals, such as social benefits and other such rights (see *Antoni Lewandowski*, cited above, § 80). It is true that the authorities, in particular the courts, reviewed the applicant's case over a relatively long period of time. However, as already noted above, throughout these proceedings the applicant was employed.

38. In view of the foregoing, it cannot be said that the authorities' decisions placed on the applicant an excessive burden incompatible with Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention (see *Rzepa v. Poland*, no. 30361/04, §§ 31-37, 9 April 2013). The applicant's case is therefore clearly distinguishable from the facts of the leading case concerning EWK pensions, *Moskal v. Poland*.

39. It follows that the application is manifestly ill-founded and must be rejected in accordance with Article 35 §§ 3 (a) and 4 of the Convention.

II. OTHER ALLEGED VIOLATION OF THE CONVENTION

40. The applicant also alleged a violation of the Article 6 of the Convention (see paragraph 24 above).

41. However, the Court considers that the issues raised by the applicant in that regard have already been adequately addressed above (see paragraphs 33-39 above).

42. In any event, in all the previous similar cases examined to date, the Court considered that the complaint under this provision did not require a separate examination (see, among many other examples, *Moskal* §§ 77-99 and *Antoni Lewandowski* §§ 86-88, cited above; see also paragraph 25 above).

43. It follows that the remainder of the applications must likewise be rejected under Article 35 § 4 of the Convention.

For these reasons, the Court unanimously

Declares the application inadmissible.

Fatoş Aracı
Deputy Registrar

David Thór Björgvinsson
President