ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN: MONTENEGRO

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I. What is the legal status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)?

A. What is the status of the CRC and other relevant ratified international instruments in the national legal system?

Montenegro ratified the CRC on 23 October 2006 with no reservations.¹ The Constitution of Montenegro provides that "the ratified and published international agreements and generally accepted rules of international law shall make an integral part of the internal legal order, shall have the supremacy over the national legislation and shall be directly applicable when they regulate the relations differently from the internal legislation."²

In addition, Montenegro has ratified all three Optional Protocols to the CRC.³ For more information on the Optional Protocol on a communications procedure, please see part III.A below.

B. Does the CRC take precedence over national law?

Yes, the CRC takes precedence over conflicting provisions of national law by virtue of Article 9 of the Constitution.

C. <u>Has the CRC been incorporated into national law?</u>

Yes, the CRC was directly incorporated on ratification. Finding that some areas of national law were inconsistent with the Convention, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that the State fully incorporates the CRC.⁴

D. Can the CRC be directly enforced in the courts?

The CRC can be directly enforced in the courts under Article 9 of the Constitution.

http://www.comparativeconstitutionsproject.org/files/Montenegro 2007.pdf.

 $\underline{http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC\%2fC\%2fMNE\%\\ \underline{2fCO\%2f1\&Lang=en}.$

¹ https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en.

² Constitution of Montenegro, 19 October 2007, available at:

³ http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CRC&Lang=en.

⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Montenegro*, CRC /C/MNE/CO/1, 21 October 2010, at para. 5, available at:

E. Are there examples of domestic courts using or applying the CRC or other relevant international instruments?

Research did not identify any case law from the national court citing the CRC.

II. What is the legal status of the child?

A. <u>Can children and/or their representatives bring cases in domestic courts to challenge violations of children's rights?</u>

A complaint for the protection of a child's rights can be filed by a child, their parent(s), the public prosecutor, or guardianship authority.⁵

B. If so, are children of any age permitted to bring these cases by themselves/on their own behalf, or must the case be brought by or with the assistance of a representative?

The age of majority in Montenegro is 18 and also the age at which full legal capacity is acquired, except for married children,⁶ who acquire legal capacity at the time of marriage.⁷ In civil proceedings, a child who has not acquired full legal capacity shall be considered to have litigation capacity within the limits of their recognised legal competence.⁸ Parties without litigation capacity must be represented by a legal representative as determined by law.⁹

According to the Family Law, parents have the right and the duty to represent their children in all legal affairs. ¹⁰ In cases where there may be conflicting interests between the child and their legal representative, a 'collision guardian' will be appointed. ¹¹ Such appointment may be requested directly by children aged over 10 who are deemed 'capable of reasoning'. ¹²

Violations of children's rights which amount to a criminal offence are generally prosecuted by the state, but children making an allegation of a crime must be accompanied by a parent or a guardian, which means that sexual abuse or incest may go unreported.¹³ Violations of children's rights which amount to a criminal offence may be also prosecuted through a private action.¹⁴ Such private actions must typically be filed by a representative on behalf of the child, however,

⁵ Family Law of Montenegro, Article 354, available at: http://www.gov.me/files/1230131053.doc.

⁶ The default minimum age of consent for marriage is 18, but in some circumstances persons aged 16 and above may be permitted to marry by a court. Family Law, Article 24.

⁷ Family Law, Article 13.

⁸ Law on Civil Procedure, Article 77, available at: http://en.sudovi.me/podaci/en/vrhs/dokumenta/75.pdf.

⁹ Law on Civil Procedure, Article 78.

¹⁰ Family Law, Article 73.

¹¹ Family Law, Article 356.

¹² Ihid

¹³ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *Montenegro country report*, at p. 42, available at: http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160205.pdf.

¹⁴ Criminal Procedure Code, Chapter 5, available at: http://www.legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/4023/preview.

exceptionally children over the age of 16 may be allowed to bring the action independently. 15

C. In the case of infants and young children, how would cases typically be brought?

No separate provisions apply to younger children, so cases on their behalf will be brought according to the procedure outlined in part II.B above.

D. Would children or their representatives be eligible to receive free or subsidised legal assistance in bringing these kind of cases?

Under the Constitution, everyone has the right to legal aid to be provided free of charge and in accordance with the law.¹⁶

Legal aid is regulated by the Law on Legal Aid passed in 2011.¹⁷ It is available to all persons who would otherwise be unable to access the courts without causing harm to the necessary subsistence of themselves or their families.¹⁸ It takes the form of legal advice, assistance with preparation of documents and representation in court¹⁹ and is granted by the Basic Court for the territory of permanent residence of the applicant.²⁰ For further information, please see part IV.B below.

E. Are there any other conditions or limits on children or chosen legal representatives bringing cases (e.g., would a child's parents or guardian have to agree to a case being brought)?

Although court hearings are public, only adults are allowed to attend them.²¹

III. How can children's rights violations be challenged before national courts?

A. <u>If there is a potential violation of the Constitution or other principles established in domestic law, or with the CRC or other relevant ratified international/regional instruments, how can a legal challenge be brought?</u>

Every person has the right to access to a court in order to exercise their rights.²²

The Constitutional Court of Montenegro may decide cases regarding alleged violations of human rights and liberties granted by the Constitution, after all other efficient legal remedies have been exhausted, as well as matters regarding the conformity of laws with the Constitution and confirmed and published international agreements.²³ Any person may file an initiative to start the

www.mpa.gov.me/ResourceManager/FileDownload.aspx?rid=150870&rType=2&file=Zakon_o_besplatn oj_pravnoj_pomoci.pdf.

²¹ Civil Procedure Law, Article 308.

http://www.legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/3877.

¹⁵ Criminal Procedure Code, Article 53.

¹⁶ Constitution, Article 21.

¹⁷ Available in Montenegrin language at:

¹⁸ Ministry of Justice, *Right to Free Legal Aid*, available at:

www.pravda.gov.me/ResourceManager/FileDownload.aspx?rid=150878&rType=2&file=Pravo_Eng.pdf. 19 *Ibid*.

²⁰ Ihid

²² Law on the Courts, Article 5, available at:

²³ Constitution, Article 149.

procedure for the assessment of constitutionality and legality and the procedure may be initiated by the Court itself or other state authority, the Ombudsman or a group of five Members of Parliament.²⁴ The person on whose initiative the procedure is commenced will be considered a party to the proceedings.²⁵

The Ombudsman of Montenegro, called Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, ²⁶ can receive complaints from anyone who believes that an act, action or failure to act by a public authority violated their rights or freedoms. ²⁷ He may also act on his own initiative but with the consent of the victim. ²⁸ A complaint form can be downloaded from the Ombudsman's website. ²⁹ In the case of a violation of the rights of the child, the complaint may be filed by their parent or guardian or legal representative; however, if the latter is responsible for the rights violation, the complaint may be filed by the child protection authorities or an NGO. ³⁰ The Ombudsman issues opinions on whether a violation of human rights has occurred and makes recommendations on how the violation should be remedied. ³¹

The European Court of Human Rights decides cases concerning alleged violations of any of the rights contained in the European Convention on Human Rights.³² Any individual, group of individuals or an NGO who is a victim of a violation of one of these rights may submit a complaint to the Court, ³³ but the complaint will be admissible only if all domestic remedies have been exhausted. ³⁴ Anonymous complaints are not permitted.³⁵ The procedural rules for the Court do not make any child-specific provisions. Persons may initially present an application themselves or through a representative, however, all applicants must be represented at hearings thereafter.³⁶ After examining the case, the Court renders a judgment which is binding on the State³⁷ and also has powers to award monetary compensation to the victims of human rights abuses.³⁸ It is also worth noting that the Court has an established practice of referring to other international human rights instruments, including the CRC, as guides to interpretation of the European Convention.

 $\frac{http://www.ustavnisudcg.co.me/engleska/PDF/Law\%20on\%20the\%20Constitutional\%20Court\%20of\%20Montenegro\%20.pdf.}{0Montenegro\%20.pdf}.$

http://www.ombudsman.co.me/propisi/eng/Law on Protector.pdf.

 $\underline{https://www.crin.org/en/library/legal-database/european-convention-protection-human-rights-and-fundamental-freedoms}.$

http://www.echr.coe.int/documents/rules court eng.pdf.

²⁴ Constitution, Article 150.

²⁵ Law on the Constitutional Court of Montenegro, Article 19, available at:

²⁶ Constitution, Article 81.

²⁷ Law on the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, Article 3 and 28, available at:

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ http://www.ombudsman.co.me/eng/.

³⁰ Law on the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, Article 30.

³¹ Law on the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, Article 41.

³² European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms ("European Convention on Human Rights"), 1950, Articles 19 and 32, available at:

³³ *Ibid.*, Article 34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Article 35.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ Rules of Court, July 2014, Rule 36, available at:

³⁷ European Convention on Human Rights, Article 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Article 41.

Finally, once all domestic remedies have been exhausted, complaints against violations of children's rights may be submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child under the third Optional Protocol to the CRC on a communications procedure, ³⁹ which Montenegro ratified in September 2013. Complaints can be made directly by both an individual child or a group of children, or indirectly, on their behalf by an adult or an organisation. ⁴⁰ The violations must concern a right granted by either the CRC, the Optional Protocol on the sale of children or the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict⁴¹ and must have occurred after the entry into force of the Protocol on 14 April 2014. ⁴² Anonymous complaints are inadmissible and so are complaints not made in writing. ⁴³ In addition, only complaints made in one of the working languages of the UN will be accepted. ⁴⁴ After examining the complaint, the Committee can make recommendations to the State, which are not legally binding. ⁴⁵

B. What powers would courts have to review these violations, and what remedies could they offer?

The Constitution guarantees a right to a legal remedy.⁴⁶ Research did not identify the national law provisions which specify what form the remedies may take.

The Constitutional Court has the power to repeal laws which it deems contrary to the Constitution or to ratified international treaties.⁴⁷

Lastly, Montenegro is considering a draft law on compensation of victims of crime.⁴⁸

C. Would such a challenge have to directly involve one or more individual child victims, or is it possible to challenge a law or action without naming a specific victim?

Research did not identify any provisions of national law that allow for a civil claim to be brought on behalf of an unidentified or unspecified victim.

 $\underline{http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=A/RES/66/138\&Lang=\underline{en}.$

http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/petitions/individual.htm#contact.

³⁹ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure, 2013, available at:

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Article 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Article 7(g).

⁴³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, '23 FAQ about Treaty Body complaints procedures', available at:

⁴⁵ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure, Article 10.

⁴⁶ Constitution, Article 20.

⁴⁷ Constitution, Article 152. See also http://www.ustavnisudcg.co.me/engleska/nadleznost.htm.

⁴⁸ Organisation Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Opinion on the Draft Law on Compensation of Damages for Victims of Criminal Acts in Montenegro*, 26 July 2014, available at: http://www.osce.org/odihr/122224.

Although complaints to the Ombudsman may not be anonymous,⁴⁹ they are confidential.⁵⁰

D. <u>Is any form of collective action or group litigation possible, with or without naming individual victims?</u>

It is possible for several people to bring the same proceedings⁵¹ and each co-litigant shall be independent party in the litigation.⁵²

E. Are non-governmental organisations permitted to file challenges to potential children's rights violations or to intervene in cases that have already been filed?

Any natural or legal person may be a party to civil proceedings,⁵³ so NGOs should be able to bring cases, provided they can show legal interest in the claim. ⁵⁴ It is not clear whether 'legal interest' is construed widely or whether NGOs have been successful in bringing challenges to human rights violations.

IV. Practical considerations

A. <u>Venue:</u> In what courts could a case be filed (e.g., civil, criminal, administrative, etc.)? What would the initial filing process entail?

In Montenegro, the basic courts are typically the court of first instance for civil and criminal matters. The High Courts can decide at second instance on appeals against decisions of the Basic courts. They also have jurisdiction in, among others, criminal proceedings for criminal offences punishable by imprisonment of more than ten years and other certain serious criminal offences. The Court of Appeals hears appeals against decisions of the High Courts. The Administrative Court can decide on legality of administrative acts. The Constitutional Court decides matters related to the Constitution. The highest court is the Supreme Court.⁵⁵

Civil actions should generally be brought at the court with general territorial jurisdiction for the defendant's permanent place of residence.⁵⁶ Claims for the protection of children's rights can be brought in the court with jurisdiction for the place of permanent residence of the child.⁵⁷ The procedure starts with filing of a complaint,⁵⁸ which must contain the facts of the claim and any evidence to support these facts.⁵⁹

⁴⁹ Law on the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, Article 34.

⁵⁰ Law on the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, Article 29.

⁵¹ Civil Procedure Code, Article 197.

⁵² Civil Procedure Code, Article 201.

⁵³ Civil Procedure Law, Article 76.

⁵⁴ Civil Procedure Law, Article 3.

⁵⁵ Law on Courts, available at: http://www.legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/3877. For more information about the courts, please see: http://en.sudovi.me/vrhs/judicial-power/jurisdicton/.

http://en.sudovi.me/vrhs/judicial-power/jurisdicton/.

⁵⁶ Civil Procedure Law, Articles 38 and 39.

⁵⁷ Family Law, Article 353.

⁵⁸ Civil Procedure Law, Article 186.

⁵⁹ Civil procedure Law, Article 187.

B. <u>Legal aid/Court costs:</u> Under what conditions would free or subsidised legal aid be available to child complainants or their representatives through the court system (i.e., would the case have to present an important legal question or demonstrate a likelihood of success)? Would child complainants or their representatives be expected to pay court costs or cover other expenses?

Free legal aid is granted to applicants based on their financial status, however, if the beneficiary of legal aid is awarded money as a result of the litigation, he will need to pay back the costs.⁶⁰

When filing a complaint, plaintiffs must attach a receipt as proof of payment of a court fee.⁶¹ Regarding costs of the procedure, a party may be exempt from payment if the court finds that their general financial situation prevents them from bearing the costs without "jeopardizing necessary support of himself/herself and his/her family".⁶²

There are no costs associated with filing a complaint to the Ombudsman. 63

C. <u>Pro bono/Financing:</u> If legal aid is not available, would it be possible for child complainants or their representatives to obtain legal assistance from practising lawyers on a pro bono basis, through a children's rights organisation, or under an agreement that does not require the payment of legal fees up front?

Pro bono legal aid in Montenegro is a developing field, but research did not identify any services which focus on providing assistance to children or children's rights issues.⁶⁴

D. <u>Timing:</u> How soon after a violation would a case have to be brought? Are there any special provisions that allow young adults to bring cases about violations of their rights that occurred when they were children?

In relation to criminal proceedings, private actions must be filed within three months of the time when the private prosecutor learns about the crime.⁶⁵

Complaints to the Ombudsman must be filed within six months from the day on which the complainant learned about the violation or within one year from the day on which the violation occurred.⁶⁶ The time limits may be waived by the Ombudsman if he considers that necessary in light of the importance of the complaint.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Ministry of Justice, *Right to Free Legal Aid*, available at: www.pravda.gov.me/ResourceManager/FileDownload.aspx?rid=150878&rType=2&file=Pravo_Eng.pdf.

⁶¹ Civil Procedure Law, Article 187.

⁶² Civil Procedure Law, Article 166.

⁶³ Law on the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, Article 3.

⁶⁴ The Pro Bono Institute and Latham & Watkins LLP, *A Survey of Pro Bono Practices and Opportunities in 71 Jurisdictions*, August 2012, at p. 183, available at: http://www.probonoinst.org/wpps/wp-content/uploads/a-survey-of-pro-bono-practices-and-opportunities-in-71-jurisdiction-2012.pdf.

⁶⁵ Criminal Procedure Code, Article 51.

⁶⁶ Law on the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, Article 32.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

E. <u>Evidence</u>: What sort of evidence is admissible/required to prove a violation? Are there particular rules, procedures or practices for dealing with evidence that is produced or presented by children?

The parties to civil proceedings must present all facts on which they ground their claims and present evidence in support of these facts.⁶⁸ A child may be heard as a witness if the court finds that he/she is capable of testifying.⁶⁹ Legal representative shall be heard for the party without litigation capacity, although the court may decide to head also or instead from the party itself.⁷⁰ Witnesses, who are unable to respond to the summons to testify due to their age, illness or disability, may be heard in their dwelling or premises in which they reside.⁷¹ However, no further provisions regarding the testimony of children are made by the Civil Procedure Law.

In criminal proceedings, minors shall not be examined as witnesses if, taking into consideration their age and mental development, they are not capable to comprehend the importance of testimony.⁷² Children giving evidence do not need to take oath.⁷³ When a minor is heard, especially if they are the victim of the criminal offence, special care shall be taken in order to ensure that the hearing would not have an adverse effect on the minor's mental condition and, when necessary, the minor shall be heard with assistance of a psychologist or another expert.⁷⁴

F. <u>Resolution:</u> How long might it take to get a decision from the court as to whether there has been a violation?

According to the Family Law, proceedings for the protection of a child's rights shall be particularly urgent and the first hearing must take place within eight days from the day on which the court received the action, and in case a decision is appealed, the second-instance court shall be obliged to pass the judgment within 15 days from the day on which it was received the appeal.⁷⁵

Civil courts must conduct proceedings without any unnecessary delay and within reasonable period of time.⁷⁶

G. Appeal: What are the possibilities for appealing a decision to a higher court?

Appeals against first instance judgements can be made within 15 days⁷⁷ and on the grounds of substantial violation of provisions of the civil procedure, erroneously or incompletely determined facts or misapplication of the substantive law.⁷⁸

⁶⁸ Civil Procedure Law, Articles 8 and 217.

⁶⁹ Civil Procedure Law, Article 231.

⁷⁰ Civil Procedure Law, Article 262.

⁷¹ Civil Procedure Law, Article 238.

⁷² Criminal Procedure Law, Article 108.

⁷³ Criminal Procedure Law. Article 118.

⁷⁴ Criminal Procedure Law, Article 113.

⁷⁵ Family Law, Article 360.

⁷⁶ Civil Procedure Law, Article 11.

⁷⁷ Civil Procedure Law, Article 361.

⁷⁸ Civil Procedure Law, Article 366.

Decisions rendered on appeal by a court of second instance can be reviewed by the Supreme Court⁷⁹ when a request for review is made within 30 days.⁸⁰ The Civil Procedure Law contains detailed provisions regarding the review process.⁸¹ The Supreme Court has the power to reverse the judgment of the court of second instance in its ruling and, if necessary, remand the case to the second instance court for retrial.⁸²

For criminal procedures, Article 297 of the Criminal Procedure Code allows the prosecutor and/or the injured party or the accused to appeal against the decisions of the court.

H. <u>Impact</u>: What are the potential short-term and long-term impacts of a negative decision? Is there a possibility for political backlash or repercussions from a positive decision?

Montenegrin law follows a civil law system so court precedent does not have as significant an impact as in a common law jurisdiction, where courts are bound by precedents set by higher courts, and the impact of a negative decision will be limited.

I. <u>Follow up</u>: What other concerns or challenges might be anticipated in enforcing a positive decision?

The enforcement of judicial decisions is governed by the Law on Enforcement and Securing of Claims. 83 Most decisions will be enforced by public bailiffs, but not those relating to the removal of a child, which can only be done through the enforcement function of a court. 84

V. Additional factors. Please list any other national laws, policies or practices you believe would be relevant to consider when contemplating legal action to challenge a violation of children's rights.

Children's right to be heard is protected by the Family Law which states that a child who has completed 10 years of age may freely and directly express their opinion in every court and administrative procedure in which their rights are being decided on.⁸⁵

This report is provided for educational and informational purposes only and should not be construed as legal advice.

81 See Title 27.

⁷⁹ Civil Procedure Law, Article 397.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸² Civil Procedure Law, Article 411.

⁸³ Available at: http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/me/me031en.pdf.

⁸⁴ Law on Enforcement and Securing of Claims, Article 4. See also Ministry of Justice, *Public bailiffs have started they [sic] service today*, 07 April 2014, available at:

http://www.mpa.gov.me/en/news/137387/Public-bailiffs-have-started-they-service-today.html.

⁸⁵ Family Law, Article 67.