

PROTECTING AND PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN ITALY: WHAT HAS BECOME OF THE PROPOSAL OF A NATIONAL AND INDEPENDENT COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS?

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Proposals

‘The Setting Up of a National Human Rights Institution: A Proposal by The Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman’ <http://www.ombudsman.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/The-setting-up-of-a-National-Human-Rights-Institution.pdf>

Abstract

On 20 December 1993, the General Assembly of the United Nations reaffirmed the importance of developing effective national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights. The resolution is merely exhortative. However, in view of the Italian candidature to the Human Rights Council for the term 2007-2010, the Permanent Representative of Italy in the UN referred to the commitment to establish an independent national Agency. On 20 July 2011, the Senate approved a draft law in accordance with the resolution 48/134. The text grants the Agency not only advisory and initiative powers, but also monitoring tasks and quasi-judicial powers.

At the moment, the establishment of this Agency is only contained in a draft law although it seemed as if 2015 brought positive signals of recovery. For instance, a conference promoted by the interdepartmental Committee for Human Rights relaunched the project in July 2015, in a period when Europe was, as it still is, divided on the topic of priorities concerning human rights, especially for issues concerning immigration and asylum.

1. Introduction

National human rights institutions (NHRIs)¹ are relatively new actors on the human rights scenario. On 20 December 1993, the General Assembly of the United Nations formally recognised the «importance of developing, in accordance with national legislation, effective national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights»². The resolution of the General Assembly is merely exhortative. However, in the past twenty years, the number of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) has significantly grown.

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¹ This article is a first draft of a work in progress about the creation in Italy of an independent institution for human rights. There are very few bibliographical references on the establishment in Italy of an independent HR institution. I would like to thank the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Human Rights (within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation), especially the President, Min. Gianludivico De Martino, for providing statements and reports on conferences promoted about the subject mentioned in the article.

² General Assembly, Resolution 48/134, on National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 20 December 1993, A/RES/48/134, <<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r134.htm>>.

Not only did resolution 48/134 encourage Member States to establish or strengthen these independent institutions, but it also provided actual guidelines relating to their status. The resolution endorsed the Paris Principles³, which represent the minimum standards applicable to NHRIs entrusted with a mandate to protect and promote human rights. NHRIs must comply with the Paris Principles in order to be considered credible both by other similar institutions and within the UN system. In 2005, the Commission of Human Rights reaffirmed by resolution 2005/74 «the importance of establishing and strengthening independent, pluralistic» NHRIs consistent with the Paris Principles and of improving cooperation among them.

The level of compliance with those principles is reflected by the accreditation status accorded to NHRIs. “Status A” means a state is fully compliant with the Paris Principles⁴, while “status B” corresponds to a state of partial compliance, and finally, “status C” corresponds to a state of non-compliance. The Paris Principles recommend that States establish independent national institutions to (i) promote human rights, (ii) advise governments on human rights protection, (iii) review human rights legislation⁵, (iv) prepare human rights reports⁶, and (v) receive and investigate complaints from individuals and civil society’s organisations.

Requiring that NHRIs be entrusted with «as broad a mandate as possible» to enable them to assume their dual responsibility for protecting and promoting human rights, the Paris Principles distinguish NHRIs from other institutions with similar goals (e.g. ombudsmen) but which are mandated only to protect human rights and not to establish structured relations with other civil society organisations. Furthermore, the accreditation by international standards guarantees the independence and accountability of NHRIs. According to the Vienna Declaration⁷, NHRIs may take many forms depending on the regions in which they are established, on the legal traditions according to which they are regulated and on the purposes for which they are formed. Examples of such entities are: the institution of ombudsman, human rights institutes or centres, the office of the public defender, human rights committees, and commissioners for human rights⁸. The model selected and the level of accreditation are not correlated. What is pivotal is that an appropriate institutional structure be in place. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stresses that «distinctions between these models are becoming blurred» and that what is «relevant more than the label attached to an institution is the fact that its mandate, functions and powers accord

³ Principles agreed in 1991 at the first International Workshop on National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights convened in Paris by the UN Commission on Human Rights (see Gauthier De Beco and Rachael Murray (2014), *Commentary on the Paris Principles on National Human Rights Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁴ By June 2010, 67 NHRIs were accredited with “A-status” by the International Coordinating Committee (see Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights (2010), *National Human Rights Institutions. History, Principles, Roles and Responsibilities*. New York and Geneva: United Nations, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/PTS-4Rev1-NHRI_en.pdf>).

⁵ In countries with “A-status” NHRIs (such as Denmark, Greece, Germany), mechanisms of systematic screening of legislative proposals are provided by such NHRIs to ensure compliance with rights standards.

⁶ «The Human Rights Council welcomes the important role played by national human rights institutions in the Human Rights Council, including its universal periodic review mechanism, in both preparation and follow-up, and the special procedures, as well as in the human rights treaty bodies . . . , and encourages national human rights institutions to continue to participate in and contribute to these mechanisms, including by continuing to engage with the treaty bodies by, inter alia, providing parallel reports and other information» (Human Rights Council, Resolution 27/18, National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 7 October 2014, <<http://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?Open&DS=A/HRC/RES/27/18&Lang=E>>).

⁷ The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted on 25 June 1993 at the World Conference on Human Rights, reaffirmed the right of each State to choose the framework for national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights. The model adopted takes into consideration particular needs at a national level in order to facilitate promotion of human rights in accordance with international human rights obligations and commitments.

⁸ A comparative overview of NHRI models in Europe has been outlined by the Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012) *Handbook on the Establishment and Accreditation of National Human Rights Institutions in the European Union*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, <http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2012_nhri-handbook_en.pdf>.

with the letter and spirit of the Paris Principles»⁹.

Despite the differences, from a wider perspective, it can be said that NHRIs are «autonomous quasi-governmental or statutory institutions with human rights in their mandate»¹⁰. All human rights institutions are expected to be set forth in a constitutional or legislative text; to operate independently of the government; to have a broad mandate based on universal human rights standards; to implement its mandate «by acting as “guardians”, “experts” and “teachers” of human rights»¹¹; to have autonomous and adequate funding and budget, and, finally, to represent the pluralistic composition of civil society.

In general, the most successful NHRIs appear to be those which «operate well at several levels»¹². These in particular «are perceived to be legitimate, make themselves accessible, and build good working links with relevant institutions in civil society and government»¹³. As independent institutions, although established by governments, NHRIs are particularly well adapted for forging links between civil society and national authorities playing an effective role in the implementation of international human right norms¹⁴.

NHRIs act, not only at national level collaborating with national institutions but also at regional and international levels. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and the OHCHR have become increasingly involved in the establishment and strengthening of NHRIs¹⁵. Such NHRIs are now actively participating in the UN human rights infrastructure, a development that has been positively acknowledged¹⁶. At the same time, recent studies suggest that acceleration of this integrative process has raised the profile of NHRIs and led to their full participation in UN human rights activities¹⁷. NHRIs have already achieved full cooperation with the Council of Europe. In particular, NHRIs have the status of permanent observers and are kept apprised of relevant activities concerning the promotion and protection of human rights within the framework of the Council of Europe¹⁸. The cooperation and the interaction with the European Court of Human Rights has been considered extremely useful in order to make «European human rights more effective and the Court’s judgements more legitimate»¹⁹.

⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁰ See International Council on Human Rights Policy (2004) *National Human Rights Institutions: Effectiveness and Legitimacy*. 2nd edn. Versoix: International Council on Human Rights Policy, <http://www.ichrp.org/files/reports/17/102_report_en.pdf>.

¹¹ Anna Elina Pohjola (2006) *The Evolution of National Human Rights Institutions. The Role of the United Nations*. Copenhagen: The Danish Institute for Human Rights, p. 1, <http://nhri.net/pdf/Evolution_of_NHRIs.pdf>.

¹² According to a research project realised by the Council on Human Rights Policy to examine how successfully such institutions promote and protect human rights in their societies (International Council on Human Rights Policy, *op. cit.*).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Their increasing involvement in the «domestication of international human rights law has been highlighted by Andrew Wolman (2015) *Sub-National Human Rights Institutions and the Domestication of International Human Rights Norms, Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 224-250.

¹⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, *op. cit.*, p. 9

¹⁶ On 7 October 2014, the Human Rights Council welcomed the important role played by national human rights institutions in the universal periodic review mechanism for the preparation and follow-up, in the special procedures, as well as in the human rights treaty bodies (Human Rights Council, *op. cit.*). In the same resolution, the Human Rights Council noted the increased engagement between special procedures and national human rights institutions, an observation which was reinforced by country follow-up visits and thematic report, and, following the presentation of country mission reports to the Human Rights Council, encouraged the strengthening of such engagement, also through the participation of national human rights institutions.

¹⁷ See Andrew Wolman (2014) *Welcoming a New International Human Rights Actor? The Participation of Subnational Human Right Institutions at the UN, Global Governance*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 437-457.

¹⁸ Committee of Ministers, Resolution (97)11 on Cooperation between National Human Rights Institutions of Member States and between them and the Council of Europe, <<http://nhri.ohchr.org/EN/Regional/Europe/PageDocum/Resolution%20no%2011%20%281997%29.pdf>>.

¹⁹ See: Buyse, Antoine (2013) *The Court’s Ears and Arms: National Human Rights Institutions and the European*

At EU level, the European Network of National Human Rights (ENNHRI)²⁰ and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) work collaboratively to facilitate the transfer of knowledge on legal and human rights issues from the national to the European level. Above all, NHRIs with “A-status” are considered key players in connecting national, EU and international, human rights systems²¹.

2. The proposal for an Italian NHRI

Italy has not yet established an independent NHRI. Nowadays, also due to the cuts in public expenditure, the framework of this Commission is contained only in a draft law approved by the Senate on 20 July²². How have we arrived here? What has been done before? In this regard, we wish to stress two elements that are relevant, not only in the case of Italy, but also globally, and which have produced an impetus towards better protection of human rights. The first was the debate and consultation within civil society. Since early 2000, civil society representatives have pushed for an independent human rights body. In 2002, a group of legal experts under the newly established Committee for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (*Comitato per la Promozione e Protezione dei Diritti Umani*) – an umbrella organisation for 86 Italian human-rights related NGOs – drafted the first proposal for a law establishing an NHRI²³.

The second element was international and European calls to Italy to create an independent institution for human rights. Since 2003, all the UN Treaty Bodies that had reviewed Italy for human rights protection, «recommended its establishment without further delay». In the same way, during the Universal Periodic Review - II cycle (from 27 October to 7 November 2014), Italy received 23 recommendations from other UN States calling for the early establishment of a human rights institution according to the Paris Principles²⁴. In its response in March 2015, the Italian Government advised that the recommendations were not only acceptable but actually in the course of implementation.

In May 2015, after the official follow-up visit to Italy from 2 to 6 December 2014, the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, François Crepeau, recommended that the Government establish «a national human rights institution in line with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles)». Moreover, it ensures that «it is both functionally and financially independent from the Government and vested with the authority to investigate all issues relating to human rights, including those of migrants, regardless of their administrative status»²⁵.

Court of Human Rights, in Wouters, Jan, Meuwissen, Katrien (2013) National human rights institutions in Europe: comparative, European and international perspectives. Cambridge, Antwerp, Portland, Intersentia, pp. 173-186, pp.185-186.

²⁰ European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) comprises National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) across Europe and is part of the International Coordinating Committee of NHRIs (ICC).

²¹ Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012) *Annex to the Handbook on the establishment and accreditation of National Human Rights Institutions in the European Union. The path to A-Status. Contribution from selected EU Member States*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, <http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2012_nhri-handbook-annex_en.pdf>.

²² The draft law is the result of the unification of the drafts No. 1223, 1431 and 2720. See:<<http://leg16.camera.it/126?PDL=4534&leg=16&tab=6>>.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

²⁴ The recommendations Nos. 26 to 48 were presented by the following States: Malaysian, Bulgaria, Uruguay, France, Ireland, India, Chad, Indonesia, Bahram, Chile, Morocco, Congo, Todo, Senegal, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Azerbaijan, Peru, Kenya, Egypt, Guatemala, Denmark, Pakistan, Portugal. The recommendations were very similar and strict. Portugal and Ireland added that human rights institutions should have a very broad human rights mandate and India underlined the importance of functional and financial independence.

²⁵ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, François Crépeau, Follow-up mission to Italy (2-6 December 2014) - Addendum, A/HRC/29/36/Add.2, <<http://www.ohchr.org/>-

It is anticipated that such international calls will provide new impetus for the development of a project for an independent NHRI. From 2005 to 2011, various political interests submitted four different bills providing for the creation of a National Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in line with the Paris Principles and UN General Assembly Resolution 48/134. However, despite the UN Treaty Bodies' recommendations and pressure from civil society, the legal drafts languished in the Chamber of Deputies. Furthermore, even though the final draft bill was not only adopted by the Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional Affairs on 20 January 2010, but also subsequently approved by the Senate on 20 July 2011, and, further, transmitted to the second chamber for approval, it did not progress any further through the parliamentary procedure.

3. Requirements and answers

In spite of the twenty-year long debate on the Italian NHRI, all four bills were drafted without consulting civil society organisations, thus, disregarding the Paris Principles, in particular with respect to the basic imperative of pluralist representation.

In the following sections, we propose to examine the content of the final draft bill and to compare it with the proposals put forward during the workshop, *Crossover Rights*²⁶, which was organised on 10 November 2014 by the combined efforts of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Human Rights, the Department for European Affairs and designated non profit organisations to discuss the challenges of, and possibilities for, an "A-status" Italian NHRI". Members of civil society, academic and institutional experts, representatives from European and international institutions, were invited to participate in this discussion.

As mentioned previously, the Paris Principles provide for minimum standards without, at the same time, imposing any particular model on new NHRIs. Therefore, the final structure chosen for each NHRI depends on the legal and political traditions of the governing State. What is essential is that its mandate and functions effectively comply with the Paris Principles. The NHRI mandate is required to be clearly set forth in a constitutional or legislative text to ensure its permanence, independence and transparency. According to the Sub-Committee on Accreditation, executive instruments do not comply with the Paris Principles. In the Italian case, the NHRI is to have a legislative basis. How does the draft bill translate the requirements of the Paris Principles into institutional reality? The legislative proposal provides for a human right Commission consisting of a President and two members nominated by the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies and envisages that the Commission work in tandem with a Council for human rights and fundamental freedoms to be composed of institutional and independent experts in human rights, representatives of NGOs and trade union associations (art. 7 ff.). This will ensure the representation of all sections of society within the NHRI membership in order to achieve the requirements of pluralism, independence and impartiality required from the Paris Principles.

The majority of participants in the workshop *CrossOverRights* organised in November 2014 agreed that the preferred solution for an Italian NHRI would be a small number of members (three or four) - selected from a shortlist created by a public selection and elected by a joint committee of independent experts - and representatives of civil society organisation elected by a conference of NGOs. It is worth observing that this joint committee could also serve as a forum for dialogue between the NHRI and civil society organisations. On the other hand, some proposals suggested replacing the Commission with the Ombudsperson model. In this case, an Ombudsperson, or a

EN/Issues/Migration/SRMigrants/Pages/AnnualReports.aspx>.

²⁶ Workshop «Towards a Coherent EU framework for Fundamental Rights and an Independent HR Institution in Italy» organised on 10 November 2014 by the Open Society Foundation and Parsec, in collaboration with the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Human Rights and the Department for European Affairs.

board of diverse ombudspersons, would work in close relationship with a civil platform providing for the ongoing involvement of NGOs. This model, due to its simplicity, seems better than the alternative model proposed, and could pave the way out of the impasse regarding the creation of an NHRI in Italy.

The draft law fulfills the requirement of formal and functional independence that is considered the «cornerstone» of the NHRI system. The functional independence dictates that the NHRI should listen to all stakeholders without being unduly influenced by any one of them. The formal independence from the government is ensured not only at decisional level, but also in relation to financing issues, by means with an autonomous funding system and an adequate budget. It is however to be underlined that even though the autonomous funding guarantees the independence of the NHRIs, in times of austerity it does not necessarily ensure to reach the adequate budget to realise its mandate. It can be argued, nonetheless, that, in periods of economic crisis, a sufficient investment in a NHRI is essential because such crisis often brings with it «more human rights violations»²⁷. Independence is connected to reporting and accountability obligations. The NHRIs are required to both report to State by preparing annual and special reports and to keep the public informed of their work.

The mandates of NHRIs should be «as broad as possible» including the promotion and protection of all categories of human rights. Not all NHRI mandates cover practical implementation of economic, social and cultural rights because protecting such rights presents particular difficulties²⁸. On the basis of Article 2 of the draft bill, the Italian NHRI would have a competence extending beyond all fundamental rights recognised in the Constitution and in international agreements to which Italy has become a party. The draft bill refers explicitly in Article 3 to many promotional and protective functions. The former envisages a number of measures including: collaboration with schools and universities; human rights education and training; the launching of public awareness initiatives; and, powers to give advice and make recommendations to governments, parliamentarians and public bodies on the monitoring, investigation of, and reporting on, human rights issues.

Many human rights commissions are empowered to receive individual complaints in order to fulfil their protective functions. Notwithstanding the fact that the Paris Principles do not require such a specific facility, resolution 48/134 grafts additional principles on commissions with «quasi-judisdictional competence». Also, in the Italian case, the draft law grants the Commission, not only advisory and initiative powers, but also monitoring and quasi-judicial competences. In fact, according to its proponents, the institution should be authorised to hear and consider complaints by individuals, following the model of the Human Rights Commissions of Ireland and the UK. The proposal acknowledges furthermore inspections and controls of the Commission in the places where the violation should have happened (article 7). The proposals submitted during the *CrossOverRights* workshop on this point were very different. Some argued that the Italian NHRI should not include the power to receive individual petitions, because this would entail a substantial amount of work to the detriment of its intended power to hold its own inquiries and it would, moreover, raise problems of achieving coordination with the judiciary. Other commentators, however, underlined how such a

²⁷ Presentation by D. Kohner for the Conference «Protecting and Promoting Human Rights. Establishing National Independent Institutions» organised on 22 July 2015 by the Inter-ministerial Committee for Human Rights and the Department for European Affairs, <<http://www.cidu.esteri.it/ComitatoDirittiUmani>>.

²⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, *op. cit.*, p. 26. On the role that NHRIs play in protecting and promoting these rights, see Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 10*, 10 December 1998, E/C.12/1998/25, <http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx>. If there is no reason why NHRIs should not have economic, social and cultural rights in their mandates, «there rights still seem to be of secondary importance for NHRIs, despite some positive signals» (Brems, Eva, De Beco, Gauthier and Vandenhole, Wouter eds. (2013) *National Human Rights Institutions and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Cambridge-Antwerp-Portland: Intersentia, p. 29).

competence could, in times of economic crisis, lead governments to reduce public spending for the judicial system, promoting the prevention of violations and applications to courts. It is interesting to remember what the OHCHR said about this particular function: «the power to investigate human rights issues and /or individual complaints is obviously central to addressing human rights concerns in a meaningful manner. At the same time, commissions whose decisions or investigations are subject to judicial review in the courts tend to be very cautious in their investigations, which can lead to delays and formalistic approaches»²⁹.

4. Conclusions: Why is it important to establish an NHRI in Italy?

If all aforementioned key requirements are fulfilled, an NHRI could be accredited with “A-status” by the International Coordinating Committee (ICC). It is only in circumstances where the institution is in compliance with the Paris Principles that it may participate in the decision making of the ICC as well as in the different human rights monitoring mechanisms of the United Nations. The European Network of NHRIs (ENNHRI) provides support for the accreditation of NHRIs and facilitates NHRIs’ engagements with agencies and committees for human rights of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

Presently, the establishment of an Italian NHRI is only represented by a draft law that remains blocked in the national procedures for too long time.

A conference promoted by the Inter-ministerial Committee for Human Rights relaunched the project in July 2015, without any tangible achievements though³⁰. Consequently, in March 2017, the Human Rights Committee recommended in the concluding observations of the sixth periodic report of Italy that the State party «expeditiously» established a national human rights institution. Therefore the Committee required that The Italian Government provided information one year after the adoption of the observations on the implementation of this specific recommendation, in addition to those regarding migrants, asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors³¹.

This remark emphasizes once again that in a period Europe is divided on priorities concerning human rights, on the top of all immigration and asylum, a national human rights institution, that ensures a strong independent nature and quasi-judicial powers, is expected to play an important role in promoting and protecting the human rights culture.

²⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

³⁰ Consequently, the Inter-ministerial Committee referred to the future competences of the Commission in the national action plan 2016-2021 regarding the enterprises and human rights presented at the end of 2016 in accordance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. See: <www.cidu.esteri.it/ComitatoDirittiUmani/it/ambasciata/news>.

³¹ Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Italy, 6-29 March 2017 (119th Session), <<http://www.ohchr.org>>.

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