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STEERING COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
(CDDH)

**COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE REFORM OF THE COURT
(DH-GDR)**

Draft Explanatory report to Protocol No. 16

*(prepared by the Secretariat on the basis of the draft Protocol
as drafted by the DH-GDR at its 2nd meeting)*

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The proposal to extend the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (the Court) to give advisory opinions was made in the report to the Committee of Ministers of the Group of Wise Persons, set up under the Action Plan adopted at the Third Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Member States of the Council of Europe (Warsaw, 16-17 May 2005) “to consider the issue of the long-term effectiveness of the ECHR control mechanism”. The Group of Wise Persons concluded that “it would be useful to introduce a system under which the national courts could apply to the Court for advisory opinions on legal questions relating to interpretation of the Convention and the protocols thereto, in order to foster dialogue between courts and enhance the Court’s ‘constitutional’ role. Requests for an opinion, which would be submitted only by constitutional courts or courts of last instance, would always be optional and the opinions given by the Court would not be binding.”¹ Such a new competence would be in addition to that accorded to the Court under Protocol No. 2 to the European Convention on Human Rights (the Convention),² whose provisions are now principally reflected in Articles 47-49 of the Convention. The Group of Wise Persons’ proposal was examined by the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) as part of its work on follow-up to the former’s report.³

2. The Izmir High-level Conference on the future of the Court (26-27 April 2011), in its final Declaration, subsequently “[invited] the Committee of Ministers to reflect on the advisability of introducing a procedure allowing the highest national courts to request advisory opinions from the Court concerning the interpretation and application of the Convention that would help clarify the provisions of the Convention and the Court’s case-law, thus providing further guidance in order to assist States Parties in avoiding future violations”. The Ministers’ Deputies decisions on follow-up to the Izmir Conference then invited the CDDH to elaborate specific proposals, with options, for introducing such a procedure.⁴ The CDDH’s Final Report to the Committee of Ministers on measures requiring amendment of the ECHR⁵ included an in-depth examination of a more detailed proposal made by the experts of The Netherlands and Norway, reflected also in its Contribution to the Ministerial Conference organised by the United Kingdom Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers.⁶

3. The question of advisory opinions was discussed at length during the preparation of the subsequent Brighton High-level Conference on the future of the Court (19-20 April 2012), to which the Court contributed a detailed “Reflection Paper on the proposal to extend the Court’s advisory jurisdiction”.⁷ The final Declaration of the Brighton Conference, “[noting] that the interaction between the Court and national authorities could be strengthened by the introduction into the Convention of a further power of the Court, which States Parties could optionally accept, to deliver advisory opinions upon request on the interpretation of the Convention in the context of a specific case at domestic level, without prejudice to the non-

¹ See doc. CM(2006)203, para. 135.

² See CETS No. 044.

³ See the CDDH Activity Report on guaranteeing the long-term effectiveness of the control system of the European Convention on Human Rights, doc. CDDH(2009)007 Addendum I, paras. 42-44 and the CDDH Opinion on the issues to be covered at the Interlaken Conference, doc. CDDH(2009)019 Addendum I, para. 19.

⁴ See doc. CM/Del/Dec(2011)1114/1.5. These instructions were subsequently absorbed into the terms of reference for the biennium 2012-2013 of the CDDH’s subordinate body, the Committee of experts on the Reform of the Court (DH-GDR).

⁵ See doc. CDDH(2012)R74 Addendum I, paras. 51-56 & Appendix V.

⁶ See doc. CDDH(2012)R74 Addendum III, para. 17.

⁷ See doc. # 3853038.

binding character of the opinions for the other States Parties[, invited] the Committee of Ministers to draft the text of an optional protocol to the Convention with this effect by the end of 2013; and further invites the Committee of Ministers thereafter to decide whether to adopt it”.

4. Following the Brighton Conference, the 122nd Session of the Committee of Ministers instructed the CDDH to draft the required text. This work initially took place during two meetings of a Drafting Group of restricted composition, before being examined by the plenary Committee of experts on the reform of the Court (DH-GDR), following which the draft was further examined and adopted by the CDDH at its ... meeting (... .. 20...) for submission to the Committee of Ministers. The key issues addressed during this process were: the nature of the domestic authority that may request an advisory opinion of the Court; the type of question on which the Court may give an advisory opinion; the procedures for considering requests, for deliberating upon accepted requests and for issuing advisory opinions; and the legal effect of an advisory opinion on the different categories of subsequent case. The CDDH’s position on these issues is reflected in the commentary on the Protocol’s provisions in Section II below.

5. The Parliamentary Assembly, at the invitation of the Committee of Ministers, adopted Opinion No. ... on the draft protocol on 20....

6. At its ... meeting, the [Committee of Ministers] / [Ministers’ Deputies] examined and decided to adopt the draft as Protocol No. 16 to the Convention (CETS ...). At the same time, it took note of the present Explanatory Report to Protocol No. 16.

II. COMMENTS ON THE PROVISIONS OF THE PROTOCOL

Article 1

7. Paragraph 1 of Article 1 sets out three key parameters of the new procedure. First, by stating that relevant courts or tribunals “may” request that the Court give an advisory opinion, it makes clear that it is optional for them to do so and not in any way obligatory, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. In this connection, it should also be understood that the requesting court or tribunal may withdraw its request.

8. Second, it defines the domestic authority that may request an advisory opinion of the Court as being the “highest courts or tribunals... as specified by [the High Contracting Party] under Article 10”. This wording is intended to avoid potential complications by allowing a certain freedom of choice. “Highest court or tribunal” would refer to the courts and tribunals at the summit of the national judicial system. Use of the term “highest”, as opposed to “the highest”, permits the potential inclusion of those courts or tribunals that, although inferior to the constitutional or supreme court, are nevertheless of especial relevance on account of being the ‘highest’ for a particular category of case. This, along with the requirement that a High Contracting Party specify which highest courts or tribunals may request an advisory opinion, allows the necessary flexibility to accommodate the particularities of national judicial systems. Limiting the choice to the ‘highest’ courts or tribunals is consistent with the idea of exhaustion of domestic remedies – although a ‘highest’ court need not be one to which recourse must have been made in order to satisfy the requirement of exhaustion of domestic remedies under Article 35(1) of the Convention – and should avoid a proliferation of requests. It can be noted that under Article 10 (see further below), a High Contracting Party may at any

time change its specification of those of its highest courts or tribunals that may request an advisory opinion.

9. The third parameter concerns the nature of the questions on which a domestic court or tribunal may request the Court's advisory opinion. The definition – “questions of principle relating to the interpretation or application of the rights and freedoms defined in the Convention or the Protocols thereto” – is that which was used by the Group of Wise Persons and endorsed by the Court in its Reflection Paper, which was in turn inspired by Article 43(2) of the Convention on referral to the Grand Chamber. It was felt that there were certain parallels between these two procedures, not limited to the fact that advisory opinions would themselves be delivered by the Grand Chamber (see Article 2(2)). That said, when applying the criteria, the different purposes of the procedure under this Protocol and that under Article 43(2) of the Convention will have to be taken into account. Interpretation of the definition will be a matter for the Grand Chamber of the Court, and its panel of five judges when deciding whether to accept a request for an advisory opinion (see Article 2(1)). *[It was understood that the Court would remain free to reformulate the questions.]*

10. Paragraph 2 of Article 1 requires the request for an advisory opinion to be made in the context of a case pending before the requesting court or tribunal. The relevant question must have arisen in the context of a contentious case concerning individual rights in a dispute between parties. The procedure is not intended, for example, to allow for abstract review of legislation.

11. Paragraph 3 of Article 1 sets out certain procedural requirements that must be met by the requesting court or tribunal. They reflect the aim of the procedure, which is not to transfer the dispute to the Court, but rather to give the requesting court or tribunal guidance on Convention issues when determining the case before it. These requirements serve two purposes. First, they imply that the requesting court or tribunal must have reflected upon the necessity and utility of requesting an advisory opinion of the Court, so as to be able to explain its reasons for doing so. Second, they imply that the requesting court or tribunal must itself have already given serious consideration to both the legal and factual issues in the case, so as, insofar as possible at that stage of the domestic proceedings, to be in a position to set out the relevant legal and factual background, thereby allowing the Court to focus on the question of interpretation or application of the Convention or the Protocols thereto.

12. In providing the relevant legal and factual background, the requesting court or tribunal should present the following:

- The subject matter of the domestic case and relevant findings of fact made during the domestic proceedings, or at least a summary of the relevant factual issues;
- The relevant domestic legal provisions;
- The relevant Convention issues, in particular the rights or freedoms at stake;
- If necessary, a summary of the arguments of the parties to the domestic proceedings on the question;
- If possible and appropriate, a brief statement of its own views on the question, including any analysis it may itself have made of the question.

13. It is understood that the Court would be able to process requests in languages other than English or French, as it does at present for individual applications. Requesting courts or tribunals may thus address the court in the national official language used in the domestic proceedings.

Article 2

14. Paragraph 1 of Article 2 sets out the procedure for deciding whether or not a request for an advisory opinion is accepted. The Court has a discretion to accept a request or not, although in principle a request should be accepted if it satisfies the relevant criteria by relating to an appropriate question (as defined in paragraph 1 of Article 1) and the requesting court or tribunal fulfilling the procedural requirements (as set out in paragraphs 2 and 3 of Article 1). As is the case for requests for referral to the Grand Chamber under Article 43 of the Convention, the decision on acceptance is taken by a five-judge panel of the Grand Chamber.

15. Unlike the procedure under Article 43, however, the panel must give reasons for any refusal to accept a national court or tribunal's request for an advisory opinion. This is intended to reinforce dialogue between the Court and national judicial systems, including through clarification of the Court's interpretation of what is meant by "questions of principle relating to the interpretation or application of the rights and freedoms defined in the Convention or the Protocols thereto", which would provide guidance to domestic courts and tribunals when considering whether to make a request and thereby help to deter inappropriate requests. The Court should inform the High Contracting Party concerned of the acceptance of any requests made by its courts or tribunals.

16. Paragraph 2 of Article 2 states that it is the Grand Chamber of the Court (as defined in Article 26 of the Convention – see further under Article 6 below) that shall deliver advisory opinions following acceptance of a request by a five-judge panel. This is appropriate given the nature of the questions on which an advisory opinion may be requested and the fact that only the highest domestic courts or tribunals may request it, along with the recognised similarities between the present procedure and that of referral to the Grand Chamber under Article 43 of the Convention.

17. The prioritisation to be given to proceedings under this protocol would be a matter for the Court, as it is with respect to all other proceedings, in accordance with the principles set out in its published priority policy. That said, the nature of the question on which it would be appropriate for the Court to give its advisory opinion suggests that such proceedings would have high priority. Undue delay in the advisory opinion proceedings before the Court would also cause delay in proceedings in the case pending before the requesting court or tribunal and should therefore be avoided (see further under paragraph 23 below). It is understood that, should a request for an advisory opinion under this protocol concern a question that had already arisen in proceedings initiated by individual application under Article 34 of the Convention, the Court would give priority to the individual application over the request for an advisory opinion, assuming the latter were accepted.

18. Paragraph 3 of Article 2 states that the panel and the Grand Chamber shall include *ex officio* the judge elected in respect of the High Contracting Party to which the requesting court or tribunal pertains. It can be noted that this is also the case for the Grand Chamber when sitting in its full composition on a case brought before it under Articles 33 or 34 of the Convention (see Article 26(4) of the Convention).

Article 3

19. Article 3 gives to the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and to the High Contracting Party of which a domestic court or tribunal has requested an advisory opinion – in effect, the national government, as a matter of international law – the right to

submit written comments to and take part in hearings before the Grand Chamber in advisory opinion proceedings under this Protocol. The intention is that the Commissioner have an equivalent right under the Protocol to participate in advisory opinion proceedings as s/he does under Article 36(3) of the Convention to make a third party intervention in proceedings before a Chamber or the Grand Chamber. The wording used in the Protocol, although slightly different to that found in the Convention, it is intended to have the same effect. Since advisory opinion proceedings would not be adversarial, neither would it be obligatory for the government to participate, although it would always retain the right to do so, in the same way as does a High Contracting Party in proceedings brought by one of its nationals against another High Contracting Party (see Article 36(1) of the Convention on third party interventions).

20. The President of the Court may also invite any other High Contracting Party or person to submit written comments or take part in hearings, where to do so is in the interest of the proper administration of justice; this mirrors the situation concerning third party interventions under Article 36(2) of the Convention. It is expected that the parties to the case in the context of which the advisory opinion had been requested would be invited to take part in the proceedings.

21. It will be to the Court to decide whether or not to hold a hearing on an accepted request for an advisory opinion. [Given the importance of such proceedings, however, it is expected that a hearing would generally be held, as is the case for other proceedings before the Grand Chamber.]

Article 4

22. Paragraph 1 of Article 4 requires the Court to give reasons for advisory opinions delivered under this Protocol; paragraph 2 of Article 4 allows for judges of the Grand Chamber to deliver a separate (dissenting or partially dissenting) opinion. These provisions mirror those of Article 45 of the Convention, although the extent of reasoning given for advisory opinions will obviously be more in line with that given for judgments than that given for admissibility decisions.

23. Paragraph 3 of Article 4 requires the Court to communicate advisory opinions to both the requesting court or tribunal and the High Contracting Party to which that court or tribunal pertains. It is important to bear in mind that in most cases advisory opinions will have to be admitted to proceedings that take place in an official language of the High Contracting Party concerned that is neither English nor French, the Court's official languages. Whilst respecting the fact that there are only two official languages of the Court, it was considered important to underline the sensitivity of the issue of the language of advisory opinions. In the event of concerns that the time taken for translation into the working language of the requesting court or tribunal of an advisory opinion may delay the resumption of suspended domestic proceedings, it may be possible for the Court to cooperate with national authorities in the timely preparation of such translations.

24. It was not considered necessary for the Court to be required to communicate to the Committee of Ministers advisory opinions delivered under this Protocol (although see further under paragraph 25 below). Such advisory opinions would not, unlike those given under Article 47 of the Convention, be delivered at the request of the Committee of Ministers itself; and advisory opinions are not subject to supervision by the Committee of Ministers of their execution.

25. Paragraph 4 of Article 4 requires the Court to publish advisory opinions delivered under this Protocol. It is expected that, in accordance with the Court's practice in similar matters, this will include direct notification of interested parties such as the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as prominent publication on the Court's website.

Article 5

26. Article 5 states that advisory opinions shall not be binding. This reflects the intention that the procedure be as flexible as possible. The requesting court is not obliged to agree with the Court's advisory opinion, although given that it is optional to make a request, it is expected that there would only be disagreement in exceptional circumstances and for good reason.

27. The fact that the Court had delivered an advisory opinion on a question arising in the context of a case pending before a court or tribunal of a High Contracting Party would not prevent a party to that case subsequently exercising their right of individual application under Article 34 of the Convention, i.e. they could still bring the case before the Court. It is noted, however, that the Court could then apply the admissibility criteria in Article 35 or the provisions on striking out applications in Article 37 of the Convention to applications subsequent to proceedings in relation to which an advisory opinion of the Court had effectively been followed.

28. As regards later cases brought with respect to a High Contracting Party of which a court or tribunal had requested [and effectively followed] an advisory opinion, or to other High Contracting Parties to the Convention whether parties to the present Protocol or not, the principles of interpretation of the Convention contained in an advisory opinion would have the same legal status as principles set out by the Court in judgments.

Article 6

29. Article 6 reflects the fact that acceptance of the Protocol is optional for High Contracting Parties to the Convention. It thus does not have the effect of introducing new provisions into the Convention, whose text remains unchanged. Only between High Contracting Parties that choose to accept the Protocol do its provisions operate as additional Articles to the Convention, in which case its application is conditioned by all other relevant provisions of the Convention. It is understood that this, in conjunction with Article 58 of the Convention, allows for the possibility of States denouncing the Protocol without denouncing the Convention.

Article 7

30. Article 7 is based on one of the model final clauses approved by the Committee of Ministers and contains the provisions under which a High Contracting Party to the Convention may become bound by the Protocol.

Article 8

31. The text of Article 8 is taken from Article 7 of Protocol No. 9 to the Convention and is based on the model final clauses approved by the Committee of Ministers. The number of High Contracting Parties whose expression of consent to be bound is required for the protocol

to enter into force was set at ten, consistent with that found in Protocol No. 9, the only previous optional additional protocol to the Convention.⁸

Article 9

32. Article 9 specifies, as an exception to Article 57 of the Convention, that High Contracting Parties may not make a reservation in respect of the Protocol.

Article 10

33. Article 10 is based on a standard clause used in Council of Europe treaties. It is intended explicitly to allow High Contracting Parties to make declarations on material issues arising under the Protocol, in this case to specify which of their highest courts or tribunals will be able to request advisory opinions from the Court. It also allows for further declarations to be made at any time adding or removing from the list of specific courts or tribunals. All such declarations are addressed to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, as depository of multilateral agreements made within the organisation.

Article 11

34. Article 11 is one of the usual final clauses included in treaties prepared within the Council of Europe. Its paragraph d. refers to the procedure established under Article 10 of the Protocol for specifying which of a High Contracting Party's highest courts or tribunals will be able to request advisory opinions from the Court (see paragraph 33 above).

⁸ Protocol No. 14bis, whose entry into force required only three ratifications, was considered a special case occurring in particular circumstances and thus of less certain relevance to the present Protocol.