

Litigation & Dispute Resolution

Fifth Edition

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Italy

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Efficiency of process

Italy is a civil law jurisdiction. Rules on civil procedure are found in the Code of Civil Procedure. The efficiency of the Italian court system is guaranteed through a structured hierarchy outlined below.

In the first instance, cases are heard by the justice of the peace, who sits as a single judge, or by the high court, which, depending on the case at issue (in particular, in case of specialised divisions), may sit either as a collegium of three judges or as a single judge. In the second instance, a decision by justices of the peace may be appealed before the high court, and a first-instance decision by the high court may be appealed before the courts of appeal, established by a collegium of three judges. The highest degree is occupied by the Supreme Court of Cassation, which acts as a collegium of five judges, except in cases of peculiar issues (matters of jurisdiction, issues on which the case law of the Supreme Court, where it acts as a collegium of nine judges, has shown material difference of opinions or important points of law). Justice of peace decisions, if issued on an equitable basis, can be appealed before the Supreme Court of Cassation (section 113 of the Italian Code of Civil Procedure).

As for the efficiency of the Italian courts in terms of timing with respect to civil proceedings, it is widely acknowledged that Italy has the highest number of violations of the “reasonable time” requirement provided for by article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, according to recent statistics carried out by the Italian Government, the number of pending cases in court has decreased from 6 million (in 2009) to 4.5 million (as at December 31, 2015). Such decrease has also influenced the average duration of civil proceedings. A trial in first instance lasts approximately three years; in second instance from two to four years; while a proceeding before the Court of Cassation lasts from five to eight years.

In order to expedite the procedure, courts and the Code of Civil Procedure itself set deadlines for submitting pleadings and statements of defence. Should the parties fail to respect these deadlines or appear before the judge at hearings, Italian civil procedure allows trials *in absentia*. Actually, the court verifies whether the service of the claim is correct and, if so, declares the *absentia* of the missing party.

Furthermore, courts do not have an inquisitorial role in civil proceedings; this means that the judges may not provide evidences in support of the parties’ claims but, on the contrary, the latter is a duty of the parties. Regardless of the above, courts can issue search orders – regarding both individuals and goods – or enquire after written information concerning acts and documents from public administration. They also have the power to summon a witness to testify and to decide the case upon the oath of the parties.

Moreover, the Italian Civil Procedure Code includes provisions setting forth simple proceedings aimed at the achievement of a quick court decision. Firstly, whenever the creditor does not expect the debtor to contest the claim and its credit is supported by written evidence (such as invoices), the creditor can apply for a summary payment injunction (the so called, “*decreto ingiuntivo*”). This procedure, involving credits which are certain in its amount, is aimed at obtaining a court’s payment order forcing the debtor to pay the enjoined amount. After the notification of the *decreto ingiuntivo* to the debtor, the latter has a 40-day deadline to lodge a statement of opposition, otherwise the *decreto ingiuntivo* will be enforceable. Should the debtor be resident in a European country other than Italy, he or she may lodge the statement of opposition within 50 days upon receipt of the order for payment, provided that this term can be reduced up to a 20 days term. If the debtor lodges the opposition, such opposition will trigger an ordinary civil proceeding. The creditor, pursuant to EU Regulation no. 1896/2006, can also avail itself of a payment order when the litigation involves parties located in different EU countries.

Secondly, parties reasonably believing that their rights may be threatened by an imminent and irreparable harm, before ordinary proceedings are complete, can apply with the court to issue an order to protect those rights. This order, which is issued after a quick proceeding also known as *ricorso ex articolo 700 c.p.c.*, is granted if two conditions are satisfied (the burden of proof lies on the claimant):

- presence of the *fumus boni iuris* (that is, *prima facie* existence of the right claimed); and
- presence of a *periculum in mora* (that is, a concrete risk, linked to the delay, for the right claimed).

However, such order is granted on the basis of a summary inquiry; therefore, the court has the authority to revoke it if the circumstances on the basis of which they have been granted may be otherwise verified through an ordinary proceeding.

Furthermore, another method that has improved the quality of the civil procedure is the civil telematics proceeding (the “PCT”), which has digitalised and expedited several activities such as the consultation of deeds, document filing, transmission and notification. Starting from 2014, the filing of a specific document has become mandatory in civil proceedings. According to recent inquiries of the Italian Ministry of Justice, between May 2015 and May 2016, over 7,300,000 deeds were filed digitally and between June 2015 and May 2016, over 4,000,000 court decisions were issued digitally.

Finally, parties seeking quick means to resolve litigations can turn to ADR, which is a possible choice and up to the parties, but it is not mandatory, except for mediation on specific matters (this topic is widely elucidated under the “*Mediation and ADR*” paragraph).

Integrity of process

The rules of natural justice, independence and impartiality of the judiciary are constitutionally guaranteed in Italy.

Indeed, article 25 of the Italian Constitution sets forth that before commencing a proceeding, each individual has the right to identify which judge will be entitled to judge its case by operation of law. Any principle or law regulating such identification *ex post* (i.e. after the commencement of the civil procedure) is unconstitutional because it operates against the constitutional right to a fair trial. Moreover, pursuant to article 111 of the Italian Constitution, parties in civil proceedings have the right to hearings, on a “*pi d d’ galit *” to be held before

independent and impartial courts (and judges). As a result of these constitutional principles involving the judiciary, individuals have the right to institute legal proceedings in order to protect their rights and judges have the duty to state within the limits of the claims filed by the plaintiff; in a nutshell, the judge cannot go beyond the object of the proceedings identified by the parties.

The judiciary is only bound by law. A judge can abstain him/her self from judging a proceeding or can be recused by either party should he/she be lacking the independence and impartiality conditions required by law.

Should a judge pervert the course of justice or act in detriment of a party, he/she will be liable on a civil and criminal basis, even if the Italian criminal law does not set forth *ad hoc* types of offence tailored to judges.

Privilege and disclosure

As for privilege rules, the parties may not file any confidential correspondence between counsel regarding possible settlement of the case, since attorney-client privilege applies also to civil proceedings. As specifically provided in the lawyers' code of professional conduct, the only correspondence that the parties can file is correspondence between counsels regarding the fulfilment of the obligation from one party to another. Furthermore, the parties can file correspondence sent by the opposite party's counsel only if it regards a confirmation of the performance of obligations.

According to leading case law (both Italian and EU), advice from in-house counsel may not be qualified as privileged. This rule applies also to foreign in-house lawyers involved in Italian civil proceedings. In any case, according to their code of conduct, in-house counsel must also keep confidential all information that they become aware of until the end of their mandate.

Ultimately, restrictions apply to the publication of documents containing sensitive and personal data, as well as secret documents covered by legal privilege.

With respect to disclosure, Italian law provides no general duty of disclosure or discovery similar to common law jurisdictions. There is no duty on the parties to preserve documents and other evidence pending trial. The parties are not obliged to share relevant documents, unless an order by the judge is issued upon the other party's request. Each party is free to disclose evidence or not, depending on whether or not it may support its argumentation. There is no step available to the claimant to assist in bringing an action, such as a pre-action exchange of documents.

The electronic document is the representation of acts, facts or data. An electronic document, signed with digital or electronic signature, upon specific conditions, satisfies the legal requirement of written form. In terms of evidence the document itself is freely estimated, taking into account its objective characteristics of quality and safety.

With respect to disclosure by third parties, Italian provisions of law enable the parties to request the judge to order the production of documents by third parties or measures aimed at gathering evidence. However, such provisions only apply to specific documents and cases. Indeed, any person requested to provide evidence is legally bound to cooperate with the court. Nevertheless, parties may challenge the disclosure of documents if they have a legitimate reason to do so (such as legal privilege, medical secrecy or bank secrecy). The courts tend to order production of evidence only when the documents can be sufficiently identified.

Costs and funding

By way of principle, litigation costs, which are usually estimated by each party independently, are imposed on the losing party. Legal counsels of the parties may submit to the court their statements of costs. However, Italian local courts have the power to determine the amount of costs to be paid; indeed the judge may exclude the payment of certain costs, should he or she consider them excessive or unnecessary and, of course, can order the losing party to reimburse the costs incurred by the winning party.

Furthermore, if both parties partially lose, or the case has never been handled before or there is a change of case law on the subject, the judge can offset, either totally or partially, the litigation costs between the parties.

On the other hand, nothing prevents parties from agreeing that compensation of the attorneys be calculated as a percentage of the value of the litigation, or be totally excluded in the event of defeat (although such a scenario is unlikely).

If a party has annual income falling below a specific financial threshold, the Italian Government provides financial aid for litigation costs. In other words, such individual is exempted from the payment of litigation fees and other costs because the costs are borne by the Italian Government.

With regard to minimum lawyers' fees, the Decree Law no. 223/2006 has revoked the settled minimum fees for attorneys. Lawyers' fees are now settled, in written form, between the counsel and the client. Such fees are flat fees or are commonly invoiced on an hourly or percentage basis (calculated on the amount awarded by the court).

Interim relief

Parties can demand interim remedies either before the proceeding has been initiated or during the proceeding. The remedy will be requested from the entitled court to decide on the merits. Should a justice of the peace have jurisdiction, the interim remedy must be requested to the relevant high court.

Different kinds of interim remedies are provided for by law. Some are clearly defined: different kinds of seizures; report of new works and of potential damage; and pre-trial technical investigation. If a situation does not fall within any of these remedies, a general remedy (paragraph 700 of the Civil Procedure Code) shall apply; in such a case, the judge may adopt those remedies that are deemed more suitable to the circumstances of the case.

All the remedies share some common features: they are granted on the basis of a summary inquiry; therefore, the court has the authority to revoke them if the circumstances on the basis of which they have been granted are otherwise verified during the proceeding; and they are granted if two conditions are satisfied (the burden of proof lies on the claimant):

- presence of the *fumus boni iuris*; and
- presence of a *periculum in mora*.

In some cases (for instance, when service to the counterparty could entail delays that could jeopardise the right of the claimant), the court may decide *inaudita altera parte*, and re-establish the necessary dialogue with both parties in a second phase.

Certain remedies (in particular, seizures and attachments) are temporary, hence they must be followed by an action on the merit (otherwise the measure becomes ineffective) and are destined to be confirmed or revoked by the final judgment. Other remedies may be followed by the merit or not.

In addition, the parties may demand an injunction during the proceeding, which shall be ordered by the court in the case of uncontested sums.

Italian courts have the power to adopt interim remedies (necessarily *ante causam*), with reference to persons not having residence or domicile within the country, if they have jurisdiction as to the merit of the dispute or the interim remedy has to be carried out within the country (section 35 EU Regulation 1215/2012 which has replaced EU Regulation 44/2001 since January 10, 2015). Furthermore, while sections 64 to 71 of the Law 218/1995 (which applies between Italy and non-EU countries) do not take into consideration interim remedies as foreign decisions whose effectiveness the law recognises within the country, section 35 *et seq.* of EU Regulation 1215/2012 recognises the effectiveness of the interim remedies adopted within another EU Member State.

Enforcement of judgments

The procedure of recognition and enforcement of foreign judgments is regulated by the following laws and regulations:

- EU Regulation 1215/2012: judgments in civil and commercial matters issued by a judge of an EU Member State;
- the Lugano Convention of 1988: judgments in civil and commercial matters issued by judges of Iceland, Norway and Switzerland; and
- bilateral conventions between Italy and, *inter alia*, Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Kuwait, Moldova and Tunisia.

Section 64 *et seq.* of Law 218/1995 applies in any other case. Foreign judgments are recognised in Italy without any further procedure being necessary, should all of the following requirements be met:

- applying the rules on jurisdiction laid down under Italian law, the foreign judge would have had jurisdiction;
- the writ of summons instituting the proceedings was duly served and the defendant's right to be heard was respected;
- the parties appeared in the foreign proceedings (or a party's absence was formally declared under foreign law);
- the judgment is final and definitive under foreign law (pending the foreign proceedings, the interested party may only apply before Italian courts to seek interim measures);
- the judgment is not in conflict with an Italian judgment that is final and definitive;
- no proceedings on the same subject matter and between the same parties are pending before an Italian court; and
- the foreign judgment is not contrary to Italian public policy.

The court of appeal located where the applicant seeks enforcement has jurisdiction over this matter.

Cross-border litigation

In case of international civil or commercial matters, where there is the need to transmit a judicial or extrajudicial document for service abroad, the Hague Convention of November 15, 1965 applies also in Italy, except in case of bilateral convention between Italy and relevant country.

As for the service in European Member States of judicial and extrajudicial documents in civil or commercial matters, Regulation (EC) 1393/2007 on the service in the Member States (“Service Regulation”) sets forth rules on the transmission of judicial and extrajudicial documents inside and outside Italy.

Both the Service Regulation and the Hague Convention require member and contracting states to designate central authorities (“Receiving Authorities”) which are entitled to the receipt of judicial or extrajudicial documents from another Member State, which are duly translated into Italian and duly filled into *ad hoc* forms. Should a service of foreign proceeding be made in Italy, the preferred method is represented by the *Ufficio unico degli ufficiali giudiziari*. Such office sits at the Court of Appeal of Rome.

Pursuant to Italian international private laws, the Receiving Authorities transmit the relevant documentation following applicable Italian procedural laws, although the civil procedure laws and regulations of the transmitting authorities may differ from the Italian ones. However, the Receiving Authority may follow the transmission instructions given by the transmitting authority, to the extent permitted by applicable Italian laws and regulations.

The confidentiality of the transmitted information shall be ensured by the Receiving Authorities in accordance with their national laws and the Service Regulation.

Secondly, *as per* the need of obtaining oral or documentary evidences in cross-border litigations, the Hague Convention of March 18, 1970 on the taking of evidence abroad in civil or commercial matters (the “Hague Evidence Convention”), and the European Regulation 1206/2001 on co-operation between the courts of the Member States, in the taking of evidence in civil or commercial matters (“Evidence Regulation”) shall apply in Italy.

In case of cross-border documentary discovery and witness examination between non-EU countries and Italy, pursuant to the Hague Evidence Convention, the requesting party sends to the Receiving Authority a “letter of request” (duly conformed to a related form) indicating the evidence to be served or other judicial act to be performed or, in case of witness examination, the personal information of such person and the questions to be asked.

The discovery requests within the European zone are regulated by the Evidence Regulation. Such Regulation improves the co-operation system between the courts and judges of the requesting and receiving countries. Indeed, pursuant to the provisions of the Evidence Regulation, the requesting party may fill a specific form indicating a description of the taking of evidence to be performed or information on the person to be examined and the questions to be put to such person. The requested court shall then execute the request within 90 days of receipt of the request.

Based on international private law principles, Italian authorities may follow the instructions given by the requesting authorities, to the extent permitted by Italian procedural laws, given that pre-trial discovery is not permitted in Italy.

International arbitration

The most popular method of ADR is represented by arbitration. Two kinds of arbitration exist:

- formal arbitration, where the award has the same effect as the court’s judgment. In order to have an award enforced in Italy, the party must deposit the award together with the arbitration agreement at the clerk’s office of the competent court. The court, after a formal check, declares the award to be enforceable. Should any party not fulfil it, the other may seek an enforcement procedure; and

- informal arbitration: the award does not have the binding force of a judgment, but is qualified as an agreement between the parties. Hence, it cannot be automatically enforced through the same procedure established for the formal arbitration award, but, given its contractual nature, any party may sue the non-fulfilling party for any breach of the agreement.

Foreign awards are enforceable in Italy through a peculiar procedure for the *exequatur*. A party seeking the enforcement of a foreign award applies to the president of the court of appeal of the district where the counterparty resides (and the Rome Court of Appeal if the latter does not reside in Italy), by depositing the award and the arbitration agreement (with their Italian translations). The judge, after a formal check, declares its enforceability, unless the subject matter of the arbitration could not be subject to an arbitration agreement under Italian law, or the award embodies clauses that conflict with public policy. The award then becomes an enforceable title, subject to the provisions of law established for its enforcement.

Finally, in 1968 Italy ratified the 1958 New York Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Arbitral Awards. Under this treaty, all signatory states share a faster and easier procedure to make awards issued in one of the Member States enforceable in all the others.

There can be one or more arbitrators, provided that the panel has an odd number of members. Should the parties appoint an even number of arbitrators, the president of the competent high court will appoint an additional arbitrator. If parties do not express otherwise, the panel will consist of three arbitrators.

Each party designates one arbitrator, and the third arbitrator is appointed by mutual agreement of the parties. Should the third arbitrator not be appointed by the parties, he or she is designated by the president of the high court. Regardless, if the arbitration agreement does not set forth that the arbitrators must be designated by the parties, the interested party can request that the president of the high court appoint the panel. Each party can challenge the designation of an arbitrator through a claim to the president of the high court within the mandatory term of 10 days from the service of the appointment, or from when the reason for challenging the appointment became known. Parties may agree on a specific time limit for issuing the award. Should no agreement be made, the award will be issued within 240 days of the last acceptance of appointment by the arbitrators. However, the deadline can be extended:

- upon a joint request of the parties; or
- upon an application by a party or by an arbitrator before the competent court, for a maximum of 180 days, if there is the need to take evidence, conduct independent expertise, issue a partial award or replace an arbitrator.

The award must be in writing and must be approved by a majority of the arbitrators. The award may be sent to each party within 10 days from the signature by the last arbitrator.

The arbitrators can decide how to conduct the arbitration, according to the rules, if any, established by the arbitration agreement and, in any case, in compliance with the rules of fair process, which are compulsory under Italian law. Disputes over indefeasible rights (citizenship, divorce and other family law issues), and certain disputes over labour and social security benefits or contributions issues, cannot be settled through arbitration.

Courts can intervene in the process of an arbitration upon request of any of the parties to designate and substitute one or more arbitrators and decide on challenges to arbitrators' appointment. They also decide on the arbitrators' remuneration and costs in cases of

conflict among parties and arbitrators. Finally, courts may extend the deadline for issuing the final award. The above powers may be expressly excluded by agreement of the parties. Furthermore, courts must support the arbitrators in the process of taking evidence and have the exclusive power to issue interim relief.

Mediation and ADR

Mediation

Mediation is mandatory in civil and commercial proceedings, in certain specific matters (*inter alia*, the right to seek compensation for damages resulting from libel or medical liability; financial, bank and insurance agreements; condominium, rights *in rem*, divisions and inheritance disputes; lease agreements; company lease; family agreements, libel cases through press).

Parties seeking judicial relief in the above-mentioned matters are now required to seek an amicable resolution through qualified mediation organisations. For any matters other than the foregoing, mediation is only voluntary.

In the case of mandatory mediation, parties seeking judicial relief must devolve their dispute to the prior attention of a mediation organisation in the territory of the court that would have jurisdiction on the dispute; in addition, it is mandatory that they are assisted by a lawyer. Should the parties fail to seek ADR and, on the contrary, start a legal proceeding, the court must invite them to proceed to the mediation and give them 15 days to submit their request to the mediation organisation.

The Minister of Justice has established a register on which accredited mediation organisations shall be recorded. A collegial body or a single individual can conduct the mediation proceedings; in both cases, the mediator has no authority to make judgments or decisions that bind the parties. At the first hearing the parties decide whether to continue the mediation procedure (this cannot last longer than three months, unless both parties agree to renounce such term), and whether they can find common ground to solve their dispute amicably. If, during the mediation proceeding, no agreement is reached or the parties at the first hearing decided not to continue the proceeding, they are free to devolve their dispute to the competent court.

The mediator draws up a report certifying the outcome of the proceeding and the agreement reached by the parties, if any. The agreement concludes the mediation, and is challengeable in the case of invalidity or nullity. An agreement reached in a mandatory mediation is immediately enforceable. In the case of voluntary mediation, an agreement will be immediately enforceable only if each party has been assisted by a lawyer; otherwise, parties shall submit the agreement to the court for its formal approval in order to make it enforceable.

Negotiation

Negotiation is regulated by Decree-law no. 132 of September 10, 2014 as amended by Law no. 162 of November 10, 2014. Negotiation is mandatory in the following matters: damages resulting from circulation of vehicles and ships; and requests of payment for any amount lower than €50,000.00, not including matters covered by mandatory mediation.

The party who intends to start a legal action in any of the above matters, must invite in writing the counterparty to negotiate an amicable solution of the issue with the assistance of his/her lawyer. The counterparty, within 30 days, may accept the invitation in order to co-operate in good faith to reach an amicable agreement; if he/she rejects the invitation or

does not respond to it, the party is entitled to start the legal action (as to the consequences on the litigation costs in case of non-participation to the negotiation, see ‘Costs and funding’). Mediation was introduced in 2010 – by Legislative Decree no. 28 – to relieve the burden affecting the Italian judicial system and to make dispute resolution faster, easier and cheaper. In 2012, however, the Constitutional Court declared the unconstitutionality of mandatory mediation due to formal reasons (the Government had not been duly delegated to issue Legislative Decree no. 28); hence, the mediation was just left as a possibility to the parties’ will (i.e. mediation was voluntary). Mandatory mediation has since been reintroduced in the Italian legal system by means of Legislative Decree no. 69 of June 21, 2013.

The other most common ADR processes in Italy are:

- conciliation held before the Italian Securities Authority (“CONSOB”);
- arbitration in banking and finance disputes;
- conciliation concerning consumers’ rights; and
- the ‘joint negotiation’ (a popular process between a company and one or more consumer associations in respect of disputes involving more than one consumer sharing the same cause of action).

Regulatory investigations

Regulatory controls of consumer rights and business affairs are carried out by independent regulatory bodies and entities. However, for the sake of completeness, it is worth highlighting that the above topics owe their structure and developments to enhancement by the European Legislator; therefore, in this respect, no national peculiarity stands out.

As per the consumer rights protection, in Italy there is not an independent body or entity with regulatory powers in this respect. However, Legislative Decree no. 206 of September 6, 2005 (the “Consumers Code”) set up the National Council of Consumers and Users (the “Council”). The Council is composed of representatives of consumers’ and users’ associations listed on an official list of representatives of such associations. The Council contributes to the protection of consumers’ rights in the market. As previously mentioned, the Council does not have regulatory or decision-making powers; on the contrary, its powers are limited to advisory tasks.

Indeed, the Council is responsible, amongst others, for: a) expressing opinions on the frameworks of consumers’ regulations; b) formulating proposals in relation to the protection of consumers and users; c) promoting studies, research programs and conferences on the problems related to consumers’ rights; d) improving initiatives aimed at consumers’ access to justice; e) encouraging co-ordination between national and regional policies related to consumer protection; and f) promoting relations with similar bodies from other countries and within the EU.

Notwithstanding the above, consumer rights protection is not subject to any regulatory inquiry; however, the Consumers Code provides for the possibility, for registered consumers’ associations, to protect the collective interests of consumers on their behalf. However, such associations are entitled to file legal actions whenever there is an infringement of the collective interests of consumers and in areas envisaged by the Consumers Code.

As for business affairs regulatory controls, the Italian Competition Authority (the “ICA”) is the independent body entitled to guarantee the respect of national and European provisions regarding anti-competitive agreements, abuse of dominant position and concentrations and, in general, to prevent the restriction or distortion of competition on the Italian market.

The ICA was established by Law no. 287 of October 10, 1990 (the “Competition Law”). Such law recognises to the ICA several powers including, amongst others, sending opinions to the Government or the Parliament or local authorities, carrying out investigations on concentrations, issuing decisions, sanctions and administrative fines, and protecting consumers against misleading and comparative advertising.

Furthermore the ICA, as well as each competent authority in the European Member States, has a duty of cooperation with such authorities and the European Commission in order to ensure the application of the antitrust principles and provisions laid down in the European Treaties and Regulations.

With reference to ICA’s decision and sanction powers, leading case law has established that the ICA’s decisions, even if issued as a result of *ad hoc* procedure, may be challenged by ordinary civil and administrative courts. On the other hand, if an ICA decision has been issued and contested before an ordinary court, judges are not bound or limited by such decision; however, the ICA’s decision may establish a presumption of an unlawful conduct.

Moreover, should an ICA administrative fine be opposed before an administrative court, applicable Italian law provides that administrative courts have full powers to cancel, review, reduce or increase such fine.

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