New Dutch bill on collective damages action

Following the draft bill and consultation paper on Dutch collective actions for damages of 2014 (see our previous post), the final – fully amended – draft has been put before Parliament.

The following text has been prepared by Ianika Tzankova, professor at Tilburg University.

On 16 November 2016 the Dutch Ministry of Justice presented to Parliament a new Bill for collective damages actions. The proposal aims to make collective settlements more attractive for all parties involved by improving the quality of representative organizations, coordinating the collective (damages) procedures and offering more finality. It is unclear when or whether the Bill will be passed in its current form, but below are my first impressions and a personal selection of some noteworthy features of the Bill.

1. The proposed regime covers all substantive areas of law, which is a continuation of the status quo. What is new is that plaintiffs would be able to claim collective damages, not only declaratory and injunctive relief, and that the same requirements would apply to all types of actions: injunctive, declaratory or damages. More specifically, under the new legislation it would be much harder for claimants to file actions for injunctive and declaratory relief (see further below under 5. and further).
2. Exclusive jurisdiction in the first instance would be with the Amsterdam District Court, but it would be possible to transfer the collective action to another lower court if that would be more appropriate in a given situation.
3. There would be a registry for class actions so the public is notified once a class action has been initiated.
4. A system of 'lead representative organizations' would be introduced to streamline the process if there are multiple candidates for the position. There could also be co-lead representative organizations if that is appropriate for a specific action. Under the current regime it is possible to have multiple competing collective actions, a situation that is perceived

as confusing for consumers and burdensome for defendants.

5. Only non-profit entities would be allowed to file the collective action, as under current law. Those could also be ad hoc foundations, but heavy governance requirements would be put in place for their Board and Supervisory Board structure, which would require D&O insurance, guarantees for non-profit background of the Board and Supervisory Board members, a website and communication strategy for the group, the preparation of financial statements etc. This would require a significant financial investment beforehand in the logistical infrastructure of the organization, and it is unclear how this could be funded on a non-commercial basis. There is an exception for matters with a idealistic public policy background. Those ad hoc foundations might be exempted from some of the requirements, but in fact the Bill puts the ad hoc foundations in a disadvantageous position in comparison to pre-existing non-profit organizations.
6. Moreover, the lead representative candidates would need to demonstrate expertise and track record in class actions, have a sufficient number of claimants supporting them in relation to the specific action, and have sufficient financial means. The parliamentary notes specify that the court might ask a neutral third party to review the agreement, which would not need to be shared with the defendant.
7. Opt out seems to be the main rule under the new regime, but this is somehow mitigated, because under the selection test for lead representative organization (see under 6 above), the candidate has to demonstrate that it has a large enough group of claimant supporters behind it and is not an empty shell. This assumes at least some book-building effort beforehand and is therefore at least in part an opt in. After the lead representative organization is appointed, the whole group will be represented on an opt out basis.
8. The lead representative organization would need to demonstrate the superiority of the collective action in comparison to individual law suits.
9. The lead representative organization would need to demonstrate a sufficient link with the Netherlands. The Dutch legislator has consulted the Dutch State Commission for Private International Law and the Advisory Commission on Civil Procedure in relation to that requirement. According to the legislature, the test for a sufficient link with the Netherlands is compatible with Brussels I, because it does not concern

the jurisdictional test but the certification of a civil action, which is a matter of national civil procedure. It aims to exclude from the collective action situations where the defendant is not based in the Netherlands, the harmful events did not take place in the Netherlands or the majority of the claimants are not domiciled in the Netherlands. In those situations the claimants will still have the option of starting an individual action. This requirement seems to aim to address the recent VEB v BP type of collective actions, where the Dutch Investors' Association VEB initiated a collective action for declaratory relief for all investors who had their BP shares in bank accounts in the Netherlands, following the ECJ's criteria formulated in the Kolassa ruling (C-375/13). The Amsterdam District Court declared on 28 September of this year that it lacked jurisdiction to hear the action, which is questionable in view of the Kolassa ruling. The current proposal aims to eliminate the use of the new Dutch collective actions regime in situations where Dutch courts under Brussels I and ECJ case law would have jurisdiction to hear individual cases for the 'Kolassa type' of claimant, but those would not be able to use the Dutch collective action regime to effectuate their rights.

10. Group members could opt out at the beginning of the certified class action and start an individual proceeding, but those individual proceedings could be stayed at the request of the defendant, at least for one year after the parties opted out. The court would have discretion to allow the stay of the proceedings. This departs somewhat from the systems existing in other jurisdictions (e.g. US and Canada) where claimants who opt out can resume their individual actions with no delays.
11. The collective action tolls the statute of limitation for the whole group represented by the lead representative organization. Parties who choose to opt out need to preserve their individual rights within 6 months after they have opted out. Under Dutch law it is not necessary to start a civil action to preserve one's rights. It is sufficient to send a letter to that effect to the defendant.
12. Under current Dutch law, adverse cost orders are fixed. Under the proposal it would be possible for the lead representative organization to recover the real costs of litigation if parties reach a settlement. The lead representative organization would be liable for any adverse costs if it loses the action.
13. Any settlement reached under the new collective action regime would

need to be approved by the District Court. It is unclear whether the new regime aims to limit the extra-territorial application of the WCAM: the Dutch act on collective settlements that has already been used twice for global settlement purposes. Presumably not, if globally settling parties choose to invoke the WCAM directly and not via the Dutch collective action regime.