

Unfair arbitration clause before the ECJ

In a recent decision of October 6, 2009 (C 40/08 – Asturcom Telecomunicaciones SL v. Maria Cristina Rodríguez Nogueira) the European Court of Justice held that a national court or tribunal hearing an action for enforcement of an arbitration award which has become final and was made in the absence of the consumer is required to assess *of its own motion* whether an arbitration clause in a contract concluded between a seller or supplier and a consumer is unfair.

As in the Elisa María Mostaza Claro v. Centro Móvil Milenium SL (C-168-05) case, the dispute arose from a subscription contract for a mobile telephone concluded between Asturcom and Mrs Rodríguez Nogueira. The contract contained an arbitration clause under which any dispute concerning the performance of the contract was to be referred for arbitration to the Asociación Europea de Arbitraje de Derecho y Equidad (European Association of Arbitration in Law and Equity) ('AEADE'). The seat of that arbitration tribunal, which was not indicated in the contract, was located in Bilbao.

An arbitral award condemned Mrs Rodríguez Nogueira to pay EUR 669,60 to Asturcom. The consumer neither participated into the arbitral proceedings nor did she intend to get the annulment of the award, as permitted by the Spanish Arbitration Law.

Asturcom brought an action before the Juzgado de Primera Instancia No 4 de Bilbao for enforcement of the award.

First, the Spanish Court of First Instance rules that the arbitration clause contained in the subscription contract is unfair. However, the Spanish Law on Arbitration does not allow the arbitrators to examine of their own motion whether unfair arbitration clauses are void and secondly, the Spanish Code of Civil Procedure (Ley 1/2000 de Enjuiciamiento Civil) does not contain any provision dealing with the assessment to be carried by the court or tribunal having jurisdiction as to whether arbitration clauses are unfair when adjudicating on an action for enforcement of an arbitration award that has become final.

In those circumstances, the Juzgado de Primera Instancia decided to stay the

proceedings and to refer to the Court the following question for a preliminary ruling:

“In order that the protection given to consumers by [Directive 93/13] should be guaranteed, is it necessary for the court hearing an action for enforcement of a final arbitration award, made in the absence of the consumer, to determine of its own motion whether the arbitration agreement is void and, accordingly, to annul the award if it finds that the arbitration agreement contains an unfair arbitration clause that is to the detriment of the consumer?”

The ECJ held that national courts having jurisdiction for the enforcement of arbitral awards made in the absence of the consumer are “required to assess of their own motion whether an arbitration clause in a contract concluded between a seller or supplier and a consumer is unfair, *in so far as, under national rules of procedure, they can carry out such an assessment in similar actions of a domestic nature*.”

If that is the case, it is for that court or tribunal to establish all the consequences thereby arising under national law, in order to ensure that the consumer is not bound by that clause”.

In my opinion, the decision is written in a misleading way.

In the first place, it seems to mean that national courts having jurisdiction over the enforcement of arbitral awards should on their own motion raise the nullity of the arbitration clause on the basis of Directive 93/13.

However, they should do so only where their national procedural laws (“*in similar actions of a domestic nature*”) authorize them to do so. Which means that in this case (if I understand well), as the provisions on the enforcement of domestic awards of the Spanish Code of Civil Procedure are silent on this matter, Spanish judges are not required to raise on their own motion the unfair arbitration clause... But what should we understand by “*in similar actions of a domestic nature*”? It is quite clear that the ECJ excludes the procedure of the enforcement of international awards from its ambit. But what are these provisions that national judges should look at???

If anyone has a clue on this...