

Application of the Brussels I bis Regulation *ratione materiae*, interim relief measures and immunities: Opinion of AG Saugmandsgaard Øe in the case Supreme Site and Others, C-186/19

Written by María Barral Martínez, a former trainee at the European Court of Justice (Chambers of AG Campos Sánchez-Bordona) and an alumna of the University of Amsterdam and the University of Santiago de Compostela

The Hoge Raad Neederlanden (The Dutch Supreme Court), the referring court in the case Supreme Site Service and Others, C-186/19, harbours doubts regarding the international jurisdiction of Dutch courts under the Brussels I bis Regulation, in respect to a request to lift an interim garnishee order. An insight on the background of the case can be found [here](#) and [here](#), while the implications of that background for admissibility of request for a preliminary ruling are addressed in section 1 of the present text.

In replying to a preliminary ruling request made by that court, AG Saugmandsgaard Øe issued his Opinion. Advocate General concluded that a flexible approach should be taken when interpreting the concept of “civil and commercial matters” within the meaning of Article 1(1) of the Brussels I bis Regulation. AG was of the view that an action for interim measures as the one brought by SHAPE, aimed at obtaining the lifting of a garnishee order, qualifies as civil and commercial matters, within the meaning of Article 1(1), provided that such garnishee order had the purpose of safeguarding a right originating in a contractual legal relationship which is not characterised by an expression of public powers, a matter that is left to the referring court to verify. For presentation of AG reasoning and its analysis in relation to interim measures, see

section 2.

Moreover, according to AG, alleged claims of immunity enjoyed under international law by one of the parties to the proceedings had no significance, when it comes to the analysis of the material scope of the Brussels I bis Regulation. Against this background, the case provides a good opportunity to explore jurisdictional issues in the face of immunities, such as the debate regarding international jurisdiction preceding the assessment of immunities, and what can be inferred from the case-law of the Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights in that respect. Next, it requires us to determine whether the case-law developed in relation to State bodies and their engagement in *acta iure imperii* can be applied mutatis mutandis to the international organisations. Finally, it revives the concerns on whether the scope of the Brussels I bis Regulation should be determined in a manner allowing to establish international jurisdiction under that Regulation even though enforcement against public authorities stands little chances, be that international organisations as in the present case. These issues are discussed in section 3.

1. Admissibility of the preliminary reference

Advocate General Saugmandsgaard Øe made some remarks on the admissibility of the preliminary ruling and on whether a reply of the Court of Justice would be of any avail to the referring court.

It should be recalled that at national level, two sets of proceedings were initiated in parallel. In the first set, - the proceedings on the merits - Supreme, the private-law companies, sought a declaratory judgment that it was entitled to the payment of several amounts by SHAPE, an international organisation. These proceedings were under appeal before the Den Bosch Court of Appeal because SHAPE challenged the first instance court's jurisdiction. In the second set - the proceedings for interim measures where the preliminary ruling originated from - SHAPE brought an action seeking the lift of the interim garnishee order and requesting the prohibition of further attempts from Supreme to levy an interim garnishee order against the escrow account.

In the opinion of AG, the preliminary ruling was still admissible despite the fact that the Den Bosch Court of Appeal ruled on the proceedings on the merits granting immunity of jurisdiction to SHAPE in December 2019 - the judgment is

under appeal before the Dutch Supreme Court. He opined that the main proceedings should not be regarded as having become devoid of purpose until the court renders a final judgment on the question whether SHAPE is entitled to invoke its immunity from jurisdiction, in the context of the proceedings on the merits and whether that immunity, in itself, precludes further garnishee orders targeting the escrow account (point 35).

2. Civil and commercial matters in respect of substantive proceedings or interim relief proceedings?

The Opinion addressed at the outset the question on whether the substantive proceedings should fall under the material scope of the Brussels I bis Regulation in order for the interim relief measures to fall as well within that scope. As a reminder, the object of the proceedings on the merits, is a contractual dispute over the payment of fuels supplied by Supreme to SHAPE, in the context of a military operation carried out by the latter.

As AG signalled, to answer the question several hypotheses have been put forward by the parties at the hearing held at the Court of Justice. The first hypothesis, supported by the Greek Government and Supreme, proposed that in order to determine if an action for interim measures falls within the scope of the Regulation, the proceedings on the merits should fall as well under the material scope of the Regulation. In particular, the characteristics of the proceedings on the merits should be taken into account. The second hypothesis, supported by SHAPE, considered that the analysis should be done solely in respect to the proceedings for interim measures. The European Commission and the Dutch and Belgian Governments opined that in order to determine if the action for interim measures can be characterised as civil and commercial matters, it is the nature of the right which the interim measure was intended to safeguard in the framework of the interim relief proceedings that matters.

Endorsing the latter hypothesis, AG indicated that an application for interim measures cannot be regarded as automatically falling within or outside the scope of the Brussels I bis Regulation, depending on whether or not the proceedings on the merits fall within that scope, simply because it is ancillary to the proceedings on the merits (point 51). To support his conclusion, AG followed the line of

reasoning developed by the Court in the context of the instruments preceding the Brussels I bis Regulation. In that regard, the Court has held that to ascertain that provisional/protective measures come within the scope of the Regulation, it's not the nature of the measures that should be taken into account but the nature of the rights they serve to protect. To illustrate this: in *Cavel I*, the Court held that interim measures can serve to safeguard a variety of rights which may or may not fall within the scope of the now Brussels I bis Regulation (then the Brussels Convention) depending on the nature of the rights which they serve to protect. This has been confirmed in *Cavel II*: "ancillary claims accordingly come within the scope of the Convention according to the subject-matter with which they are concerned and not according to the subject-matter involved in the principal claim". Further, in *Van Uden*, the Court held that "provisional measures are not in principle ancillary to arbitration proceedings but are ordered in parallel to such proceedings and are intended as measures of support. They concern not arbitration as such but the protection of a wide variety of rights". This case-law has been also confirmed in recent judgments of the Court, namely in *Bohez* - where a penalty payment was imposed as a measure to comply with the main judgment - and *Realchemie Nederland* concerning an action brought for alleged patent infringement in the context of interim proceedings, where a prohibition in the form of payment of a fine was ordered.

In brief, what matters in this discussion on interim measures falling or not within the scope of the Brussels I bis Regulation, is not the relation between the main proceedings and the interim measures, the crucial factor being the **purpose - determined from a procedural law standpoint -** of the interim relief measure vis-à-vis the proceedings on the merits: **an interim measure falling within the scope of the Regulation has to safeguard the substantive rights at stake in the main proceedings**. In the present case, the substantive right in question is a credit arising from a contractual obligation that Supreme holds against SHAPE.

3. Whether immunities play a role in determining if an action can qualify as "civil and commercial matters" within the meaning of Article 1(1) of the Regulation

One of the particularities of the case is that in the second set of proceedings

where the preliminary ruling originated, SHAPE and JFCB (NATO) have introduced an action for interim relief measures, based on immunity from execution. SHAPE alleged that its immunity from execution flowing from the 1952 Paris Protocol trumps any jurisdiction derived from that Regulation.

It is against this background that the Dutch Supreme Court asked the Court of Justice if the fact that an International Organisation claims to enjoy immunity from execution under public international law, bars the application of the Brussels I bis Regulation or has an impact on its application *ratione materiae*. In his Opinion, Advocate General considered that the referring court is concerned by the actions relating to “acts or omissions in the exercise of state authority” linked to the concept of “*acta iure imperii*” - a concept which is also used in international law in relation to the principle of State immunity.

The Opinion tackled the question of immunities under public international law and concluded that a dispute where an International Organisation is a party, should not be automatically excluded from the material scope of the Brussels I bis Regulation. Interestingly, some aspects of the reasoning that allowed to reach that conclusion echo the doctrinal debates on the interplay between the jurisdictional rules of EU private international law, on the one hand, and the immunity derived from public international law, on the other hand.

• **Does immunity precede the jurisdiction under EU PIL?**

At point 72, AG rejected the arguments advanced by the Austrian Government, who argued that the Brussels I bis Regulation should not apply to the case at hand. In the view of this government, if an international organisation takes part in a dispute, the immunity that this organisation enjoys on the basis of customary international law or treaty law, characterizes the nature of the legal relationship between the parties. In other words, a criterion based on the nature of a party (*scil.* the fact that it is an international organization that is a party to proceedings) should suffice to decline jurisdiction under the Brussels I regime.

In that respect, AG made some interesting remarks: first, by applying the Brussels I bis Regulation to a dispute where an International Organisation is a party, there is no breach of Article 3(5) TUE and of the obligation to respect public

international law enshrined in that provision. Second, if, based on the Brussels I bis regime, a national court declares its international jurisdiction over a dispute, potential immunity claims advanced by the parties will not be affected, as they are to be considered at a later stage of the proceedings. AG departed from the premise that the assessment on immunities should take place after the national judge seized with the case looks into the substance of the merits, including party allegations. This is therefore, at a second stage, after the national court has decided over its international jurisdiction within the first stage, that the immunity needs to be ascertained and its limits set (point 69).

This approach resonates with the idea that national courts are not supposed to engage in an in-depth analysis of the substance at that very first stage, when they are determining their own jurisdiction. They should not be undertaking a mini-trial, ascertaining jurisdiction requires only a first approximation to the facts of the case, solely for the purpose of determining jurisdiction. In *FlyLaL II*, a case concerning jurisdictional issues pursuant to the Brussels I Regulation, in respect of an action for damages brought for infringement of competition law, the Court observed that at the stage of determining jurisdiction “the referring court must confine itself to a prima facie examination of the case without examining its substance”. The statement draws on AG Bobek’s Opinion presented in the aforementioned case: “[d]etermination of jurisdiction should be as swift and easy as possible. Thus, a jurisdictional assessment is by definition a prima facie one. [...] The jurisdictional assessment will, in practice, require a review of the basic factual and legal characteristics of the case at an abstract level.”

From the ECtHR case-law (see, most notably, *Waite and Kennedy v. Germany*) dealing with immunities of international organizations and the right to a remedy enshrined in Article 6 ECHR, a similar reading can be extracted. National courts deciding on granting of an immunity – be [it] immunity of jurisdiction or from execution – and performing the “reasonable alternative means” test, inevitably engage in a substantive analysis of the merits. **To ensure that the claimant’s right to access justice is not breached, requires more than an abstract examination of the facts.** This would seem to favour the idea **that determination of international jurisdiction precedes a substantive analysis of the circumstances of the case in respect to any alleged claim of immunities made by the parties.**

However, it is still not clear how this reasoning can be reconciled with judgments

of the Court of Justice in the cases Universal Music International Holding and Kolassa. There, the Court of Justice held that according to the objective of the sound administration of justice which underlies the Brussels I Regulation, and respect for the independence of the national court in the exercise of its functions, a national court in the framework of ascertaining its international jurisdiction pursuant to the Brussels I regime, must look at all the information available to it. Although such an assertion seems to be construed in very general terms, one may well wonder what exactly a court assessing its international jurisdiction under the Brussels I bis Regulation is required to look at. Should it be a minimal review of the substance or a prima facie analysis strictly focused on the nature of the elements of the action - relevant in the context of the connecting factors used by the rules on jurisdiction -, including all the information available before the court?

If the answer would be the latter, that means that in the case at hand, the immunity from execution relied on by SHAPE in support of its action should be taken into account.

A reading of paragraphs 53 to 58 in the Court of Justice's recent judgment in Rina, hints that in order to establish its own jurisdiction under the Brussels I bis Regulation, a national court has to take into consideration all available information. In the case at issue, party allegations where a party (Rina) invokes immunity of jurisdiction. While at first glance this instruction does not steer away from the judgments in Universal Music International Holding and Kolassa, what the Court proposes here is definitely more complex than a first approximation to the facts of the case. At paragraph 55 the Court notes "a national court implementing EU law in applying [the Brussels I Regulation] must comply with the requirements flowing from Article 47 of the Charter. [...] **The referring court must satisfy itself that, if it upheld the plea relating to immunity from jurisdiction, [the claimants] would not be deprived of their right of access to the courts**, which is one of the elements of the right to effective judicial protection in Article 47 of the Charter." If the national courts were to engage in such analysis - in a similar fashion as the ECtHR established in regards to Article 6 ECHR - it will certainly go beyond a mere examination *in abstracto*, implying rather a deep dive on the merits.

Moreover, the judgment in Rina seems to suggest that the analysis of international law cannot be avoided even when it comes only to the question whether the Brussels I regime applies or not. At paragraph 60, the Court of

Justice explained “[t]he principle of customary international law concerning immunity from jurisdiction does not preclude the national court seised from exercising the jurisdiction provided for by that regulation in a dispute relating to such an action, where that court **finds that such corporations have not had recourse to public powers** within the meaning of international law.” Again, for the examination of these matters in the framework of determining international jurisdiction, a greater level of scrutiny is required. A national judge would have to dig deeper in the facts and party allegations to come to the conclusion that a certain party did not have recourse to public powers. Something that is everything but a swift and easy exercise.

• **Does the case-law developed in the context of State bodies apply to international organisations?**

Be that as it may, while an immunity claim does not automatically rule out the application of the Brussels I bis Regulation according to AG Saugmandsgaard Øe, the key question in his analysis is to determine if actions related to *acta iure imperii* under Article 1(1) of the Regulation are applicable to international organisations. It flows from the Court of Justice well-settled case-law that disputes between a State body and a person governed by private law come within the scope of civil and commercial matters, if the public authority in question does not act in the exercise of its public powers. At point 75 of his Opinion, AG made a reference to the judgment in Eurocontrol and indicated that exceptions under Article 1(1) *in fine* can extend to acts and omissions carried out by an international organisation. He remarked that, the concept of “public powers” established under the Court’s case-law, not only relates to State responsibility but refers also to those situations where a public authority acts under the umbrella of its public powers.

Advocate General moved then to analyse the Court of Justice case-law concerning liability of the State for acts and omissions carried out in the exercise of sovereign authority. Here matters get a bit complicated.

On the one hand, **it remains to be seen how that case-law could be applied mutatis mutandis to international organisations**. Leaving aside the question of immunities and putting emphasis on the notion of “civil and commercial matters” within the meaning of Article 1(1) of the Brussels I bis Regulation, the

acts and omissions of an international organization are strictly connected with the powers conferred to the organisation for its proper functioning. Thus, one could wonder whether a functional test would be more suitable to determine if the acts or omissions were carried out by an international organization in the exercise of its public powers: a demarcating line could be drawn between non-official (non-related to the mission of the organization) acts and omissions and those of official nature, therefore necessary to fulfil the organisation's mandate.

On the other hand, concerning the criteria applied by the Court when analysing if a public authority has exercised its powers of State authority, there is no "one size fits all" solution. As AG rightly pointed out at point 84 of his Opinion, the Court has still to sort out the interplay between different criteria: matters characterising the legal relationship between the parties, the subject-matter of the dispute and the basis of the action and the detailed rules governing the action brought.

To illustrate this point: in *Préservatrice Foncière TIARD*, the Court looked mainly at the legal relationship between the parties, while in *Baten and Sapir and Others* the Court did not refer to the legal relationship between the parties but focused on the subject-matter of the dispute and the basis of the action brought. Hence, the alternative or cumulative use of these criteria - or a flexible one- seem to reflect the need to provide an adequate response to the case-specific factual context of a particular case.

In that sense, AG pointed out that the criterion concerning the basis of the action is not relevant in all cases, it will be determinant in situations where is not established that the substantive basis of the claim is an act carried out in the exercise of public powers. For that reason, at 90, AG considered more appropriate that **the action is based on a right originating from an act of public authority or in a legal relationship characterized by a manifestation of public power.**

- **Does the perspective of anticipated recognition/enforcement influence the interpretation of the notion of "civil and commercial matters"?**

It is worth mentioning that some commentators (see also Van Calster, G.,

European Private International Law, Hart Publishing, 2016, p. 32) pointed out that, in the light of the judgment in Eurocontrol, the scope of application of the Brussels I bis Regulation should be interpreted by taking into account the perspectives of recognition and enforcement. Thus, if immunity bears no significance at the stage of determining jurisdiction, but it is later granted/recognised resulting in refusal of recognition and/or enforcement, concerns are raised regarding what is the practical use of exercising jurisdiction under the Brussels I bis Regulation against public authorities when there are little chances of recognition/enforcement.

On this point, the Spanish Supreme Court - in a case concerning the enforcement of a judgment rendered in Germany in favour of a private party against the Republic of Argentina -, held that a declaration of enforceability issued in relation to a general enforcement order does not breach the rules on immunity of execution. The Spanish Court precised that only when specific legal attachment measures are taken, a court should determine if the property in question is subject to execution. Thus, **the issue of immunity of execution and the assessment whether the property to be executed is for commercial or official purposes would be at stake at a second stage of the enforcement procedure, not interfering with the application of the Brussels I regime.**