

Álvarez-Armas on potential human-rights-related amendments to the Rome II Regulation (II): The proposed Art. 6a; Art. 7 is dead, long live Article 7?

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Over the last few months, the European Parliament's draft report on corporate due diligence and corporate accountability (2020/2129(INL)) and the proposal for an EU Directive contained therein have gathered a substantial amount of attention (see, amongst others, blog entries by Geert Van Calster, Giesela Rühl, Jan von Hein, Bastian Brunk and Chris Thomale). As the debate is far from being exhausted, I would like to contribute my two cents thereto with some further (non-exhaustive and brief) considerations which will be limited to three selected aspects of the proposal's choice-of-law dimension.

1. **A welcome but not unique initiative (Comparison with the UN draft Treaty)**

Neither Article 6a of Rome II nor the proposal for an EU Directive are isolated initiatives. A so-called draft Treaty on Business and Human Rights ("*Legally binding instrument to regulate, in international human rights law, the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises*") is currently being prepared by an *Open-ended intergovernmental working group on transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights*, established in 2014 by the United Nation's Human Rights Council. Just like it is the case with the EP's proposal, the 2nd revised UN draft Treaty (dated 6th August 2020) (for comments on the applicable law aspects of the 1st revised draft, see

Claire Bright's note for the BIICL here) contains provisions on international jurisdiction (Article 9, "*Adjudicative Jurisdiction*") and choice of law (Article 11, "*Applicable law*").

Paragraph 1 of the latter establishes the *lex fori* as applicable for "*all matters of substance [...] not specifically regulated*" by the instrument (as well as, quite naturally, for procedural issues). Then paragraph 2 establishes that "*all matters of substance regarding human rights law relevant to claims before the competent court may, upon the request of the victim of a business-related human rights abuse or its representatives, be governed by the law of another State where: a) the acts or omissions that result in violations of human rights covered under this (Legally Binding Instrument) have occurred; or b) the natural or legal person alleged to have committed the acts or omissions that result in violations of human rights covered under this (Legally Binding Instrument) is domiciled*".

In turn, the proposed Article 6a of Rome II establishes that: "[...] *the law applicable to a non-contractual obligation arising out of the damage sustained shall be the law determined pursuant to Article 4(1), unless the person seeking compensation for damage chooses to base his or her claim on the law of the country in which the event giving rise to the damage occurred or on the law of the country in which the parent company has its domicile or, where it does not have a domicile in a Member State, the law of the country where it operates.*" (The proposed text follows the suggestions made in pp. 112 ff of the 2019 Study requested by the DROI committee (European Parliament) on Access to Legal Remedies for Victims of Corporate Human Rights Abuses in Third Countries.)

Putting aside the fact that the material scopes of the EP's and the UN's draft instruments bear differences, the EP's proposal features a more ambitious choice-of-law approach, which likely reflects the EU's condition as a "Regional integration organization", and the (likely) bigger degree of private-international-law convergence possible within such framework. Whichever the reasons, the EP's approach is to be welcomed in at least two senses.

The first sense regards the clarity of victim choice-of-law empowerment. While in the UN proposal the victim is allowed to "*request*" that a given law governs "*all matters of substance regarding human rights law relevant to claims before the competent court*", in the EP's proposal the choice of the applicable law unequivocally and explicitly belongs to the victim (the "*person seeking*

compensation for damage”). A cynical reading of the UN proposal could lead to considering that the prerogative of establishing the applicable law remains with the relevant court, as the fact that the victim may request something does not necessarily mean that the request ought to be granted (Note that paragraph 1 uses “*shall*” while paragraph 2 uses “*may*”). Furthermore, the UN proposal contains a dangerous opening to *renvoi*, which would undermine the victim’s empowerment (and, to a certain degree, foreseeability). Therefore, if the goal of the UN’s provision is to provide for *favor laesi*, a much more explicit language in the sense of conferring the choice-of-law prerogative to the victim would be welcomed.

2. A more ambitious initiative (The “domicile of the parent” connection, and larger victim choice)

A second sense in which the EP’s choice-of-law approach is to be welcomed is its bold stance in trying to overcome some classic “business & human rights” conundrums by including an ambitious connecting factor, the domicile of the parent company, amongst the possibilities the victim can choose from. Indeed, I personally find this insertion in suggested Art. 6a Rome II very satisfying from a substantive justice (*favor laesi*) point of view: inserting that very connecting factor in Art. 7 Rome II (environmental torts) is one of the main *de lege ferenda* suggestions I considered in my PhD dissertation (*Private International Environmental Litigation before EU Courts: Choice of Law as a Tool of Environmental Global Governance*, Université Catholique de Louvain & Universidad de Granada, 2017. An edited and updated version will be published in 2021 in Hart’s “Studies in Private International Law”), in order to correct some of the shortcomings of the latter. While not being the ultimate solution for all the various hurdles victims may face in transnational human-rights or environmental litigation, in terms of content-orientedness this connecting factor is a great addition that addresses the core of the policy debate on “business & human rights”. Consequently, I politely dissent with Chris Thomale’s assertion that this connecting factor “*has no convincing rationale*”. Moreover, I equally dissent from the contention that a choice between the *lex loci damni* and the *lex loci delicti commissi* is already possible via “*a purposive reading of Art. 4 para 1 and 3 Rome II*”. For reasons I have explained elsewhere, I do not share this optimistic reading of Art. 4 as being capable of filling the transnational human-rights gap in Rome II. And even supposing that such interpretation was correct, as draft Art. 6a would

make explicit what is contended that can be read into Art. 4, it would significantly increase legal certainty for victims and tortfeasors alike (as otherwise some courts could potentially interpret the latter Article as suggested, while others would not).

Precisely, avoiding a decrease in applicable-law foreseeability seems to be (amongst other concerns) one of the reasons behind Jan von Hein's suggestion in this very blog that Art. 6a's opening of victim's choice to four different legal systems is excessive, and that not only it should be reduced to two, but that the domicile of the parent should be replaced by its "habitual residence". Possibly the latter is contended not only to respond to systemic coherence with the remainder of Rome II, but also to narrow down options: in Rome II the "habitual residence" of a legal person corresponds only with its "*place of central administration*"; in Brussels I bis its "domicile" corresponds with either "*statutory seat*", "*central administration*" or "*principal place of business*" at the claimant's choice. Notwithstanding the merits in system-alignment terms of this proposal, arguably, substantive policy rationales (*favor laesi*) ought to take precedence over pure systemic private-international-law considerations. This makes all the more sense if one transposes, *mutatis mutandis*, a classic opinion by P.A. Nielsen on the three domiciles of a corporation under the "Brussels" regime to the choice-of-law realm: "*shopping possibilities are only available because the defendant has decided to organise its business in this way. It therefore seems reasonable to let that organisational structure have [...] consequences*" (P. A. NIELSEN, "Behind and beyond Brussels I - An Insider's View", in P. DEMARET, I. GOVAERE & D. HANF [eds.], *30 years of European Legal Studies at the College of Europe [Liber Professorum 1973-74 - 2003-04]*, Cahiers du Collège d'Europe N°2, Brussels, P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2005, pp. 241-243).

And even beyond this, at the risk of being overly simplistic, in many instances, complying with four different potentially applicable laws is, actually, in alleged overregulation terms, a "false conflict": it simply entails complying only with the most stringent/restrictive one amongst the four of them (compliance with X+30 entails compliance with X+20, X+10 and X). Without entering into further details, suffice it to say that, while ascertaining these questions *ex post facto* may be difficult for victim's counsel, it should be less difficult *ex ante* for corporate counsel, leading to prevention.

3. A perfectible initiative (tension with Article 7 Rome II)

Personally, the first point that immediately got my attention as soon as I heard about the content of the EP report's (even before reading it) was the Article 6a *versus* Article 7 Rome II scope-delimitation problem already sketched by Geert Van Calster: when is an environmental tort a human-rights violation too, and when is it not? Should the insertion of Art. 6a crystallize, and Art. 7 remain unchanged, this question is likely to become very contentious, if anything due to the wider range of choices given by the draft Art. 6a, and could potentially end before the CJEU.

What distinguishes say *Mines de Potasse* (which would generally be thought of as "common" environmental-tort situation) from say *Milieudéfensie v. Shell* 2008 (which would typically fall within the "Business & Human Rights" realm and not to be confused with the 2019 *Milieudéfensie v. Shell* climate-change litigation) or *Lluyia v. RWE* (as climate-change litigation finds itself increasingly connected to human-rights considerations)? Is it the geographical location of tortious result either inside or outside the EU? (When environmental torts arise outside the EU from the actions of EU corporations there tends to be little hesitation to assert that we are facing a human-rights tort). Or should we split apart situations involving environmental damage *stricto sensu* (pure ecological damage) from those involving environmental damage *lato sensu* (damage to human life, health and property), considering only the former as coming within Art. 7 and only the latter as coming within Art. 6a? Should we, alternatively, introduce a *ratione personae* distinction, considering that environmental torts caused by corporations of a certain size or operating over a certain geographical scope come within Art. 6a, while environmental torts caused by legal persons falling below the said threshold (or, rarely, by individuals) come within Art. 7?

Overall, how should we draw the boundaries between an environmental occurrence that qualifies as a human-rights violation and one that does not in order to distinguish Art. 6a situations from Art. 7 situations? The answer is simple: we should not. We should consider every single instance of environmental tort a human-rights-relevant scenario and amend Rome II accordingly.

While the discussion is too broad and complex to be treated in depth here, and certainly overflows the realm of private international law, suffice it to say that (putting aside the limited environmental relevance of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU) outside the system of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) there are clear developments towards the recognition of a human

right to a healthy or “satisfactory” environment. This is already the case within the systems of the American Convention on Human Rights (Art. 11 of the Additional Protocol to the Convention in the area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (Art. 24). It is equally the case as well in certain countries, where the recognition of a fundamental/constitutional right at a domestic level along the same lines is also present. And, moreover, even within the ECHR system, while no human right to a healthy environment exists as such, the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights has recognized environmental dimensions to other rights (Arts. 2 and 8 ECHR, notably). It may therefore be argued that, even under the current legal context, all environmental torts are, to a bigger or lesser extent, human-rights relevant and (save those rare instances where they may be caused by an individual) “business-related”.

Ultimately, if any objection could exist nowadays, if/when the ECHR system does evolve towards a broader recognition of a right to a healthy environment, there would be absolutely no reason to maintain an Art. 6a *versus* Art. 7 distinction. Thus, in order to avoid opening a characterization can of worms, it would be appropriate to get “ahead of the curve” in legislative terms and, accordingly, use the proposed Art. 6a text as an all-encompassing new Art. 7.

There may be ways to try to (artificially) delineate the scopes of Articles 7 and 6a in order to preserve a certain *effet utile* to the current Art. 7, such as those suggested above (geographical location of the tortious result, size or nature of the tortfeasor, type of environmental damage involved), or even on the basis of whether situations at stake “trigger” any of the environmental dimensions of ECHR-enshrined rights. But, all in all, I would argue towards using the proposed text as a new Art. 7 which would comprise both non-environmentally-related human-rights torts and, comprehensively, all environmental torts.

Art. 7 is dead, long live Article 7.