

# Polish Constitutional Court about to review the constitutionality of the jurisdictional immunity of a foreign State?

*Written by Zuzanna Nowicka, lawyer at the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and lecturer at Department of Logic and Legal Argumentation at University of Warsaw*

In the aftermath of the judgment of the ICJ of 2012 in the case of the Jurisdictional Immunities of the State (Germany v. Italy: Greece intervening) that needs no presentation here (for details see, in particular, the post by Burkhard Hess), by its judgment of 2014, the Italian Constitutional Court recognized the duty of Italy to comply with the ICJ judgment of 2012 but subjected that duty to the “fundamental principle of judicial protection of fundamental rights” under Italian constitutional law (for a more detailed account of those developments see this post on EAPIL by Pietro Franzina and further references detailed there). In a nutshell, according to the Italian Constitutional Court, the fundamental human rights cannot be automatically and unconditionally sacrificed in each and every case in order to uphold the jurisdiction immunity of a foreign State allegedly responsible for serious international crimes.

Since then, the Italian courts have reasserted their jurisdiction in such cases, in some even going so far as to decide on the substance and award compensation from Germany. The saga continues, as Germany took Italy to the ICJ again in 2022 (for the status of the case pending before the ICJ see here). It even seems not to end there as it can be provocatively argued that this saga has its spin-off currently taking place before the Polish courts.

## **A. Setting the scene...**

In 2020, a group of members of the Sejm, lower chamber of the Polish Parliament, brought a request for a constitutional review that, in essence, concerns the application of the jurisdictional immunity of the State in the cases pertaining to

liability for war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. The request has been registered under the case number K 25/20 (for details of the, in Polish, see [here](#); the request is available [here](#)). This application is identical to an application previously brought by a group of members of the lower chamber of the Parliament in the case K 12/17. This request led to no outcome due to the principle according to which the proceedings not finalized during a given term of the Sejm shall be closed upon the expiration of that term.

This time, however, the Polish Constitutional Court has even set the date of the hearing in the case K 25/20. It is supposed to take place on May 23, 2023.

The present post is not drafted with the ambition of comprehensively evaluating the request for a constitutional review brought before the Polish Constitutional Court. Nor it is intended to speculate on the future decision of that Court and its ramifications. By contrast, while the case is still pending, it seems interesting to provide a brief overview of the request for a constitutional review and present the arguments put forward by the applicants.

Under Polish law, a request for a constitutional review, such as the one in the case K 25/20, can be brought before the Polish Constitutional Court by selected privileged applicants, with no connection to a case pending before Polish courts.

Such a request has to identify the legislation that raise concerns as to its conformity with the Polish constitutional law (“subject of the review”, see point B below) and the relevant provisions of the Polish Constitution of 1997 against which that legislation is to be benchmarked against (“standard of constitutional review”, see point C). Furthermore, the applicant shall identify the issues of constitutional concern that are raised by the said legislation and substantiate its objections by arguments and/or evidence (see point D).

## **B. Subject of constitutional review in question**

By the request for a constitutional review of 2020, the Polish Constitutional Court is asked to benchmark two provisions of Polish Code of Civil Procedure (hereinafter: “PL CCP”) against the Polish constitutional law, namely Article 1103[7](2) PL CCP and Article 1113 PL CCP.

### **i) Article 1103[7](2) PL CCP**

The first provision, Article 1103[7] PL CCP lays down rules of direct jurisdiction that, in practice, can be of application solely in the cases not falling within the ambit of the rules of direct jurisdiction of the Brussels I bis Regulation. In particular, pursuant to Article 1103[7](2) PL CCP, the Polish courts have jurisdiction with regard to the cases pertaining to the extra-contractual obligations that arose in Poland.

In the request for a constitutional review of 2020, the applicants argue that, according to the settled case law of the Polish Supreme Court, Article 1103[7](2) PL CCP does not cover the torts committed by a foreign State to the detriment of Poland and its nationals. For the purposes of their request, the applicants do focus on the non-contractual liability of a foreign State resulting from war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. The applicants claim that, according to the case law of the Polish Supreme Court, such a liability is excluded from the scope of Article 1103[7](2) PL CCP.

Against this background, it has to be noted that the account of the case law of the Polish Supreme Court is not too faithful to its original spirit. Contrary to its reading proposed by the applicants, the Polish Supreme Court does not claim that the scope of application of the rule of direct jurisdiction provided for in Article 1103[7](2) PL CPP is, *de lege lata*, circumscribed and does not cover the liability of a foreign State for international crimes. In actuality, this can be only seen as the practical effect of the case law of the Polish Supreme Court quoted in the request for a constitutional review. Pursuant to this case law, also with regard to liability for international crimes, the foreign States enjoy jurisdiction immunity resulting from international customary law, which prevents claimants from suing those States before the Polish courts.

### **ii) Article 1113 PL CPP**

The second provision subject to constitutional review is Article 1113 PL CPP, according to which jurisdictional immunity shall be considered by the court *ex officio* in every phase of the proceedings. If the defendant can rely on the jurisdictional immunity, the court shall reject the claim. According to the applicants, the Polish courts infer from this provision of the PL CPP the right of

the foreign States to rely on the jurisdictional immunity with regard to the cases on liability resulting from war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

### **C. Standard of constitutional review (relevant provisions of Polish constitutional law)**

In the request for a constitutional review of 2020, four provisions of Polish constitutional law are referred to as the standard of constitutional review, namely:

#### **i) Article 9 of the Polish Constitution of 1997 (“Poland shall respect international law binding upon it”);**

according to the applicants, due to the general nature of Article 9, it cannot be deduced thereof that the rules of international customary law are directly binding in Polish domestic legal order. The applicants contend that the Polish Constitution of 1997 lists the sources of law that are binding in Poland. In particular, Article 87 of the Constitution indicates that the sources of law in Poland are the Constitution, statutes, ratified international agreements, and regulations. No mention is made there to the international customary law. Thus, **international customary law does not constitute a binding part of the domestic legal order and is not directly applicable in Poland. Rather, Article 9 of the Polish Constitution of 1997 must be understood as providing for the obligation to respect international customary law exclusively “in the sphere of international law”;**

#### **ii) Article 21(1) of the Polish Constitution of 1997: “Poland shall protect ownership and the right of succession”,**

here, the applicants contend that Article 21(1) covers not only the property currently owned by the individuals, but also property that was lost as a result of the international crimes committed by a foreign State, which, had it not been lost, would have been the subject of inheritance by Polish nationals;

**iii) Article 30 of the Polish Constitution of 1997: “The inherent and inalienable dignity of the person shall constitute a source of freedoms and rights of persons and citizens. It shall be inviolable. The respect and protection thereof shall be the obligation of public authorities”,**

the applicants infer from Article 30 that the respect and protection of dignity is the duty of public authorities. Such a protection can be guaranteed by creating an institutional and procedural framework, which enables the pursuit of justice against the wrongdoers who have taken actions against human dignity. For the applicants, this is particularly relevant in the case of liability for war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity;

**iv) Article 45(1) of the Polish Constitution of 1997: “Everyone shall have the right to a fair and public hearing of his case, without undue delay, before a competent, impartial and independent court”,**

in short, Article 45(1) enshrines to the right to access to a court; this provision conceptualizes this right as a mean by which the protection of other freedoms and rights guaranteed by the Constitution can be realized; the applicants argue that the jurisdictional immunity of a foreign State is a procedural rule that, in its essence, limits the right to a court. They acknowledge that the right to a court is not an absolute right and it can be subject to some limitations. However, the Constitutional Court should examine whether the limitation resulting from the operation of jurisdiction immunity is proportionate.

## **D. Issues and arguments raised by the request for a constitutional review**

After having presented the subject of the request and the relevant provisions of Polish constitutional law, the applicants identify the issues of constitutional concern that, in their view, are raised by the jurisdictional immunity of a foreign State upheld via the operation of Article 1103[7](2) PL CCP and Article 1113 PL CCP in the cases on the liability resulting from international crimes. The applicants then set out their arguments to substantiate the objection of non-constitutionality directed at Article 1103[7](2) PL CCP and Article 1113 PL CCP.

The main issue and arguments put forward boil down to the objection that the upholding of the jurisdictional immunity results in the lack of access to a court and infringes the right guaranteed in the Polish Constitution of 1997, as well as enshrined in the international agreements on human rights, ratified by Poland,

- in this context, first, the applicants reiterate the contention that **while ratified international agreements constitute a part of the domestic legal order, this is not the case of the rules of international customary law**; furthermore, in order to “reinforce” this contention, a recurring statement appears in the request for a constitutional review, according to which the international customary law is not consistently applied with regard to the jurisdictional immunity of a foreign State;
- second, **a foreign State cannot claim immunity from the jurisdiction of a court of another State in proceedings which relate to the liability for war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity, if the facts which occasioned damage occurred in the territory of that another State**; there is a link between those international crimes and the territory of the State of the forum and the latter must be authorised to adjudicate on the liability for those acts;
- third, the applicant claim that **a foreign State does not enjoy jurisdictional immunity in the cases involving clear violations of universally accepted rules of international law** - a State committing such a violation implicitly waives its immunity;
- fourth, the applicants acknowledge the ICJ judgment of 2012 but claim that it (i) failed to take into account all the relevant precedent on the scope of jurisdictional immunity; (ii) held that the illegal acts constituted *acta iure imperii*, disregarding the conflict between the jurisdictional immunity and the acts violating fundamental human rights; (iii) preferred not to explicitly address the question as to whether the jurisdictional immunity should be enjoyed by a State that violated human dignity or not - doing so, the ICJ left space for the national courts to step in; (iv) the ICJ judgments are binding only to the parties to the proceedings; with regard to the non-parties they have the same binding force as national decisions;

(v) due to the evolving nature of the doctrine of jurisdictional immunity and its scope, a national court can settle the matter differently than the ICJ did in 2012.

Subsequent issues of constitutional concern seem to rely on the same or similar arguments and concern:

- violation of international law binding Poland due to the recognition of jurisdictional immunity of a State with regard to the cases on liability for war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity;
- violation of the human dignity as there is no procedural pathway for claiming the reparation of damages resulting from those international crimes;
- violation of the protection of ownership and other proprietary rights by barring the actions for damages resulting from those international crimes.

## **E. The controversies regarding the Constitutional Court**

The overview of the request for a constitutional review in the case K 25/20 would not be complete without a brief mention of the current state of affairs in the Polish Constitutional Court itself.

In the 2021 judgement in *Xero Flor v. Poland*, the European Court of Human Rights held, in essence, that the Constitutional Court panel composed in violation of the national constitution (i.e. election of one of the adjudicating judges “vitiating by grave irregularities that impaired the very essence of the right at issue”) does not meet the requirements allowing it to be considered a “tribunal established by law” within the meaning of the Article 6(1) of the European Convention.

One of the judges sitting on the panel adjudicating the case K 25/20 was elected under the same conditions as those considered by the ECHR in its 2021 judgment. The other four were elected during the various stages of the constitutional crisis ongoing since 2015. In practice, and most regrettably, the case K 25/20 that revolves around the alleged violation of the right to a court provided for in Polish constitutional law risks to be deliberated in the circumstances that, on their own, raise concerns as to the respect of an equivalent right enshrined in the European

Convention.