Remote Child-Related Proceedings in Times of Pandemic – Crisis Measures or Justice Reform Trigger?

by Nadia Rusinova

The coronavirus will have an enormous impact on how we consume, how we learn, how we work, and how we socialize and communicate. It already significantly impacts the functioning of the justice system – the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements have required courts to be flexible and creative in continuing to carry out essential functions.

Six weeks ago, it was almost difficult to imagine that in a regular child-related proceeding the hearing could be conducted online, and that the child can be heard remotely. Is this the new normal in the global justice system? This post will first provide brief overview regarding the developments in the conduction of remote hearings, and discuss the limitations, but also the advantages, of the current procedures related to children. Second, it will touch upon the right of the child to be heard in all civil and administrative proceedings which concern its interest, pursuant to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and how this right is regarded in remote proceedings in the context of the COVID-19 situation. It will also highlight good practices, which are without doubt great achievements of the flexibility and adaptability of the professionals involved in child-related civil proceedings, which deserve to be appreciated and which may provide grounds for significant change in the future (e.g. by using remote tools much more often.)

In civil and administrative proceedings, which concern children, strict insistence on personal attendance is unlikely to be feasible during the Coronavirus pandemic, and may contravene current health guidance, putting both families and professionals at unacceptable risk. As a consequence, the number of children's hearings scheduled to take place during the Coronavirus pandemic have globally been reduced to only those required to ensure essential and immediate protection

of children or to consider orders relating to restriction of liberty. So long as restrictions regarding social distancing remain in place all over the world, many children's hearings in the next months will be conducted remotely and digital facilities are being put in place to enable a wide range of people to participate remotely in virtual hearings.

I. What the recent experience on the remote hearings shows

Worldwide, over the past month, thousands of hearings took place remotely, many of them concerning children. How did the authorities comply with the current challenges and also with the right of the child to express its views?

Some countries, like Scotland, issued special rules as an amendment to the existing national law. In the context of the emergency, the provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 Guidance on looked-after children and children's hearings provisions, issued by the Scottish Parliament as an update to the Coronavirus (Scotland) Bill, are designed to enable best use of very limited resources by local authorities, and the children's hearings system, so that efforts can be focused on safeguarding the welfare of Scotland's most vulnerable children, and on supporting families and careers who need it most. The provisions are also time-limited and will automatically expire within six months, unless the Scottish Parliament extends them for a further period of six month.

The American Bar Association has also prepared detailed rules on "Conducting Effective Remote Hearings in Child Welfare Cases" to distill some best practices and other recommendations for remote or "virtual" hearings, providing special considerations to the judges, and directions for all professionals dealing with child-related proceedings.

The case law of the domestic courts is not less intriguing. In one recent judgment of The Family Court of England and Wales – RE P (A CHILD: REMOTE HEARING) [2020] EWFC 32, delivered by Sir Andrew McFarlane, the issues surrounding the advantages and disadvantages of the remote hearing when the case concerns children are discussed in a very original way. The case concerns ongoing care proceedings relating to a girl who is aged seven. The proceedings are already one year old and they were issued as long ago as April 2019, but the possibilities for multiple appeals in the adversarial proceedings caused immense delay. It has been initiated by the local authority, which have made a series of allegations, all

aimed at establishing the child has been caused significant harm as a result of fabricated or induced illness by its mother. The allegations are all fully contested by the mother, and a full final hearing is to take place in order to be decided if the child should be return to its mother or placed in long term foster care. Since April 2019 the child has been placed in foster care under an interim care order. The 15-day hearing was scheduled to start on Monday, 20 April, but the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a lockdown and most Family Court hearings that have gone ahead are being undertaken remotely, over the telephone or via some form of video platform.

II. Challenges

In this light it might be useful to identify some of the issues that the justice system faced in the attempts to comply with the special measures amid the pandemic and the lockdown order in disputes about children.

Must a hearing take place remotely, or this is just an option to be decided on by the court?

All the guidance available aims mostly at the mechanics of the process. The question whether any particular hearing should, or should not, be conducted remotely, is not specifically discussed. In any case, the access to justice principle should in some way provide for flexibility and practicability. In this sense, the fact that a hearing can be conducted remotely, does not in any way mean that the hearing must be conducted in that way.

As Sir McFarlane said, *"In pushing forward to achieve Remote Hearings, this must not be at the expense of a fair and just process."* Obviously, the question is how to strike a fair balance between keeping the principle of fair trial as paramount while not putting the child into an intolerable situation that might follow as a consequence of the limitations in this pandemic situation.

In which cases it is justified to hold a remote hearing?

Given the Government's imposition of the 'stay at home' policy in many countries, requests for an attended hearing are highly unlikely to be granted unless there is a genuine urgency, and it is not possible to conduct a remote hearing, taken as a cumulative condition together. If one of these elements is not present, the respective judge should assess the emergency in the particular case.

In general, all cases are pressing when the welfare of children is to be determined. However, some of it indeed call for urgency and it is to be analyzed on a case by case basis, in accordance with the claims of the parties and available evidence. In the discussed case RE P [2020] EWFC 32 the girl was already suffering significant emotional harm by being held "in limbo", and that she could only be released from this damaging situation of simply not knowing where she is going to live and spend the rest of her childhood, at least for the foreseeable future, by the court decision. As the judge says, *"she needs a decision, she needs it now and to contemplate the case being put off, not indefinitely but to an indefinite date, is one that (a) does not serve her interests, because it fails to give a decision now, but (b) will do harm itself because of the disappointment, the frustration and the extension of her inability to know what her future may be in a way that will cause her further harm."*

Another issue to be considered is to which extent the personal impression (for which the face-to-face hearing is best suited to) and the physical presence in the courtroom as a procedural guarantee for fair trial in adversarial proceedings, are decisive in the particular case. In RE P [2020] EWFC 32 sir McFarlane holds that *"The more important part, as I have indicated, for the judge to see all the parties in the case when they are in the courtroom, in particular the mother, and although it is possible over Skype to keep the postage stamp image of any particular attendee at the hearing, up to five in all, live on the judge's screen at any one time, it is a very poor substitute to seeing that person fully present before the court."* This is a case for protection from violence, and taking into account the subjective aspect, the personal impression is crucial. Yet, it might be that other type of cases, with less impact on the life of the child, or when the balance between the urgency and the importance of personal attendance might affect the best interest of the child ,might still be held remotely. In the discussed case the judge refers explicitly to the need of the physical presence of the parties, and especially of the mother, for him to get personal impression, and to give her full opportunity to present her defense and to ensure fair trial. The Court therefore finds that a trial of this nature is simply not one that can be contemplated for remote hearing during the present crisis. It follows that, irrespective of the mother's agreement or opposition to a remote hearing, the judge holds that this hearing cannot "properly or fairly" be conducted without her physical presence in a courtroom.

A similar approach (with different outcome) has been taken in Ribeiro v Wright, 2020 ONSC 1829, Court of Ontario, Canada. The parties, currently in the process of divorce, and the plaintiff wishes to obtain a safeguard order so that the defendant's access rights are modified such that they are suspended and replaced by contacts via technological means (Skype, Facetime, etc.). Due to the ongoing divorce procedure at the stage of the application for the safeguard order, some evidence is available already. The judge recognizes that the social, government and employment institutions are struggling to cope with COVID-19 and that includes the court system. Obviously, despite extremely limited resources, the court will always prioritize cases involving children, but it is stated that parents and lawyers should be mindful of the practical limitations the justice system is facing. If a parent has a concern that COVID-19 creates an urgent issue in relation to a parenting arrangement, they may initiate an emergency motion under the domestic law – but they should not presume that raising COVID-19 considerations will necessarily result in an urgent hearing. In this case the judge refuses to start emergency proceeding (which would be conducted remotely), takes into account the behavior of the parents and urge them to renew their efforts to address vitally important health and safety issues for their child in a more conciliatory and productive manner, asking them to return to court if more serious and specific COVID-19 problems arise.

In order to determine some general criteria to be applied when the emergency assessment is to be done, a good general example can be seen in the Coronavirus Act 2020 Guidance on looked-after children and children's hearings provisions (Scotland). The Scottish Government seeks to empower professional staff and volunteer tribunal members to exercise sound judgment and make decisions to protect and support children and young people, based on available information and in partnership with families. It provides that this exercise of emergency powers should: i. be underpinned by a focus on children's, young people's, and families' human rights when making decisions to implement powers affecting their legal rights; ii. be proportionate – limited to the extent necessary, in response to clearly identified circumstances; iii. last for only as long as required; iv. be subject to regular monitoring and reviewed at the earliest opportunity; v. facilitate, wherever possible and appropriate, effective participation, including legal representation and advocacy for children, young people and family members, and vi. be discharged in consultation with partner agencies.

Furthermore, in the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration update paper on Children's Hearings System, issued on 20 April 2020, it is stated that the reporter assesses and considers each individual child's case and their unique circumstances, and the panel makes the best possible decision based on the information before them. Priority is given to hearings with fixed statutory timescales, or to prevent an order from lapsing. The UK Protocol Regarding Remote Hearings, issued on 26 March 2020, also sets some general criteria in par. 12 applicable to child-related proceedings, stating that it will normally be possible for all short, interlocutory, or non-witness, applications to be heard remotely. Some witness cases will also be suitable for remote hearings.

What form the "remote" hearing may take?

There is currently no 'single' technology to be used by the judiciary. The primary aim is to ensure ongoing access to justice by all parties to cases before the court, so the professionals and parties involved must choose from a selection of possible IT platforms (e.g. Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.) At present, many courts provide laptops to magistrates with secure Skype for Business and Microsoft Teams installed.

Remote hearings may be conducted using any of the facilities available. Generally, it could be done by way of an email exchange between the court and the parties, by way of telephone using conference calling facilities, or by way of the court's video-link system, if available. In the specific child related proceedings however, it should be noted that the UN General comment No. 12 (2009) on the right of the child to be heard sets one recommendation in par. 43 – the experience indicates that the situation should have the format of a talk rather than a one?sided examination. Therefore, the use of tools allowing conversational approach, like Skype for Business, BT MeetMe, Zoom, FaceTime or any other appropriate means of remote communication can be considered. If other effective facilities for the conduct of remote hearings are identified, the situation obviously allows for any means of holding a hearing as directed by the court, so there is considerable flexibility.

The timing of the hearing of the child

Naturally, if there are rules in place regarding the timely hearing of the child, in the current situation some adjustments could be accepted. In the domestic

systems, when such provisions exist, respective temporary amendments could be a solution to facilitate the activity in these very challenging circumstances.

If we look again at the Coronavirus Act 2020 Guidance on looked-after children and children's hearings provisions, it provides for situations where it will not be practicable for there to be a hearing within three working days (as prescribed by the law), due to the likely shortage of social workers, reporters, decision-makers, children and families to attend an urgent hearing in the new area. As a result, the Act amends the time limit for some particular proceedings involving children up-to seven days. It is duly noted that in order to avoid unnecessary delays, the respective professionals involved should note these extended timescales, and prepare accordingly.

Is the objection by the parties to the hearing being held remotely decisive?

The pandemic situation is very potentially convenient for the parties who seek delays for one reason or another. As an example, the passage of time could undoubtedly affect the court's decision to assign custody in parental disputes, or as pointed by the ECtHR in Balbino v. Portugal, the length of proceedings relating to children (and especially in child abduction proceedings) acquire particular significance, since they are in an area where a delay might in fact settle the problem in dispute.

The objections that deserve attention would be most likely based on two grounds: health reasons, related or not to COVID-19, and the technical issue of internet access. When we speak about health reasons, the first logical suggestion would be to request medical evidence. Sadly, in the coronavirus situation this is not the case – simply because one can have contracted it without any knowledge or symptoms, which puts the courts in difficult position having in mind the considerable danger if they take the wrong decision. Therefore, it is justified that the judges continue with the proceedings and do not accede to these kinds of applications, but to indicate that the party's health and the resulting ability to engage in the court process would be kept under review.

Regarding internet access, this might arise as a difficult issue. On one side, it is easy to say that the arrangements for the party to engage in the process, as they are currently understood, involve the party being in her/his home and joining the proceedings over the internet, and all that's needed is some basic internet access.

It can be also said that the party can go to some neutral venue, maybe an office in local authority premises, a room in a court building, and be with an attorney that they are instructing, keeping a safe socially isolated distance. However, for objective reasons the internet access available might be not sufficient, and this should not lead to a violation of the principle of a fair trial, and the judge should also take these considerations seriously.

How is security and transparency addressed?

This section will briefly touch upon only two of a multitude of issues related to the security and transparency when dealing with remote hearings – the open hearings principle and the recording of the hearing.

Obviously, all remote hearings must be recorded for the purposes of making records of the respective hearing, and it goes without saying that the parties may not record without the permission of the court. Some of the solutions might be recording the audio relayed in an open court room by the use of the court's normal recording system, recording the hearing on the remote communication program being used (e.g. BT MeetMe, Skype for Business, or Zoom), or by the court using a mobile telephone to record the hearing.

As to the second issue, remote hearings should, so far as possible, still be public hearings. Some of the proceedings concerning children are indeed not public, but this is not the rule. The UK Protocol Regarding Remote Hearings addresses how this can be achieved in times of pandemic: (a) one person (whether judge, clerk or official) relaying the audio and (if available) video of the hearing to an open court room; (b) allowing a media representative to log in to the remote hearing; and/or (c) live streaming of the hearing over the internet, where broadcasting hearings is authorized in legislation. This way, the principles of open justice remain paramount.

It could be suggested that, in established applications moving to a remote hearing, any transparency order will need to be discharged and specific directions made. In the UK Court of protection remote hearings the authorities are satisfied that, to the extent that discharging the order in such a case engages the rights of the press under Article 10 ECHR, any interference with those rights is justified by reference to Article 10(2), having particular regard to the public health situation which has arisen, and also the detailed steps set out are designed to ensure that

the consequences on the rights of people generally and the press in particular under Article 10 are minimized.

III. How to assess if a particular child-related hearing is suitable to take place online?

As noted by Sir McFarlane, whether or not to hold a remote hearing in a contested case involving the welfare of a child is a particularly difficult one for a court to resolve. A range of factors are likely to be in play, each potentially compelling but also potentially at odds with each other. The need to maintain a hearing in order to avoid delay and to resolve issues for a child in order for its life to move forward is likely to be a most powerful consideration in many cases, but it may be at odds with the need for the very resolution of that issue to be undertaken in a "thorough, forensically sound, fair, just and proportionate manner". The decision to proceed or not may not turn on the category of case or seriousness of the decision, but upon other factors that are idiosyncratic of the particular case itself, such as the local facilities, the available technology, the personalities and expectations of the key family members and, in these early days, the experience of the judge or magistrates in remote working. It is because no two cases may be the same that the decision on remote hearings has been left to the individual judge in each case, rather than making it the subject of binding national guidance.

Therefore, it should be assessed on a case per case basis if a hearing that concerns a child can be properly undertaken over the remote system. Sometimes the proceedings prior to this moment are supporting the judge in allowing the hearing to go remotely – the allegations have been well articulated in documents, they are well known to the parties, the witnesses – members of the medical profession, school staff, social workers – gave or can give their evidence remotely over the video link and for the process of examination and cross-examination to take place. What normally goes wrong is the technology rather than the professional interaction of the lawyers and the professional witnesses. In this sense the case might be ready for hearing and the parties are sufficiently aware of all of the issues to be able to have already instructed their legal teams with the points they to make.

IV. The right of the child to be heard in the context of remote proceedings

It is natural that remote hearings and all means of online communication unavoidably affect the proceedings itself. The current situation, unprecedented as it is and with all the challenges described above, raises the question of specifically how the child should be heard, if at all, and is this an absolute right, considering that providing a genuine and effective opportunity for the child to express their views requires the court to take all measures which are appropriate to the arrangement of the hearing, having regard to the best interests of the child and the circumstances of each individual case?

To explore this right in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, some background should be provided. As it is pointed in the UN General comment No. 12 (2009) on the right of the child to be heard, the right itself imposes a clear legal obligation on States' parties to recognize it and ensure its implementation by listening to the views of the child and according them due weight. This obligation requires that States' parties, with respect to their particular judicial system, either directly guarantee this right, or adopt or revise laws so that this right can be fully enjoyed by the child. Something more – in par. 19 it says that *"Article 12, paragraph 1, provides that States parties "shall assure" the right of the child to freely express her or his views. "Shall assure" is a legal term of special strength, which leaves no leeway for State parties' discretion. Accordingly, States parties are under strict obligation to undertake appropriate measures to fully implement this right for all children."*

The right of the child to be heard is regulated in the same sense in Article 24(1) of the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the EU and Article 42(2)(a) of Regulation No. 2201/2003 (Brussels II bis). The Hague convention of 25 October 1980 on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction also provides in Article 13 that the judicial or administrative authority may also refuse to order the return of the child if it finds that the child objects to being returned and has attained an age and degree of maturity at which it is appropriate to take account of its views.

Brussels IIa recast (Regulation 1111/2019, in force as of August 2022) pays special attention to the strengthening of the right of the child to express his or her view, reinforcing it with special provision – Article 26 in Chapter III "International child abduction", in compliance with a detailed Recital 39. It states that the court may use "all means available to it under national law as well as the speci?c instruments of international judicial cooperation, including, when appropriate, those provided for by Council Regulation (EC) No 1206/2001" but "in

so far as possible and always taking into consideration the best interests of the child" thus retaining some degree of discretion also in this regard.

In Joseba Andoni Aguirre Zarraga v. Simone Pelz (case C-491/10 PPU) however CJEU held that hearing a child is not an absolute right, but that if a court decides it is necessary, it must offer the child a genuine and effective opportunity to express his or her views. It also held that the right of the child to be heard, as provided in the Charter and Brussels II bis Regulation, requires legal procedures and conditions which enable children to express their views freely to be available to them, and the court to obtain those views. The court also needs to take all appropriate measures to arrange such hearings, with regard to the children's best interests and the circumstances of each individual case.

It is worth noting that in some cases the hearing of the child can be conducted indirectly or via representative, or where it is considered as harmful for the child it can be dispensed with altogether. In the case of Sahin v. Germany, on the question of hearing the child in court, the ECtHR referred to the expert's explanation before the regional court in Germany. The expert stated that after several meetings with the child, her mother and the applicant, he considered that the process of questioning the child could have entailed a risk for her, which could not have been avoided by special arrangements in court. The ECtHR found that, in these circumstances, the procedural requirements implicit in Article 8 of the ECHR – to hear a child in court – did not amount to requiring the direct questioning of the child on her relationship with her father.

So far, the question how the right of the child to be heard is regarded in the remote hearings, that had to take place recently, is not widely discussed. Therefore, at this moment we should draw some conclusions from the available case-law and emergency rules. Naturally, this right itself cannot be waived and the views of children and young people should be taken into account when emergency placements are first made; the decision at any given time must take into account the best interests of the child. The most appropriate approach would be adjusting the available domestic proceedings, and at all times the local authorities should provide pertinent information to inform this decision and the child must be at the center of all decision making, which includes the social work team listening to the child's views.

How this might look in practice? First of all, the children as a rule should be

offered the opportunity to join their hearing virtually and securely. Testing and monitoring are crucial in order to get as many children as possible able to attend. Good suggestion would be a letter giving them more information about how they can participate via their tablet laptop/PC or mobile phone, information sheet which will explain how they can join a virtual hearing, instructions to help them with the set up. This should be followed by a test to make sure everyone is prepared for the day of the hearing. In accordance with the domestic procedural rules, information about rights and reminder for the children and young people that they have the right to have a trusted adult, an advocate or lawyer attend the virtual hearing to provide support might be also useful.

However, it for sure would not be possible for every child to join its hearing remotely. In this case, they should still provide their views – e.g. by emailing the information to the local team mailbox and the judge will then ensure this information is given to the respective professionals involved in the procedure.

V. Conclusion

The rapid onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has been a shock to most existing justice systems These are times unlike any other, and extraordinary measures are being taken across the world. Many of us are already asking ourselves – why not earlier? And with those changes in place, can things go back to the way they were? Should a regular framework for the development of virtual courtrooms and remote hearings that enables all concerned, including the judges, to operate remotely and efficiently be created, and was it due even before the pandemic? There are no easy answers – but it is well-worth analyzing the options of applying and making full use of the existing online tools and resources in child-related proceedings in the future. Well summarized by Justice A. Pazaratz in *Ribeiro v Wright*: “None of us have ever experienced anything like this. We are all going to have to try a bit harder – for the sake of our children.”

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Praxis des Internationalen Privat- und Verfahrensrechts (IPRax) 3/2020: Abstracts

The latest issue of the „Praxis des Internationalen Privat- und Verfahrensrechts (IPRax)“ features the following articles:

A. Stein: **The 2019 Hague Judgments Convention – All’s Well that Ends Well?**

The Hague Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Judgments, which was concluded in July 2019, holds the potential of facilitating the resolution of cross-border conflicts by enabling, accelerating and reducing the cost of the recognition and enforcement of judgments abroad although a number of areas have been excluded from scope. As the academic discussion on the merits of this instrument unfolds and the EU considers the benefits of ratification, this contribution by the EU’s lead negotiator at the Diplomatic Conference presents an overview of the general architecture of the Convention and sheds some light on the individual issues that gave rise to the most intense discussion at the Diplomatic Conference.

C. North: **The 2019 HCCH Judgments Convention: A Common Law Perspective**

The recent conclusion of the long-awaited 2019 HCCH Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Judgments in Civil or Commercial Matters (the “Judgments Convention”) provides an opportunity for States to reconsider existing regimes for the recognition and enforcement of foreign judgments under national law. This paper considers the potential benefits of the Judgments Convention from a common law perspective. It does so by considering the existing regime for recognition and enforcement at common law, and providing an overview of the objectives, structure and a number of key provisions of the Judgments Convention. It then highlights some of the potential benefits of the Convention for certain common law (and other) jurisdictions.

P.-A. Brand: **Recognition and enforcement of decisions in administrative**

law matters

Whereas for civil and commercial matters there are extensive rules of international and European civil procedural law on mutual legal assistance and in particular on the recognition and enforcement of civil court decisions, there is no similar number of regulations on legal assistance and for the international enforcement of administrative court decisions. The same applies to the recognition of foreign administrative acts. This article deals with the existing rules, in particular with regard to decisions in administrative matters, and concludes that the current system of enforcement assistance in the enforcement of administrative decisions should be adapted to the existing systems of recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters.

B. Hess: **About missing legal knowledge of German lawyers and courts**

This article addresses a decision rendered by the Landgericht Düsseldorf in which the court declined to enforce, under the Brussels Ibis Regulation, a provisional measure issued by a Greek court. Erroneously, in its decision the Landgericht held that applications for refusal of enforcement of foreign decisions (article 49 Brussels Ibis Regulation) are to be lodged with the Landgericht itself. Since the party lodged its application with the Landgericht on the last day of

the time limit, the Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf eventually held that the application was untimely as it was not lodged with the Oberlandesgericht, instead. The Oberlandesgericht refused to restore the status quo ante because the information about the competent court had been manifestly erroneous, whereas the lawyer is expected to be familiar with articles 49 (2) and 75 lit b) of the Brussels Ibis Regulation. This article argues that jurisdiction over applications for refusal of enforcement is not easily apparent from the European and German legal provisions and that the legal literature addresses the issue inconsistently. This results in a certain degree of uncertainty as concerns jurisdiction over such applications, making it difficult to establish cases of possibly manifestly incorrect applications.

C.F. Nordmeier: **Abuse of a power of attorney granted by a spouse – The exclusion of matrimonial property regimes, the place of occurrence of the damage under Brussels Ibis and the escape clause of art. 4 (3) Rome II**

The article deals with the abuse of power of attorney by spouses on the basis of a

decision of the Higher Regional Court of Nuremberg. The spouses were both German citizens, the last common habitual residence was in France. After the failure of the marriage, the wife had transferred money from a German bank account of the husband under abusive use of a power of attorney granted to her. The husband sues for repayment. Such an action does not fall within the scope of the exception of matrimonial property regimes under art. 1 (2) (a) Brussels Ibis Regulation. For the purpose of determining the place where the damage occurred (Art. 7 No. 2 Brussels Ibis Regulation), a distinction can be made between cases of manipulation and cases of error. In the event of manipulation, the bank account will give jurisdiction under Art. 7 No. 2 Brussels Ibis Regulation. Determining the law applicable by Art. 4 (3) (2) Rome II Regulation, consideration must be given not only to the statute of marriage effect, but also to the statute of power of attorney. Particular restraint in the application of Art. 4 (3) (2) Rome II Regulation is indicated if the legal relationship to which the non-contractual obligation is to be accessory is not determined by conflict-of-law rules unified on European Union level.

P.F. Schlosser: **Governing law provision in the main contract – valid also for the arbitration provision therein?**

Both rulings are shortsighted by extending the law, chosen by the parties for the main contract, to the arbitration provision therein. The New York Convention had good reasons for favoring, in the absence of a contractual provision specifically directed to the arbitration provision, the law governing the arbitration at the arbitrators' seat. For that law the interests of the parties are much more predominant than for their substantive agreements.

F. Rieländer: **Choice-of-law clauses in pre-formulated fiduciary contracts for holding shares: Consolidation of the test of unfairness regarding choice-of-law clauses under Art. 3(1) Directive 93/13/EEC**

In its judgment, C-272/18, the European Court of Justice dealt with three conflict-of-laws issues. Firstly, it held that the contractual issues arising from fiduciary relationships concerning limited partnership interests are included within the scope of the Rome I Regulation. While these contracts are not covered by the exemption set forth in Art. 1(2)(f) Rome I Regulation, the Court, unfortunately, missed an opportunity to lay down well-defined criteria for determining the types of civil law fiduciary relationships which may be considered functionally

equivalent to common law trusts for the purposes of Art. 1(2)(h) Rome I Regulation. Secondly, the Court established that Art. 6(4)(a) Rome I Regulation must be given a strict interpretation in light of its wording and purpose in relation to the requirement "to be supplied to the consumer exclusively in a country other than that in which he has his habitual residence". Accordingly, this exception is applicable only if the consumer needs to leave the country in which he has his habitual residence for the purpose of enjoying the benefits of the services. Thirdly, the Court re-affirmed that choice-of-law clauses in pre-formulated consumer contracts are subject to a test of unfairness under Art. 3(1) Directive 93/13/EEC. Since the material scope of this Directive is held to apply to choice-of-law clauses, such a clause may be considered as unfair if it misleads the consumer as far as the laws applicable to the contract is concerned.

U. Bergquist: **Does a European Certificate of Succession have to be valid not only at the point of application to the Land Registry, but also at the point of completion of the registration in the Land Register?**

When it comes to the evidentiary effect of European Certificates of Successions, there are different opinions on whether a certified copy of the certificate has to be valid at the time of the completion of a registration in the Land register. The Kammergericht of Berlin recently ruled that a certified copy loses its evidentiary effect in accordance with art. 69 (2) and (5) of the European Succession Regulation (No. 650/2012) after expiry of the (six-month) validity period, even if the applicant has no influence on the duration of the registration procedure. This contribution presents the different arguments and concludes – in accordance with the Kammergericht – that not the date of submission of the application but the date of completion of the registration has to be decisive for the required proof.

D. Looschelders: **International and Local Jurisdiction for Claims under Prospectus Liability**

The judgment by the Austrian Supreme Court of Justice (Oberster Gerichtshof, OGH) deals with international and local jurisdiction for a claim under prospectus liability. It is mainly concerned with the determination of the place in which the harmful event occurred, as stated in Art. 5(3) of Regulation No 44/2001. Specifying the damage location can pose significant problems due to the fact that prospectus liability compensates pure economic loss. The OGH had stayed the proceedings in order to make a reference to the European Court of Justice (ECJ)

for a preliminary ruling on several questions related to this issue. However, the decision by the ECJ left many details unsettled. This article identifies the criteria developed by the OGH in light of the case. The author agrees with the OGH to designate the damage location in this particular case as the injured party's place of residence. Nevertheless, he points out the difficulties of this approach in cases where not all investment and damage specific circumstances point to the investor's country of residence.

W.Voß: **U.S.-style Judicial Assistance – Discovery of Foreign Evidence from Foreign Respondents for Use in Foreign Proceedings**

In the future, will German litigants in German court proceedings have to hand over to the opposing party evidence located on German territory based on American court orders? In general, under German law, the responsibility to gather information and to clarify the facts of the case lies with the party alleging the respective facts, while third parties can only be forced to produce documents in exceptional circumstances. However, the possibility to obtain judicial assistance under the American Rule 28 U.S.C. § 1782(a) increasingly threatens to circumvent these narrow provisions on document production in transatlantic relations. For judicial assistance under this Federal statute provides parties to foreign or international proceedings with access to pre-trial discovery under U.S. law, if the person from whom discovery is sought "resides or is found" in the American court district. Over the years, the statute has been given increasingly broad applicability – a trend that is now being continued by the recent ruling of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals discussed in this article. In this decision, the Court addressed two long-disputed issues: First, it had to decide on whether the application of 28 U.S.C. § 1782(a) is limited to a person who actually "resides or is found" in the relevant district or whether the statute could be read more broadly to include all those cases in which a court has personal jurisdiction over a person. Second, the case raised the controversial question of whether 28 U.S.C. § 1782 allows for extraterritorial discovery.

M. Jänterä-Jareborg: **Sweden: Non-recognition of child marriages concluded abroad**

Combatting child marriages has been on the Swedish legislative agenda since the early 2000s. Sweden's previously liberal rules on the recognition of foreign marriages have been revisited in law amendments carried out in 2004, 2014 and

2019, each reform adding new restrictions. The 2019 amendment forbids recognition of any marriage concluded abroad as of 1/1/2019 by a person under the age of 18. (Recognition of marriages concluded before 1/1/2019 follows the previously adopted rules.) The marriage is invalid in Sweden directly by force of the new Swedish rules on non-recognition. It is irrelevant whether the parties had any ties to Sweden at the time of the marriage or the lapse of time. The aim is to signal to the world community total dissociation with the harmful practice of child marriages. Exceptionally, however, once both parties are of age, the rule of nonrecognition may be set aside, if called upon for "extraordinary reasons". No special procedure applies. It is up to each competent authority to decide on the validity of the marriage, independently of any other authority's previous decision. While access to this "escape clause" from the rule of non-recognition mitigates the harshness of the system, it makes the outcome unpredictable. As a result, the parties' relationship may come to qualify as marriage in one context but not in another. Sweden's Legislative Council advised strongly against the reform, as contrary to the aim of protecting the vulnerable, and in conflict with the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as European Union law. Regrettably, the government and Parliament took no notice of this criticism in substance.

I. Tekdogan-Bahçivanci: **Recent Turkish Cases on Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Family Law Judgements: An Analysis within the Context of the ECHR**

In a number of recent cases, the Turkish Supreme Court changed its previous jurisprudence, rediscovered the ECHR in the meaning of private international law and adopted a fundamental-rights oriented approach on the recognition and enforcement of foreign judgements in family matters, i.e. custody and guardianship. This article aims to examine this shift together with the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, to find a basis for this shift by analysing Turkey's obligation to comply with the ECHR and to identify one of the problematic issues of Turkish private international law where the same approach should be adopted: namely recognition and/or enforcement of foreign judgements relating to non-marital forms of cohabitation.

Child abduction in times of corona

By Nadia Rusinova

Currently large increases in COVID-19 cases and deaths continue to be reported from the EU/EEA countries and the UK. In addition, in recent weeks, the European all-cause mortality monitoring system showed increases above the expected rate in Belgium, France, Italy, Malta, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

It is not unreasonable to predict that COVID-19 will be used increasingly as a justification in law for issuing non-return order by the Court in international child abduction proceedings, return being seen as a "grave risk" for the child and raised as an assertion under Article 13(b) of the Hague Convention.

What would be the correct response to these challenging circumstances, when the best interest of the child in child abduction proceedings calls for restoration of *status quo ante* under the Hague convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (hereinafter: the Convention)? This post will focus on the recent judgment [2020] EWHC 834 (Fam), issued on 31 March 2020 by the High Court of England and Wales (Family Division) seen in the light of the ECtHR case law on the child abduction, providing brief analysis and suggesting answer to the question if the return of the child to the state of its habitual residence in the outbreak of COVID-19 can constitute grave risk for the child under Article 13(b) of the Convention, and how the practitioners and the Court should approach these assertions in the present pandemic situation.

The facts of *Re PT [2020] EWHC 834 (Fam)*

PT (the abducted child) and both of her parents are all Spanish nationals. PT was born in 2008 and had lived all of her life in Spain, until she was brought to England by her mother, HH, in February 2020. She is the only child of the parents' relationship. They separated in 2009. Following the parents' separation, legal proceedings were brought in Spain by the mother concerning PT's welfare. A judgment was issued in these proceedings by the Spanish Courts on 25 May

2012, providing for the mother to have custody and for parental responsibility for the child to be shared by both parties. The order provided for the father to have contact with PT on alternate weekends from after school on Friday until Sunday evening. In addition, she was to spend half of each school holiday with each parent. The order also required that the parents should inform each other of any change in address thirty days in advance.

On or about 13 February 2020, the mother travelled to England with PT. The mother's partner (with whom she is expecting a child the following month) lives in the South East of England, and they have moved in with him. The evidence on behalf of the father is that the child was removed from Spain by the mother without his knowledge or consent.

The father asked the mother to return PT to Spain, but she refused to do so. The father travelled to the UK and met with the mother and PT at a shopping centre. However, the mother again refused to permit the child to return to Spain. She did however permit PT (and S) to spend a night with the father at his hotel in England.

The case first came before the Court on 10 March 2020 on a "without notice" basis. At that hearing the mother attended in person, and indicated that she would be seeking to defend the application on the basis of (1) the father's consent and / or acquiescence and (2) Article 13(b) of the Hague convention – claiming existence of a grave risk that a return would expose the child to physical or psychological harm or otherwise place the child in an intolerable situation.

On that occasion PT was, as directed by the judge, present in the Court vicinity to be interviewed by the CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) Officer. She told CAFCASS that she had not wanted to come to England, and that she wanted to be with her father, although she did not want to be separated from her mother either. PT's clear wish was that she wanted to return to Spain with her father rather than stay in England.

The judgment

The Court is entirely satisfied on the evidence that PT is habitually resident in Spain as she had lived there all of her life until she was recently brought to the UK. In this case the Court ruled that PT has been wrongfully removed from Spain within the terms of Article 3 of the Convention and that none of the Article 13

defences have been made out. Therefore, return order for the summary return of PT to Spain has been made.

Comments

First of all, in such cases the Court should unavoidably take the challenge to identify the risks for the child in case of return in the context of the pandemic situation. Indeed, in the present case the formulation is rather simplified. Therefore and due to the lack of case law on this issue, and in order to be able to answer the question if the return of the child would pose a grave risk, we should take a look also at the recently published Guide to Good Practice on Article 13(1)(b) (hereinafter: the Guide) by the Hague Conference On Private International Law (HCCH) and the concept of "grave risk" in child abduction proceedings in general, as set by the ECtHR in its case law.

In general, the grave risk exception in child abduction cases is based on "the primary interest of any person in not being exposed to physical or psychological danger or being placed in an intolerable situation", as stated in the § 29 of the Explanatory report to the Hague Convention. The general assumption that a prompt return is in the best interests of the child can therefore be rebutted in the individual case where an exception is established. It is important to note that the exception provided for in Article 13(b) concerns only situations which go beyond what a child might reasonably be expected to bear (Ushakov v. Russia § 97, X v. Latvia § 116, Maumousseau and Washington v. France §§ 69 and 73, K.J. v. Poland §§ 64 and 67)

In § 46-48 of the discussed judgment the Court points final argument relates to the risk of physical harm that is presented by the current coronavirus pandemic in the following way:

"…This risk presents itself in two ways:

(1) The pandemic is more advanced in Spain than in the UK. As at the date of the preparation of this judgment (29 March) the official death toll stood at 1,228 in the UK and 6,528 in Spain. It could therefore be argued that PT would be at greater risk of contracting the virus in Spain than in the UK.

(2) The increased risk of infection that is posed by international travel at this time."

Did the Court explore all possible harm that the return order can bring, and since it is recognized that the risk is present, what specific kind of risk the return of the child would constitute in the context of the pandemic situation – physical or psychological danger, or being placed in an intolerable situation?

The way the Court approached this issue is a very basic attempt to identify the risks that a return order in the outbreak of COVID-19 can bring to the child. As the Guide points in § 31, although separate, the three types of risk are often employed together, and Courts have not always clearly distinguished among them in their decisions. It is clear that the return could bring physical danger of contamination with COVID-19 together with all possible complications, despite the fact that child is not in the at-risk groups as are the elderly or other chronically ill people. But we should not underestimate the psychological aspect of the pandemic situation. As the coronavirus pandemic rapidly sweeps across the world, the World Health Organisation has already, a month earlier, stated that it is inducing a considerable degree of fear, worry, and concern in the population. It is therefore out-of-the-question that for a relatively mature child (in this case of 12 years old), whether the ability to watch, read or listen to news about COVID-19 can make the child feel anxious or distressed and therefore can, and most likely will, bring also psychological harm to it. In this sense the potential psychological harm is inevitable and whilst the physical harm can or cannot happen, and indeed the contamination cannot be foreseen, in any case with the return order (especially to a state with significant risk of increasing community transmission of COVID-19) the psychological integrity of the child will be put at immediate risk.

In order to explore how this risk can be adequately assessed in child abduction proceedings in the context of the COVID-19, we should look at § 62 of the Guide, where HCCH explicitly discusses risks associated with the child's health, stating that *"In cases involving assertions associated with the child's health, the grave risk analysis must focus on the availability of treatment in the State of habitual residence, and not on a comparison between the relative quality of care in each State".* How is this applicable to the pandemic situation, if at all? It seems like the only adequate response in these fast-changing unprecedented circumstances would be that the Court should indeed not compare the situations in both states, but still having in mind the nature of the COVID-19, to try to foresee the developments, relying on the general and country-specific health organizations

reports, accessible nowadays online in a relatively easy way.

As a first step the Court should consider whether the assertions are of such a nature, with sufficient detail and substance that they could constitute a grave risk, as overly broad or general assertions are unlikely to be sufficient. In this situation, without precedent in the history of the Convention's application, holding that *"Although the course of the pandemic is clearly more advanced in Spain than in the UK, I do not have any evidence from which I can draw a conclusion that either country is any more or less safe than the other… I am simply not in a possession to make any findings as to the relative likelihood of contracting the virus in each country. On the material before me, all that I can conclude is that there is a genuine risk that PT could contract the virus whether she remains in England or returns to Spain."* does not fulfil the obligation of the Court to assess the risk in full, in all its possible implications. The Court is obliged to conduct the step-by-step analysis, prescribed by and explained in the Guide, and to examine the types of risk for the child, assessing it separately and in the context of their deep interrelation in these specific circumstances.

Secondly, the wording of Article 13(b) also indicates that the exception is "forward-looking" in that it focuses on the circumstances of the child upon return and on whether those circumstances would expose the child to a grave risk. Therefore, ECtHR is clear that in any case (regardless the context and for sure not only in cases with history of domestic violence), where such assertions have been raised, the Courts should satisfy themselves that adequate safeguards and tangible measures are available in the country of return (Andersena v. Latvia §118, Blaga v. Romania §71).

In addition, as the Guide points in § 53, Article 13(b) analysis should be always be highly factually specific. Each Court determination as to the application or non-application of the exception is therefore unique, based on the particular circumstances of the case. A careful step-by-step analysis of an asserted grave risk is therefore always required, in accordance with the legal framework of the Hague convention, including the exception as explained in the Guide. When we discuss this issue, not only the Convention, but also Article 11(4) of Brussels IIa applies in answering the question of, what in the case of COVID-19 are "adequate safeguards". This is, without a doubt, a question difficult to answer to with certainty, as the case law of the ECtHR and the Guides do not contain any directions or good practices on the behaviour of the domestic authorities in times

of pandemic.

In the present case the judge estimated as “tangible safeguards” the following “number of undertakings”, offered by the father, effective until the matter could be brought before the Spanish Court, and intended to support PT’s return to Spain. They include: *(1) Lodging the final order in Spain; (2) Not pursuing any criminal charges against the mother for her wrongful removal of PT from Spain to England; (3) Seeking to mediate with the mother on PT’s return in relation to the mother’s access; (4) Agreeing to unrestricted indirect contact between PT and her maternal family (especially with the mother and S):(5) Agreeing to direct contact for PT with her mother in Spain and England, to the extent that is possible or appropriate from a public health perspective given the current global pandemic;(6) Meeting with the mother only at neutral and/or public places when picking or dropping PT off;(7) To pay PT’s maintenance and school fees pending any further determination about maintenance by the Spanish Courts; and (8) To pay all the travelling costs (flights) for PT of travelling to and from England for the purposes of contact with the mother.”*

It looks like the Court is indeed satisfied with the undertakings, but unfortunately, these examples are far from adequate protective measures when we consider the grave risk induced by return in the current pandemic situation. None are directed to prevention of the grave risk as raised by the mother, and none are related to the child’s health. Better examples remain to be seen from the upcoming case law of the Courts, but in the current situation, a strong focus should remain on comprehensive testing and surveillance strategies (including contact tracing), community measures (including physical distancing), strengthening of healthcare systems and informing the public and health community. Therefore, following the Guide, such measures should at the minimum include rapid risk assessment upon arrival at the state of habitual residence, application of different types of available COVID-19 Rapid Tests, ensuring social distance and exploring online education possibilities, providing guarantees that the child will be isolated and distanced from potentially infected people (through evidence for appropriate living conditions upon return), etc. Strong focus should also be put on the possibilities for mental support for the child, bearing in mind the extremely stressful situation, related not only the COVID-19 but also to additional factors such as the separation from the other parent and the mental consequences from the forced social isolation which, as pointed above, would inevitably affect the mental

wellbeing of the child.

The next question is who should prove the risk, and its gravity in this specific situation? Following the ECtHR case law, the burden of proof traditionally lies with the party opposing the child's return (Ushakov v. Russia, § 97). In this case the abducting parent indeed shall prove the grave risk, but it is true that the COVID-19 situation itself and the wide-spread precautions and information contribute a lot to proving this risk. Yet, what in the current pandemic circumstances is still to be proved by the abducting parent?

According to § 49 of the Guide, even if a Court *ex officio* gathers information or evidence (in accordance with domestic procedures), or if the person or body which has lodged the return application is not actively involved in the proceedings, the Court must be satisfied that the burden of proof to establish the exception has been met by the party objecting to return. However, in these specific circumstances, the national and international situation is developing at such speed that any evidence that could be gathered would be likely to be immediately outdated. Something very convenient for the abducting parent, it would be almost enough if the Court *ex officio* conducts check on the actual COVID-19 information regarding the state of habitual residence of the child, ensuring it is current when issuing the return or non-return order. However, this does not relieve the opposing party from the procedural obligation to present evidence as accurately as possible, and it remains important that arrangements regarding the "tangible safeguards", discussed above, are offered and supported by evidence by the party which claims the return order.

There is a further discretionary ground in the Convention which permits a refusal of a return in certain circumstances where the child objects. According to Article 12 UNCRC, the child has the right to express its views freely, these views to be given due weight in accordance with age and maturity, and the Court should carefully examine them together with the other evidence (and not to provide stereotyped reasoning). The COVID-19 limitations raise the question should the child still be heard in this context and, if yes, how this should happen such that the risk for is minimised? Obviously, this right cannot and should not be waived in times when many procedural actions can take place online. It is worth to note that next to the existing legislation, Brussels IIa recast (Regulation 1111/2019, in force as of August 2022) pays special attention to the strengthening of the right of the child to express his or her view, reinforcing it with special provision – Article 26

in Chapter III “International child abduction”, in compliance with a detailed Recital 39. No minimum age is prescribed, but also no rules who can conduct the hearing of the child, how it must happen and where it should be conducted are set. Therefore, the hearing of the child should take place following the general conditions, and while the personal impression will indeed be reduced, and the possibilities to manipulate the child could potentially increase, the unlimited online tools to conduct the hearing eliminate the risk of contamination and offers acceptable solution for this emergency situation.

To get back to the discussed case – Re PT [2020] EWHC 834 (Fam), the Court is satisfied that the Art 13(b) defence has not been made out in this case. Many more comments could be made on the Courts assessment – the best interest of the child is not touched upon, the domestic violence is not discussed at all as an additional assertion, etc. One positive conclusion from procedural point of view is that the urgency has been taken into account, and that the Court made full use of the opportunities to conduct the proceedings online. Of course we cannot say that the return of a child during the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a grave risk in all child abduction cases– but we can at least begin to build the good practices in this unprecedented time, when the “lockdown” will bring brand new meaning to the notion of “grave risk” under the Convention.

Nadia Rusinova is an attorney-at-law and lecturer in International and European private law at The Hague University, Netherlands. Next to her teaching and research activities, she is a regular ERA speaker and judicial trainer in children’s rights and international family law, delivering multidisciplinary trainings for legal professionals on international child abduction, children’s rights, ECtHR case law in family matters, LGBTQ rights, gender-inclusive language and trafficking of children. She is appointed as an expert in these areas of law in various projects, involving countries of broad geographic range. Originally Bulgarian, she holds an LL.M. degree from Sofia University, and for more than 15 years she has been successfully managing a specialized international family law office in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Opening Pandora's Box – The interaction between human rights and private international law: the specific case of the European Court of Human Rights and the HCCH Child Abduction Convention

Written by Mayela Celis

It is undeniable that there is an increasing interaction between human rights and private international law (and other areas of law). This of course adds an additional layer of complexity to private international law cases, whether we like it or not. Indeed, States can be sanctioned if they do not fulfill specific criteria specified by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Importantly, the European Convention on Human Rights has been considered to be an instrument of European public order (*ordre public*), to which 47 States are currently parties.

I have recently published an article entitled "The controversial role of the ECtHR in the interpretation of the Hague Convention of 25 October 1980 on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, with special reference to *Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland* and *X v. Latvia*" (in Spanish only but with abstracts in English and Portuguese in the Anuario Colombiano de Derecho Internacional). To view it, click on "*Ver artículo*" and then click on "*Descargar el archivo PDF*", currently pre-print version, published online in March 2020.

Below I include briefly a few highlights and comments.

As its name suggests, this article explores the controversial role of the ECtHR in the interpretation of the HCCH Child Abduction Convention. It analyses two judgments rendered by the Grand Chamber: *Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland* (Application no. 41615/07) and *X v. Latvia* (Application no. 27853/09). And then it goes on to analyse three more recent judgments and in particular, whether or not they are in line with *X v Latvia*.

The article seeks to clarify the applicable standard that should be applied in child abduction cases as there has been some confusion as to the extent to which *Neulinger* applies and the impact of *X v. Latvia*. Indeed *Neulinger* seemed to suggest that courts should conduct a full examination of the best interests of the child during child abduction proceedings, which is blatantly wrong. *X v. Latvia* clarifies *Neulinger* and provides a detailed and thoughtful standard to avoid conducting "an in-depth examination of the entire family situation and of a whole series of factors…" but at the same time upholds the human rights of the persons involved and strikes, in my view and as noted by the Court, a fair balance between the competing interests at stake – those of the child, of the two parents, and of public order.

The article then examines three recent judgments rendered by several chambers of the ECtHR (not the Grand Chamber): *K.J. v. Poland* (Application no. 30813/14), *Vladimir Ushakov v. Russia* (Application no. 15122/17), and *M.K. v. Grèce* (Requête n° 51312/16). *M.K. v. Grèce*, which was rendered in 2018, has put the ECtHR in the spotlight again. Surprisingly, this precedent has ignored the standard established in *X v. Latvia* and has followed only *Neulinger*. The precedents of the Grand Chamber of the ECtHR are binding on the chambers so it is stupefying that this could happen. Nevertheless, I have concluded that the outcome of the case is correct.

By way of conclusion, the legal community seems to be divided as to whether or not *X v Latvia* sets a good precedent. Human rights lawyers seem to regard this precedent favourably, whereas private international law lawyers seem to be more cautious. This article concludes that *X v. Latvia* was correctly decided for several reasons based on Article 13(1)(b), Article 3 of the HCCH Child Abduction Convention and the need to provide for measures of protection. Both human rights and private international law can interact harmoniously and complement each other. The efforts of the human rights community to understand the Child Abduction Convention are evident in the change of direction in *X v. Latvia*. Both human rights lawyers and private international law lawyers should make an effort to understand each other as we have a common goal and objective: the protection of the rights of the child.

ERA: Recent European Court of Human Rights Case Law in Family Matters (conference report)

Report written by Tine Van Hof, researcher at the University of Antwerp

On the 13th and 14th of February 2020, the Academy of European Law (ERA) organized a conference on 'Recent ECtHR Case Law in Family Matters'. This conference was held in Strasbourg and brought together forty participants coming from twenty-one different countries. This report will set out some of the issues addressed at the conference.

The presentation, made by ***Ksenija Turkovi?***, Judge at the European Court of Human Rights, focused on children on the move and more specifically on minors in the context of migration. On this topic the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has developed a child-specific human rights approach. This approach implies taking into account three particular concepts: vulnerability, best interests and autonomy. Judge Turkovi? pointed to the interesting discussion on whether vulnerability could only apply to young migrant children. On this discussion, there is now agreement that the vulnerability applies to all children under the age of 18 and regardless whether they are accompanied by adults. The ECtHR made very clear in its case law that migrant children are especially vulnerable and that this vulnerability is a decisive factor that takes precedence over the children's migrant status. This vulnerability also plays a role in the cases on the detention of children. The more vulnerable a person is, the lower the threshold for a situation of detention to fall within the scope of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human

Rights (ECHR), encompassing the prohibition of torture.

Family unification and the free movement of family status was the second topic of the day. ***Michael Hellner***, professor at Stockholm University, discussed several cases of the ECtHR (Ejimson v Germany) and the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) (K.A. v Belgium, Coman and S.M.). He concluded that family life does not automatically create a right of residence but it can create such a right in certain circumstances. In the Coman case for example, the CJEU decided that Romania had to recognize the marriage between the two men for the purpose of enabling such persons to exercise the rights they enjoy under EU law (i.e. free movement). Professor Hellner noted that it seems to be quite easy to circumvent national law in the future if one looks at the Coman case. He considered it positive if the consequence was that same-sex marriages and surrogacy arrangements created abroad were recognized. However, he made the interesting observation that it might be a very different story if one thinks about child marriages and the recognition thereof.

Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou, consultant in family law for the Council of Europe, thereafter shared her insights on parental rights, pre-adoption foster care and adoption. She discussed i.a. the evolution in the case law of the ECtHR on the representation of the child before the Court. In the Strand-Lobben case, the Court stated that the issue of representation does not require a restrictive or technical approach and thus made clear that a certain level of flexibility is necessary. In the Paradisio and Campanelli case, the ECtHR provided three criteria that should be taken into account for assessing the representation of the child: the link between the child and the representative, the subject-matter of the case and any potential conflict of interests between the interests of the child and those of the representative. The latest case, A. and B. against Croatia, introduced a security safeguard. In this case, the ECtHR asked the Croatian Bar Association to appoint a legal representative for the child for the procedure before the ECtHR since the Court was not sure that there were no conflict of interests between the child and the mother, who proposed to be the representative.

To end the first conference day, ***Dmytro***

Tretyakov, lawyer at the Registry of the ECtHR, enlightened us about the misconceptions and best practices of submitting a case to the Court. His most important tips for a submission to the Court are the following:

- Use the current application form and not an old one;
- Submit well in time and certainly within the six-month period;
- Summarize the facts of the case on the three pages provided. This summary has to be clear, readable (for those that do it in handwriting) and comprehensible;
- To state claims, refer to the relevant Article from the ECHR (do not cite it) and explain what the specific problem is with regard to that Article;
- Support each claim with documents; and
- Sign the form in the correct boxes and carefully look where the signature of the applicant and where the signature of the representative is required.

The second day of the conference started with the presentation of ***Nadia Rusinova***, attorney-at-law and lecturer at the Hague University of Applied Science, on international child abduction. She discussed i.a. the issue of domestic violence in child abduction cases. Several questions can be raised in this regard, for example: what constitutes domestic violence? When should a court accept the domestic violence to be established? What is adequate protection in light of the Hague Convention on International Child Abduction (1980) and who decides on this? In the case O.C.I. and others v Romania, one of the questions was whether there is such a thing as light violence that does not amount to a grave risk in the sense of Article 13(1)(b) of the Hague Convention. The ECtHR approached this issue very critically and stated that no form of corporal punishment is acceptable. Regarding the adequate measures, the Court stated that domestic authorities have a discretion to decide what is adequate but the measures should be in place before ordering the return of the child. Another point raised by Ms. Rusinova is the time factor that is required. If one looks at Article 11(2) of the Hague Convention and at

Article 11(3) of the Brussels IIbis Regulation together, six weeks is the required time period for the return proceedings. The Brussels IIbis Recast clarified that the procedure should take no more than six weeks per instance. However, according to Ms. Rusinova it is hardly possible to do the procedures in six weeks; it will only work when the proceeding is not turned into an adversarial proceeding in which all kinds of claims of both parents are dealt with.

Samuel Fulli-Lemaire, professor at the University of Strasbourg, addressed the interesting evolution of reproductive rights and surrogacy. In the case of C. and E. v France, the French Court of Cassation asked the ECtHR for an advisory opinion on the question whether the current state of the case law in France was compatible with the obligations under Article 8 ECHR (the right to respect for private and family life). The status of the French case law was that the genetic parent was fully accepted but the other intended parent was required to adopt the child if he or she wished to establish parentage links. The ECtHR replied that the obligation under Article 8 entailed that there must be a possibility of recognition of the parent-child relationship but that it is up to the States to decide how to do this. Adoption is a sufficient method of recognizing such relationship, provided that it is quick and effective enough. The Court also refers to the possibility of transcription of the birth certificate as an alternative to adoption. However, professor Fulli-Lemaire pointed out that there is a misconception on what transcription means under French law. The mere transcription of the birth certificate does not establish legal parentage in France. The fact that the ECtHR says that an intended parent can adopt or transcribe the birth certificate is therefore tricky because under French law the effects of the two methods are not at all the same.

The very last presentation of the conference was given by ***Gabriela Lünsmann***, attorney-at-law and member of the Executive Board of the Lesbian and Gay Federation in Germany. She spoke about LGBTQI rights as human rights and hereby focused i.a. on transsexuals' gender identity and the case of X. v North-Macedonia. The question raised in that case is whether the state must provide for a procedure to recognize a different gender. The applicant had tried to change their gender but North-Macedonia did not offer

any possibility to undergo an operation or to have medical treatment in that regard.
The applicant then went abroad for treatment. Back in North-Macedonia, he had his name changed but it was not possible to change his officially registered gender.
The applicant claimed that this amounted to a violation of Article 8 ECHR and specially referred to the obligation of the state to respect a person's physical and psychological integrity. The Court found that there was indeed a violation. What is as yet unclear, and is thus an interesting point for reflection, is whether states are under an obligation to provide for a procedure for the recognition of a change of gender without the person having had an operation.

The author would like to thank ERA for the excellent organization of the conference and for the interesting range of topics discussed.

Same-sex parentage and surrogacy and their practical implications in Poland

Written by Anna Wysocka-Bar, Senior Lecturer at Jagiellonian University (Poland)

On 2 December 2019 Supreme Administrative Court of Poland (*Naczelny S?d Administracyjny*) adopted a resolution of seven judges (signature: II OPS 1/19), in which it stated that it is not possible – due to public policy – to transcribe into the domestic register of civil status a foreign birth certificate indicating two persons of the same sex as parents. The Ombudsman joined arguing that the refusal of transcription infringes the child's right to nationality and identity, and as a result may lead to infringement of the right to protection of health, the right to education, the right to personal security and the right to free movement and

choice of place of residence. Interestingly, the Ombudsman for Children and public prosecutor suggested non-transcription. The background of the case concerns a child whose birth certificate indicated two women of Polish nationality as parents, a biological mother and her partner to a *de facto* union. Parents applied for such transcription in order to apply subsequently for the issuance of the passport for the child.

The Supreme Administrative Court stated that in accordance with the law on civil status register, the transcription must be refused if contrary to *ordre public* in Poland. The public policy clause protects the domestic legal order against its violation. Such violation would result from the "recognition" of a birth certificate irreconcilable with fundamental principles of public policy. It was underlined that in accordance with Article 18 of the Constitution of Poland marriage is understood as a union between a man and a woman; family, motherhood and parenthood are under protection and guardianship of the State. In accordance with those principles and the whole system of family law, only one mother and one father might be treated as parents of a child. Any other category of "parent" is unknown. The Court underlined, at the same time, that transcription of the birth certificate into the domestic register should not be indispensable for a child to obtain a passport, as the child has, by operation of law, already acquired Polish nationality as inherited from the mother. However, in practical terms this would require challenging administrative authorities' approach (requesting domestic birth certificate) in another court procedure.

It should be explained here that the resolution was taken on the request of the panel of judges of the Supreme Administrative Court reviewing the cassation appeal brought by the parents, and therefore, in this particular case is binding. In other, similar cases panels of judges should, in general, follow the standpoint presented in such resolution. If the panel of judges is of a different view, it should request another resolution, instead of presenting a view contrary to the previous one. As a result, it might happen that there are two resolutions of seven judges presenting different views. Given the above, it can be said that the question of transcription is not as definitively answered as might seem at first glance.

A similar justification based on the public policy clause in conjunction with Article 18 of the Constitution has already been presented before in other cases, for example one concerning children born in the US out of surrogacy arrangements with a married woman, whose birth certificates indicated two men as parents, a

(biological) father and his partner (identical judgments of 6 May 2015, signature: II OSK 2372/13 and II OSK 2419/13). The implications of these judgments were quite different as the Court refused to confirm that children acquired Polish nationality by birth from their father. In the eyes of the Court and according to fundamental principles of Polish family law, children born out of surrogacy (which is not regulated in Poland) by operation of law have filiation links only with the (biological, surrogate) mother and her husband. The paternity of the biological father (only) might be (at least theoretically) established, once the paternity of the surrogate mother's husband is successfully disavowed in a court proceeding.

Here it should be added that opposite views were presented by the Supreme Administrative Court in other judgments. One of the cases concerned transcription of the birth certificate of a child born in India out of surrogacy arrangement. Such birth certificate indicates only the father (in this case a biological father) and do not contain any information about the (surrogate) mother. This was perceived as contrary to public policy by the administrative authorities, which underlined that in the Polish legal order establishing paternity is always dependent on the establishment of maternity. As a result, the lack of information about the mother raises doubts as to paternity of the man indicated on the birth certificate as father. Interestingly, based on the same birth certificate the acquisition of Polish nationality of the child was earlier confirmed by administrative authorities. In its judgment of 29 August 2018 (signature: II OSK 2129/16), Supreme Administrative Court criticized the way the public policy clause was so far understood. The Court (which hears the case after the refusal of administrative authorities of two instances and administrative court of the first instance – just as in all of the mentioned cases) underlined that this clause must be interpreted having regard to a broader context of the legal issue at hand, in particular it should take into account constitutional values (always prevailing best interest of a child) and international standards on protection of children's rights and human rights. This allows for the transcription of the birth certificate into civil status records in Poland.

Another interesting case concerned again the question of confirmation that the children acquired Polish nationality by birth after their father (four identical judgments of 30 October 2018, signatures: II OSK 1868/16, II OSK 1869/16, II OSK 1870/16, II OSK 1871/16). Four girls were born in US through surrogacy. The US birth certificates indicated two men as parents, one of them

being a Polish national. The Supreme Administrative Court underlined that for the legal status of a child, including the possibility of confirming acquisition of Polish nationality, it should not matter that the child was born to a surrogate mother. What should matter is that a human being with inherent and inalienable dignity was born and this human being has a right to Polish nationality, as long as one of the parents is a Polish national.

The above mentioned cases, where the Supreme Administrative Court presented a conservative approach and approved the refusal of the confirmation that children born out of surrogacy acquired Polish nationality by birth is now pending before European Court of Human Rights (Schlittner-Hay v. Poland). The applications raise violation by Poland of Article 8 (respect for private and family life) and Article 14 (discrimination on grounds of parents' sexual orientation) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

This shows that practical implications for children to same-sex parents and from surrogacy arrangements are of growing interest and importance also in Poland. The approaches of domestic authorities and courts seems to be evolving, but are still quite divergent. The view on the issue from the European Court of Human Rights is awaited.

A never-ending conflict: News from France on the legal parentage of children born trough surrogacy arrangements.

As reported previously, the ECtHR was asked by the French *Cour de cassation* for an advisory opinion on the legal parentage of children born through surrogacy arrangement. In its answer, the Court considered that the right to respect for private life (article 8 of ECHR) requires States parties to provide a possibility of recognition of the child's legal relationship with the intended mother. However,

according to the Court, a State is not required, in order to achieve such recognition, to register the child's birth certificate in its civil status registers. It also declared that adoption can serve as a means of recognizing the parent-child relationship.

The ECtHR's opinion thus confirms the position reached by French courts: the *Cour de cassation* accepted to transcribe the birth certificate only when the intended father was also the biological father. Meanwhile, the non-biological parent could adopt the child (See for a confirmation ECtHR, C and E v. France, 12/12/2019 Application n°1462/18 and n°17348/18).

The ECtHR advisory opinion was requested during the trial for a review of a final decision in the *Mennesson* case. Although it is not compulsory, the *Cour de cassation* has chosen to comply with its recommendations (Ass. plén. 4 oct. 2019, n°10-19053). Referring to the advisory opinion, the court acknowledged that it had an obligation to provide a possibility to recognize the legal parent-child relationship with respect to the intended mother. According to the *Cour de cassation*, the mere fact that the child was born of a surrogate mother abroad did not in itself justify the refusal to recognize the filiation with the intended mother mentioned in the child's birth certificate.

When it comes to the mean by which this recognition has be accomplished, the *Cour de cassation* recalled that the ECtHR said that the choice fell within the State's margin of appreciation. Referring to the different means provided under French law to establish filiation, the Court considered that preference should be given to the means that allow the judge to exercise some control over the validity of the legal situation established abroad and to pay attention to the particular situation of the child. In its opinion, adoption is the most suitable way.

However,
considering the specific situation of the Mennesson twins who had been involved in legal proceedings for over fifteen years, the Court admitted that neither an adoption nor an apparent status procedure were appropriate as both involve a judicial procedure that would take time. This would prolong the twins' legal uncertainty regarding their identity and, as a consequence, infringe their right to respect for private life protected by article 8 ECHR. In this particular case, this would not comply with the conditions set by the ECtHR in its advisory opinion: "the procedure laid down by the domestic law to ensure

that those means could be implemented promptly and effectively, in accordance with the child's best interest".

As a result and given the specific circumstances of the Mennessons' situation, the *Cour de cassation* decided that the best means to comply with its obligation to recognize the legal relationship between the child and the intended mother was to transcribe the foreign birth certificate for both parents.

The *Cour de cassation's* decision of October 2019 is not only the final act of the *Mennesson* case, but it also sets a *modus operandi* for future proceedings regarding legal parentage of children born trough surrogate arrangements: when it comes to the relation between the child and the intended mother, adoption is the most suitable means provided under domestic French law to establish filiation. When such an adoption is neither possible nor appropriate to the situation, judges resort to transcribing the foreign birth certificate mentioning the intended mother. Thus, adoption appears as the principle and transcription as the exception.

Oddly enough, the Court then took the first chance it got to reverse its solution and choose not to follow its own *modus operandi.*

By two decisions rendered on December 18th 2019 (Cass. Civ. 1ère, 18 déc. 2019, n°18-11815 and 18-12327), *the Cour de cassation* decided that the intended non-biological father must have its legal relationship with the child recognized too. However, it did not resort to adoption as a suitable means of establishing the legal relationship with the intended parent. Instead, the court held that the foreign birth certificate had to be transcribed for both parents, while no references were made to special circumstances which would have justified resorting to a transcription instead of an adoption or another means of establishing filiation.

The Court used a similar motivation to the one used in 2015 for the transcription of the birth certificate when the intended father is also the biological father. It

considered that neither the fact that the child was born from a surrogate mother nor that the birth certificate established abroad mentioned a man as the intended father were obstacles to the transcription of the birth certificate as long that they complied with the admissibility conditions of article 47 of the Civil Code.

But
while in 2015 the Court referred to the fact that the certificate "did not contain facts that did not correspond to reality", which was one of the requirements of article 47, in 2019 this condition is no longer required.

Thus,
it seems that the *Cour de cassation* is no longer reluctant to allow the full transcription of the foreign birth certificate of children born of surrogate arrangements. After years of constant refusal to transcribe the birth certificate for the non-biological parent, and just a few months after the ECtHR advisory opinion accepting adoption as a suitable means to legally recognize the parent-child relationship, this change of view was unexpected.

However,
by applying the same treatment to both intended parents, biological and non-biological,
this reversal of solution put into the spotlight the publicity function of the transcription into the French civil status register. As the *Cour de cassation* emphasized, a claim for the transcription of a birth certificate is different from a claim for the recognition or establishment of filiation. The transcription does not prevent later proceedings directed against the child-parent
relationship.

But

the end is still not near! On January 24th,
during the examination of the highly sensitive Law of Bioethics, the *Sénat* (the French Parliament's upper house) adopted an article prohibiting the full transcription
of the foreign birth certificates of children born trough surrogate arrangements. This provision is directly meant to "break" the *Cour de cassation's*

solution of December 18th 2019. The article will be discussed in

front of the *Assemblée nationale*, the lower house, and the outcome of the final vote is uncertain.

The conflict over the legal parentage of children born trough surrogate arrangements is not over yet. To be continued…

The SHAPE v Supreme Litigation: The Interaction of Public and Private International Law Jurisdictional Rules

Written by Dr Rishi Gulati, Barrister, Victorian Bar, Australia; LSE Fellow in Law, London School of Economics

The interaction between public and private international law is becoming more and more manifest. There is no better example of this interaction than the Shape v Supreme litigation ongoing before Dutch courts, with the most recent decision in this dispute rendered in December 2019 in *Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe ("SHAPE") et al v Supreme Site Service GmbH et al (Supreme)*, COURT OF APPEAL OF 's-HERTOGENBOSCH, Case No. 200/216/570/01, Ruling of 10 December 2019 (the 'CoA Decision'). I first provide a summary of the relevant facts. Second, a brief outline of the current status of the litigation is provided. Third, I make some observations on how public and private international law interact in this dispute.

1 Background to the litigation

In 2015, the Supreme group of entities (a private actor) brought proceedings (the 'Main Proceedings') against two entities belonging to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation ('NATO') (a public international organisation) before a Dutch district

court for alleged non-payments under certain contracts entered into between the parties for the supply of fuel (CoA Decision, para 6.1.12). The NATO entities against whom the claims were brought in question were Shape (headquartered in Belgium) and Allied Joint Force Command Headquarters Brunssum (JFCB) (having its registered office in the Netherlands). JFCB was acting on behalf of Shape and concluded certain contracts (called BOAs) with Supreme regarding the supply of fuel to SHAPE for NATO's mission in Afghanistan carried out for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) created pursuant to a Chapter VII Security Council Resolution following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States (CoA Decision, para 6.1.8). While the payment for the fuels supplied by Supreme on the basis of the BOAs was made subsequently by the individual states involved in the operations in Afghanistan, 'JFCB itself also purchased from Supreme. JFCB paid Supreme from a joint NATO budget. The prices of fuel were variable. Monitoring by JFCB took place…' (CoA Decision, para 6.1.9. The applicable law of the BOAs was Dutch law but no choice of forum clause was included (CoA Decision, para 6.1.9). There was no provision for arbitration made in the BoAs (CoA Decision, para 6.1.14.1). However, pursuant to a later Escrow Agreement concluded between the parties, upon the expiry of the BoAs, Supreme could submit any residual claim it had on the basis of the BOAs to a mechanism known as the Release of Funds Working Group ('RFWG'). Pursuant to that agreement, an escro account was also created in Belgium. The RFWG comprises of persons affiliated with JFCB and SHAPE, in other words, NATO's representatives (CoA Decision, para 6.1.10). Supreme invoked the jurisdiction of Dutch courts for alleged non-payment under the BOAs. The NATO entities asserted immunities based on their status as international organisations ('IOs') and succeeded before the CoA meaning that the merits of Supreme's claims has not been tested before an independent arbiter yet (more on this at 2).

In a second procedure, presumably to protect its interests, Supreme also levied an interim garnishee order targeting Shape's escrow account in Belgium (the 'Attachment Proceedings') against which Shape appealed (see here for a comment on this issue). The Attachment Proceedings are presently before the Dutch Supreme Court where Shape argued amongst other things, that Dutch courts did not possess the jurisdiction to determine the Attachment Proceedings asserting immunities from execution as an IO (see an automated translation of the Supreme Court's decision here (of course, no guarantees of accuracy of translation can be made)). The Dutch Supreme Court made a reference for a preliminary ruling to

the European Court of Justice ('CJEU') (case C-186/19). It is this case where questions of European private international law have become immediately relevant. Amongst other issues referred, the threshold question before the CJEU is:

> *Must Regulation (EU) No 1215/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2012 on jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters (recast) (OJ 2012 L 351, p. 1 [Brussels Recast] be interpreted as meaning that a matter such as that at issue in the present case, in which an international organisation brings an action to (i) lift an interim garnishee order levied in another Member State by the opposing party, and (ii) prohibit the opposing party from levying, on the same grounds, an interim garnishee order in the future and from basing those actions on immunity of execution, must be wholly or partially considered to be a civil or commercial matter as referred to in Article 1(1) of the Brussels I Regulation (recast)?*

Whether the claims pertinent to the Attachment Proceedings constitute civil and commercial matters within the meaning of Article 1 of the Brussels Recast is a question of much importance. If it cannot be characterised as civil and commercial, then the Brussels regime cannot be applied and civil jurisdiction will not exist. If jurisdiction under the Brussels Recast does not exist, then questions of IO immunities from enforcement become irrelevant at least in an EU member state. The CJEU has not yet ruled on this reference.

2 The outcome so far

Thus far, the dispute has focused on questions of jurisdiction and IO immunities. These issues arise in somewhat different senses in both sets of proceedings.

The Main Proceedings

Shape and JFCB argue that Dutch courts lack the jurisdiction in public international law to determine the claims brought by Supreme as NATO possesses immunities given its status as an IO (CoA Decision, para 6.1.13). The rules and problems with the law on IO immunities have been much discussed, including by this author in this very forum. Two things need noting. First, in theory at least, the immunities of IOs such as NATO are delimited by the concept of

'functionalism' – IOs can only possess those immunities that are necessary to protect its functional independence. And second, if an IO does not provide for a 'reasonable alternative means' of dispute resolution, then national courts can breach IO immunities to ensure access to justice. According to the district court, as the NATO entities had not provided a reasonable alternative means of dispute resolution to Supreme, the former's immunities could be breached. The CoA summarised the district court's decision on this point as follows (CoA Decision, para 6.1.14):

> *[T]he lack of a dispute settlement mechanism in the BOAs, while a petition to the International Chamber of Commerce was agreed in a similar BOA agreed with another supplier, makes the claim of an impermissible violation of the right to a fair trial justified. The above applies unless it must be ruled that the alternatives available to Supreme comply with the standard in the Waite and Kennedy judgments: there must be "reasonable means to protest effectively rights". The District Court concludes that on the basis of the arguments put forward by the parties and on the basis of the documents submitted, it cannot be ruled that a reasonable alternative judicial process is available.*

The CoA disagreed with the district court. It said that this was not the type of case where Shape and JFCB's immunities could be breached even if there was a complete lack of a 'reasonable alternative means' available to Supreme (CoA Decision, para 6.7.8 and 6.7.9.1). This aspect of the CoA's Decision was made possible because of the convoluted jurisprudence of the European Court of Human rights where that court has failed to provide precise guidance as to when exactly IO immunities can be breached for the lack of a 'reasonable alternative means', thereby giving national courts considerable leeway. The CoA went on to further find that in any event, Supreme had alternative remedies: it could bring suit against the individual states part of the ISAF action to recover its alleged outstanding payments (CoA Decision, para 6.8.1); and could have recourse to the RFWG (CoA Decision, para 6.8.4). This can hardly be said to constitute a 'reasonable alternative means' for Supreme would have to raise claims before the courts of multiple states in question creating a risk of parallel and inconsistent judgments; the claims against a key defendant (the NATO entities) remain unaddressed; and the RFWG comprises representatives of the defendant completely lacking in objective independence. Perhaps the CoA's decision was driven by the fact that Supreme is a sophisticated commercial party who had

voluntarily entered into the BOAs where the standards of a fair trial in the circumstances can be arguably less exacting (CoA Decision, para 6.8.3).

On the scope of Shape's and JFCB's functional immunities, the CoA said that 'if immunity is claimed by SHAPE and JFCB in respect of (their) official activities, that immunity must be granted to them in absolute terms' (CoA Decision, para 6.7.9.1). It went on to find:

> *The purchase of fuels in relation to the ISAF activities, to be supplied in the relevant area of operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, is directly related to the fulfilment of the task of SHAPE and JFCB within the framework of ISAF, so full functional immunity exists. The fact that Supreme had and has a commercial contract does not change the context of the supplies. The same applies to the position that individual countries could not invoke immunity from jurisdiction in the context of purchasing fuel. What's more, even if individual countries – as the Court of Appeal understands for the time being before their own national courts – could not invoke immunity, this does not prevent the adoption of immunity from jurisdiction by SHAPE and JFCB as international organisations that, in concrete terms, are carrying out an operation on the basis of a resolution of the United Nations Security Council CoA Decision, para 6.7.9.2).*

Acknowledging that determining the scope of an IO's functional immunity is no easy task, the CoA's reasoning is somewhat surprising. The dispute at hand is a contractual dispute pertaining to alleged non-payment under the BOAs. One may ask the question as to why a classical commercial transaction should attract functional immunity? Indeed, other IOs (international financial institutions) have included express waiver provisions in their treaty arrangements where no immunities exist in respect of business relationships between an IO and third parties (see comments on the Jam v IFC litigation ongoing in United States courts by this author here). While NATO is not a financial institution, it should nevertheless be closely inquired as to why NATO should possess immunities in respect of purely commercial contracts it enters into. This is especially the case as the CoA found that the NATO entities in question did not possess any treaty based immunities (CoA Decision, para 6.6.7), and upheld its functional immunities based on customary international law only (CoA Decision, para 6.7.1), a highly contested issue (see M Wood, 'Do International Organizations Enjoy Immunity

Under Customary International Law?' (2013) 10 IOLR 2). It is likely that the CoA Decision would be appealed to the Dutch Supreme Court and any further analysis must await a final outcome.

The Attachment Proceedings

The threshold question in the Attachment Proceedings is whether Dutch courts possess civil jurisdiction under the Brussels Recast to determine the issues in that particular case. If the claim is not considered civil and commercial within the meaning of Article 1 of the Brussels Recast, then no jurisdiction exists under the rules of private international law and the claim comes to an end, with the issue of immunities against enforcement raised by the NATO entities becoming superfluous. This is because if a power to adjudicate does not exist, then the question on the limitations to its exercise due to any immunities obviously becomes irrelevant. Perhaps more crucially, after the CoA Decision, the ongoing relevance of the Attachment Proceedings has been questioned. As has been noted here:

> *At the public hearing in C-186/19 held in Luxembourg on 12 December, the CJEU could not hide its surprise when told by the parties that the Dutch Appellate Court had granted immunity of jurisdiction to Shape and JCFB. The judges and AG wondered whether a reply to the preliminary reference would still be of any use. One should take into account that the main point at the hearing was whether the "civil or commercial" nature of the proceedings for interim measures should be assessed in the light of the proceedings on the merits (to which interim measures are ancillary, or whether the analysis should solely address the interim relief measures themselves.*

Given that a Supreme Court appeal may still be filed in the Main Proceeding potentially reversing the CoA Decision, the CJEU's preliminary ruling could still be of practical relevance. In any event, in light of the conceptual importance of the central question regarding the scope of the Brussels Recast being considered in the Attachment Proceeding, any future preliminary ruling by the CJEU is of much significance for European private international law. Summarising the CJEU's approach to the question at hand, the Dutch Supreme Court said:

> *The concept of civil and commercial matters is an autonomous concept of European Union law, which must be interpreted in the light of the purpose and*

> *system of the Brussels I-bis Regulation and the general principles arising from the national legal systems of the Member States. In order to determine whether a case is a civil or commercial matter, the nature of the legal relationship between the parties to the dispute or the subject of the dispute must be examined. Disputes between a public authority and a person governed by private law may also fall under the concept of civil and commercial matters, but this is not the case when the public authority acts in the exercise of public authority. In order to determine whether the latter is the case, the basis of the claim brought and the rules for enforcing that claim must be examined. For the above, see, inter alia, ECJ 12 September 2013, Case C-49/12, ECLI: EU: C: 2013: 545 (Sunico), points 33-35, ECJ 23 October 2014, Case C ? 302/13, ECLI: EU: C: 2014: 2319 (flyLal), points 26 and 30, and CJEU 9 March 2017, case C-551/15, ECLI: EU: C: 2017: 193 (Pula Parking), points 33-34 (see the automated translation of the Supreme Court's decision cited earlier, para 4.2.1).*

There is not the space here to explore the case law mentioned above in any detail. Briefly, if the litigation was taken as a whole with the analysis taking into account the nature of the Main Proceedings as informing the characterisation of the Attachment Proceedings , there would be a close interaction between the scope of functional immunity and the concept of civil and commercial. If an excessively broad view of functional immunity is taken (as the CoA has done), then it becomes more likely that the matter will not be considered civil and commercial for the purposes of the Brussels system as the relevant claim/s can said to arise from the exercise of public authority by the defendants. However, as I said earlier, it is somewhat puzzling as to why the CoA decided to uphold the immunity of the defendants in respect of a purely commercial claim.

However, it is worth noting that in some earlier cases, while the CJEU seem to take a relatively narrow approach to the scope of the Brussels system (CJEU Case C-29/76, *Eurocontrol*). More recent case law has taken a broader view. For example, in *Pula Parking*, para. 39, the CJEU said 'Article 1(1) of Regulation No 1215/2012 must be interpreted as meaning that enforcement proceedings brought by a company owned by a local authority…for the purposes of recovering an unpaid debt for parking in a public car park the operation of which has been delegated to that company by that authority, which are not in any way punitive but merely constitute consideration for a service provided, fall within the scope of

that regulation'. If the true nature and subject of Supreme's claims are considered, it is difficult to see how they can constitute anything but civil and commercial within the meaning of the Brussels system in light of recent case law, with the issue of IO immunities a distraction from the real issues. It will be interesting to see if the CJEU consolidates its recent jurisprudence or prefers to take a narrower approach.

3 The interaction between public and private international law?

In the Main Proceedings, in so far as civil jurisdiction is concerned, already, the applicable law to the BOAs is Dutch law and Dutch national courts are perfectly suited to take jurisdiction over the underlying substantive dispute given the prevailing connecting factors. As the CoA determined that the NATO entities tacitly accepted the jurisdiction of the Dutch courts the existence of civil jurisdiction does not seem to be at issue (CoA Decision, para 6.5.3.4). Clearly, in a private international law sense, Dutch courts are manifestly the suitable forum to determine this claim.

However, on its face, the norms on IO immunities and access to justice require balancing (being issues relevant to both public and private international law). As the district court found, if an independent mechanism to resolve a purely commercial dispute (such as an arbitration) is not offered to the claimant, IO immunities can give way to ensure access to justice. Indeed, developments in general international law require the adoption of a reinvigorated notion of jurisdiction where access to justice concerns should militate towards the exercise of jurisdiction where not doing so would result in a denial of justice. Mills has said:

> *The effect of the development of principles of access to justice in international law also has implications when it comes to prohibitive rules on jurisdiction in the form of the immunities recognised in international law…Traditionally these immunities have been understood as 'minimal' standards for when a state may not assert jurisdiction — because the exercise of jurisdiction was understood to be a discretionary matter of state right, there was no reason why a state might not give more immunity than required under the rules of international law. The development of principles of access to justice, however, requires a state to exercise its jurisdictional powers, and perhaps to expand those jurisdictional powers as a matter of domestic law to encompass internationally permitted*

> *grounds for jurisdiction, or even to go beyond traditional territorial or nationality-based jurisdiction (A Mills, 'Rethinking Jurisdiction in International Law' (2014) British Yearbook of International Law, p. 219).*

The Main Proceedings provide an ideal case where civil jurisdiction under private international law should latch on to public international law developments that encourage the exercise of national jurisdiction to ensure access to justice. Not only private international law should be informed by public international law developments, the latter can benefit from private international law as well. I have argued elsewhere that private international law techniques are perfectly capable of slicing regulatory authority with precision so that different values (IO independence v access to justice) can both be protected and maintained at the same time (see here). Similarly, in the Attachment Proceedings, a reinvigorated notion of adjudicative jurisdiction also demands that the private and public properly inform each other. Here, it is of importance that the mere identity of the defendant as an international public authority or the mere invocation of the pursuit of public goals (such as military action) does not detract from properly characterising the nature of a claim as civil and commercial. More specifically, any ancillary proceeding to protect a party's rights where the underlying dispute is purely of a commercial nature ought to constitute a civil and commercial matter within the meaning of the Brussels system. Once civil jurisdiction in a private international law sense exists, then any immunities from enforcement asserted under public international law ought to give way to ensure that the judicial process cannot be frustrated by lack of enforcement at the end. It remains to be seen what approach the CJEU takes to these significant and difficult questions where the public and private converge.

To conclude, only a decision on the merits after a full consideration of the evidence can help determine whether Supreme's (which itself is accused of fraud) claims against Shape et al can be in fact substantiated. In the absence of an alternative remedy offered by the NATO entities, if the Dutch courts do not exercise jurisdiction, we may never know whether its claims are in fact meritorious.

ERA Seminar on ‘Recent ECtHR Case Law in Family Matters’ – Strasbourg 13-14 February 2020

On 13-14 February 2020, ERA (Academy of European Law) will host a Seminar in Strasbourg to present the major judgments related to family matters issued by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in 2019. The focus of the presentations will be mainly on:

- Children in European migration law
- Parental rights, pre-adoption foster care and adoption
- Parental child abduction
- Reproductive rights and surrogacy
- LGBTQI rights and gender identity

The Seminar, organised by Dr Angelika Fuchs, will provide participants with a detailed understanding of this recent jurisprudence. The focus will be placed, in particular, on Article 8 ECHR (respect for private and family life) and the analysis of the case law of the ECtHR will tackle the legal implications but it will also extend to social, emotional and biological factors.

The opening speech will be given by Ksenija Turkovi?, Judge at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

More information on the event and on registration is available here.

This event is organised with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union

Mutual Trust v Public Policy : 1-0

In a case concerning the declaration of enforceability of a UK costs order, the Supreme Court of the Hellenic Republic decided that the 'excessive' nature of the sum (compared to the subject matter of the dispute) does not run contrary to public policy. This judgment signals a clear-cut shift from the previous course followed both by the Supreme and instance courts. The decisive factor was the principle of mutual trust within the EU. The calibre of the judgment raises the question, whether courts will follow suit in cases falling outside the ambit of EU law.

[Areios Pagos, Nr. 579/2019, unreported]

THE FACTS

The claimant is a Greek entrepreneur in the field of mutual funds and investment portfolio management. His company is registered at the London Stock Exchange. The defendant is a well known Greek journalist. On December 9, 2012, a report bearing her name was published in the digital version of an Athens newspaper, containing defamatory statements against the claimant. The claimant sued for damages before the High Court of Justice, Queens Bench Division. Although properly served, the respondent did not appear in the proceedings. The court allowed the claim and assigned a judge with the issuance of an order, specifying the sum of the damages and costs. The judge ordered the default party to pay the amount of 40.000 ? for damages, and 76.290,86 ? for costs awarded on indemnity basis. The defendant did not appeal.

The UK order was declared enforceable in Greece [Athens CFI 1204/2015, unreported]. The judgment debtor appealed successfully: The Athens CoA ruled that the amount to be paid falls under the category of ‚excessive' costs orders, which are disproportionate to the subject matter value in accordance with domestic perceptions and legal provisions. Therefore, the enforcement of the UK order would be unbearable for public policy reasons [Athens CoA 1228/2017, unreported]. The judgment creditor lodged an appeal on points of law before the Supreme Court.

THE RULING

The Supreme Court was called to examine whether the Athens CoA interpreted properly the pertinent provisions of the Brussels I Regulation (which was the applicable regime in the case at hand), i.e. Article 45 in conjunction with Art. 34 point 1. The SC began its analysis by an extensive reference to judgments of the CJEU, combined with recital 16 of the Brussels I Regulation, which encapsulates the Mutual Trust principle. In particular, it mentioned the judgments in the following cases: C-7/98, Krombach, Recital 36; C-38/98, Renault, Recital 29; C-302/13, flyLAL-Lithuanian Airs, Recital 45-49; C-420/07, Orams, Recital 55), and C-681/13, Diageo, Recital 44. It then embarked on a scrutiny of the public policy clause, in which the following aspects were highlighted:

- The spirit of public policy should not be guided by domestic views; the values of European Civil Procedure, i.e. predominantly the European integration, have to be taken into consideration, even if this would mean downsizing domestic interests and values. Hence, the court of the second state may not deny recognition and enforcement on the grounds of perceptions which run contrary to the European perspective.
- The gravity of the impact in the domestic legal order should be of such a degree, which would lead to a retreat from the basic principle of mutual recognition.
- Serious financial repercussions invoked by the defendant may not give rise to sustain the public policy defense.
- In principle, a foreign costs order is recognized as long as it does not function as a camouflaged award of punitive damages. In this context, the second court may not examine whether the foreign costs order is ‘excessive’ or not. The latter is leading to a review to its substance.
- The proportionality principle should be interpreted in a twofold fashion: It is true that high costs may hinder effective access to Justice according to Article 6.1 ECHR and Article 20 of the Greek Constitution. However, on an equal footing, the non-compensation of the costs paid by the claimant in the foreign proceedings leads to exactly the same consequence.
- In conclusion, the proper interpretation of Article 34 point 1 of the Brussels I Regulation should lead to a disengagement of domestic perceptions on costs from the public policy clause. Put differently, the Greek provisions on costs do not form part of the core values of the

domestic legislator.

In light of the above remarks, the SC reversed the appellate ruling. The fact that the proportionate costs under the Greek Statutes of Lawyer's fees would lead to a totally different and significantly lower amount (2.400 in stead of 76.290,86 ?) is not relevant or decisive in the case at hand. The proper issue to be examined is whether the costs ordered were necessary for the proper conduct and participation in the proceedings, and also whether the calculation of costs had taken place in accordance with the law and the evidence produced. Applying the proportionality principle in the way exercised by the Athens CoA amounts to a re-examination on the merits, which is totally unacceptable in the field of application of the Brussels I Regulation.

COMMENTS

As mentioned in the introduction, the ruling of the SC departs from the line followed so far, which led to a series of judgments denying recognition and enforcement of foreign (mostly UK) orders and arbitral awards [in detail see my commentary published earlier in our blog, and my article: Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Judgments in Greece under the Brussels I-*bis* Regulation, in Yearbook of Private International Law, Volume 16 (2014/2015), pp. 349 et seq]. The decision will be surely hailed by UK academics and practitioners, because it grants green light to the enforcement of judgments and orders issued in this jurisdiction.

The ruling applies however exclusively within the ambit of the Brussels I Regulation. It remains to be seen whether Greek courts will follow the same course in cases not falling under the Regulation's scope, e.g. arbitral awards, third country judgments, or even UK judgments and orders, whenever Brexit becomes reality.