Belgium Requests an opinion on Investment Court System in CETA

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Published in:
ELNI Review

Citation for published version (APA):
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Belgium Requests an Opinion on Investment Court System in CETA

Laurens Ankersmit

1 Introduction

On 29 of October the leaders of the Belgian federal government and the regional and community governments reached a compromise deal over the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). One of the key outcomes is that the Belgian federal government will seek the Opinion of the European Court of Justice on the compatibility of the Investment Court System (ICS) in Chapter Eight of CETA with the EU Treaties. As soon as the Belgian federal government makes the request for an Opinion, the Court will be able to express itself on this contentious legal issue. This article provides some background on the origins of the Walloon request before explaining why ICS could potentially pose a legal problem for the EU.

2 Wallonia’s longstanding resistance against CETA and the resolution of 25 April of 2016

To insiders, the resistance put up by Wallonia in particular should have been no surprise. Over the past few years, the Walloon and Brussels parliaments have had extensive debates on the merits of CETA and have been increasingly critical of the deal. One of the main and more principled cause for opposition was the inclusion of ICS in CETA, a judicial mechanism that allows foreign investors to sue governments over a breach of investor rights contained in the agreement.

In the Parliament of Wallonia this resulted in the adoption of a resolution on the 25th of April 2016 (6 months before the compromise deal mentioned above) listing the key concerns Wallonia has about CETA. In that resolution the very first request by the Walloon parliament: “de solliciter l’avis de la Cour de justice européenne (CJE) sur la compatibilité de l’accord avec les Traités européens sur la base de l’article 218 (11) du TFUE pour éviter qu’un accord incompatible avec les Traités européens soit conclu et de ne pas procéder à la ratification de cet accord tant que la CJE ne s’est pas prononcée”

In other words, the Walloon Parliament wanted to know whether ICS is compatible with the EU Treaties, and asked the Belgian federal government to make use of the procedure of Article 218 (11) TFEU to request the CJE’s opinion on the issue. In the words of the Court, that procedure “has the aim of forestalling complications which would result from legal disputes concerning the compatibility with the Treaties of international agreements binding upon the European Union”. In particular, the advantage of the procedure is to avoid “serious difficulties” for both the EU internally and for third parties that would result from a successful challenge of the agreement after its entry into force.

Wallonia could not make this request itself, as this power is reserved for the federal level of the Belgian Government. However, Belgium is in many ways a ‘little Europe’, as its regional governments need to authorize federal action at the international level in a number of fields, including trade. As a result, Wallonia had to broker a deal with the federal government of Belgium in exchange for authorising Belgium’s signature on CETA.

3 Is ICS compatible with the Treaties?

The Walloon request did not come out of the blue. The issue of the compatibility of Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) and ICS (a form of ISDS) with the Treaties has been contentious among EU law insiders for a while. Recently, 101 law professors objected to ICS in an open letter because ICS is “in strong tension with the rule of law and democratic principles enshrined in national constitutions and European law. Additionally, ICS is likely to affect the autonomy of the European Union’s legal order, as the investment tribunals’ binding and enforceable decisions on state liability threaten the effective and uniform application of EU law”.

An increasing number of academic contributions have also raised this issue. Moreover, the European Asso-

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* An earlier version of this article appeared on the European Law Blog and on Investment Treaty News.
3 Opinion 1/09, the European and Community Patents Court EU:C:2011:123, para. 47.
The legal service of the European Commission has itself been busy fighting intra-EU bilateral investment treaties containing ISDS. In addition to a number of ongoing infringement proceedings, the legal service also wrote several amicus curiae briefs contesting the jurisdiction of the investment tribunals. Within the EU institutions and bodies, the compatibility of ISDS/ICS has clearly also been an issue. The European Parliament in its TTIP Resolution of 8 July 2015 called upon the Commission to ensure that the “jurisdiction of courts of the EU and of the Member States is respected”. In a praiseworthy feat of transparency, the opinion of the Legal Service of the European Parliament on the issue of compatibility was published this summer.

The European Economic and Social Committee in an Opinion adopted on 27 May 2015 also stated that “[there] are considerable EU treaty-related and constitutional law concerns regarding the relations of ISDS ruling with the EU legal order. Private arbitration courts have the capacity to make rulings which do not comply with EU law or infringe the CFR [Charter of Fundamental Rights]. For this reason, the EESC feels that it is absolutely vital for compliance of ISDS with EU law to be checked by the ECJ in a formal procedure for requesting an opinion, before the competent institutions reach a decision and before the provisional entry into force of any IIAs [International Investment Agreements], negotiated by the EC.”

So what are the main legal issues when assessing the compatibility of ICS with EU law? It is clear that the Treaties in principle permit international agreements providing for state-to-state dispute settlement between the EU and third countries (such as the WTO’s dispute settlement body). Such state-to-state dispute settlement mechanisms do not encroach on the powers of the ECJ, because TFEU Part Six, Title I, Chapter 1, Section 5 does not grant the EU courts the power to hear such disputes. However, when it comes to claims by individuals involving questions of EU law, the situation is radically different. The preliminary reference procedure in Article 267 TFEU gives the courts of the Member States and the European Court of Justice important powers to resolve such cases. In fact, the ECJ itself refers to this procedure as the “keystone” of the EU’s judicial system. It is perhaps important to recall that Article 267 TFEU was central to the ECJ’s reasoning when it found that the Treaties constituted “a new legal order” that gives individuals, not just the Member States, rights and obligations, and whose uniform interpretation the European Court of Justice oversees.

4. The autonomy of the EU legal order and the preliminary reference procedure as the keystone of Europe’s judicial system


European Parliament resolution of 8 July 2015 containing the European Parliament’s recommendations to the European Commission on the negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) (2014/2228(INI)).


European Economic and Social Committee, ‘Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on investor protection and investor to state
dispute settlement in EU trade and investment agreements with third coun-
tries’ (27 May 2015) (emphasis added).

9  European Parliament resolution of 8 July 2015 containing the European Parliament’s recommendations to the European Commission on the negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) (2014/2228(INI)).

10  European Economic and Social Committee, ‘Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on investor protection and investor to state
The ECJ has made clear in no uncertain terms that it has the exclusive power to give definitive interpretations of EU law and therefore ensure the uniform interpretation of EU law across Europe. However, as a fundamental purpose of ICS in CETA is to enable investors to challenge not only EU acts and decisions based on these acts, but also national acts which might involve EU law somehow, an ICS tribunal would have to interpret and give meaning to EU law. Similarly to the context of human rights law, ICS will therefore encroach on the powers of the EU courts to rule on questions of EU law. Furthermore, ICS in CETA does not require the exhaustion of domestic remedies, which would soften the risk of divergent interpretation as well as respect the powers of the courts of the Member States to hear claims by individuals involving questions of EU law. ICS in CETA also does not require prior involvement of the ECJ for questions of EU law faced by these ICS tribunals.

5 CETA’s safeguards

To be sure, the Commission has implicitly admitted and sought to address this problem in CETA. In contrast to the EU – Singapore Free Trade Agreement (FTA), Article 8.31 (2) of CETA states that its tribunals “may consider” domestic law “as a matter of fact”. The provision continues by stating that in “doing so, the Tribunal shall follow the prevailing interpretation given to the domestic law by the courts or authorities of that Party and any meaning given to domestic law by the Tribunal shall not be binding upon the courts or the authorities of that Party”.

The question is whether these provisions are sufficient. For one, it is hard to see how law can be considered ‘as a matter of fact’ since law is a social construction. This approach is likely derived from international law circles to make international law more acceptable to domestic legal systems. However, as CETA will become an integral part of the EU legal order, this concept will find its way into EU law with potentially problematic consequences. What if the highest courts in the Member States no longer feel required to make preliminary references because they can consider EU law as a matter of fact, as these tribunals are allowed to do?

For another, following the prevailing interpretation given to EU law, it begs the question of what happens if no such interpretation exists. CILFIT makes clear that this is anything but an exceptional situation. In that case, the ECJ found that the highest courts in the Member States may only refrain from the obligation to make a preliminary reference when the “correct application of [EU] law may be so obvious as to leave no scope for any reasonable doubt as to the manner in which the question raised is to be resolved”.

Lastly, one may wonder whether stipulating that the interpretation of domestic law is not binding is sufficient. This is considering the substantial financial consequences of the awards that are themselves binding, and the fact that ICS contains an appeal mechanism, in which the appeal tribunal can further solidify a particular interpretation of EU law.

6 Article 340 TFEU: Suing the European Union

Another problem related to the EU courts powers is that under EU law the EU courts have exclusive jurisdiction to hear and determine actions seeking compensation for damage brought under the second paragraph of Article 340 TFEU, which covers non-contractual liability of the European Union. In other words, when looking to sue the European Union for damages, one must go to the ECJ. ICS in CETA introduces an alternative to such suits for foreign investors, undermining the exclusive nature of the EU courts’ powers in claims for damages. Under EU law a claim for damages is an autonomous remedy, but the ECJ limits its use. In particular, actions for damages are inadmissible if they are used improperly as a disguised action for annulment or action for failure to act. An example would be to use an action for damages to nullify the effects of a measure that has become definitive, such as a fine. It is also very difficult, if not impossible, to claim damages for lawful acts.

Moreover, the Court is very wary of the potential of a ‘regulatory chill if it were to accept damages claims too easily. The Court has held that the “exercise of the legislative function must not be hindered by the prospect of actions for damages whenever the general interest of the Community requires legislative measures to be adopted which may adversely affect individual exists”. https://www.iisd.org/itn/2016/02/29/is-isds-in-

15 Opinion 2/13 Accession to the ECHR EU:C:2014:2454, para. 244-248.
16 Article 9.19 of the EU-Singapore FTA does not contain such clauses. It merely provides that the investment tribunal shall decide whether the treatment that is the subject of the claim is in breach of an obligation under the investment protection section in accordance with the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties.
18 Case 181/73, Haegeman EU:C:1974:41, para. 5.
19 Case 283/81, CILFIT EU:C:1982:335.
20 Ibid, para 16.
22 See also A. Carta, supra note 6, p. 30.
24 Joined cases C-120/06 P and C-121/06 P Fabbrica italiana accumulatori motocarri Montecchio SpA (FIAMM) and others v Council and Commission EU:C:2008:476, paras. 184–169.
25 Ibid., para 174.
but the European Ombudsman partially sided with Intel.  

8 Conclusion

One of the most astounding aspects of this story is that it took the defiance of the Walloons to initiate a preliminary check by the ECJ on the legality of ICS. The Commission could have easily added the question of compatibility of ISDS in the EU-Singapore FTA to its request for an Opinion in Opinion 2/15. That opinion was requested in July 2015, after the ECJ delivered its Opinion 2/13. It was obvious to informed Court watchers at the time that Opinion 2/13 raised serious questions regarding the compatibility of ISDS and ICS with the Treaties. Indeed, it is quite clear based on an access-to-documents request made by ClientEarth that the Commission’s legal service was well aware of the potential negative implications.

Instead of going for a ‘better safe than sorry’ approach (the explicit purpose of the 218 (11) TFEU procedure), the Commission took the political risk of negotiating and concluding an agreement that could potentially be annulled afterwards. That would have not only embarrassed the EU internationally, it could have resulted in serious constitutional law issues, because the EU and its Member States might have faced ICS awards that were internationally binding yet in conflict with EU law (not least because of the CETA Article 30.9 (2) so-called ‘sunset clause’ allowing for claims up to 20 years after termination of the agreement). In that sense, it appears that Wallonia did Europe and its trade partners a huge favour by seeking clarity on this issue before the EU entered into binding commitments in international agreements containing investor-state dispute settlement.

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