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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS CONTENTS

SECTION POLITICAL SCIENCE

1. DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL POLICY IN ELECTION PROGRAMS OF COALITION POLITICAL PARTIES IN SLOVAKIA, doc. PhDr. Mgr. Oľga Bočáková, PhD., PhDr. et Mgr. Andrej Martoš, MBA3
2. DIPLOMATIC SIGNALLING IN FOREIGN POLICY OF SMALL STATES, Mg.Pol.Sc. Maris Cepuritis.....9
3. EUROPEAN UNION SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AND ELECTRICITY SECURITY OF COUNTRIES, Dr. Maria Luskova, Ing. Zdenka Urbancová 15
4. INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN DISASTER RISK REDUCTION, Vladislav Plyushchikov, Vitaly Zhalnin, Prof. Vadim Plyushchikov, Prof. Dmitry Slizovsky, Assoc. Prof. Vladimir Avdotyin.....23
5. ON THE ISSUE OF THE DEFINITION OF THE BEHAVIORAL WAR, PhD. Nataliya Rudolfovna Krasovskaya , Assoc. Prof. PhD. Andrey Anatolevich Gulyaev29
6. RUSSIAN POLITICAL CULTURE: FEATURES OF FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS, PhD student Nataliia Aniskevich , Prof. Nataliia Kasatkina , Prof. Elena Pavlova 35

SECTION LAW

7. ASPECTS REGARDING THE STATE AS THE MAIN SUBJECT OF PUBLIC INTERNATIONAL LAW, Lecturer phd./Postdoctoral researcher Radu Ștefan PĂTRU....45
8. AZTEC CONCEPT OF LAW, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Peter Vyšný 51
9. BREXIT AND NEW EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK IN FAMILY PROPERTY REGIMES, Prof. Dr. Lucia Ruggeri 59

10. CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS: THE EU FRAMEWORK FOR CROSS-BORDER COUPLES AND THE RECENT LEGISLATIVE REFORM IN THE UK, Dr. Roberto Garetto.....	65
11. CRIMINAL LIABILITY IN ITALY IN RELATION TO THE INNOVATIVE INSTRUMENT OF THE DNA DATABASE AND THE DNA TEST. SOME OBSERVATIONS IN RELATION TO THE BOSSETTI CASE, PhD Dr. Elisabetta Galli.....	71
12. DEFINITION AND LEGAL REGIME OF PROTECTION ZONES OF LANDS OF COMMUNICATIONS UNDER THE UKRAINIAN LEGISLATION, Assoc. Prof., PhD Dr. Anzhela Slepchenko, Assoc. Prof., PhD Dr. Tetiana Sharaievska.....	79
13. DISHARMONY IN NON-PROPRIETARY DAMAGE COMPENSATION IN LABOUR AND CIVIL LAW IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, Assis. Prof. Ing. Martina Krügerová, Ph.D., Assis. Prof. Dr Mgr. Michal Kozieł, Ph.D., Assis. Prof. JUDr. Jana Martiníková, Ph.D.....	87
14. ELECTRONIC EVIDENCE CONCEPT (EXPERIENCE OF LATVIA), Assoc. Prof. Dr. iur, Tatjana Jurkevich.....	95
15. GENERAL ASPECTS REGARDING THE ELABORATION OF THE ROMANIAN ENERGY STRATEGY, PhD. BALAN Lidia -Lenuta, PhD. VIJDEA Anca- Marina.....	103
16. GENERAL REFLECTIONS ON SWOT ANALYSIS OF GEOTHERMAL ENERGY LEGISLATION IN ROMANIA, PhD. VIJDEA Anca -Marina, PhD. BALAN Lidia – Lenuta	111
17. INTERNATIONAL TRANSFERS OF PERSONAL DATA, Assoc. Prof. Dr. iur, Tatjana Jurkevich, Mg. iur., PhD student Oļegs Sedjamins	119
18. LEGAL FEATURES OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ARMENIAN REVOLUTION, PhD student Mesrop Tarkhanyan	127
19. LEGAL REGULATION OF THE BORDER BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, Post-doctoral researcher Docent Dr.iur. Artūrs Gaveika.....	133

20. NEUROSCIENCES AND ITALIAN CRIMINAL LAW: IS DIALOGUE POSSIBLE? AND WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS?, PhD Dr. Elisabetta Galli.....	139
21. PROBLEMS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF THE FEDERAL STRUCTURE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, PhD student Nataliia Aniskevich , Prof. Nataliia Kasatkina , Prof. Elena Pavlova	147
22. PUBLIC INTEREST LAWSUITS IN ENVIRONMENTAL CASES IN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, STUDY IN AMENDMENT OF CIVIL AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE LAWS ISSUED IN 2017, Assistant Professor. Dr. Mohamed Abdelnaby Elsayed Ghanem.....	155
23. RATIFICATION OF THE CONVENTIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZATION BY THE STATES OF SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE - AN ANALYSIS, Lecturer phd./Postdoctoral researcher Radu Ștefan PĂTRU, Prof. phd. Florentina Camelia STOICA	161
24. PROPERTY RIGHT ATTRIBUTE BENCHMARKS IN THE ROAD MAP FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE RUSSIAN CIVIL LAW, Prof. Dr. Oleg Alexandrovich Khatuntsev	169
25. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND EQUAL ACCESS TO ENERGY SOURCES. A HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH, Dr. Roberto Garetto	177
26. THE AGEING EUROPE: FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PENSION SYSTEM AFFECTED BY DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES, Assoc. Prof. Sonja Cindori, PhD, Valentino Kuzelj, Student.....	183
27. THE ANALYSIS OF THE PENSION REFORMS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE MIDDLE AND EAST EUROPA, Doc. JUDr. Ing. Milan Hrdý, Ph.D.....	191
28. THE ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING INITIATIVES IN THE FOOTBALL SECTOR, Assoc. Prof. Sonja Cindori, PhD, Ana Manola, LL.M.....	197
29. THE DOCTRINE OF FRUIT OF THE POISONOUS TREE IN THE REALITIES OF LATVIAN CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS, Assoc. Prof. Dr. iur, Tatjana Jurkevich , LL. M. Kaspars Smits	205

30. THE LAW APPLICABLE TO MATRIMONIAL PROPERTY REGIMES AFTER THE REGULATION (EU) No. 2016/1103. THE IMPACT UPON THE ITALIAN LAW, PhD Manuela Giobbi	213
31. THE RELEVANT ISSUES OF TERMINATION OF CRIMINAL PROCEDURE WITH EXEMPTION OF THE PERSON FROM CRIMINAL LIABILITY IN LATVIA, Assoc. Prof. Dr. iur Marina Sumbarova.....	219
32. THE STATUS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE 21ST CENTURY WITH A CONCENTRATION ON MONETARY LAW, Gina Sebok,.....	227
33. VIRTUAL (CRYPTO) CURRENCY BETWEEN LEGALIZATION AND / OR TAXATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION, Lecturer PhD. Alexandru-Mihnea Găină....	235

SECTION ECONOMICS & FINANCE

34. AN OVERVIEW ON PARAMETRIC AND NON-PARAMETRIC METHODS TO MEASURE PERFORMANCE, PhD Student Lavinia MIHIȚ , Lecturer Dr Lavinia DUDAȘ , Prof. Dr Habil. Gabriela MIRCEA, PhD Student Florin Costea	245
35. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES IN THE EXPRESS EVALUATION OF CONSOLIDATED FINANCIAL REPORTING, Prof. DSc. Irina Kurochkina, PhD Liudmila Mamatova, Economist Valeriia Kuritsyna	253
36. ASSESSING AND PLANNING PUBLIC POLICIES FOR GUIDING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, PhD student Calinovici Alina Ioana, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Para Iulia, Lecturer Dr. Vătavu Sorana, Assoc. Prof. Dr. habil. Lobonț Oana-Ramona	259
37. CHANNELS THROUGH WHICH QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE RELATES TO QUALITY OF LIFE? EVIDENCE FROM NORTHERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, Prof. Dr. Nicoleta-Claudia Moldovan , Lect. Dr. Sorana Vătavu , Roxana-Livia Colariu , Assoc. Prof. Dr. Oana-Ramona Lobont	267

38. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENT FINANCIAL PROTECTION SCHEMES AGAINST NATURAL DISASTERS, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Laura Elly Naghi , Lect. Dr.Roxana Mihai , Nicoleta Radu, PhD Student	275
39. COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSE OF POLISH, EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN MODEL OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE, Dr hab. Małgorzata Kurleto	281
40. CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO AUDIT RISK ASSESSMENT BASED ON BEHAVIORAL MODELS, Prof. Dr. Sergey Arzhenovskiy, Assoc. Prof. Ph.D. Tatiana Sinyavskaya, Assoc. Prof. Ph.D. Andrey Bakhteev	289
41. CORPORATE GOVERNANCE ISSUES AND VULNERABILITIES IN THE WAKE OF A GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS, Research & Teaching Assist. Dr. Delia DELIU.....	297
42. DETECTING FRAUD IN FINANCIAL SECTOR– ONGOING CHALLENGES FOR INTERNAL AUDIT, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Iustina Alina Boitan	307
43. DETERMINATION OF THE COLLATERAL REQUIREMENTS TO BE DEPOSITED BY FINANCIAL ENTITIES TO THE CENTRAL COUNTERPARTY, Lect. Dr.Roxana Mihai, Laurențiu Paul Barangă PhD Student, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Laura Elly Naghi	315
44. DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A Balanced Scorecard, Assoc. Prof. Darina Sizova , Assoc. Prof. Tatyana Sizova , Assoc. Prof. Julia Gordeeva , Assoc. Prof. Yana Ivanova , Assoc. Prof. ElenaChernenkova	323
45. ECOLOGICAL SAFETY AND ITS FINANCIAL EVALUATION, Prof. DSc. Elena Shuvalova, Prof. DSc. Aleksey Bolvachev, Nadezhda Zatsarnaya.....	331
46. ECONOMIC EVALUATION OF ROAD PROJECT EFFICIENCY: I/18 LIPNÍKY – HANUŠOVCE NAD TOPLŮU, Ing. Martina Margorínová, doc. Ing. MáriaTrojanová, PhD	339

47. ECONOMIC GROWTH AND UNEMPLOYMENT NEXUS: ARE VARYING CONDITION IN BULGARIA AND ROMANIA?, Lecturer Dr Lavinia Dudaş , PhD. Student Lavinia Mihiţ , Postdoctoral fellow Dr Mădălin Dogaru , Assoc. Prof. Dr. Anda Iosif	347
48. IMPROVEMENT OF THE INFORMATION BASE FOR THE FORENSIC AUDIT OF EXPENSES OF COMMUTER RAIL SERVICE COMPANIES, PhD st. Marina Motolianetc ¹ , Prof. DSc Irina Kurochkina, Prof. DSc Janna Kevorkova	355
49. MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTING PRACTICES IN EMERGING MARKETS: A MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY OF RUSSIAN MIDSIZED PRIVATE COMPANIES, Pavel Lebedev.....	361
50. Modeling corporate competitiveness, Assoc. Prof. Darina Sizova , Assoc. Prof. Tatyana Sizova , Assoc. Prof. Elena Voronkova , Assoc. Prof. Anzor Soltahanov , Assoc. Prof. Kira Kalinkina	377
51. MODELLING AND ASSESSING SUSTAINABILITY ON THE EXAMPLE OF ESTONIAN MINISTRIES, Prof Dr Maret Branten, Dr Lea Roostalu, MA Argo Hallik...385	
52. NOSIE SOCIAL COSTS FROM THE ROAD TRANSPORT, Ing. Martina Margorínová , doc. Ing. Mária Trojanová, PhD. , prof. Dr. Ing. Martin Decký	393
53. ON THE INFORMATION AND ANALYTICAL TOOLS OF INTEGRATED REPORTING TO ENSURE THE COMPANY'S ECONOMIC SECURITY, Prof. DSc Irina Kurochkina , Prof. DSc Irina Kuzmina-Merlino , Prof. DSc Elena Shuvalova , PhD Liudmila Mamatova , PhD Iuliia Novozhilova	401
54. ON THE STAGES OF CARRYING OUT OF FORENSIC AUDIT OF EXPENSES OF COMMUTER RAIL SERVICE COMPANIES IN RUSSIA, PhD st. Marina Motolianetc, Prof. DSc. Irina Kurochkina, PhD Liudmila Mamatova, PhD Tatiana Novikova.....	409
55. POSSIBILITIES OF USING PUBLIC FINANCES FOR RAISING THE LEVEL OF CITIZENS SECURITY, Ing. Viktor Šoltés, PhD, doc. Ing. Katarína Repková Štofková, PhD, Ing. Filip Lenko	415

56. QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT QUALITY OF THE INTEGRATED REPORTING, Prof. DSc. Elena Shuvalova , Assoc. Prof. DSc. Irina Kurochkina , Natalia Sibatulina	423
57. REAL INCOMES OF THE POPULATION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND GROWTH PROSPECTS, Assoc. Prof., Candidate of Economic Sciences Elena V. Ordynskaia	429
58. REINVENTING ACCOUNTING: FROM ANALYTICAL TO EMOTIONAL SKILLS, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boitan Iustina Alina	437
59. REPORTING ON THE FINANCIAL INSOLVENCY OF HOUSEHOLDS IN THE CROATIAN MEDIA AND THE PROBLEM OF FINANCIAL LITERACY, Roman Šubić, PhD, Assistant Professor , Nika Đuho, Mag. Soc. , Darja Kupinić Guščić, Mr. Oecc.	445
60. RISK PERCEPTION AT LEVEL OF SELF-GOVERNMENT - CASE OF SLOVAK REPUBLIC, Ing. František Hocman, PhD.	453
61. STUDY REGARDING THE INTEREST RATES PRACTICED BY THE CREDIT INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE BANKING ACTIVITY, PhD Assoc. Prof. Claudia Sîrbulescu, PhD Prof. Luminița Pîrvulescu, PhD Assoc. Prof. Iasmina Iosim, PhD Assoc. Prof. Remus Gherman, PhD Prof. Tiberiu Iancu.....	461
62. THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF EASTERN EUROPE FOR PRIVATE EQUITY INVESTORS, PhD Mihai Precup.....	471
63. THE CONCEPT OF CROWDFUNDING AND ITS APPEARANCE IN RUSSIA, Assoc.prof.Natalia Nikolaeva, MCC student Daria Syrtsova	483
64. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDEBTEDNESS IN THE USA AND IN THE EUROPE IN SELECTED BRANCHES AND ITS DEPENDENCY, Doc. JUDr. Ing. Milan Hrdý, Ph.D.....	489

65. THE ROLE AND SPECIFICS OF ACCOUNTING SYSTEM IN SMALL FARMS IN LATVIA, Leading Researcher, Head of Department Dr. oec. Valda Bratka, Researcher Dr. oec. Artūrs Prauliņš.....	497
66. THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF TAX POLICY AND ITS PRACTICAL STUDY, Prof. Dr. Iveta Mietule, Msc Aiga Mikusane, Dr. Jelena Lonska, Dr. Irina Maksymova, Prof. Dr. Svetlana Veģera.....	505
67. TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE TAXATION POLICY: HOW TAXES CAN INFLUENCE HAPPINESS?, Lect. Dr. Sorana Vatavu , Prof. Dr. Nicoleta-Claudia Moldovan , Roxana Elena Stan , Assoc. Prof. Dr. Oana-Ramona Lobont	513
68. USEFULNESS OF FINANCIAL INFORMATION AND FRAUD PREVENTION, Assoc. Prof. PhD. Kameliya Savova, CPA, PhD. Iavor Bachev, CIA, CFE.....	521
69. WHO CHOOSES THE DIFFERENT VOLUNTARY INSURANCE TYPES: ECONOMETRIC ANALYSIS, Assoc. Prof., PhD Tatiana G. Sinyavskaya, Assoc. Prof., PhD Alexandra A. Tregubova, Assoc. Prof., PhD Anna A. Rudyaga, Assoc. Prof., PhD Elena P. Kokina.....	531

CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS: THE EU FRAMEWORK FOR CROSS-BORDER COUPLES AND THE RECENT LEGISLATIVE REFORM IN THE UK

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ABSTRACT

The EU Regulation 2016/1004, entered into force on 29th January 2019, regulates the property consequences of cross-border couples in registered partnerships and recognizes to the partners the same rights of married couples. Registered partnerships initially originated often for the legal recognition of same-sex couples, as the European Court of Human Rights required countries to ensure them specific rights, but not necessarily to recognize same-sex marriage. As a result, nowadays we have a complex taxonomy of legally-recognized couples in Europe. After legalizing same-sex marriages, some states abolished registered partnerships, but most of them conserved both. Early this year, England and Wales approved the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Act, which solved a legal problem: after the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2014, same-sex couples, in fact, could decide to marry or to enter a civil partnership, while an opposite-sex couple only had one chance, marriage. Overcoming this legal anomaly is especially important for foreign, opposite-sex couples that entered in a registered partnership in their own country, and then moved to England or Wales. On the other hand, it introduced the risk of limping the status of registered partnerships in countries that abolished, or never adopted, registered partnerships. The autonomy of the parties recognized by the EU Regulation 2016/1004 to cross-border couples entered in registered partnerships can avoid the risk of a legal vacuum in the field of the property consequences.

Keywords: Registered partnership, cross-border couple, same-sex marriage, property regime, limping status.

INTRODUCTION

The legislative process that led to the entry into force of the EU Regulations 2016/1103 and 2016/1004 on 29 January 2019 has been particularly long and complex, as the regulation on the property regime of marriage had to be carried out in parallel with respect to the one on property consequences of registered partnership. Such a delay – the process started in 2010 with the EU Citizenship Report 2010 “Dismantling the obstacles to EU citizens' rights” - finds its logical explanation in the legislative divergence between the EU Member States about marriage and civil partnership, the reluctance that some Member States have towards recognition of same-sex unions, as well as the difficulty that has involved the necessary processing as a “package” of both the two Regulations. All these issues would have determined the lack of unanimity in the adoption of a common regulation - as provided in art. 81.3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European

Union (TFEU) for this area - and explain the recourse to the enhanced cooperation procedure, ending with its approval by eighteen Member States.

It is a matter of fact that same-sex marriage and registered partnership are central issues in family law nowadays. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) opted for an extensive interpretation of art. 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), moving beyond the idea of traditional family. This evolution can be noticed considering some decisions of the ECtHR, particularly *Schalk and Kopf v. Austria*, *Hämäläinen v. Finland*, *Oliari and Others v. Italy*, and *Gas and Dubois v. France*. The Court expressed a clear principle: the ECHR does not ask the Member States to recognize same-sex marriage; it requires, on the contrary, to ensure to same-sex couples specific rights. Each state will be free to achieve this goal through a marriage or a form of civil partnership. This framework, on the plane of private international law, explains the complex taxonomy regarding all forms of legally recognized couples. Registered partnership originated mainly in order to recognize and give a regulation to same-sex unions. Its presence and discipline vary from one country to the other. Marriage is a “quasi-universal”: all states have marriage for opposite-sex couples, and several of them allow opposite and same-sex couples to marry [1]. The same cannot be said for registered partnerships. Some state have registered partnerships, while others do not have registered partnerships. Some allow opposite and same-sex couples to enter a registered partnership, others reserve registered partnerships to same-sex couples. Some, among the states that adopted registered partnerships, apply to them substantially the same discipline of marriage, others apply a less rigorous discipline.

1. THE RECENT LEGISLATIVE REFORM IN THE UK

With regard to registered partnerships, the UK can be considered an interesting scenario, as England and Wales recently faced and solved a new problem, at the moment still unresolved in Scotland. Furthermore, this problem can reappear in the future in other contexts. In England and Wales, until the approval of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Act 2019, same-sex couples that wanted to formalize their *status* could choose between two options: marriage and civil partnership. Opposite-sex couples only had one choice: marriage [2]. This manifest disparity was the result of the Parliament’s decision [3] of extending marriage to same-sex couples with the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act of 2013, without simultaneously abolishing the Civil Partnership Act of 2004 [4], or extending its provisions to opposite-sex couples. The fact that many civil partners did not convert them in same-sex marriages after 2014 shows that registered partnerships possess a meaning and a special value [5]; also for opposite-sex couples the need for an “equal civil partnerships”, supported by a vibrant campaign, was diffused. An opposite-sex couple who wished to register a civil partnership, Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan, challenged the disparity of treatment. They went to their local registry office, and were reputed disqualified to enter a civil partnership, reserved by law to same-sex couples. They initiated so a judicial review proceeding on the basis that the English law discriminated unlawfully in its treatment of opposite-sex couples compared to the treatment of same-sex couples. Their claim was rejected by the High Court and by the Court of Appeal [6], but it was finally upheld by the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court stated that the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act of 2013 should have been accompanied concomitantly by the abolition of civil partnership, or by its extension to opposite-sex couples. The Supreme Court pointed out a “manifest inequality of treatment” [*R (on the*

application of Steinfeld and Keidan) v Secretary of State for International Development, at 3] and declared the incompatibility under section 4 of the Human Rights Act of 1998 of sections 1 and 3 of Civil Partnership Act of 2004, that prohibited an opposite-sex couple to entering into a civil partnership. This provision was openly conflicting with Article 14, in conjunction to Article 8, of the ECHR. Though the Supreme Court could not force the Government to act immediately, it made clear that discrimination was taking place and exerted a pressure upon the government to reform the civil partnerships [7]. In response to those initiatives, the UK Government recognized the need of adopting a legislation to extend partnership to opposite-sex couples, and on 15 March 2019 it finally approved the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Bill. The bill received Royal Assent on 26 March 2019 and the legislation came into effect on 26 May 2019. It is necessary to stress that the opposite-sex couples that decided to opt for cohabitation instead of marriage, could have had ideological objections to marriage. In that case they were necessarily excluded from the benefits of marriage, unlike same-sex couples. The approval of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Act of 2019 allows heterosexual couples in England and Wales to enter a civil partnership, extending the rights currently only afforded to same-sex couples. These rights of the parties of a civil partnership are substantially equivalent to the ones guaranteed by marriage.

The evolution of civil partnership regulation in England and Wales represents a paradigmatic example. A lawmaking process in comparable situations needs an initial assessment: it is required to evaluate the necessity to adopt and/or maintain civil partnership in a legal system. In this regard, we must relate to marriage. In a theoretical perspective we could say that, in case a legal system allows both opposite-sex marriage and same-sex marriage, we do not need other forms of legally-recognized relationships. If a couple wants special recognition, duties and privileges, they can decide to marry. If, on the contrary, two persons want to live together on the assumption that their relationship is flexible, they can choose cohabitation. Marriage can offer better protection to the weakest party of the relationship and it undoubtedly is a social model deeply rooted in the society. Unfortunately the evolution of marriage in the last decades has not been linear. In most countries, before allowing marriage for same-sex couples, registered partnership was adopted. Sometimes this legally-recognized partnership was reserved to same-sex couples, such as in England and Wales; other times it was opened to same and opposite-sex couples. For this historical reason, it is now hard to imagine to abolish the intermediate model of “registered partnership” from a legal system, even when it is just allowed to same-sex couples. The complex situation that England and Wales had to face in the last few years could in the future reappear in other legal systems. The Supreme Court decision expressed a general principle: we cannot discriminate opposite-sex couples, denying them the same options enjoyed by same-sex couples. That is true even under the assumption that the “special” rights recognized to same-sex couples were originated by a previous discrimination, like the preclusion of marriage. The measures that the Parliament adopted could be a model in similar situations in other countries.

2. IMPLICATIONS IN PRIVATE INTERNATIONAL LAW

The approval of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Act of 2019 fills a gap in English private international law, namely the absence of any mechanism for recognition of overseas opposite-sex registered partnerships and their highly undesirable limping status [8]. But, while the extension of the Civil Partnership Act of 2004 to opposite-sex couples would resolve these internal problems, the availability of opposite-sex registered partnership in England and Wales could cause new external problems related to their limping *status*. English opposite-sex and same-sex registered partners will probably encounter obstacles to the recognition of their partnership if they travel [9] to countries where this legal institution is unknown to domestic family law. While in several states in Europe, including Estonia, France, Greece, Malta, and the Netherlands, opposite-sex and same-sex couples are enabled to enter a registered partnership, other states, such as Finland and Sweden, abolished the institution of registered partnership at the time of introducing same-sex marriage. English registered partners – both same-sex and opposite-sex - could evade their responsibilities by moving to foreign jurisdictions which do not recognize their partnership, leaving dependent partners without judicial remedies. This provides a clear evidence for the need of regulating cross-border partnerships according to the principles of the universal application and of the unity of the applicable law.

Registered partnerships, that have a taxonomy much more complicate than marriage, and that unlike marriage, have no general diffusion all over the world, risk to be confined to a legal vacuum. This vacuum could originate a lack of protection for the weakest party. The risk of “evasive forum shopping” [10], is seriously conceivable. A UK citizen, in case of dissolution of his or her partnership, could decide to move to a country that has no registered partnerships, and the dependent partner’s claims would not be recognized by the court of that country, nor the decision of a UK court would be applied in that country, except in the case of a specific convention between the two countries. At this moment in time, the few ones that can avoid this risk are cross-border registered partners. According to the aforementioned EU Regulation 2016/1104 of 24 June 2016, they can regulate in advance, with agreement, jurisdiction, applicable law, and property regime of the partnership. In the case of a break down of their relationship, legal certainty will be guaranteed. To avoid the aforementioned risk of a legal vacuum, in case the registered partnership is not recognized in a certain Member State, there is a specific provision about jurisdiction at Article 9, that differs from the correspondent Article 9 of the Regulation 2016/1103, dealing with marriage [11]. In case of registered partnerships, the *forum non conveniens* principle is admitted, but the parties will be guaranteed by the provision of alternative and subsidiary competence. Of course the procedure is merely voluntaristic, as the agreement is based on the autonomy of the parties. But, what is most important is that, as the EU Regulation is based on principles of universal application and unity of the applicable law, despite the fact that the UK is not one of the eighteen countries that are parties to the Regulation, the UK law can be applied in foreign courts, if that corresponds to the choice of the parties. Third countries, as a matter of principle, are not excluded from the application of the Regulation.

CONCLUSION

The approval of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Act of 2019 can be considered a paradigmatic epilogue of the evolution of the notion of “registered partnership”. As several countries in Europe adopted same-sex registered partnership and opted to permit marriage only to opposite-sex couples, some of them could grant in the future marriage to same-sex couples, without reforming the regulation of civil partnerships. In that case, they would find themselves in the same situation of England and Wales in recent years: they will have to manage the issue by either extending same-sex registered partnerships to opposite-sex couples, or by abolishing them at all. The extension of registered partnership to opposite-sex couples seems to be the most pragmatic and effective solution, even if a formal approach would maybe suggest to simplify the frame reducing all the forms of legally-recognized couples to a flexible model of marriage, opened to all sexes. As pointed out, such a complex situation has significant implications in private international law: in a modern, globalized society people move frequently from one state to another for different reasons. Furthermore, in such a dynamic scenario, the risk that registered partnerships in certain foreign states would be confined to a legal vacuum, is likely to originate “forum shopping”, is real and tangible. Cross-border couples, increasingly common in EU, can avoid these risks thanks to the provisions of EU Regulation 2016/1104 of 24 June 2016, that permits to regulate in advance, by agreement, the jurisdiction, the applicable law, and the property regime of the partnership. Although the Regulation allows for the principle of *forum non conveniens*, the parties will be guaranteed by the provision (art. 9) of an alternative and subsidiary competence.

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