Determination of the Objectively Applicable Law Governing Succession to Deceaseds’ Estates

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Introduction

In the absence of a testator having any limited possibility to designate the law to govern succession to his estate or a testator having duly taken advantage of such a possibility, it is, of course necessary to establish what law is to be objectively applied as the lex successionis (which should, in my view, extend to questions of construing the meaning of the words used in his will as well as the application of such construction to the factual situation prevailing at his death).

The deceased will either have died intestate or have died testate without duly designating a lex successionis. It thus needs to be clear what precisely is a due designation. Must the testamentary designation be an express choice of a particular jurisdiction of nationality or habitual residence (whether at the date of the testator’s will or death) or may there be a necessarily implicit choice e.g. by reference to some statute or terminology appropriate only for one particular jurisdiction? What if there is an express choice of British law or of Spanish law but not of a particular jurisdiction within the UK or Spain? My preference, in the interest of certainty and clarity, is for the designation to be an express choice of a specified jurisdiction. However, if there is an express choice of the law of a multi-jurisdictional State, then that should be regarded as that of the particular jurisdiction therein where the testator was habitually resident at the time of his will, though if the testator’s nationality law was designated and he was not then habitually resident in a jurisdiction in such State, the designation should be regarded as that of the jurisdiction therein in which the testator was last habitually resident. This should normally give sensible effect to the presumed wishes of the testator.

Where express choice of nationality law of a multi-jurisdictional State is possible there are two further problems. What if the testator had never been habitually
resident in any jurisdiction within his nationality State or if he chooses a jurisdiction within his nationality State which is one where he has not been habitually resident? The simplest solution is for such choices to be ineffective.

Needless to say, a testator needs to be able easily and predictably to ascertain what is his habitual residence when he makes his will so that he can be sure he has made a valid choice of *lex successionis*, so some definition (dealt with below) will be necessary.

In my opinion, capacity to make an express testamentary choice needs also to be expressly dealt with but only for the purposes of succession in the conflict of laws. Instead of some States utilising to determine capacity nationality, some habitual residence, some domicile in the technical sense, and some the *lex situs* for immovables, all States should, in my view, rely only upon the *lex successionis* to determine capacity issues for purposes of succession. Having decided upon the most appropriate law for the *lex successionis*, we should have the courage of our convictions and apply such *lex* to capacity. This will then ensure that enforcement of a judgment on the validity of a disposition under the *lex successionis* would be incapable of challenge eg by allegations that such judgment applied the wrong law to determine capacity and, in any event, the appropriate jurisdiction was that of another State.

It may be that there should be express provision that the domestic and conflict of law rules of the *lex successionis* will determine who is or is not a spouse (even if of the same sex as the other party) or cohabitant or child of the deceased for the purposes of succession to the deceased’s estate.

**Time of death as the key time**

In the case of total intestacy the key time for ascertaining the applicable law must be the date of death in the absence of other possible dates. Where the deceased made a will but did not expressly choose a *lex successionis* to govern transmission of his patrimony at the date of his death, it seems clear that the focus for ascertaining the applicable law to govern transmission at death needs also to be a particular law at the date of the testator’s death.
Where a testator expressly chose an available *lex successionis* but died partially intestate, then it would seem that the chosen *lex successionis* should necessarily govern the intestate position as well as the testate position since it was this law that the testator had in mind, while application of a single law will avoid the possibility of having to apply two different and, perhaps, inconsistent laws to the one estate.

**One law for whole estate, immovable and movable**

As one might expect, in the nineteenth century many jurisdictions established the safe, self-interested rule that succession to immovables must be governed by the *lex situs* of the immovable. After all, it was easy for local lawyers to know their local law and thus transfer the immovable to the persons entitled under local law (especially for an intestacy) according to the appropriate local formalities, while States, then particularly concerned with national security and a national identity, naturally felt it appropriate to have their own laws apply to succession to “their” land.

However, with the increasing wealth of the middle-classes and increasing mobility, especially with freedom of movement in the EU, a person often dies owning immovables in more than one jurisdiction and in a jurisdiction different from the jurisdiction the law of which governs succession to his movables. As a result, the effect of the varying intestacy rules and mandatory family protection rules can lead to spouses and children receiving rather more or rather less than might be considered their fair share and to expenditure of much time and legal costs in resolving matters. It must also be the case that often there will be frustration of the intentions of a deceased who died believing that one law would govern the whole of his estate, a most natural assumption to make.

Thus, in most EU countries (with exceptions, for example, for UK jurisdictions, Ireland, Belgium, Luxemburg, France, Malta) one law applies to the deceased’s whole estate except for immovables happening to be located in schismatic States like the exceptional ones mentioned above.
Reviewing the matter afresh after my involvement in The Hague Convention on Succession to Deceaseds’ Estates 1986-1988, I remain convinced that there should only be one lex successionis for the whole of a deceased’s estate or patrimony. This should be simpler and cheaper than having different non-interlocking succession laws apply to different types of assets, while modern textbooks, the ease of communicating with foreign lawyers by phone, fax or e-mail and the ability of a State easily to put its succession law on an internet website should make matters relatively straightforward for local lawyers where immovables are situated. It will also side-step the characterisation difficulties that arise if one forum characterises the distinction between movables and immovables differently from another forum, and the problem as to whether a jurisdiction should consider there to have been a fraudulent manipulation of conflict of laws rules by a person owning an immovable within its jurisdiction through a company, and thus dying owning shares which are movables.

To recognise the legitimate interests of the lex situ of assets, whether movable or immovable, some very narrow specified scope should be left for it to apply its rare “lois de police” mandatory laws applicable to international situations irrespective of conflict of laws rules and any particular inheritance regime it has for special categories of assets (like farming and wine-producing enterprises) because of economic, family or social considerations as provided for in Article 15 of the Succession Convention, so long, of course, as such regime does not amount to discrimination on nationality grounds.

**Which sole connecting factor?**

Currently, some jurisdictions apply domicile (in the narrow common law sense) at death, some nationality at death and some the last habitual residence of the deceased.

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3 Eg D J Hayton (ed) European Succession Laws (Jordan Publishing Ltd) 2nd ed 2002 covering domestic and conflict of laws rules of 22 European jurisdictions


5 See DWM Waters’ Official Report thereon paras 110-113
In examining the utility of these approaches one needs to specify criteria for determining what is required of the connecting factor. It needs to lead as simply and clearly as possible to the easily predictable ascertainment of the law of the one jurisdiction that is most appropriate for being the lex successionis for the deceased’s patrimony. Thus, it should be the law of the jurisdiction with which the deceased had his most close and real connection when he died.

Common law jurisdictions like England and Ireland use a technical notion of domicile as the key to personal status and to succession on death for movables. A person can have only one domicile, starting off with a “domicile of origin” (the domicile of his father if a marital child or of his mother if a non-marital child) which can change while under 16 years old as a “domicile of dependency” following that of the relevant parent. Thereafter, a person can acquire a “domicile of choice” if he becomes resident in a particular jurisdiction with the intention to settle there permanently or indefinitely. Not only are there problems over ascertaining after his death his relevant intent, but an artificial connecting factor can arise because D’s domicile of origin revives when he gives up his domicile of choice and, then, continues until a new domicile of choice is acquired. Often D will be under a misapprehension that his old domicile of choice continues to apply or, if he believes he falls back to his origins, then he will assume his domicile to be that of the jurisdiction where he was born rather than the domicile of his father, which may well be of some other jurisdiction unknown to D. Thus, common law domicile is not always satisfactory as the lex successionis.

D’s nationality appears to be a more satisfactory personal connecting factor because clear and easily ascertainable, but suffers from the possibility of D having more than one nationality so that a further rule is necessary to determine the most recently dominant nationality. The nationality law can also be wholly inappropriate where D has abandoned his nationality jurisdiction and has spent many happy years in a new jurisdiction though not becoming a national thereof. Here one sees the advantages of the common law domicile approach which would rightly base him in his new jurisdiction.

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D’s habitual residence, however, seems to me to be a much more natural and appropriate connecting factor. However, this has led to the use of habitual residence in determining jurisdiction for many diverse purposes (e.g. divorce, child abduction, taxation, granting income support or loans for university study) and English courts have recognised that a person can have two habitual residences, so leading to the need (as for nationality) to have some statutory provision for determining the most recently dominant habitual residence. There is also the problem of distinguishing between “residence” and “habitual residence” because “residence” is far too lightweight a connection for determining the appropriate lex successionis.

In the context of Article 59 of the Council Regulation (EC) 44/2001 (replacing the Brussels Convention on Jurisdiction and the Recognition and Enforcement of Judgments) the UK Civil Jurisdiction and Judgments Order 2001 Sched 1 para 9 (re-enacting s. 41 of the Civil Jurisdiction and Judgments Act 1982) requires a person to be treated as “domiciled” (in the continental sense of “habitually resident”) in England if (a) resident in England and (b) the nature and circumstances of his residence indicate that he has a substantial connection with England which is rebuttably presumed if he has been resident in England for the last three months or more. However, whether a person is “domiciled” in another Member State is to be determined by the law of such other State so that a person may have sufficient connections with two States to justify him being sued in either State.

There is, however, only one jurisdiction that can be the lex successionis, while any period of residence required for the residence to become a person’s “habitual residence” is inevitably arbitrary. Moreover, there will be exceptional cases where someone’s job has made them habitually resident in State A for 5 years but they retain strong connections with State B to which they will return permanently when their temporary habitual residence via their job ceases or where someone has deliberately abandoned State A for State B but who dies in State B only a week or a month later. One must also accept that the “tail” cannot be allowed to “wag the dog”, so that trying

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8 Ikimi v Ikimi [2002] Fam 72
9 See Re J [1990] 2 AC 562
11 Nessa v Chief Adjudication Officer [1997] 1 WLR 1937
12 R v Barnet LBC ex parte Shah [1983] 2 AC 309
13 Ikimi v Ikimi [2002] Fam 72
to cater for exceptional cases cannot be allowed to distort and complicate the connecting factor rules. Indeed, for wealthy persons one must remember that their lawyers can easily avoid most problems occasioned by the default rule for the applicable *lex successionis* by express choice of the law that is expressly stated to be the testator’s nationality law or that of his habitual residence, any court or notary being very inclined to accept such evidence that the testator’s residence is to be regarded as his habitual residence even before his continuing residence has made this objectively clear.

In drafting the Succession Convention in The Hague back in 1986-87, I believe we were forced to make too many compromises in choosing\(^{14}\) (1) the law of D’s habitual residence at death if also coinciding with his national law, (2) otherwise, the law of D’s habitual residence for a period of no fewer than 5 years immediately before his death, unless, “in exceptional circumstances”, at his death he was more closely connected with his nationality State, when the law of that State will apply, (3) otherwise, the law of his nationality at death unless D was then more closely connected with another State, when the law of that State will apply. It seems that the complexity of these default rules, coupled with a belief in the unpredictability provoked by the exceptions to the second and third possibilities, led to few States implementing the Convention. However, I believe that the Dutch Notaries Organisation considers that these rules have provoked little difficulty in practice in The Netherlands, so, perhaps, it may be found safer by the ten new EU countries to persuade everyone to fall back on these rules.

In 2004, for those of us who have been involved in this area for almost 20 years, it now seems clear that we should not be over-protective of our national law or our common law domiciliary law. In the EU we are all siblings or, at least, cousins, so we should accept our differences in our family protection rules, some jurisdictions giving more protection, some less. I strongly favour adopting the proposal in the German Notary Institute Report that an express choice of the law of nationality or of the habitual residence at the date of the will (or of death) should be valid and the default rule should be the simple one of the *lex successionis* being the law of the State of the deceased’s last habitual residence. However, I believe that there needs to be a

\(^{14}\) See Article 3
specific exception to enable justice to be done in ascertaining the most appropriate *lex successionis*. It could be provided that in exceptional circumstances where the deceased’s habitual residence at death was manifestly intended by him merely to be temporary (like those where the deceased’s employment or need to care for a relative or other person connected with the deceased required him to reside where he resided), then the *lex successionis* should be the law of his nationality unless, before taking up his temporary last habitual residence he had been habitually resident in another jurisdiction where he had manifestly decided to settle permanently or indefinitely, in which event the *lex successionis* should be the law of that jurisdiction. Of course, the option of choosing the law of nationality or of habitual residence is also open to anyone who wants to make the position clear where fearing there might otherwise be uncertainty.

It seems to me that since it is necessary for all jurisdictions to have the same concept of habitual residence for the purposes only of the law of succession (for express choice and the default rule), there needs to be a common definition of a person’s sole habitual residence which makes it clear that every person must have a last habitual residence before death even if a person at the time of his death is only resident – and not habitually resident - in the jurisdiction where he died. Perhaps “the last voluntarily acquired main centre of a person’s personal, social and economic life” could be the core of a definition of “habitual residence” for an adult, with the omission of “voluntarily acquired” for minors.

Having the one connecting factor common to all EU States will not only make it possible to have a workable, satisfactory Regulation on Jurisdiction and Recognition & Enforcement of Succession Judgments, it should diminish the scope currently available to the exceptional testator who wishes to avoid the application of appropriate mandatory family protection rules.

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15 A person could be held in jail or as a hostage or prisoner of war or moved as a mental patient to a secure foreign establishment
16 Used instead of “family” in case not in a family relationship
17 Within the EU there should be no need to insert a reservation similar to that in Art 24 (1) (c) of the Hague Succession Convention (which enables the express choice of law to be nullified if at the time of death D was no longer habitually resident in or a national of the chosen State law but was an habitually resident national of the State claiming to nullify his choice) or the more complex Art 24 (1) (d)
**Succession to assets in estate at death**

Consideration needs to be given to the extent of the deceased’s current or former assets to which the relevant *lex successionis* will apply. What law should determine whether a disposition is a testamentary disposition or a lifetime disposition and whether a particular asset is or is not part of a deceased person’s estate?

Consider D, who (1) takes out a contract of assurance on his life to be held on trust for X with an English company, English law governing the contract and trust, who (2) creates a joint account with E over cash and securities held by an English bank, English law governing the contract with the bank and the proprietary relationship between D and E, and who (3) transfers English assets to an English trust company on trusts governed by English law for a discretionary class consisting of descendant’s of D’s father, their spouses and cohabitants (other than D and his spouse). Unless D’s dispositions were made within 6 years of his death and with intent to defeat the mandatory family protection rules in the discretionary reasonable provision that a court may order under the Inheritance (Provision for Family and Dependents) Act 1975 if D died domiciled in England, the English *lex successionis* has no scope to apply to them, such assets not being comprised within D’s estate at death due to his earlier lifetime dispositions that were wholly valid under the applicable English *lex situs*.

What would be the position if Civilopia regarded X and E as taking property on D’s death under a testamentary disposition and regarded the trustees as liable to a personal claim from D’s forced heirs to enable them to receive the due amount of their indefeasible share in D’s estate taking account of earlier lifetime transfers like the one to the trustees, so a claim was brought in the English court?

The English court would hold that X, E and the trustees took their interests under unimpeachable lifetime dispositions governed by English law so that there was no scope for the application of any Civilopian *lex successionis*\(^\text{18}\). Assets passing under valid lifetime transfers are not part of D’s estate to be governed by D’s *lex successionis* and cannot subsequently be impeached or undermined by the fact that D dies with a non-English *lex successionis*, when it can be fortuitous whether the

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\(^{18}\) See Hayton, *European Succession Laws* 2nd ed paras 1.67 to 1.69

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relevant foreign law permits forced heirship claims for gifts made up to 5, 10 or 30 years before D’s death and whether such gifts are valued at the date of the gift or at the date of D’s death as in Belgium (the difference being huge where shares in a small start-up private company were the subject matter of the gift and the company is now a hugely valuable public company).

No doubt, civil law jurisdictions accustomed to forced heirship claims will wish to continue to give effect to them under foreign laws, though query to what extent if the foreign law goes much further than the local law. Common law jurisdictions, however, will certainly not wish to extend the *lex successionis* beyond assets that are part of the deceased’s estate at his death, the *lex situs* of assets determining whether or not the relevant assets are part of the deceased’s estate. This already seems to be the position under the Council Regulation 44/2001 where a civil judgment of the English court upon the entitlement of X, E and the trustees would need to be recognised throughout the EU. Any extension of the Regulation to matters governed by a *lex successionis* determined under a new common connecting factor should not be permitted to change the position.

Finally, there is the complex question of matrimonial property regimes. The pragmatic and simplest practical solution is just to accept that assets which, under the relevant law governing such property, do not fall into the deceased’s estate cannot be treated as assets which are to be subjected to the *lex successionis*. 