

ΕΛΛΑ, απόφαση της 24.6.2010, Schalk και Kopf κατά Αυστρίας (Α΄ Τμήμα)

[Γάμος ομοφύλων]

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Η σταθερή συμβίωση μεταξύ προσώπων του ιδίου φύλου εμπίπτει στην έννοια της οικογενειακής ζωής κατά το άρθρο 8 ΕΣΔΑ. Το δικαίωμα αυτό, ωστόσο, δεν παραβιάζεται από εθνική νομοθεσία που ορίζει ότι έγκυρος γάμος μπορεί να συναφθεί μόνο μεταξύ προσώπων διαφορετικού φύλου.

[...]

THE FACTS

I. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CASE

1. The applicants were born in 1962 and 1960, respectively. They are a same-sex couple living in Vienna.

2. On 10 September 2002 the applicants requested the Office for matters of Personal Status (*Standesamt*) to proceed with the formalities to enable them to contract marriage.

3. By decision of 20 December 2002 the Vienna Municipal Office (*Magistrat*) refused the applicants' request. Referring to Article 44 of the Civil Code (*Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*), it held that marriage could only be contracted between two persons of opposite sex. According to constant case-law, a marriage concluded by two persons of the same sex was null and void. Since the applicants were two men, they lacked the capacity for contracting marriage.

4. The applicants lodged an appeal with the Vienna Regional Governor (*Landeshauptmann*), but to no avail. In his decision of 11 April 2003 the Governor confirmed the Municipal Office's legal view. In addition he referred to the Administrative Court's case-law according to which it constituted an impediment to marriage if the two persons concerned were of the same sex. Moreover, Article 12 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms reserved the right to contract marriage to persons of different sex.

5. In a constitutional complaint the applicants alleged that the legal impossibility for them to get married constituted a violation of their right to respect for private and family life and of the principle of non-discrimination. They argued that the notion of marriage had evolved since the entry into force of the Civil Code in 1812. In particular, the procreation and education of children no longer formed an integral part of marriage. In present-day perception, marriage was rather a permanent

union encompassing all aspects of life. There was no objective justification for excluding same-sex couples from concluding marriage, all the more so since the European Court of Human Rights had acknowledged that differences based on sexual orientation required particularly weighty reasons. Other European countries either allowed homosexual marriages or had otherwise amended their legislation in order to give equal status to same-sex partnerships.

6. Finally, the applicants alleged a breach of their right to peaceful enjoyment of their possessions. They argued that in the event that one partner in a homosexual couple died, the other was discriminated against since he would be in a much less favourable position under tax law than the surviving partner in a married couple.

7. On 12 December 2003 the Constitutional Court (*Verfassungsgerichtshof*) dismissed the applicants' complaint. The relevant parts of its judgment read as follows:

“The administrative proceedings that resulted in the impugned decision were exclusively concerned with the issue of the legitimacy of the marriage. Accordingly, the complainants' sole applicable grievance is that Article 44 of the Civil Code only recognises and provides for marriage between “persons of opposite sex”. The allegation of a breach of the right of property is simply a further means of seeking to show that this state of affairs is unjustified.

With regard to marriage, Article 12 of the ECHR, which ranks as constitutional law, provides:

'Men and women of marriageable age have the right to marry and to found a family, according to the national laws governing the exercise of this right.'

Neither the principle of equality set forth in the Austrian Federal Constitution nor the European Convention on Human Rights (as evidenced by “men and women” in Article 12) require that the concept of marriage as being geared to the fundamental possibility of parenthood should be extended to relationships of a different kind. The essence of marriage is, moreover, not affected in any way by the fact that divorce (or separation) is possible and that it is a matter for the spouses whether in fact they are able or wish to have children. The European Court of Human Rights found in its *Cossey* judgment of 27 September 1990 (no. 10843/84, concerning the particular position of transsexual persons) that the restriction of marriage to this “traditional” concept was objectively justified, observing

'... that attachment to the traditional concept of marriage provides sufficient reason for the continued adoption of biological criteria for determining a person's sex for the purposes of marriage.'

[The subsequent change in the case-law concerning the particular issue of transsexuals (ECHR, *Goodwin*, no. 28957/95, 11 July 2002) does not permit the conclusion that there should be any change in the assessment of the general question at issue here.]

The fact that same-sex relationships fall within the concept of private life and as such enjoy the protection of Article 8 of the ECHR – which also prohibits discrimination on non-objective grounds (Article 14 of the ECHR) – does not give rise to an obligation to change the law of marriage.

It is unnecessary in the instant case to examine whether, and in which areas, the law unjustifiably discriminates against same-sex relationships by providing for special rules for married couples. Nor is it the task of this court to advise the legislature on constitutional issues or even matters of legal policy.

Instead, the complaint must be dismissed as ill-founded.”

8. The Constitutional Court's judgment was served on the applicants' counsel on 25 February 2004.

II. RELEVANT DOMESTIC AND COMPARATIVE LAW

A. Austrian law

1. *The Civil Code*

9. Article 44 of the Civil Code (*Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*) provides:

“The marriage contract shall form the basis for family relationships. Under the marriage contract two persons of opposite sex declare their lawful intention to live together in indissoluble matrimony, to beget and raise children and to support each other.”

The provision has been unchanged since its entry into force on 1 January 1812.

2. *The Registered Partnership Act*

10. The purpose of the Registered Partnership Act (*Eingetragene Partnerschaft-Gesetz*) was to provide same-sex couples with a formal mechanism for recognising and giving legal effect to their relationships. In introducing the said Act the legislator had particular regard to developments in other European states (see the explanatory report on the draft law – *Erläuterungen zur Regierungsvorlage*, 485 *der Beilagen XXIV GP*).

11. The Registered Partnership Act, Federal Law Gazette (*Bundesgesetzblatt*) vol. I, no. 135/2009, entered into force on 1 January 2010. Its section 2 provides as follows:

“A registered partnership may be formed only by two persons of the same sex (registered partners). They thereby commit themselves to a lasting relationship with mutual rights and obligations.”

12. The rules on the establishment of registered partnership, its effects and its dissolution resemble the rules governing marriage.

13. Registered partnership involves co-habitation on a permanent basis and may be entered into between two persons of the same sex having legal capacity and having reached the age of majority (section 3). A registered partnership must not be established between close relatives or with a person who is already married or has established a still valid registered partnership with another person (section 5).

14. Like married couples, registered partners are expected to live together like spouses in every respect, to share a common home, to treat each other with respect and to provide mutual assistance (section 8(2) and (3)). As in the case of spouses, the partner who is in charge of the common household and has no income has legal authority to represent the other partner in everyday legal transactions (section 10). Registered partners have the same obligations regarding maintenance as spouses (section 12).

15. The reasons for dissolution of registered partnership are the same as for dissolution of marriage or divorce. Dissolution of a registered partnership occurs in the event of the death of one partner (section 13). It may also be pronounced by a judicial decision on various other grounds: lack of intent to establish a registered partnership (section 14), fault of one or both partners, or breakdown of the partnership due to irreconcilable differences (section 15).

16. The Registered Partnership Act also contains a comprehensive range of amendments to existing legislation in order to provide registered partners with the same status as spouses in various other fields of law, such as inheritance law, labour, social and social insurance law, fiscal law, the law on administrative procedure, the law on data protection and public service, passport and registration issues, as well as the law on foreigners.

17. However, some differences between marriage and registered partnership remain, apart from the fact that only two persons of the same sex can enter into a registered partnership. The following differences were the subject of some public debate before the adoption of the Registered Partnership Act: while marriage is contracted before the Office for matters of Personal Status, registered partnerships are concluded before the District Administrative Authority. The rules on the choice of name differ from those for married couples: for instance, the law speaks of “last name” where a registered couple chooses a common name, but of “family name” in reference to a married couple's common

name. The most important differences, however, concern parental rights: unlike married couples, registered partners are not allowed to adopt a child; nor is step-child adoption permitted, that is to say, the adoption of one partner's child by the other partner (section 8(4)). Artificial insemination is also excluded (section 2 (1) of the Artificial Procreation Act - *Fortpflanzungsmedizingesetz*).

B. Comparative law

1. European Union law

18. Article 9 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which was signed on 7 December 2000 and entered into force on 1 December 2009, reads as follows:

“The right to marry and to found a family shall be guaranteed in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of these rights.”

19. The relevant part of the Commentary of the Charter states as follows:

“Modern trends and developments in the domestic laws in a number of countries toward greater openness and acceptance of same-sex couples notwithstanding, a few states still have public policies and/or regulations that explicitly forbid the notion that same-sex couples have the right to marry. At present there is very limited legal recognition of same-sex relationships in the sense that marriage is not available to same-sex couples. The domestic laws of the majority of states presuppose, in other words, that the intending spouses are of different sexes. Nevertheless, in a few countries, e.g., in the Netherlands and in Belgium, marriage between people of the same sex is legally recognized. Others, like the Nordic countries, have endorsed a registered partnership legislation, which implies, among other things, that most provisions concerning marriage, i.e. its legal consequences such as property distribution, rights of inheritance, etc., are also applicable to these unions. At the same time it is important to point out that the name 'registered partnership' has intentionally been chosen not to confuse it with marriage and it has been established as an alternative method of recognizing personal relationships. This new institution is, consequently, as a rule only accessible to couples who cannot marry, and the same-sex partnership does not have the same status and the same benefits as marriage. (...)

In order to take into account the diversity of domestic regulations on marriage, Article 9 of the Charter refers to domestic legislation. As it appears from its formulation, the provision is broader in its scope than the corresponding articles in other international instruments. Since there is no explicit reference to 'men and women' as the case is in other human rights instruments, it may be argued that there is no obstacle to recognize same-sex relationships in the context of marriage. There is, however, no

explicit requirement that domestic laws should facilitate such marriages. International courts and committees have so far hesitated to extend the application of the right to marry to same-sex couples. (...)"

20. A number of Directives are also of interest in the present case:

European Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003, on the right to family reunification, deals with the conditions for the exercise of the right to family reunification by third country nationals residing lawfully in the territory of the Member States.

Its Article 4, which carries the heading "family members", provides:

"(3) The Member States may, by law or regulation, authorise the entry and residence, pursuant to this Directive and subject to compliance with the conditions laid down in Chapter IV, of the unmarried partner, being a third country national, with whom the sponsor is in a duly attested stable long-term relationship, or of a third country national who is bound to the sponsor by a registered partnership in accordance with Article 5(2), ..."

Directive 2004/38/EC of the European Parliament and Council of 29 April 2004 concerns the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States.

Its Article 2 contains the following definition:

"(2) 'Family member' means:

(a) the spouse

(b) the partner with whom the Union citizen has contracted a registered partnership, on the basis of the legislation of a Member State, if the legislation of the host Member State treats registered partnerships as equivalent to marriage in accordance with the conditions laid down in the relevant legislation of the host Member State.

(c) the direct descendants who are under the age of 21 or are dependants and those of the spouse or partner as defined in point (b)

(d) the dependent direct relative in the ascending line and those of the spouse or partner as defined in point (b)."

2. The state of relevant legislation in Council of Europe member States

21. Currently six out of forty-seven member States grant same-sex couples equal access to marriage, namely Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

22. In addition there are thirteen member States, which do not grant same-sex couples access to marriage, but have passed some kind of legislation permitting same-sex couples to register their relationships: Andorra, Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. In sum, there are nineteen member States in which

same sex couples either have the possibility to marry or to enter into a registered partnership (see also the overview in *Burden v. the United Kingdom* [GC], no. 13378/05, § 26, ECHR 2008).

23. In two States, namely in Ireland and Liechtenstein reforms intending to give same-sex couples access to some form of registered partnership are pending or planned. In addition Croatia has a Law on Same-Sex Civil Unions which recognises cohabiting same-sex couples for limited purposes, but does not offer them the possibility of registration.

24. According to the information available to the Court, the vast majority of the States concerned have introduced the relevant legislation in the last decade.

25. The legal consequences of registered partnership vary from almost equivalent to marriage to giving relatively limited rights. Among the legal consequences of registered partnerships, three main categories can be distinguished: material consequences, parental consequences and other consequences.

26. Material consequences cover the impact of registered partnership on different kinds of tax, health insurance, social security payments and pensions. In most of the States concerned registered partners obtain a status similar to marriage. This also applies to other material consequences, such as regulations on joint property and debt, application of rules of alimony upon break-up, entitlement to compensation on wrongful death of partner and inheritance rights.

27. When it comes to parental consequences, however, the possibilities for registered partners to undergo medically assisted insemination or to foster or adopt children vary greatly from one country to another.

28. Other consequences include the use of the partner's surname, the impact on a foreign partner's obtaining a residence permit and citizenship, refusal to testify, next-of-kin status for medical purposes, continued status as tenant upon death of the partner, and lawful organ donations.

THE LAW

I. THE GOVERNMENT'S REQUEST TO STRIKE THE APPLICATION OUT OF THE COURT'S LIST

29. In their oral pleadings the Government argued that the Registered Partnership Act allowed same-sex couples to obtain a legal status adjusted as far as possible to the status conferred by marriage on different-sex couples. They submitted that the matter might be regarded as being resolved and that it was justified to strike the application out of the Court's list. They relied on Article 37 § 1 of the Convention which, so far as material, reads as follows:

“1. The Court may at any stage of the proceedings decide to strike an application out of its list of cases where the circumstances lead to the conclusion that

...

(b) the matter has been resolved;

...

However, the Court shall continue the examination of the application if respect for human rights as defined in the Convention and the Protocols thereto so requires.”

30. To conclude that Article 37 § 1 (b) of the Convention applies to the instant case, the Court must answer two questions in turn: firstly, it must ask whether the circumstances complained of directly by the applicants still obtain and, secondly, whether the effects of a possible violation of the Convention on account of those circumstances have also been redressed (see *Shevanova v. Latvia* (striking out) [GC], no. 58822/00, § 45, 7 December 2007).

31. The Court observes that the gist of the applicants' complaint is that, being a same-sex couple, they do not have access to marriage. This situation still obtains following the entry into force of the Registered Partnership Act. As the Government themselves pointed out, the said Act allows same-sex couples to obtain only a status similar or comparable to marriage, but does not grant them access to marriage, which remains reserved for different-sex couples.

32. The Court concludes that the conditions for striking the case out of its list are not met and therefore dismisses the Government's request.

II. ALLEGED VIOLATION OF ARTICLE 12 OF THE CONVENTION

33. The applicants complained that the authorities' refusal to allow them to contract marriage violated Article 12 of the Convention, which provides as follows:

“Men and women of marriageable age have the right to marry and to found a family, according to the national laws governing the exercise of this right.”

The Government contested that argument.

A. Admissibility

34. The Court observes that the Government raised the question whether the applicants' complaint fell within the scope of Article 12, given that they were two men claiming the right to marry. The Government did not argue, however, that the complaint was inadmissible as being incompatible *ratione materiae*. The Court agrees that the issue is sufficiently complex not to be susceptible of being resolved at the admissibility stage.

35. The Court considers, in the light of the parties' submissions, that the complaint raises serious issues of fact and law under the Convention, the determination of which requires an examination of the merits. The Court concludes therefore that this complaint is not manifestly ill-founded within the meaning of Article 35 § 3 of the Convention. No other ground for declaring it inadmissible has been established.

B. Merits

1. The parties' submissions

36. The Government referred to the Constitutional Court's ruling in the present case, noting that the latter had had regard to the Court's case-law and had not found a violation of the applicants' Convention rights.

37. In their oral pleadings before the Court, the Government maintained that both the clear wording of Article 12 and the Court's case-law as it stood indicated that the right to marry was by its very nature limited to different-sex couples. They conceded that there had been major social changes in the institution of marriage since the adoption of the Convention, but there was not yet any European consensus to grant same-sex couples the right to marry, nor could such a right be inferred from Article 9 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Despite the difference in wording, the latter referred the issue of same-sex marriage to national legislation.

38. The applicants argued that in today's society civil marriage was a union of two persons which encompassed all aspects of their lives, while the procreation and education of children was no longer a decisive element. As the institution of marriage had undergone considerable changes there was no longer any reason to refuse same-sex couples access to marriage. The wording of Article 12 did not necessarily have to be read in the sense that men and women only had the right to marry a person of the opposite sex. Furthermore, the applicants considered that the reference in Article 12 to "the relevant national laws" could not mean that States were given unlimited discretion in regulating the right to marry.

2. The third party interveners' submissions

39. The Government of the United Kingdom asserted that the Court's case-law as it stood considered Article 12 to refer to the "traditional marriage between persons of the opposite biological sex" (see *Sheffield and Horsham v. the United Kingdom*, 30 July 1998, § 66, *Reports of Judgments and Decisions* 1998-V). In their view there were no reasons to depart from that position.

40. While the Court had often underlined that the Convention was a living instrument which had to be interpreted in present-day conditions, it had only used that approach to develop its jurisprudence where it had

perceived a convergence of standards among member States. In *Christine Goodwin v. the United Kingdom* [GC] (no. 28957/95, ECHR 2002-VI), for instance, the Court had reviewed its position regarding the possibility of post-operative transsexuals to marry a person of the sex opposite to their acquired gender, having regard to the fact that a majority of Contracting States permitted such marriages. In contrast there was no convergence of standards as regards same-sex marriage. At the time when the third-party Government submitted their observations only three member States permitted same-sex marriage, and in two others proposals to this effect were under consideration. The issue of same-sex marriage concerned a sensitive area of social, political and religious controversy. In the absence of consensus, the State enjoyed a particularly wide margin of appreciation.

41. The four non-governmental organisations called on the Court to use the opportunity to extend access to civil marriage to same-sex couples. The fact that different-sex couples were able to marry, while same-sex couples were not, constituted a difference in treatment based on sexual orientation. Referring to *Karner v. Austria*, (no. 40016/98, § 37, ECHR 2003-IX), they argued that such a difference could only be justified by “particularly serious reasons”. In their contention, no such reasons existed: the exclusion of same-sex couples from entering into marriage did not serve to protect marriage or the family in the traditional sense. Nor would giving same-sex couples access to marriage devalue marriage in the traditional sense. Moreover, the institution of marriage had undergone considerable changes and, as the Court had held in *Christine Goodwin* (cited above, § 98), the inability to procreate children could not be regarded as *per se* removing the right to marry. The four non-governmental organisations conceded that the difference between the case of *Christine Goodwin* and the present case lay in the state of European consensus. However, they argued that in the absence of any objective and rational justification for the difference in treatment, considerably less weight should be attached to European consensus.

42. Finally, the four non-governmental organisations referred to judgments from the Constitutional Court of South Africa, the Courts of Appeal of Ontario and British Columbia in Canada, and the Supreme Courts of California, Connecticut, Iowa and Massachusetts in the United States, which had found that denying same-sex couples access to civil marriage was discriminatory.

3. *The Court's assessment*

a. **General principles**

43. According to the Court's established case-law Article 12 secures the fundamental right of a man and woman to marry and to found a family. The exercise of this right gives rise to personal, social and legal

consequences. It is “subject to the national laws of the Contracting States”, but the limitations thereby introduced must not restrict or reduce the right in such a way or to such an extent that the very essence of the right is impaired (see *B. and L. v. the United Kingdom*, no. 36536/02, § 34, 13 September 2005, and *F. v. Switzerland*, 18 December 1987, § 32, Series A no. 128).

44. The Court observes at the outset that it has not yet had an opportunity to examine whether two persons who are of the same sex can claim to have a right to marry. However, certain principles might be derived from the Court's case-law relating to transsexuals.

45. In a number of cases the question arose whether refusal to allow a post-operative transsexual to marry a person of the opposite sex to his or her assigned gender violated Article 12. In its earlier case-law the Court found that the attachment to the traditional concept of marriage which underpins Article 12 provided sufficient reason for the continued adoption by the respondent State of biological criteria for determining a person's sex for the purposes of marriage. Consequently, this was considered a matter encompassed within the power of the Contracting States to regulate by national law the exercise of the right to marry (see *Sheffield and Horsham*, cited above, § 67; *Cossey v. the United Kingdom*, 27 September 1990, § 46, Series A no. 184; see also *Rees v. the United Kingdom*, 17 October 1986, §§ 49-50, Series A no. 106).

46. In *Christine Goodwin* (cited above, §§ 100-104) the Court departed from that case-law: It considered that the terms used by Article 12 which referred to the right of a man and woman to marry no longer had to be understood as determining gender by purely biological criteria. In that context, the Court noted that there had been major social changes in the institution of marriage since the adoption of the Convention. Furthermore, it referred to Article 9 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which departed from the wording of Article 12. Finally, the Court noted that there was widespread acceptance of the marriage of transsexuals in their assigned gender. In conclusion the Court found that the impossibility for a post-operative transsexual to marry in her assigned gender violated Article 12 of the Convention.

47. Two further cases are of interest in the present context: (*Parry v. the United Kingdom* (dec.), no. 42971/05, ECHR 2006-XV, and *R. and F. v. the United Kingdom* (dec.), no. 35748/05, 28 November 2006). In both cases the applicants were a married couple, consisting of a woman and a male-to-female post-operative transsexual. They complained *inter alia* under Article 12 of the Convention that they were required to end their marriage if the second applicant wished to obtain full legal recognition of her change of gender. The Court dismissed that complaint as being manifestly ill-founded. It noted that domestic law only permitted

marriage between persons of opposite gender, whether such gender derived from attribution at birth or from a gender recognition procedure, while same-sex marriages were not permitted. Similarly, Article 12 enshrined the traditional concept of marriage as being between a man and a woman. The Court acknowledged that a number of Contracting States had extended marriage to same-sex partners, but went on to say that this reflected their own vision of the role of marriage in their societies and did not flow from an interpretation of the fundamental right as laid down by the Contracting States in the Convention in 1950. The Court concluded that it fell within the State's margin of appreciation how to regulate the effects of the change of gender on pre-existing marriages. In addition it considered that, should they chose to divorce in order to allow the transsexual partner to obtain full gender recognition, the fact that the applicants had the possibility to enter into a civil partnership contributed to the proportionality of the gender recognition regime complained of.

b. Application in the present case

48. The Court notes that Article 12 grants the right to marry to “men and women”. The French version provides « *l'homme et la femme ont le droit de se marier* ». Furthermore, Article 12 grants the right to found a family.

49. The applicants argued that the wording did not necessarily imply that a man could only marry a woman and vice versa. The Court observes that, looked at in isolation, the wording of Article 12 might be interpreted so as not to exclude the marriage between two men or two women. However, in contrast, all other substantive Articles of the Convention grant rights and freedoms to “everyone” or state that “no one” is to be subjected to certain types of prohibited treatment. The choice of wording in Article 12 must thus be regarded as deliberate. Moreover, regard must be had to the historical context in which the Convention was adopted. In the 1950s marriage was clearly understood in the traditional sense of being a union between partners of different sex.

50. As regards the connection between the right to marry and the right to found a family, the Court has already held that the inability of any couple to conceive or parent a child cannot be regarded as *per se* removing the right to marry (*Christine Goodwin*, cited above, § 98). However, this finding does not allow any conclusion regarding the issue of same-sex marriage.

51. In any case, the applicants did not rely mainly on the textual interpretation of Article 12. In essence they relied on the Court's case-law according to which the Convention is a living instrument which is to be interpreted in present-day conditions (see *E.B. v. France* [GC], no. 43546/02, § 92, ECHR 2008-..., and *Christine Goodwin*, cited above, §§ 74-75). In the applicants' contention Article 12 should in present-day

conditions be read as granting same-sex couples access to marriage or, in other words, as obliging member States to provide for such access in their national laws.

52. The Court is not persuaded by the applicants' argument. Although, as it noted in *Christine Goodwin*, the institution of marriage has undergone major social changes since the adoption of the Convention, the Court notes that there is no European consensus regarding same-sex marriage. At present no more than six out of forty-seven Convention States allow same-sex marriage (see paragraph 27 above).

53. As the respondent Government as well as the third-party Government have rightly pointed out, the present case has to be distinguished from *Christine Goodwin*. In that case (cited above, § 103) the Court perceived a convergence of standards regarding marriage of transsexuals in their assigned gender. Moreover, *Christine Goodwin* is concerned with marriage of partners who are of different gender, if gender is defined not by purely biological criteria but by taking other factors including gender reassignment of one of the partners into account.

54. Turning to the comparison between Article 12 of the Convention and Article 9 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (the Charter), the Court has already noted that the latter has deliberately dropped the reference to men and women (see *Christine Goodwin*, cited above, § 100). The commentary to the Charter, which became legally binding in December 2009, confirms that Article 9 is meant to be broader in scope than the corresponding articles in other human rights instruments (see paragraph 25 above). At the same time the reference to domestic law reflects the diversity of national regulations, which range from allowing same-sex marriage to explicitly forbidding it. By referring to national law, Article 9 of the Charter leaves the decision whether or not to allow same-sex marriage to the States. In the words of the commentary: "... it may be argued that there is no obstacle to recognize same-sex relationships in the context of marriage. There is however, no explicit requirement that domestic laws should facilitate such marriages."

55. Regard being had to Article 9 of the Charter, therefore, the Court would no longer consider that the right to marry enshrined in Article 12 must in all circumstances be limited to marriage between two persons of the opposite sex. Consequently, it cannot be said that Article 12 is inapplicable to the applicants' complaint. However, as matters stand, the question whether or not to allow same-sex marriage is left to regulation by the national law of the Contracting State.

56. In that connection the Court observes that marriage has deep-rooted social and cultural connotations which may differ largely from one

society to another. The Court reiterates that it must not rush to substitute its own judgment in place of that of the national authorities, who are best placed to assess and respond to the needs of society (see *B. and L. v. the United Kingdom*, cited above, § 36).

57. In conclusion, the Court finds that Article 12 of the Convention does not impose an obligation on the respondent Government to grant a same-sex couple like the applicants access to marriage.

58. Consequently, there has been no violation of Article 12 of the Convention.

III. ALLEGED VIOLATION OF ARTICLE 14 TAKEN IN CONJUNCTION WITH ARTICLE 8 OF THE CONVENTION

59. The applicants complained under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8 of the Convention that they were discriminated against on account of their sexual orientation, since they were denied the right to marry and did not have any other possibility to have their relationship recognised by law before the entry into force of the Registered Partnership Act.

Article 8 reads as follows:

“1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life,

...

2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

Article 14 provides as follows:

“The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in [the] Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.”

A. Admissibility

1. Exhaustion of domestic remedies

60. The Government argued in their written observations that, before the domestic authorities, the applicants had complained exclusively about the impossibility to marry. Any other points raised explicitly or implicitly in their application to the Court, such as the question of any alternative legal recognition of their relationship, were to be declared inadmissible for non-exhaustion. However, the Government did not explicitly pursue that argument in their oral pleadings before the

Court. On the contrary, they stated that the issue of registered partnership could be regarded as being inherent in the present application.

61. The applicants contested the Government's non-exhaustion argument, asserting in particular that the aspect of being discriminated against as a same-sex couple formed part of their complaint and that they had also relied on the Court's case-law under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8 in their constitutional complaint.

62. The Court reiterates that Article 35 § 1 of the Convention requires that complaints intended to be made subsequently at Strasbourg should have been made to the appropriate domestic body, at least in substance and in compliance with the formal requirements and time-limits laid down in domestic law (see *Akdivar and Others v. Turkey*, 16 September 1996, § 66, *Reports of Judgments and Decisions* 1996-IV).

63. The domestic proceedings in the present case related to the authorities' refusal to permit the applicants' marriage. As the possibility to enter into a registered partnership did not exist at the material time, it is difficult to see how the applicants could have raised the question of legal recognition of their partnership except by trying to conclude marriage. Consequently, their constitutional complaint also focused on the lack of access to marriage. However, they also complained, at least in substance, about the lack of any other means to have their relationship recognised by law. Thus, the Constitutional Court was in a position to deal with the issue and, indeed, addressed it briefly, albeit only by stating that it was for the legislator to examine in which areas the law possibly discriminated against same-sex couples by restricting certain rights to married couples. In these circumstances, the Court is satisfied that the applicants complied with the requirement of exhausting domestic remedies.

64. In any case, the Court agrees with the Government that the issue of alternative legal recognition is so closely connected to the issue of lack of access to marriage that it has to be considered as being inherent in the present application.

65. In conclusion, the Court dismisses the Government's argument that the applicants failed to exhaust domestic remedies in respect of their complaint under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8.

2. *The applicants' victim status*

66. In their oral pleadings before the Court the Government also raised the question whether the applicants could still claim to be victims of the alleged violation following the entry into force of the Registered Partnership Act.

67. The Court reiterates that an applicant's status as a victim may depend on compensation being awarded at domestic level on the basis of the facts about which he or she complains before the Court and on

whether the domestic authorities have acknowledged, either expressly or in substance, the breach of the Convention. Only when those two conditions are satisfied does the subsidiary nature of the Convention preclude examination of an application (see, for instance, *Scordino v. Italy* (dec.), no. 36813/97, ECHR 2003-IV).

68. In the present case, the Court does not have to examine whether the first condition has been fulfilled, as the second condition has not been met. The Government have made it clear that the Registered Partnership Act was introduced as a matter of policy choice and not in order to fulfil an obligation under the Convention (see paragraph 80 below). Therefore, the introduction of the said Act cannot be regarded as an acknowledgement of the breach of the Convention alleged by the applicants. Consequently, the Court dismisses the Government's argument that the applicants can no longer claim to be victims of the alleged violation of Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8.

3. Conclusion

69. The Court considers, in the light of the parties' submissions, that the complaint raises serious issues of fact and law under the Convention, the determination of which requires an examination of the merits. The Court concludes therefore that this complaint is not manifestly ill-founded within the meaning of Article 35 § 3 of the Convention. No other ground for declaring it inadmissible has been established.

B. Merits

1. The parties' submissions

70. The applicants maintained that the heart of their complaint was that they were discriminated against as a same-sex couple. Agreeing with the Government on the applicability of Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8, they asserted that just like differences based on sex, differences based on sexual orientation required particularly serious reasons for justification. In the applicants' contention the Government had failed to submit any such reasons for excluding them from access to marriage.

71. It followed from the Court's *Karner* judgment (cited above, § 40) that the protection of the traditional family was a weighty and legitimate reason, but it had to be shown that a given difference was also necessary to achieve that aim. In the applicants' assertion nothing showed that the exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage was necessary to protect the traditional family.

72. In their oral pleadings, reacting to the introduction of the Registered Partnership Act, the applicants argued that the remaining differences between marriage on the one hand and registered partnership on the other were still discriminatory. They mentioned in particular that

the Registered Partnership Act did not provide a possibility to enter into an engagement; that, unlike marriages, registered partnerships were not concluded at the Office for matters of Personal Status but at the District Administrative Authority; that there was no entitlement to compensation in the event of wrongful death of the partner; and that it was unclear whether certain benefits which were granted to “families” would also be granted to registered partners and the children of one of them living in the common household. Although differences based on sexual orientation required particularly weighty reasons, no such reasons had been given by the Government.

73. The Government accepted that Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8 of the Convention applied. So far the Court's case-law had considered homosexual relationships to fall within the notion of “private life” but there might be good reasons to include the relationship of a same-sex couple living together in the scope of “family life”.

74. Regarding compliance with the requirements of Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8, the Government maintained that it was within the legislator's margin of appreciation whether or not same-sex couples were given a possibility to have their relationship recognised by law in any other form than marriage. The Austrian legislator had made the policy choice to give same-sex couples such a possibility. Under the Registered Partnership Act which had entered into force on 1 January 2010 same-sex partners were able to enter into a registered partnership which provided them with a status very similar to marriage. The new law covered such diverse fields as civil and criminal law, labour, social and social insurance law, fiscal law, the law on administrative procedure, the law on data protection and public service, passport and registration issues, as well as the law on foreigners.

2. The third parties' submissions

75. As to the applicability of Article 8, the third-party Government submitted that although the Court's case-law as it stood did not consider same-sex relationships to fall within the notion of “family life”, this should not be excluded in the future. Nonetheless Article 8 read in conjunction with Article 14 should not be interpreted so as to require either access to marriage or the creation of alternative forms of legal recognition for same-sex partnerships.

76. Regarding the justification for that difference in treatment, the third-party Government contested the applicants' argument drawn from the Court's *Karner* judgment. In that case the Court had found that excluding same-sex couples from protection provided to different-sex couples under the Rent Act was not necessary for achieving the legitimate aim of protecting the family in the traditional sense. The issue in the present case was different: what was at stake was the question of access

to marriage or alternative legal recognition. The justification for that particular difference in treatment between different-sex and same-sex couples was laid down in Article 12 of the Convention itself.

77. Finally, the third-party Government submitted that in the United Kingdom the Civil Partnership Act 2004 which had come into force in December 2005 had introduced a system of partnership registration for same-sex couples. However, the said Act was introduced as a policy choice in order to promote social justice and equality, while it was not considered that the Convention imposed a positive obligation to provide such a possibility. In the Government's view this position was supported by the Court's decision in *Courten v. the United Kingdom* (no. 4479/06, 4 November 2008).

78. The four non-governmental organisations pleaded in their joint comments that the Court should rule on the question whether a same-sex relationship of cohabiting partners fell under the notion of “family life” within the meaning of Article 8 of the Convention. They noted that the question had been left open in *Karner* (cited above, § 33). They argued that by now it was generally accepted that same-sex couples had the same capacity to establish a long-term emotional and sexual relationship as different-sex couples and, thus, had the same needs as different-sex couples to have their relationship recognised by law.

79. Were the Court not to find that Article 12 required Contracting States to grant same-sex couples access to marriage, it should address the question whether there was an obligation under Article 14 taken together with Article 8 to provide alternative means of legal recognition of a same-sex partnership.

80. The non-governmental organisations answered that question in the affirmative: firstly, excluding same-sex couples from particular rights and benefits attached to marriage (such as for instance the right to a survivor's pension) without giving them access to any alternative means to qualify would amount to indirect discrimination (see *Thlimmenos v. Greece* [GC], no. 34369/97, § 44, ECHR 2000-IV). Secondly, they agreed with the applicants' argument drawn from *Karner* (cited above). Thirdly, they asserted that the state of European consensus increasingly supported the idea that member States were under an obligation to provide, if not access to marriage, alternative means of legal recognition. By now almost 40% had legislation allowing same-sex couples to register their relationships as marriages or under an alternative name (see paragraphs 27-28 above).

3. *The Court's assessment*

a. Applicability of Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8

81. The Court has dealt with a number of cases concerning discrimination on account of sexual orientation. Some were examined

under Article 8 alone, namely cases concerning the prohibition under criminal law of homosexual relations between adults (see *Dudgeon v. the United Kingdom*, 22 October 1981, Series A no. 45; *Norris v. Ireland*, 26 October 1988, Series A no. 142; and *Modinos v. Cyprus*, 22 April 1993, Series A no. 259) and the discharge of homosexuals from the armed forces (see *Smith and Grady v. the United Kingdom*, nos. 33985/96 and 33986/96, ECHR 1999-VI). Others were examined under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8. These included, *inter alia*, different age of consent under criminal law for homosexual relations (*L. and V. v. Austria*, nos. 39392/98 and 39829/98, ECHR 2003-I), the attribution of parental rights (*Salgueiro da Silva Mouta v. Portugal*, no. 33290/96, ECHR 1999-IX), permission to adopt a child (*Fretté v. France*, no. 36515/97, ECHR 2002-I, and *E.B. v. France*, cited above) and the right to succeed to the deceased partner's tenancy (*Karner*, cited above).

82. In the present case, the applicants have formulated their complaint under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8. The Court finds it appropriate to follow this approach.

83. As the Court has consistently held, Article 14 complements the other substantive provisions of the Convention and its Protocols. It has no independent existence since it has effect solely in relation to “the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms” safeguarded by those provisions. Although the application of Article 14 does not presuppose a breach of those provisions – and to this extent it is autonomous –, there can be no room for its application unless the facts at issue fall within the ambit of one or more of the latter (see, for instance, *E.B. v. France*, cited above, § 47; *Karner*, cited above, § 32; and *Petrovic v. Austria*, 27 March 1998, § 22, *Reports* 1998-II).

84. It is undisputed in the present case that the relationship of a same-sex couple like the applicants' falls within the notion of “private life” within the meaning of Article 8. However, in the light of the parties' comments the Court finds it appropriate to address the issue whether their relationship also constitutes “family life”.

85. The Courts reiterates its established case-law in respect of different-sex couples, namely that the notion of family under this provision is not confined to marriage-based relationships and may encompass other *de facto* “family” ties where the parties are living together out of wedlock. A child born out of such a relationship is *ipso jure* part of that “family” unit from the moment and by the very fact of his birth (see *Elsholz v. Germany* [GC], no. 25735/94, § 43, ECHR 2000-VIII; *Keegan v. Ireland*, 26 May 1994, § 44, Series A no. 290; and also *Johnston and Others v. Ireland*, 18 December 1986, § 56, Series A no. 112).

86. In contrast, the Court's case-law has only accepted that the emotional and sexual relationship of a same-sex couple constitutes “private life” but has not found that it constitutes “family life”, even where a long-term relationship of cohabiting partners was at stake. In coming to that conclusion, the Court observed that despite the growing tendency in a number of European States towards the legal and judicial recognition of stable *de facto* partnerships between homosexuals, given the existence of little common ground between the Contracting States, this was an area in which they still enjoyed a wide margin of appreciation (see *Mata Estevez v. Spain* (dec.), no. 56501/00, ECHR 2001-VI, with further references). In the case of *Karner* (cited above, § 33), concerning the succession of a same-sex couples' surviving partner to the deceased's tenancy rights, which fell under the notion of “home”, the Court explicitly left open the question whether the case also concerned the applicant's “private and family life”.

87. The Court notes that since 2001, when the decision in *Mata Estevez* was given, a rapid evolution of social attitudes towards same-sex couples has taken place in many member States. Since then a considerable number of member States have afforded legal recognition to same-sex couples (see above, paragraphs 27-30). Certain provisions of EU law also reflect a growing tendency to include same-sex couples in the notion of “family” (see paragraph 26 above).

88. In view of this evolution the Court considers it artificial to maintain the view that, in contrast to a different-sex couple, a same-sex couple cannot enjoy “family life” for the purposes of Article 8. Consequently the relationship of the applicants, a cohabiting same-sex couple living in a stable *de facto* partnership, falls within the notion of “family life”, just as the relationship of a different-sex couple in the same situation would.

89. The Court therefore concludes that the facts of the present case fall within the notion of “private life” as well as “family life” within the meaning of Article 8. Consequently, Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8 applies.

b. Compliance with Article 14 taken together with Article 8

90. The Court has established in its case-law that in order for an issue to arise under Article 14 there must be a difference in treatment of persons in relevantly similar situations. Such a difference of treatment is discriminatory if it has no objective and reasonable justification; in other words, if it does not pursue a legitimate aim or if there is not a reasonable relationship of proportionality between the means employed and the aim sought to be realised. The Contracting States enjoy a margin of appreciation in assessing whether and to what extent differences in

otherwise similar situations justify a difference in treatment (see *Burden*, cited above, § 60).

91. On the one hand the Court has held repeatedly that, just like differences based on sex, differences based on sexual orientation require particularly serious reasons by way of justification (see *Karner*, cited above, § 37; *L. and V. v. Austria*, cited above, § 45; and *Smith and Grady*, cited above, § 90). On the other hand, a wide margin is usually allowed to the State under the Convention when it comes to general measures of economic or social strategy (see, for instance, *Stec and Others v. the United Kingdom* [GC], no. 65731/01, § 52, ECHR 2006-VI).

92. The scope of the margin of appreciation will vary according to the circumstances, the subject matter and its background; in this respect, one of the relevant factors may be the existence or non-existence of common ground between the laws of the Contracting States (see *Petrovic*, cited above, § 38).

93. While the parties have not explicitly addressed the issue whether the applicants were in a relevantly similar situation to different-sex couples, the Court would start from the premise that same-sex couples are just as capable as different-sex couples of entering into stable committed relationships. Consequently, they are in a relevantly similar situation to a different-sex couple as regards their need for legal recognition and protection of their relationship.

94. The applicants argued that they were discriminated against as a same-sex couple, firstly, in that they still did not have access to marriage and, secondly, in that no alternative means of legal recognition were available to them until the entry into force of the Registered Partnership Act.

95. Insofar as the applicants appear to contend that, if not included in Article 12, the right to marry might be derived from Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8, the Court is unable to share their view. It reiterates that the Convention is to be read as a whole and its Articles should therefore be construed in harmony with one another (see *Johnston and Others*, cited above, § 57). Having regard to the conclusion reached above, namely that Article 12 does not impose an obligation on Contracting States to grant same-sex couples access to marriage, Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8, a provision of more general purpose and scope, cannot be interpreted as imposing such an obligation either.

96. Turning to the second limb of the applicants' complaint, namely the lack of alternative legal recognition, the Court notes that at the time when the applicants lodged their application they did not have any possibility to have their relationship recognised under Austrian law. That

situation obtained until 1 January 2010, when the Registered Partnership Act entered into force.

97. The Court reiterates in this connection that in proceedings originating in an individual application it has to confine itself, as far as possible, to an examination of the concrete case before it (see *F. v. Switzerland*, cited above, § 31). Given that at present it is open to the applicants to enter into a registered partnership, the Court is not called upon to examine whether the lack of any means of legal recognition for same-sex couples would constitute a violation of Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8 if it still obtained today.

98. What remains to be examined in the circumstances of the present case is whether the respondent State should have provided the applicants with an alternative means of legal recognition of their partnership any earlier than it did.

99. The Court cannot but note that there is an emerging European consensus towards legal recognition of same-sex couples. Moreover, this tendency has developed rapidly over the past decade. Nevertheless, there is not yet a majority of States providing for legal recognition of same-sex couples. The area in question must therefore still be regarded as one of evolving rights with no established consensus, where States must also enjoy a margin of appreciation in the timing of the introduction of legislative changes (see *Courten*, cited above; see also *M.W. v. the United Kingdom* (dec.), no. 11313/02, 23 June 2009, both relating to the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act in the United Kingdom).

100. The Austrian Registered Partnership Act, which entered into force on 1 January 2010, reflects the evolution described above and is thus part of the emerging European consensus. Though not in the vanguard, the Austrian legislator cannot be reproached for not having introduced the Registered Partnership Act any earlier (see, *mutatis mutandis*, *Petrovic*, cited above, § 41).

101. Finally, the Court will examine the applicants' argument that they are still discriminated against as a same sex-couple on account of certain differences conferred by the status of marriage on the one hand and registered partnership on the other.

102. The Court starts from its findings above, that States are still free, under Article 12 of the Convention as well as under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8, to restrict access to marriage to different-sex couples. Nevertheless the applicants appear to argue that if a State chooses to provide same-sex couples with an alternative means of recognition, it is obliged to confer a status on them which – though carrying a different name – corresponds to marriage in each and every respect. The Court is not convinced by that argument. It considers on the

contrary that States enjoy a certain margin of appreciation as regards the exact status conferred by alternative means of recognition.

103. The Court observes that the Registered Partnership Act gives the applicants a possibility to obtain a legal status equal or similar to marriage in many respects (see paragraphs 18-23 above). While there are only slight differences in respect of material consequences, some substantial differences remain in respect of parental rights. However, this corresponds on the whole to the trend in other member States (see paragraphs 32-33 above). Moreover, the Court is not called upon in the present case to examine each and every one of these differences in detail. For instance, as the applicants have not claimed that they are directly affected by the remaining restrictions concerning artificial insemination or adoption, it would go beyond the scope of the present application to examine whether these differences are justified. On the whole, the Court does not see any indication that the respondent State exceeded its margin of appreciation in its choice of rights and obligations conferred by registered partnership.

104. In conclusion, the Court finds there has been no violation of Article 14 of the Convention taken in conjunction with Article 8.

IV. ALLEGED VIOLATION OF ARTICLE 1 OF PROTOCOL NO. 1

105. The applicants complained that, compared with married couples they suffered disadvantages in the financial sphere, in particular under tax law. They relied on Article 1 of Protocol No. 1, which reads as follows:

“Every natural or legal person is entitled to the peaceful enjoyment of his possessions. No one shall be deprived of his possessions except in the public interest and subject to the conditions provided for by law and by the general principles of international law.

The preceding provisions shall not, however, in any way impair the right of a State to enforce such laws as it deems necessary to control the use of property in accordance with the general interest or to secure the payment of taxes or other contributions or penalties.”

Admissibility

106. In their written observations the Government argued that the applicants' complaint about possible discrimination in the financial sphere was to be declared inadmissible for non-exhaustion. They did not, however, explicitly pursue that argument in their oral pleadings before the Court.

107. The Court notes that the applicants touched upon the issue of discrimination in the financial sphere, in particular in tax law, in their complaint before the Constitutional Court in order to illustrate their main

complaint, namely that they were discriminated against as a same-sex couple in that they did not have access to marriage.

108. In the circumstances of the present case, the Court is not called upon to resolve the question whether or not the applicants exhausted domestic remedies. It notes that in their application to the Court the applicants did not give any details in respect of the alleged violation of Article 1 of Protocol No. 1. The Court therefore considers that this complaint has not been substantiated.

109. It follows that this complaint is manifestly ill-founded and must be rejected in accordance with Article 35 §§ 3 and 4 of the Convention.

FOR THESE REASONS, THE COURT

1. *Dismisses* unanimously the Government's request to strike the application out of the Court's list;

2. *Declares* by six votes to one admissible the applicants' complaint under Article 12 of the Convention;

3. *Declares* unanimously admissible the applicants' complaint under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8 of the Convention;

4. *Declares* unanimously inadmissible the remainder of the application;

5. *Holds* unanimously that there has been no violation of Article 12 of the Convention;

6. *Holds* by four votes to three that there has been no violation of Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 8 of the Convention;

[...]