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Lukasz Doktor, Adriana Palczewska & Maciej Rzepka
DOKTÓR JERSZYŃSKI PIETRAS

Efficiency of process

The Polish civil justice system is administered by 318 district courts, 45 regional courts, 11 courts of appeal and the Supreme Court. District courts (*sąd rejonowy*) settle smaller cases as first instance courts. Regional courts (*sąd okręgowy*) serve as first instance courts in disputes of the value in excess of PLN 75,000 (approx. EUR 17,600) or in certain specified matters, and as second instance courts hearing appeals against the rulings of district courts. Courts of appeal hear appeals against the rulings issued by regional courts in the first instance.

Also, there are several types of specialised courts which have exclusive jurisdiction over certain types of matters, such as the Court of Competition and Consumer Protection (for appeals against decisions of certain regulatory bodies, including the Polish competition and consumer protection authority) or the Court of Community Trade Marks and Designs.

Polish civil procedure is generally two-tiered. An appeal to a court of second instance may be based on points of fact and/or points of law. Although the ruling issued by a second instance court is final, it may be challenged through a cassation appeal submitted to the Supreme Court. A cassation appeal may be based only on points of law and is limited to certain types of disputes (i.e. most non-monetary claims as well as monetary claims exceeding PLN 50,000 (approx. EUR 11,800)). Even if the formal criteria of a cassation appeal are met, the appellant must demonstrate a major legal issue requiring resolution or guidance, qualified errors in proceedings or a manifestly legitimate nature of the appeal. If any of those circumstances are successfully demonstrated, the case is remanded for the Supreme Court's examination, and if not – the case is dismissed. Although the Polish legal system is based on statutory law, the Supreme Court's rulings play an important role in shaping the jurisprudence of lower courts.

Mechanisms intended to streamline judicial proceedings are continuously being introduced in Poland as governments. The Polish parliament is currently proceeding an amendment to the Code of Civil Procedure providing for several new procedural solutions aimed at speeding up the proceedings, including a preliminary organisational hearing, a rule of single court hearing in simple cases, a possibility for the witnesses to testify in writing, etc.

Polish law provides for several simplified and low-cost procedures for categories of monetary claims if the claimant provides sufficient documents supporting the claim in which a summary judgment may be issued based on these documents, without comprehensive evidence-taking process. An example of these is an electronic summary judgment procedure, applicable mainly to contractual claims with a value not exceeding PLN 20,000 (around EUR 4,600). In this procedure, a statement of claim is submitted online in an electronic

form, via the website provided by the Ministry of Justice. Any court decisions, including the summary judgment, are also prepared and delivered to the parties via electronic means. This electronic procedure has proven to be an efficient and timely way to assert claims – in 2018, the average time of case settlement in this procedure was four months as compared to 13 months in a regular, full-trial procedure.

Currently, court hearings are recorded on a sound or audio-visual recording – a solution which helped reduce the duration of court hearings by an average of 30%. Also, fitting out the courtrooms with recording devices has led to further enhancements of the procedure, such as videoconferences with other courts to hear witnesses residing outside the locality of the court seized.

The parties and their attorneys may access online information on the status of court proceedings via an online platform provided by the Ministry of Justice. Use of the system is free of charge and enables to view court orders, download recordings of the hearings, access information on the planned court hearings and recent actions of the court.

Further developments are also planned as regards the digitalisation of court proceedings. For example, work is under way on legislation that will enable parties and their attorneys online reception of official correspondence from courts and other public authorities. Also, the Polish Code of Civil Procedure already contains provisions enabling the parties to lodge pleadings electronically (even in regular civil proceedings), but an IT system necessary to make use of such possibility has not yet been implemented.

Integrity of process

The judicial system in Poland has been undergoing reforms since 2015. Some of the reforms have sparked controversies and led to opinions that they do or may jeopardise independence and impartiality of the judiciary. The most debated elements of the said reforms were a new system of appointment of judges who are members of the National Judiciary Council (a body that appoints and promotes common court judges), appointment of presidents of common courts (judges who supervise and manage the administrative affairs of a given court) by the Minister of Justice, lowering the retirement age of common courts judges as well as the judges of the Supreme Court (to the general retirement age applicable to all workers) with the right of the Minister of Justice or the President to allow an extension of the term of office beyond retirement age as well as introduction of a new chamber of the Supreme Court overseeing disciplinary proceedings against judges.

As a result, some of the reforms have been withdrawn, e.g., application of new retirement age to the current judges on the Supreme Court accompanied by a discretionary right of the President to allow a Supreme Court judge to continue his or her duties beyond the retirement age. This reform has then been ruled by the Court of Justice of the EU (case C-619/18) to infringe EU law. Other cases before the EU Court of Justice are still pending and a judgment on the new regime for disciplinary proceedings is expected to be handed down in September this year.

Despite the aforementioned controversies, the Polish judiciary remains independent and impartial and the government's or parliament's powers in respect of the appointment or promotion of the judges are not greater than those existing in many EU countries, e.g., Germany or France. The level of corruption is low, as evidenced by the “no corruption” factor in civil justice amounting to 0.77 in WJP Rule of Law Index 2019. There is no visible trend on the part of judges to favour government in disputes with third parties, including foreign investors and there are no reasons to assume lack of impartiality of the court in a regular commercial dispute.

The Polish law provides for two main instruments related to the concept of natural justice. First, it is possible to assert a transaction invalid on equitable grounds, in an action seeking to declare the transaction as invalid as well as through a defence raised in response to an action seeking enforcement of terms of such transaction. This instrument applies also to disputes between business parties, although the general tendency is to treat it more restrictively than in disputes between private individuals or in consumer matters. According to the judicature of the Supreme Court, the application of these instruments requires two criteria to be met, i.e. there must be a specific equitable rule grossly infringed by the disputed transaction, e.g., loyalty in business dealings, basic contractual balance, etc. and the infringement in question must result from specific circumstances adversely affecting the broadly understood freedom of contract of the injured party, e.g., emergency situation or lack of proper information, etc.

The other instrument is equivalent to an estoppel in common law systems, i.e. it may be used only as a defence and enables the court to prevent a party from asserting its rights under law or contract on equitable grounds. This may happen only in specific circumstances which may be temporary or permanent. Theoretically, the estoppel may be invoked both in private as well as in business disputes although the courts tend to allow it only exceptionally in the latter.

Privilege and disclosure

The Polish legal system provides for attorney-client privilege. Professional lawyers (i.e. advocates and legal advisers) are obliged to maintain the secrecy of all information learned in connection with the provision of legal assistance to a client. The duration of this obligation is unlimited and a lawyer cannot be relieved from it. According to the prevailing view of the doctrine, however, the privilege can be waived by its holder (the client). Consequently, a lawyer summoned as a witness in a court proceeding has the right, and at the same time, an obligation to refuse to answer a question relating to the privileged information. A lawyer is also entitled and obliged to refuse the court order requesting him or her to produce a document if it contains privileged information. A lawyer disclosing privileged client information bears civil liability (damages), disciplinary liability and in certain cases even criminal liability.

Other forms of privilege available under Polish law relates to mediation proceedings, provided for in the Polish Code of Civil Procedure as a method of an alternative dispute resolution. The mediation proceedings are confidential. A mediator, the parties and other persons participating in mediation proceedings are obliged to maintain secrecy of facts disclosed to them in connection with the mediation. Only the parties may release the mediator and other persons participating in the mediation proceedings from the said confidentiality obligation. Any settlement proposals, mutual concessions or other statements made in mediation have no effect when invoked by a party in the course of court or arbitration proceedings. As regards informal settlement negotiations, their confidentiality is not addressed in the provisions of law. The advocates' code of ethics (enacted by the advocate bar association), stipulates that an advocate is obliged to keep such negotiations confidential if other advocates or legal advisers participate in such negotiations.

As a rule, court hearings in Poland are open to the public. In certain circumstances though, a court may order the whole or part of a hearing to be held *in camera*. An announcement of a judgment is always public. By contrast, access to case files is restricted only to the parties and their attorneys. Judicial decisions, including their written grounds, are made public after

being anonymised. A vast number of them are regularly published on the website <http://orzeczenia.ms.gov.pl/> run by the Ministry of Justice, as well as in commercial databases.

Evidence

With regard to evidence, Polish civil procedure is predominantly adversarial. It is primarily the parties' responsibility to present evidence in order to support their claims. Theoretically, a court is permitted by law to admit evidence which has not been presented by a party. However, according to the established view of judicature and legal doctrine, this may be done only in exceptional circumstances, e.g., when a case can hardly be resolved without additional evidence.

As a rule, parties may put forward factual allegations and present evidence up to the end of a trial. However, they are obliged to do so without a delay. Accordingly, a court may disregard allegations or evidence that it finds delayed, unless a party is able to prove that the delay occurred by no fault of its own or that taking such belated allegations or evidence into consideration will not delay the resolution of the case, or that other exceptional circumstances occur.

Polish law does not recognise disclosure or discovery procedures, other than in antitrust damages claims where the Polish law implements the provisions of EU Directive 2014/104/EU relating to damages claims for infringements of competition law. It is up to parties whether they want to produce certain evidence during the proceedings or not. There are, however, some procedural mechanisms in place to help a party obtain evidence that is not under its control.

Firstly, a party may apply to a court for ordering the other party or a third party to produce a document in its possession if such document constitutes evidence relevant for the case. If the addressee of the order, being the other party to a trial, refuses to produce the document, a court may assume that factual allegations that a party seeking the order wanted to prove with this document – are true. If the addressee of the order is a third party, unjustified refusal to produce a document is sanctioned with a fine imposed by the court.

Secondly, if a party relies on the records of a commercial enterprise and the delivery of such records to the court poses major difficulties, the court may order their review in the place where they are kept – either by a whole panel or by one delegated judge.

Costs

The general principle is that costs of the dispute are paid by the losing party, including the obligation to reimburse the opponent with the costs incurred. There are, however, a number of exceptions to that principle. Firstly, if the claim is not awarded in full, the costs should be proportionally shared between the parties. Moreover, the court may decide not to charge the losing party with the costs if it finds it justified on the grounds of equity. Also, the obligation to reimburse the costs may be imposed on the claimant winning the case, if the defendant gave no reason to bring an action and admitted the sought claim upon being sued.

Each party to the dispute may also apply for a full or partial exemption from the litigation costs, if it demonstrates that it is unable to bear such costs. A party exempt from the costs may also request a legal aid attorney. However, even if the losing party was exempt from the costs, it remains obliged to reimburse the opponent for the incurred costs on general terms.

If a statement of claim is submitted by a party residing outside of the EU, the claimant may be obliged, upon a defendant's request, to pay bail securing litigation costs, subject to certain specific exceptions, e.g., if the claimant has sufficient property in Poland, if the Polish court jurisdiction arises from contract or if the Polish court's ruling on the reimbursement of litigation costs would be enforceable in the claimant's country of residence. If the claimant does not pay the ordered bail, the claim will be rejected.

Litigation costs in Poland are reasonably predictable and comprise:

- court fees payable on the pleading initiating the case in a particular instance, e.g., statement of claim, appeal, etc. The amount of the court fee varies depending on the subject matter of a dispute and may either be fixed (in specific cases listed in the Polish Act on Court Fees in Civil Proceedings) or calculated as a percentage of the total claim value – 5%, but not more than PLN 100,000 (approx. EUR 23,500);
- expenses incurred in relation to the proceedings (which may include *inter alia*: remuneration of an expert witness or a court translator appointed in the case, other expenses related to taking of evidence, travel expenses of the parties, witnesses and attorneys incurred in attending the hearings); and
- costs of legal representation in the proceedings subject to maximum amounts provided for in the provisions of law in respect of particular types of cases, depending on the subject matter of a dispute or total claim value. As a result, the legal representation costs agreed upon with the attorney and actually incurred by the party may – and usually do – exceed the lawyer's fees awarded by the court.

Certain changes as regards litigation costs are currently in progress. Generally, court fees are to be increased (up to a maximum amount of PLN 200,000), except the fees due from individuals (especially consumers) in disputes with entrepreneurs, which are to be fixed regardless of the amount in dispute.

Litigation funding

Third party litigation funding is not very common in Poland, except for claim purchasing by specialised debt recovery companies and securitisation funds. The relative high number of overdue receivables in the Polish market (depending on the industry) is a key driver and financial institutions or telecom operators use this option frequently.

Contingency fee arrangements between lawyers and their clients are in principle legal and permitted by the bar associations subject to a requirement according to which a contingency fee should not be the only remuneration of an advocate or legal adviser.

Legal expense insurance policies are offered by many insurance companies but their use is not very popular; many of the offered insurance products are limited to add-ons to car insurance. According to public domain data, the value of stand-alone legal expense insurance policies in 2017 did not exceed PLN 100m which means that further development of this market is to be expected.

Third party claim financing is present on the Polish market only to a limited extent. Given the relatively frequent court disputes in Poland, this market segment is expected to experience dynamic growth if combined with sufficient marketing campaigns.

Class actions

Polish legislation provides for an opt-in model of class actions, which means that each

claimant must clearly express its will to join the proceedings. Only certain types of claims may be asserted through class action lawsuits, i.e.: claims for damage caused by a hazardous product; tortious liability claims; claims resulting from a breach of contract; claims on account of unjust enrichment; and consumer protection claims.

A class action may be brought by at least 10 persons, whose claims are based on the same or identical factual grounds. The group is represented in the proceedings by one representative who exercises the claimant's powers. If a class action is submitted, the court orders publication of a relevant notice on initiation of the proceedings online and/or in nationwide press, so as to enable the persons concerned to join the case on a claimant's side. The merits of the case are examined upon the expiry of a deadline for joining the group (i.e. after final determination of the personal composition of the group). Any significant procedural measures, such as withdrawal, waiver or limitation of a claim or conclusion of a settlement with the defendant, require the consent of more than 50% of the members of the group in order to be effective. The awarding judgment in class action proceedings lists the relevant amounts due to each particular member of the group. An extract from such judgment enables each member to initiate enforcement proceedings against the defendant.

Introduction of an opt-out model of class actions is now under consideration. It is intended that the opt-out model will coexist with the current opt-in model and will be available in certain types of cases relating to infringement of consumer rights or competition law. The contemplated amendments are intended to facilitate civil proceedings for consumers and small entrepreneurs, who will be able to benefit from the final judgment without actually taking part in the proceedings.

Interim relief

A range of interim measures available differs depending on a type of a claim to be secured. For monetary claims, there is an exhaustive list of available interim measures, e.g., seizure of the defendant's assets, establishment of a mortgage on the defendant's real property, prohibition of the disposal of the defendant's real property and establishment of receivership over the defendant's enterprise. As regards non-monetary claims, the claimant is free to choose and request its preferred interim measure.

A claimant may apply for an interim order after, upon or even before initiation of the legal proceedings. In the latter case, the claimant will have to initiate legal proceedings proper within a deadline set by the court in the order granting injunction, not exceeding two weeks. Interim measures may also be sought from a common court when the dispute is subject to arbitration, including foreign arbitration, with the court sometimes requiring that the arbitration proceedings must be pending when an injunction is applied for to the common court.

Interim orders may be issued only at the claimant's explicit request and the relevant proceedings are conducted *ex parte* (without the defendant which is notified of the interim order upon its enforcement). In order to obtain such an order, the claimant must demonstrate the plausibility of its claim and its interest in obtaining the interim measure. The court takes into account the interests of both parties and grants a requested interim relief only if it is sufficient to secure the claimant's interest on the one hand and, on the other, is not excessively onerous to the defendant.

The granting of an interim measure may be appealed against to the court of higher instance. Interim measures awarded by foreign courts are generally enforceable in Poland. The injunctions issued in EU Member States are enforceable in Poland without *exequatur*,

provided that the injunction in question is enforceable in the issuing country. If such injunction contains interim measures not known to the Polish law, such measure will be modified by the Polish court or bailiff to correspond to the measures permitted in Poland which have equivalent effects.

On the other hand, in order to enforce a non-EU originated injunction, its enforceability must first be confirmed by a Polish court which will examine the terms of the injunction and verify its enforceability in the country of origin.

Enforcement of judgments/awards and cross-border litigation

The enforcement of judgments, enforceable awards and interim measures is effected by bailiffs and district courts (*sąd rejonowy*). In principle, only judgments of second instance courts are enforceable (except for interim orders which are in principle immediately enforceable) but in certain cases a first instance court may rule its judgment immediately enforceable, e.g., if a delay might result in an irreparable damage for the plaintiff, or if a judgment is based on bill of exchange, promissory note or other undisputed private documents. Such immediate enforceability may be made conditional upon the enforcing party providing adequate security.

Not only court judgments or arbitral awards are subject to enforcement. Other enforceable titles include court settlements, settlements executed in mediation and certain notarial deeds providing for voluntary submission to enforcement.

In general, all kinds of assets may be subject to enforcement and to specified exceptions such as certain household items, food, 50% of monthly wages, etc. Garnishee orders are widely used by court bailiffs without the need to obtain court approval.

Polish law provides also for certain remedies for debtors, including submitting a complaint against a bailiff to the relevant district court or bringing an action opposing the enforceability of the judgment or other title based on which the enforcement is carried out, e.g., based on events occurring after issuance of the judgment.

The enforcement of judgments issued by courts of EU Members States in civil and commercial matters is regulated by EU Brussels I Regulation Recast, i.e. they are recognised and directly enforceable in Poland without any *exequatur* requirement or separate proceedings confirming enforceability. Poland is also bound by the EU legal framework relating, *inter alia*, to cross-border service of court documents (Regulation (EC) No 1393/2007) and cross-border taking of evidence (Regulation (EC) No 1206/2001).

In respect of non-EU countries (other than those which are signatories to bilateral treaties relating to enforcement of judgments), foreign judgments are granted *exequatur* by virtue of law unless they qualify as one of the specified exceptions which include the relevant judgment not being final, the case belonged to exclusive jurisdiction of Polish courts, a party was deprived of a right to defend themselves, the judgment violates *ordre public* in Poland, etc. Lack of reciprocity does not preclude a foreign court judgment from being granted *exequatur* in Poland.

A foreign court judgment must be declared enforceable by a Polish regional court (*sąd okręgowy*) before it is enforced in Poland. Enforceability in Poland requires only enforceability in the country of issuance and lack of exceptions which would preclude *exequatur* by virtue of law.

Anti-suit injunctions are generally not available under Polish law. As between the EU Member States, anti-suit injunctions, issued by common courts, are ruled by CJEU as

incompatible with EU law (case C-185/07 *West Tankers Inc.*). Anti-suit injunctions issued by a foreign arbitration tribunal or a non-EU common court would most probably not be enforced in Poland based on *ordre public* defence and the Polish court generally refuses to issue anti-suit injunctions.

Under the EU law (Regulation (EU) No 655/2014), an EU-wide bank account freezing order issued by any EU court will be directly enforceable in Poland. Freezing orders issued by a court of a non-EU country may be enforced in Poland based on general terms applicable to interim measures. Asset tracing is generally possible only within the enforcement proceedings.

International arbitration

The Polish legal system is arbitration-friendly. In general, practically any claim, whether monetary or not, except for claims for maintenance/alimony, may be subject to arbitration. In 2005, the Polish Code of Civil Procedure was amended by adding provisions regarding arbitration, reflecting the UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration. Pursuant to these provisions, arbitral awards, whether issued in Poland or abroad, are recognised and enforceable in Poland based on an *exequatur* order of a Polish court, issued at the request of a party to the arbitration proceedings. The court may refuse to declare the enforceability of an arbitral award only in certain situations, e.g., absence of a valid arbitration agreement, if the award relates to a matter excluded from arbitration or if the award infringes *ordre public* in Poland. The proceedings before a Polish court regarding *exequatur* of an arbitral award are formal in nature and the court is not allowed to review the substance of the award, except for instances of *ordre public* violations.

Moreover, Poland has been a party to the 1958 New York Convention on Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Arbitration Awards for over 50 years by now. Arbitral awards granted in the countries signatory to of the convention are recognised and enforceable in Poland based on an *exequatur* (which is subject to conditions equivalent to those set out in the Polish Code of Civil Procedure). In turn, Polish arbitral awards are recognised in the countries-signatories, following a similar *exequatur* procedure carried out by a relevant foreign common court.

Currently, there are about 50 permanent arbitration courts in Poland. The largest number of cases are submitted to the Court of Arbitration at the Polish Chamber of Commerce in Warsaw, which also happens to be the oldest arbitration tribunal in Poland, functioning since 1950. This tribunal also handles cross-border cases (such cases account for approx. 20% of the total number of cases) and conducts proceedings in Polish, English, French, German or Russian, depending on the parties' choice.

Mediation and ADR

In spite of numerous mediation centres operating in Poland, this method of dispute resolution is not very popular. Generally, the parties may attempt to mediate both before and during legal proceedings.

Polish law provides for a general instruction for the judges to strive to procure an amicable settlement (in particular by encouraging the parties to mediation). A dispute may be submitted to mediation at any stage, pursuant to the parties' agreement or a court order. In any case, mediation is voluntary and requires consent of both parties. Mediation is conducted by a mediator, either appointed by the court or chosen by the parties.

If the mediation is successful and leads to a settlement, a common court validates such a settlement by issuing an appropriate order. Upon the issuance of such order, the settlement is equivalent to an in-court settlement, in particular it entitles the parties to initiate enforcement proceedings.

Although the courts encourage the parties to settle the disputes amicably, statistics show that mediation is not particularly effective as regards court disputes. In 2018, only 1% of civil cases was submitted to mediation, out of which 32% ended in reaching a settlement in the course of mediation.

Regulatory investigations

The Polish government agency responsible for enforcement of competition and consumer protection laws is the President of the Office for the Protection of Competition and Consumers (OPCC). Other important regulatory agencies include the Financial Supervision Commission (supervising financial institutions), Office for the Protection of Personal Data, Office for Energy Regulation (overseeing the fuel and energy market), and Office for Electronic Communication (telecom and postal services regulator).

The OPCC has relatively broad competences and effective enforcement powers in the area of competition law (enforcing Polish and EU competition laws) and consumer protection (declaring general terms and conditions as ineffective due to infringement of consumer rights and issuing decisions on infringement of collective consumer rights). It is entitled to impose significant fines (up to 10% of the turnover of the entrepreneur concerned), demand all requisite information and documents from entrepreneurs, publish information on entrepreneurs infringing consumer rights and carry out dawn raids at entrepreneurs' premises in search of evidence (also at the request of the EU Commission). Upon prior approval of the court, the OPCC may also request the Police to carry out a search of premises or means of transportation or even, in case of alleged infringements of consumer rights, carry out undercover controlled purchase.

The activities of the OPCC (as well the Office for Energy Regulation and the Office for Electronic Communication) are subject to judicial review by a specialised court, i.e. the Court for the Protection of Competition and Consumers (Competition Court). Decisions of the OPCC are subject to appeal to the Competition Court which acts as a court of first instance applying rules of civil procedure. As a result, judgments of the Competition Court are then subject to an appeal to a court of second instance and cassation appeal to the Supreme Court. Due to the specialised nature of the Competition Court, the judicial review of OPCC decisions is active and vigorous, with the Competition Court relatively frequently overturning such decisions and modifying amounts of imposed fines. The Competition Court also reviews complaints of the holders of IT systems subject to 'dawn raid' controls for potential infringements by the OPCC of the applicable procedural rules.

After implementation by Poland of the EU Directive 2014/104 on Antitrust Damages Actions, the OPCC may play an important role in court proceedings relating to antitrust damages acting as *amicus curiae* or being an addressee of specific discovery orders (applicable only in antitrust damages cases).

**Łukasz Doktór****Tel: +48 22 460 55 93 / Email: ldoktor@djp.pl**

Łukasz Doktór is a partner of DJP with nearly 20 years of experience in litigation and is the co-head of the firm's Dispute Resolution department. He now focuses on disputes regarding derivative financial instruments as well as cases involving competition and corporate issues. In addition, his experience extends to representing clients in ADR proceedings, mainly out-of-court mediation proceedings.

Łukasz Doktór has also 21 years of experience in M&A and has been involved in numerous M&A transactions of various complexity advising financial and strategic investors. He also deals with restructurings and competition law, both from the perspective of merger control and anticompetitive practices.

**Adriana Palczewska****Tel: +48 22 460 57 84 / Email: apalczewska@djp.pl**

Adriana Palczewska has been an associate at DJP since 2015 and a legal advisor at Warsaw Legal Advisors Bar Association. Adriana has five years of experience in litigation and in the field of intellectual property and new technologies. In her practice, she focuses on disputes regarding unfair competition acts, trademarks and copyrights. She has worked with business clients from various industries including energy supply, industrial automatics solutions, press publishing, cinematography and cosmetics production. She has also been involved in various transactions relating to the transfer, licensing and services of IT and media products.

**Maciej Rzepka****Tel: +48 22 460 55 99 / Email: mrzepka@djp.pl**

Maciej Rzepka joined DJP in 2011 and is a trainee advocate at Warsaw Advocates Bar Association. In the area of litigation, he focuses mainly on disputes between financial institutions and entrepreneurs regarding derivatives and agency agreements. Maciej Rzepka has also been involved in drafting and negotiating contracts underlying numerous transactions in the field of intellectual property and new technologies, including transfer, licensing and maintenance services of IT and media products, hosting services and others.

DOKTÓR JERSZYŃSKI PIETRAS

ul. Ursynowska 62, 02-605 Warszawa, Poland
Tel: +48 22 460 55 90 / Fax: +48 22 460 55 91 / URL: www.djp.pl

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