Prof. Bob Wessels explains mediation, the role of the mediators, the grounds for introducing such a person and their tasks... and asks who appoints, pays and supervises the mediator?

USA: mediation in corporate insolvency is rising

In the world of rescue and insolvency a mediator is not a stranger. In the USA mediation is frequently used in insolvency procedures, including Chapter 11 cases. In 2015, for complex multi-party restructurings it has been contended that in the USA “…the use of mediation to reach consensual plans of reorganisation, while not standard protocol in cases, has become common and is no longer controversial.”

Areas of deployment of mediation include creditors’ meetings (to have creditors negotiate and agree regarding their voting on a plan of arrangement) or structured negotiating to manage and resolve a large number of claims. A much talked-about mediation concerns the Lehman Brothers liquidation Chapter 11 cases, where hundreds of disputes arising from derivative contracts due to Lehman’s filing for bankruptcy were negotiated. From a January 2016 report it follows that 495 ADR-processes have resulted in a sum above the $3b mark for the various Lehman estates. Settlements have been achieved in 424 ADR matters involving 541 counter-parties. Until 13 January 2016, 245 ADR matters have reached the mediation stage and have been concluded, 232 have been settled in or subsequent to mediation; only 13 mediations have terminated but have not found evidence, that the implementation generates only mixed feelings. The study shows for instance that the Directive’s minimum common legal framework for mediation in the Member States has not been enacted at all in Belgium; in Finland it is only in relation to court-annexed mediation; whilst the Netherlands and the UK only have implemented the Directive in relation to cross-border mediation.

Mediation in the EU in civil and commercial law matters

In Europe, mediation is rather young in years. A Directive on certain aspects of mediation in civil and commercial matters entered into force in 2008. The Directive does not concern mediation in national cases, but only in cross-border disputes, in which at least one party is domiciled or is habitually a resident in a Member State other than that of any other party on the date on which e.g. the parties agree to use mediation after the dispute has arisen. In the Directive ‘mediation’ is defined as ‘… a structured process, however named or referred to, whereby two or more parties to a dispute attempt by themselves, on a voluntary basis, to reach an agreement on the settlement of their dispute with the assistance of a mediator. This process may be initiated by the parties or suggested or ordered by a Court or prescribed by the law of a Member State.’

Recital 6 to the Directive clarifies that mediation should be promoted because: ‘Mediation can provide a cost-effective and quick extra-judicial resolution of disputes in civil and commercial matters through processes tailored to the needs of the parties. Agreements resulting from mediation are more likely to be complied with voluntarily and are more likely to preserve an amicable and sustainable relationship between the parties. These benefits become even more pronounced in situations displaying cross-border elements.’

Many EU Member States do not seem to be convinced, however. A recent study submits that its implementation generates only mixed feelings. The study shows for instance that the Directive’s minimum common legal framework for mediation in the Member States has not been enacted at all in Belgium; in Finland it is only in relation to court-annexed mediation; whilst the Netherlands and the UK only have implemented the Directive in relation to cross-border mediation.

Revision of the Mediation Directive is underway. Although within the scope of the Mediation Directive, the study mentioned does not reveal, and I have not found evidence, that the European Commission also had in mind disputes in matters of restructuring or insolvency. It is submitted that ‘civil and commercial matters’ include matters of ‘rescue and insolvency’.
Insolvency mediation in the EU

In the EU, mediation in matters of restructuring and insolvency is used in some Member States, including Belgium, England, France (in the mandataire ad hoc and réglement amiable/conciliation proceedings an out-of-court workout is enhanced), Greece, and since 2013, Spain (‘mediador concursal’). In the Netherlands, since 2012, a pilot project called ‘Mediation in Bankruptcy Liquidation Cases’ has been initiated by the District Court in Amsterdam in 2012, but its results have not been evaluated yet. In other EU Member States mediation in insolvency has not come (yet) from the ground. Rather unnoticed, the European Commission’s Recommendation of March 2014 on a new approach to business failure and insolvency introduces a ‘mediator’. Debtors themselves should be able to restructure their business, but on a case-by-case basis the Court could appoint ‘… a mediator, in order to assist the debtor and creditors in the successful running of negotiations on a restructuring plan.’

There’s work to be done!

To make the Recommendation’s suggestion work in practice, further study is needed. It would, obviously, need a focused approach on the status of ‘mediation in restructuring and insolvency’ in the EU Member States and the role and professional qualifications of such an ‘insolvency mediator’ in a national setting.

It should include study and proposals regarding the general civil/procedural framework necessary to function fully satisfactory as such a mediator, such as the basics of a mediation agreement, including the mediation procedure to be followed, addressing issues such as commencement of mediation, opting-out, timetable; choice and appointment of the mediator, compensation, immunity, as well as the confidentiality of the process.

Other issues to address would be the criteria for referrals by Courts to mediation, the legal effect of mediation on prescription terms and pending proceedings. Such a study should be comparative in nature (between the EU Member States), should include the USA as well, and should also concentrate on the question of which topics should be subjected to a form of regulation on EU level and which ones can be left to the EU Member States.

Who will take the first step?

Footnotes:

1 Article 2(1) Mediation Directive.
4 See also Horst Edelmann and David Griffiths ‘Mediation in Cross Border Insolvency Procedures’ (2009), www.globeforum.com/resources/CrossBorder Mediation.
5 Chancery Court Guide 2013, article 5.1, provided that Courts should ‘… accommodate mediation or any other form of settlement negotiated’, see www.judges.gov.uk/downloads/courts/chancery-count/chancery-guide.doc.
9 See articles 2(1) Mediation Directive.
15 Also see Horst Edelmann and David Griffiths ‘Mediation in Cross Border Insolvency Procedures’ (2009), www.globeforum.com/resources/CrossBorder Mediation.
18 These topics are mentioned in the UNCITRAL Practice Guide on Cross-Border Insolvency Cooperation 2009, but would need attention in a national setting too.