Trademarks

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Ownership of marks Who may apply?

Any natural or legal person may own a trademark.

2 Scope of trademark

What may and may not be protected and registered as a trademark?

Under the Trademarks Act (Chapter 416 of the Laws of Malta) (TA), any sign that is capable of being represented graphically and that is capable of distinguishing goods or services of one undertaking from those of other undertakings may be registered as a trademark. A trademark may, in particular, consist of words (including personal names), figurative elements, letters, numerals or the shape of goods or their packaging.

In addition, for successful trademark registration, the trademark must not fall foul of the 'absolute grounds of refusal'. Absolute grounds for refusal include that the:

- mark is not a sign capable of graphical representation or distinguishing the goods or services claimed from those of other undertakings;
- · mark is not distinctive;
- mark consists exclusively of signs or indications that may serve, in trade, to indicate the kind, quality, intended purpose, value, geographical origin, the time of production of goods or of rendering of services, or other characteristics;
- mark consists exclusively of signs or indications that have become customary in the current language or established practices of trade in goods or services claimed;
- sign is a shape resulting from the nature of the goods;
- sign is a shape of goods that is necessary to obtain a technical effect;
- sign is a shape that gives substantial value to the goods;
- mark is contrary to public policy or accepted principles of morality;
- mark may or is likely to deceive the public as to the nature, quality or origin of goods or services;
- use of the trademark is prohibited in Malta by a rule of law;
- · application was made in bad faith; and
- mark consists of the unauthorised use of a specially protected emblem in Malta, in Paris Convention countries or in international organisations.

The above-mentioned graphical representation requirement implies that it is not possible to register marks that are not capable of being represented graphically, including 'non-traditional' marks such as smells and tastes. However, upon the implementation into Maltese law of the Trademarks Directive (2015/2436, the Directive) (which amends the Trademark Directive 2008/95/EC), the graphical representation requirement will be removed from Maltese law and, as a result, it is expected that it may be possible to register non-traditional Maltese trademarks.

Further to the above, a trademark may not be registered if it falls foul of 'relative grounds of refusal'. Relative grounds of refusal included that the:

- mark is identical to an earlier trademark registered and the goods or services are also identical;
- mark is identical or similar to an earlier trademark registered for identical or similar goods or services, and a likelihood of confusion

- exists on the part of the public, including the likelihood of association to the earlier trademark;
- mark is identical or similar to an earlier mark with a reputation in Malta and the use of the later trademark would take unfair advantage or be detrimental to the distinctive character or repute of the earlier mark; and
- use of the mark in Malta is liable to be prevented by virtue of the law protecting unregistered trademarks or other signs used in the course of trade, copyright or registered designs.

3 Common law trademarks

Can trademark rights be established without registration?

Under the Commercial Code (Chapter 13 of the Laws of Malta), unregistered trademark rights may be established without registration on the basis of prior use. In this respect, the Commercial Code provides that regardless of whether a name, mark or distinctive device has been registered as a trademark in terms of the TA, traders may not make use of any name, mark or distinctive device capable of creating confusion with any other name, mark or distinctive device lawfully used by others.

4 Registration time frame and cost

How long does it typically take, and how much does it typically cost, to obtain a trademark registration? What circumstances would increase the estimated time and cost of filing a trademark application and receiving a registration? What additional documentation is needed to file a trademark application?

A trademark application that does not encounter any objections from the Malta Industrial Property Registrations Directorate (IPRD) would typically take around six months from filing of the application to be granted registration.

The fee of €116.37 is due to the Malta IPRD for every class of goods or services covered by a trademark application. Generally, applicants instruct lawyers to draft the specification of goods and services and to file the application on their behalf and as result, professional legal fees would be incurred. Furthermore, if the trademark examiner raises any objections, then this is most likely to extend the time frame for registration and increase the costs associated with the registration.

It is to be noted that from the perspective of the Malta IPRD, no documentation is required to file a trademark application. Legal counsel generally request a power of attorney in order to file a trademark application on behalf of an applicant.

Classification system

What classification system is followed, and how does this system differ from the International Classification System as to the goods and services that can be claimed? Are multiclass applications available and what are the estimated cost savings?

The Nice Agreement Concerning the International Classification of Goods and Services for the Purposes of the Registration of Marks is implemented as a trademark classification system by the Malta IPRD by way of practice.

The Malta IPRD's online trademark application portal permits the submission of multi-class applications. However, the concept of a multi-class application is alien to Maltese trademark law. Each class covered by a trademark application is considered an individual trademark, attributed its unique trademark registration number, is examined on a sole basis and individual renewal procedures and fees would be due.

6 Examination procedure

What procedure does the trademark office follow when determining whether to grant a registration? Are applications examined for potential conflicts with other trademarks? May applicants respond to rejections by the trademark office?

Upon receipt of a trademark application, the Malta IPRD examines whether it falls foul of the absolute grounds for registration and the relative grounds for registration referred to in question 2.

In examining relative grounds of refusal, the Malta IPRD examines potential conflicts with other registered Maltese and European trademarks. In this respect, it should be noted that as opposed to the practice under the European Trademark Regulation (2015/2424) and to the practice adopted in many European countries, in Malta conflicts with other registered Maltese and European trademarks are a ground for refusal of trademark registration that is raised as an objection by the Malta IPRD itself and not by third parties.

When applicants receive an objection to their application from the Malta IPRD, they are given the opportunity to make representations to the Malta IPRD or make amendments to the application.

7 Use of a trademark and registration

Does use of a trademark or service mark have to be claimed before registration is granted or issued? Does proof of use have to be submitted? Are foreign registrations granted any rights of priority? If registration is granted without use, is there a time by which use must begin either to maintain the registration or to defeat a third-party challenge on grounds of non-use?

Use of a trademark is not a prerequisite for successful trademark registration; however, it may assist in proving that the mark is to be registered as it has acquired distinctiveness through prior use.

On application at the First Hall, Civil Court (Civil Court), third parties may successfully obtain revocation of a registered trademark on the basis that the registered trademark has not been put to genuine use in Malta within a period of five years following the date of its registration.

Further to the above, it should be noted that trademarks of a foreign country that is a member of the World Trade Organization or a party to the Paris Convention are granted a right to priority to trademark registration in Malta for a period of six months from the date of filing of the foreign trademark application.

8 Appealing a denied application

Is there an appeal process if the application is denied?

A decision of the Malta IPRD that provides for a refusal of trademark registration of an application may be appealed before the Court of Appeal.

9 Third-party opposition

Are applications published for opposition? May a third party oppose an application prior to registration, or seek cancellation of a trademark or service mark after registration? What are the primary bases of such challenges, and what are the procedures? May a brand owner oppose a bad-faith application for its mark in a jurisdiction in which it does not have protection? What is the typical range of costs associated with a third-party opposition or cancellation proceeding?

Third-party opposition proceedings during the trademark application process are not present under current Maltese law. Third-party opposition proceedings are expected to be introduced upon the implementation of the Directive into Maltese law.

10 Duration and maintenance of registration

How long does a registration remain in effect and what is required to maintain a registration? Is use of the trademark required for its maintenance? If so, what proof of use is required?

A Maltese trademark registration initially remains in effect for 10 years, with the possibility to renew for further periods each of 10 years when due for expiry. Trademark use is not a requirement for trademark maintenance.

11 The benefits of registration

What are the benefits of registration?

Trademark registration confers various benefits, including:

- a prima facie presumption of its owner's exclusive rights to use the mark in connection with the goods and services covered;
- the option of applying symbols to goods and services covered by a trademark denoting that the mark is a registered trademark;
- in enforcement, a registration allows its owner to bring a civil court action for trademark infringement rather than just on the basis of unfair competition;
- allowing the owner of a registered trademark to record the mark with the Malta Customs Authority (Customs), the government agency in charge of preventing trademark counterfeiting by monitoring Malta's borders; and
- constituting a bar to later-filed applications on the basis of confusing similarity with the earlier trademark.

12 Licences

May a licence be recorded against a mark in the jurisdiction? Are there any benefits to doing so or detriments to not doing

A licence may be recorded in the Malta IPRD trademarks register.

In order to be valid and in force between the parties thereto, a licence requires no formality other than being in writing under Maltese law. However, trademark licence rights may be enforced against third parties from the date of registration of the licence in the Malta IPRD trademarks register.

13 Assignment

What can be assigned?

Both unregistered and registered trademarks may be assigned under Maltese law. Furthermore, an assignment may cover all or some of the goods and services covered by the mark.

Upon the implementation into Maltese law of the Directive, a transfer of the whole of the undertaking includes the transfer of a trademark (unless there is an agreement to the contrary or circumstances clearly dictating otherwise).

14 Assignment documentation

What documents are required for assignment and what form must they take?

The only requirement for a valid trademark assignment under Maltese law is that the assignment must be in writing.

15 Validity of assignment

Must the assignment be recorded for purposes of its validity?

Assignment registration is not necessary for the purposes of its validity under Maltese law. However, the assignment becomes effective against third parties upon its recordal in the Malta IPRD trademarks register.

16 Security interests

Are security interests recognised and what form must they take? Must the security interest be recorded for purposes of its validity or enforceability?

Pledge and security by title transfer are recognised forms of security interests over trademarks in Malta. Security interests may not be

recorded in the Malta IPRD under current Maltese law. However, they may be registrable in other (non-trademark-specific) public registers. Furthermore, upon the implementation of the Directive, it is expected that security interests will become registrable in the Malta IPRD's trademark register.

17 Markings

What words or symbols can be used to indicate trademark use or registration? Is marking mandatory? What are the benefits of using and the risks of not using such words or symbols?

Markings such as the word 'registered' and any other symbol or word importing a reference to registration may be used to indicate that a good or service is protected by a trademark. However, use of such markings is not mandatory. Furthermore, there are no strictly legal benefits in using the 'registered' or similar symbols; however, this may serve as a deterrent to potential infringers by making it evident that the mark is a registered trademark.

It is an offence to make use of these marking, or otherwise represent that a mark is registered, if it is not.

18 Trademark enforcement proceedings

What types of legal or administrative proceedings are available to enforce the rights of a trademark owner against an alleged infringer or dilutive use of a mark, apart from previously discussed opposition and cancellation actions? Are there specialised courts or other tribunals? Is there any provision in the criminal law regarding trademark infringement or an equivalent offence?

Trademark proprietors may enforce their trademark rights in Malta at the suit of the Civil Court. The remedies available include destruction of infringing merchandise and recall of its circulation, injunctions to prevent continued infringement and awards of pecuniary damages. It may also be possible for a successful party to recover legal costs.

Customs also operates a very effective border enforcement programme against the circulation of counterfeit goods by seizing ex officio goods that are suspected to infringe trademark rights. In order to benefit from ex officio seizure by Customs, the trademark registration must also be recorded with the Customs IP database. Both Maltese and European trademarks may be recorded with Customs.

Following seizure, a civil action at the suit of the Civil Court would be necessary for the trademark owner to enforce its rights against such counterfeit goods.

In terms of criminal law provisions regarding trademark infringement, it should be noted that both the TA and the Criminal Code (Chapter 9 of the Laws of Malta) provide for an array of acts that may amount to criminal offences. Broadly, the acts that may amount to a criminal offence are those relating to intentional unauthorised use, false trademark representations, commercial and industrial trademark fraud.

19 Procedural format and timing

What is the format of the infringement proceeding?

From a procedural perspective, the procedure adopted in civil trademark infringement proceedings is identical to the procedure adopted in the general Maltese civil litigation system. Live testimony, appointment of experts, submission of evidence orally or by way of affidavit and other documentary evidence are all possible. Civil trademark infringement cases are decided by a judge sitting in the Civil Court.

Infringement cases against counterfeit goods tend to be very expeditious, generally not requiring more than two sittings. Timing of other infringement actions may vary greatly depending on the subject matter or the merits of the case.

In terms of the criminal enforcement mechanism in Malta, generally it is the police that prosecute an alleged infringer.

Update and trends

There is a noticeable emerging trend of increasing cooperation between enforcement agencies and the commercial industry in Malta, particularly in the area of anti-counterfeiting.

The currently hottest topics are the expected significant reforms in Malta's national trademark law as a result of the implementation of the Directive. While more than one change will occur, the primary changes relate to the introduction of administrative remedies for revocation and invalidity, the introduction of registration of security interests in the trademark register, the introduction of third-party opposition proceedings and the removal of the requirement of graphical representation for a successful trademark registration. These reforms are expected to start entering into force throughout next year and by no later than 14 January 2019.

In terms of notable trademark infringement cases, the cases of *Bronk Productions Limited v Fabian Scerri De Carlo* (668 and 669/2009, Civil Court 19 June 2017) were particularly notable owing to the considerations given by the Civil Court to trademark and copyright protection over fictional characters under Maltese law, considerations that were mostly firsts in nature. However, ultimately the cases were decided on the basis of 'traditional' considerations, namely a holding of a valid registered trademark and failure of proving rights to an earlier trademark.

20 Burden of proof

What is the burden of proof to establish infringement or dilution?

In civil proceedings the burden of proof lies with the claimant and is established on a balance of probabilities. In criminal proceedings, the burden of proof also lies on the claimant; however, the criminal offence must be proved beyond reasonable doubt.

21 Standing

Who may seek a remedy for an alleged trademark violation and under what conditions? Who has standing to bring a criminal complaint?

Trademark owners have the right to commence an action for trademark infringement, whereas a licensee is entitled, unless the licence specifically provides otherwise, to call on the owner of the trademark to take infringement proceedings in respect of any matter that affects its interests. If the owner refuses to do so or fails to do so within two months after being called upon by the licensee, then the licensee may bring the proceedings in its own name as if it were the proprietor. Further, an exclusive licence may provide that the exclusive licensee is entitled to bring infringement proceedings in its own name against any person other than the proprietor.

Criminal proceedings are generally initiated ex officio by the executive police. A complaint procedure is also in place whereby complaints may be filed against the executive police in order for the police to initiate criminal proceedings.

22 Foreign activities

Can activities that take place outside the country of registration support a charge of infringement or dilution?

Maltese trademarks confer protection only in Malta. However, the Maltese courts may take into consideration activities taking place outside Malta in support of a claim of infringement of a trademark in Malta.

23 Discovery

What discovery or disclosure devices are permitted for obtaining evidence from an adverse party, from third parties, or from parties outside the country?

It is possible to request an order from the Civil Court to the effect that evidence that is in control of an opposing party be presented in court by the opposing party (subject to the protection of confidential information). Provisional measures to preserve evidence are also available. Before the commencement of proceedings on the merits of the case, a person who has filed reasonably available evidence to support his or her claim that his or her trademark rights are infringed or about to be infringed, may request the court to order such prompt and effective provisional measures as it considers appropriate to preserve relevant evidence in respect of the alleged infringement. Such measures may include the detailed description, with or without the taking of samples, or the physical seizure of the infringing goods and, in appropriate cases, the materials and implements or distribution of the said goods and the documents relating thereto.

A right of information is also available. During proceedings concerning an infringement of a trademark the Civil Court may order, on the basis of a justified and proportionate request by the claimant to this effect, that information on the origin and distribution networks of the goods or services that infringe a trademark be produced before the court by the infringer or by any person who has been:

- · found in possession of infringing goods on a commercial scale;
- · found to be using the infringing services on a commercial scale;
- has been found to be providing on a commercial scale services used in infringing activities; or
- has been indicated by any of the persons referred to above as being involved in the production, manufacture or distribution of the goods or the provision of the services.

24 Timing

What is the typical time frame for an infringement or dilution, or related action, at the preliminary injunction and trial levels, and on appeal?

Preliminary injunctions tend to be very expeditious, many times decided by no more than one court sitting. Trial levels and appeals tend to vary greatly in terms of timing depending on the complexity, subject matter and merits of the case. However, cases involving counterfeit goods where the infringer does not present a defence and is represented by curators tend to be very expeditious and not involve more than two court sittings.

25 Litigation costs

What is the typical range of costs associated with an infringement or dilution action, including trial preparation, trial and appeal?

The costs associated with trademark cases may vary greatly depending on the complexity of the case and therefore they are very difficult to predetermine. Cases involving counterfeits tend to be less expensive as typically only around two sittings would be required, given that the alleged infringer would not be opposing the case.

In terms of recovery of legal costs, it is generally possible for the successful party to recover such costs. However, in actions involving

counterfeit goods, since the alleged infringer does not generally defend the case, the successful party would have to bear all costs associated with the proceedings.

26 Appeals

What avenues of appeal are available?

Decisions of the Malta IPRD and of the Civil Court may be appealed to the Court of Appeal. Decisions of the Criminal Court may be appealed to the Criminal Court of Appeal.

27 Defences

What defences are available to a charge of infringement or dilution, or any related action?

The defences available include:

- · that the mark was not used as a trademark;
- that the mark was used in relation to goods or services that fall outside the remit covered by the registration;
- that the mark is not similar to the extent that there is no likelihood of confusion or association;
- use in relation to goods or services that are not covered by the trademark;
- · use by a person of his or her own name or address;
- use of a sign that is descriptive or indicative of characteristics of goods or services that are necessary to indicate the intended purpose of a good or service; and
- · acquiescence to infringing use for a continuous period of five years.

28 Remedies

What remedies are available to a successful party in an action for infringement or dilution, etc? What criminal remedies exist?

The civil remedies available include the destruction of infringing merchandise and recall of its circulation, injunctions to prevent continued infringement (preliminary and permanent) and awards of pecuniary damages. It may also be possible for a successful party to recover legal costs.

In terms of criminal remedies, the Criminal Court may order both fines and imprisonment depending on the specific criminal offence.

29 ADR

Are ADR techniques available, commonly used and enforceable? What are the benefits and risks?

Recourse to arbitration proceedings is generally slowly gaining traction, largely because arbitration is seen to be a cheaper, faster and a more flexible form of dispute resolution. However, it is to be noted that Malta provides for concurrent jurisdiction of courts and arbitral tribunals.

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30 Famous foreign trademarks

Is a famous foreign trademark afforded protection even if not used domestically? If so, must the foreign trademark be famous domestically? What proof is required? What protection is provided?

A proprietor of a foreign trademark that is entitled to protection under the Paris Convention as a well-known trademark is entitled to restrain by injunction the use in Malta of another mark that is identical or similar to the proprietor's well-known mark (and in relation to identical or similar goods or services for which the mark is well known). In this respect, it must be proved that, on a balance of probabilities, the use of such mark is likely to cause confusion to the relevant public.

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