‘Sofia the robot – a study of international law applied to artificial intelligence’

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Abstract

Sofia is a humanoid robot, which, in 2016, received citizenship from Saudi Arabia. While this is an isolated even, it reflects an emerging reality, that has to be addressed. This was recognised in a 2017 proposal by the EU Parliament that robots should receive the legal status of ‘electric person’. Such proposal raises a number of legal questions. More generally, it asks to what extent international law can or should apply to robots as persons or subjects. So far, international law has mainly concerned itself with killer robots. But the decision of Saudi Arabia to grant a robot citizenship, while only a policy matter, could, in fact, create legal rights and responsibilities. This paper examines the application of traditional principles of international law to robots, and focuses on two issues: what human rights could robots be entitled to, if at all? And what principles of jurisdiction should apply vis-à-vis these robots? The first question examines the scope of human rights protection, building on scholarship about human rights granted to animals and corporations. The second focuses on the responsibility of both robots for their actions, as well as of their state of citizenship, extending existing research on non-state actors.