

EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

Editorial Note

Cultural Heritage Law Conferences in the Age of Global Pandemic

In previous issues of the “Santander Art and Culture Law Review” we have usually published a selection of reports on the most interesting conferences on law and policy issues in the field of cultural heritage management, governance, and protection that took place in a given year. In this issue we have presented only one report, by Karolína Menšíková from the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, concerning the conference which took place last year (in 2019), in Prague, and was aimed at exploring the practice of the *Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues*, and at discussing and debating the challenges still faced by this important instrument ten years after its adoption. Insofar as concerns other cultural heritage law conferences held in 2020, we decided not to offer a set of reports, but instead to present a very short chronicle/overview of these events.

The year 2020 has indeed been very important for the international protection of cultural heritage. This is due to the number of anniversaries of some of the most important conventions on the protection of cultural heritage, which marked occasions for the international community to rethink and to reflect on the current legal framework. In fact, the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property celebrated its 50th anniversary; the UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects – its 25th anniversary; and the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions marked its 15th anniversary.

However, this year was also unprecedentedly difficult due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Owing to the tragedy of many people around the world and the ensuing economic difficulties, the last months have also been very challenging to the academic and cultural sectors. It does not come as a surprise that the pandemic affected academic exchanges. Because of the restrictions on movement and participation in assemblies, many important research and academic events on cultural heritage law have been postponed or cancelled.

Notwithstanding these difficulties several webinars, seminars, and workshops, as well as major scientific and expert conferences have been organized online. Undoubtedly, the largest conferences in the realm of movable cultural heritage were launched by UNIDROIT and UNESCO. On 8 and 9 October, the former organization hosted a celebratory international conference to mark the 25th anniversary of the adoption of its Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. The event, organized in a hybrid form, gathered c. 50 participants in UNIDROIT's headquarters and nearly 650 registered online. Another large event, the international online conference "Cultural Heritage and Multilateralism: Regional and International Strategies for the Protection of Cultural Heritage", was held from 16 to 18 November 2020, hosted by the German Federal Foreign Office in partnership with UNESCO, the European Union, and the Council of Europe on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Both events gathered together leading scholars and experts from all over the world.

The 15th anniversary of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions has also been celebrated through a series of events, including the special edition of ResiliArt of 21 October, held also in the context of the 10th anniversary of the International Fund for Cultural Diversity (IFCD), and the 40th anniversary of the UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist. This high-level panel discussion brought together artists and cultural professionals from every corner of the world to discuss the past and future of human creativity. This topic was also addressed by the International Conference on Digital Heritage, organized within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED), on 2-5 November.

Alongside other events and webinars hosted by international governmental and non-governmental organizations (ICOM, ICOMOS, IUCN among many others), a number of initiatives have also been undertaken by professional and scholarly organizations and academic centres. For instance, the EuroScience Open Forum (ESOF2020 Trieste) took place on 2-6 September in a hybrid formula. During this event the issue of the intersections between cultural heritage law and science was debated. Large, global associations held their biennial conferences online: the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (26-30 August) and the International Law Association (29 November – 13 December), where the future of cultural heritage

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law was approached particularly from the perspective of community participation and inclusion. A series of research events have also been organized. For instance, the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts hosted an online event (7-8 September 2020), “Tools for the Future Researching Art Market Practices from Past to Present”; and the Interest Group of International Law of Culture of the European Society of International Law held a seminar on the operationalization of the 2005 UNESCO Convention (9 September). Importantly, the issue of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the enjoyment of cultural rights was discussed in a number of scholarly webinars and online seminars hosted by various institutions around the world.

In 2020, the academic community, experts, and the general public had to adjust to the new conditions. On the one hand, online access to events made it possible for the public to have very broad access to scholarly debates and exchanges. This comes at a time when the practice and participation in international scientific life is still far too limited and constrained by economic inequalities. This applies both to access to knowledge (costs of access to scientific databases, publications, etc.), and access to scientific events, i.e. the costs of attending scientific meetings (including conference fees, accommodation and travel costs). In this regard, the global health crisis and new forms of academic exchange and debate have contributed to a wider participation in scientific life. On the other hand, the formula for online scientific meetings, while enabling easier access to knowledge, undoubtedly also reflects a number of limitations related to the lack of direct, person-to-person exchanges of thoughts and views. It also demonstrates, as does online education, the scale of digital exclusion in the modern world, showing that despite the rapid development of modern digital communication technologies, many people still do not have adequate access to them. Another effect of the digital revolution in science, education, and culture caused by the pandemic is the deep crisis in the sector of universities, cultural institutions (theatres, philharmonics, cinemas, museums, galleries, etc.) and tourism, which will undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on access to culture and education, which may last into the next few years.

Let us hope that the lessons learned from the events of this year will allow us to rethink and redefine the strategies of institutions, financial authorities, and the nature of modern scientific and cultural life so as to ensure a wider, better, and more inclusive participation therein by all interested parties.