

## A WORD FROM THE PRESIDENT

### THE WORLD MEETING OF THE SOCIETIES FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW

The *Société française pour le Droit international* (French Society of International Law - SFDI) has taken the initiative to organize a Meeting of Regional and National Societies for International Law – including the national branches of the International Law Association which, in a number of countries, constitute the national society for international law. This Meeting will be held in Strasbourg on the 27th and 28<sup>th</sup> of May 2015 in the headquarters/premises of the Council of Europe.

Why such an initiative? First, because it is the first event of this kind, even though there has been a few precedents. For example, in 2010, the British Institute for International and Comparative Law and the Lauterpacht Centre for International Law organized a meeting of international law research centres in Cambridge. Moreover, in the past few years, as part of its Annual Conference, the American Society for International Law (ASIL) gathered the leaders of international law societies who were present in Washington D.C. for a working breakfast meeting. However, nothing concrete has ever resulted from these events. Yet one might think – at least hope – that, by coordinating their actions, conducting regular exchanges of information, advertising the activities of sister-societies on their respective websites, or even promoting joint actions, international law societies will be more effective, more visible, and more listened to by their interlocutors.

Which interlocutors? This is not entirely known and it seems to vary quite considerably from one society to another. While the ASIL manages to gather practitioners and academics in a way that seems rather “egalitarian”, the German, Italian or French societies, as is the case with most regional societies (with the exception perhaps of the Asian Society), focus primarily on the academic world; and the ILA (and its national branches) certainly attract more lawyers or corporate lawyers than do national societies *stricto sensu*.

There are certainly complex reasons for this diversity of situations. Some are related to the circumstances in which a particular society has been created: using the French Society as an example, it was created in 1967 by a group of international lawyers, mainly academics. The French Society is especially committed to the organization of symposia and conferences and, though more marginally, to reflections on the teaching of international law and on research in this discipline. Moreover, although the Society is open to private law lawyers – none of which was among the founders – it is mainly centered on public international law as reflected in the themes of the majority of its annual conference or of the workshops held under its auspices. To this I add, not without regret, that even when the topics selected could lend itself to a “mixed” approach, the public international law approach prevailed. This then result in a vicious circle: the vast majority of its members are public international lawyers who also constitute an overwhelming a majority in the Council. This probably explains the lack of appetite of practitioners (usually private law lawyers) for our Society.

On the contrary, the ASIL “walks on two legs”: the presidential position alternates between practitioners and academics, and the composition of the governing bodies is equally balanced. Clearly this has implications for the financial resources of the two societies: the American Society, which receives important subsidies from the big law firms which form part of its membership and which have an interest in the topics that are studied, is rich, while the French Society is poor... Moreover, I fear that we – the French – are not experts in fund-raising.

With the Strasbourg Meeting, we are trying to initiate a broader dialogue, not just between societies for international law, but also with what could be considered as their natural counterparts, whether from “public sector” – to which the third panel is dedicated, chaired by Ronny Abraham, President of the International Court of Justice – or the “private sector” – to which is devoted the fourth panel chaired by Bogdan Aurescu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania and President of the Romanian branch of the ILA. The idea here is that panelists from international and domestic “public law” courts, ministries of foreign affairs and international organizations (in the case of the public sector), panelists from the Bar, the world of arbitration, private companies and from NGOs (as for the private sector) initiate a reflection on the relationship that societies maintain (or not), or could or should maintain with these “actors” of international law.

The second day will consist of a kind of “counterweight” to the first day which is more “among ourselves”: what is the use of our societies? What are their aims and purposes? How to reach them? How can they strengthen their cooperation in order to have more influence in the service of public *and* private international law? These are some of the big questions that the participants to the first two panels will debate, chaired respectively by Rein Müllerson, President of the Institute of International Law, and Ruth Wedgwood, President of the International Law Association. In both cases, the panels are composed exclusively of representatives of regional or national societies for international law (including domestic branches of the ILA). They are composed so that to be sufficiently diversified to enable a plurality of views for debate, even though the ultimate goal is obviously to seek convergences rather than divergences – “unity is strength”. One of the issues that these panels – especially the second, devoted to “Prospects for Cooperation” – could usefully address is that of the relationship between national and regional societies and perhaps also that of the relationships between a national society and a national branch of the ILA when they coexist in the same country.

This being said, we have no ambition to answer these questions – our more modest purpose is to launch a debate, perhaps to find some promising lines of reflection for the future, with the hope that they won’t get lost in the ocean of good intentions and that they will be followed by concrete achievements. There are already good news indeed: the meeting in Strasbourg has already raised had an impact since it has resulted in – or will result in – the creation of several national societies for international law; for example, I have noticed (but I may forget some) that the Lebanese, Singaporean and Vietnamese Societies will be represented by their founding members.

One last but important detail: it is indeed a *Meeting*, not a “conference” or a “symposium.” The objective is that the representatives of the fifty represented organizations meet, discuss among themselves and with other actors on the international legal stage, and initiate a reflection – and, if possible, take concrete action – aimed at strengthening the presence and the effectiveness of societies for international law. This is also the reason why drastic time-limits have been imposed to the interventions by the panelists, which I fully intend to enforce regardless of the eminence of the panelists: five minutes in principle, *seven at the most* – in order to enable other participants to express their views, ask other questions

and launch other ideas – briefly as well. And then, of course, there are informal discussions during coffee breaks or “drinks” in the many cozy cafés, bars and restaurants of the beautiful and touristic city of Strasbourg.

To conclude, five practical remarks:

1. Registration to the Meeting (free “within the limit of the number of places available”) is mandatory to access the premises of the Council of Europe; please connect to the following website, <http://www.sfdi.org/inscription-to-the-world-meeting-of-the-societies-for-international-law/>. Two reasons to rapidly register:

- The number of seats is limited and the limit will be reached quickly;
- The Council of Europe urges us to send a definitive list of guests.

2. The participation to the dinner, kindly offered by the Region of Alsace, is limited to those who receive an invitation; we apologize to those who would wish to participate, but there is a practical impossibility; thank you for your understanding.

3. Admission procedures to the Council of Europe are *very* long – I am told that it is necessary to arrive 30 minutes before the beginning of the meetings.

4. Strasbourg is a beautiful city but very touristic and particularly pleasant to visit in spring: the longer you wait make reservations, the more hotels are likely to be fully booked.

5. All the participants to the “World Meeting” are welcome to register for the Annual Conference of the SFDI, devoted to “*Le précédent en droit international*”, which will be held from 28 to 30 May (exclusively in French); please connect to the following website: <http://sfdi2015.unistra.fr/>.

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