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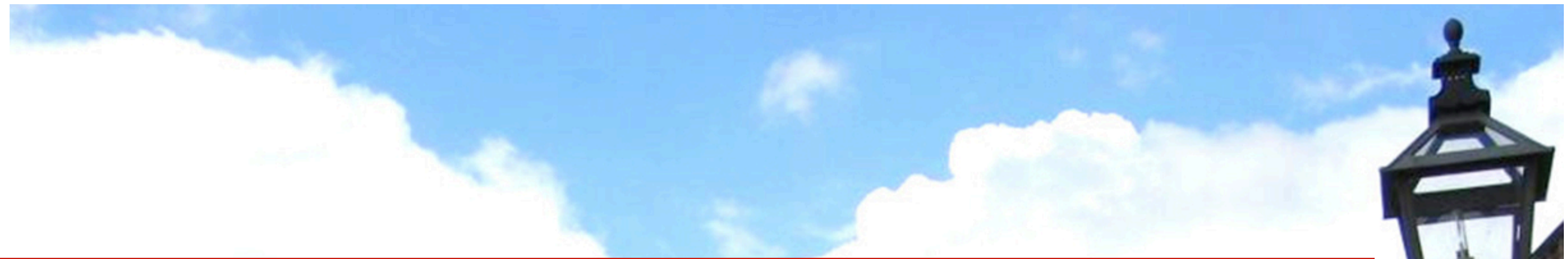
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COVID-19 scientists who faced huge bills after speaking in webinars win in court

Spanish and Swedish courts throw out claims from mysterious conference organizer that researchers owed fees of up to €80,000

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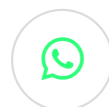
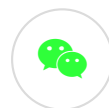
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In its ruling this month, the Swedish Court of Appeal pointed to “remarkable and troubling circumstances” surrounding the case. NORD68/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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Courts in Sweden and Spain have rejected demands by a mysterious Polish company that scientists who participated in its COVID-19 webinars pay it tens of thousands of euros.

As *Science* reported last year, scholars around Europe were [hit with the huge bills](#) after speaking at online meetings on COVID-19 modeling in 2020 and 2021. After the events, a conference secretary from the company behind the webinars, Villa Europa, asked the speakers to sign a licensing agreement. Buried in the last page, unnoticed by many participants, were long clauses mentioning charges of thousands of euros for “debate fees and open-access publication” and “editorial work.”

Months later, many of the researchers started to receive requests to pay these fees, along with fines for late payment. The demands, which ranged from a few thousand euros to €80,000 in one case, came from Krzysztof Sienicki, CEO of Villa Europa.

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At least one institution in Sweden agreed to pay €7200 to settle the claim, but many researchers ignored the demands. Then, in 2022, five scientists in Sweden, Spain, and Germany received letters from local courts informing them that a Polish arbitration court had found in favor of Villa Europa, and that the company was asking the local court to enforce the decision. Those scientists all submitted filings to argue their case.

On 11 February, the Swedish Court of Appeal that was handling the case of three scientists dismissed the demands. The decision followed a similar November 2023 ruling by Madrid's High Court of Justice, which backed a Spanish researcher's challenge.

"It is unlikely that a researcher would enter into an agreement" that would require them to pay the high fees demanded by Villa Europa, the Swedish court wrote in handing a win to Axel Brandenburg, a physicist at the Nordic Institute for Theoretical Physics.

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The court also pointed to "remarkable and troubling circumstances," including doubt about whether the Polish arbitration institution exists at all. Villa Europa admitted to the court that it had created the institution's website, for instance, though it claimed to have done so because website development was part of its business. The court also suggested the contracts signed by the researchers may have "been manipulated after the fact."

The court ordered Villa Europa to pay about €68,000 to partially cover legal fees incurred by the three Swedish researchers. The company has until mid-March to appeal the decision.

The Spanish court also dismissed Villa Europa's request, citing formal mistakes in the arbitration court's legal communication with the affected scholar and unfair arbitration clauses contained in the contract. It also ordered Villa Europa to pay legal fees and did not give the company the option to appeal.

The scientists fear that Villa Europa will never pay their legal bills, and some complain that the courts did not go far enough. "I have fought for 2 years against a fraudster. I was obliged to spend money and go to court. I would have liked the court to deem that as an outright fraud," says the Spanish researcher, who asked to remain anonymous.

"I did not expect the court would believe any of this," Brandenburg says. But he says the court should have been faster in rejecting Villa Europa's request for enforcement of the arbitration decision. "They could have checked the evidence earlier, before dragging us into this long procedure."

The legal battles are not yet over. In March, a court in Berlin is set to hear the case of a German researcher being pursued by Villa Europa.

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