The Law of Crypto Assets

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certificates stipulating his or her position as the legally rightful heir and the actual death of the deceased.72

In the United Kingdom, it is recommended to include lists of digital accounts and passwords to assert the deceased’s will, even though this might create conflicts with existing terms of service.73 From a Belgian perspective, legal relationships with providers of digital services constitute contracts. According to Art. 1122 of the Belgian Civil Code, the deceased’s legal successor inherits every contract the deceased formerly concluded, unless the contract’s wording or nature prevents it. Thus, it is argued that digital service contracts and therefore digital assets can be part of the estate.74 An accompanying right to information would only be consequent. In the end, in every jurisdiction with inheritance laws based on the principle of universal succession, these considerations should be transferable.

Since contracts with a token trading platform primarily grant property rights positions with almost no personal content, these considerations can be transferred accordingly. Since the heir obtains the contractual rights and obligations of the deceased and takes his or her place, he/she has a right of access to the account and consequently also a corresponding right to information.

The platform agreement might also state an obligation to maintain permanent accessibility of the platform’s website for users. In many cases, however, intermediaries try to exclude the permanent accessibility in their general terms and conditions in order to avoid claims, e.g., for compensation, by users in the event of technical issues.75 This includes access to the platform’s structure and, particularly with off-chain intermediaries, the retrieval of account balances.

Additionally, the platform and especially off-chain intermediaries have extensive obligations to cooperate. Due to the fiduciary elements of the underlying contracts, the platform is obligated to manage its users’ account balances. To ensure the actual execution of user contracts, it is imperative that the off-chain intermediary adjusts the account balances according to the contract concluded between users.

However, not only the platform, but also the user may be subject to additional contractual obligations. In this respect, the user must comply with the restrictions and trading conditions set forth by the trading platform in (permissible) general terms and conditions to enable correct transaction processing. But, as the website interface, i.e. the design of the homepage and its inherent restrictions, is usually adapted to the platform’s general terms and conditions, users are mostly not able to diverge.76 Additionally, the user must keep his or her password secret and is obligated to provide correct data upon registration on the intermediary’s website.77

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D. Defaults and Breach of Contractual Obligations

58 As in any other legal relationship, the parties of a contract might not be able or willing to fulfil their obligations. Hence, defaults or other kinds of breach of contract may occur. Within the crypto-trade business, a variety of different legal contracts between different parties exist and, thus, may be breached. However, only those infringements resulting from the contractual relationships between the intermediaries and their users are of further interest in this chapter. As for contracts between users, claims against the platform operator can only be raised if the terms and conditions of the platform agreement contain any specific provisions such as warranties or guarantees.78 Therefore, the trading platform generally is not liable for any defaults in user to user relationships.79 Since users and platforms conclude at least one legal relationship, i.e. the platform agreement, an underlying contractual basis always exists. However, a distinction must be made between platform categories.

I. On-Chain-Intermediary

1. Trading Platform

59 As for centralised crypto-to-crypto and crypto-to-fiat-exchanges, there are no specific characteristics which need to be considered. In those cases, the platform is the contractual partner in user transactions. Therefore, general rules apply, and the platform is liable for any contractual interruptions, defaults or a breach of contract.80 However, the situation differs for decentralised platforms. If users conclude contracts and transactions via the platform, the decentralised exchange gains the right to a transaction fee. In this case, it might be relevant to state the exact time upon which the intermediary is entitled to its fee. This is particularly relevant if a user contract concluded via the platform is not executed. Therefore, it is necessary to determine which service provided by the intermediary constitutes its right to the fee. If the transaction fee is granted just for any kind of matchmaking between users, the platform would be entitled with the conclusion of the user contract. If, on the other hand, the fee is paid for a successful transaction and, thus, as a fee for the platform’s assistance in the process, the digital infrastructure or confirmations, it can only be demanded if these services are provided in a successful transaction. If the users fail to execute, the platform did not provide billable services.

60 This question needs to be resolved by interpreting the contracts concluded between the intermediary and the user. Generally, the platform will desire a claim for the transaction fee upon effective conclusion of contract between the users. The platform will regularly not be willing to accept the risk of the contract’s execution, which depends

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on third-party behaviour and hence cannot be influenced. As the effective execution of contracts with on-chain intermediaries also requires, by its very nature, the cooperation of the other network participants in the blockchain, the platform would agree to major uncertainties. Therefore, the claim for the transaction fee should regularly arise upon formation of contract between users.

2. Users

From a user’s point of view, claims against the intermediary may arise in the event of contractual infringements. However, the user can only obtain claims against the platform if the claim itself arises from an actual legal contract with the intermediary. Therefore, the user only has additional claims against the intermediary if the default occurs in this contractual relationship, i.e. the platform agreement. In the case of default or breach of contract within any user (token exchange) contract, the user must adhere to his or her respective contractual partner. General claims against the intermediary are mostly unfeasible, unless additional contractual agreements, for example in the form of guarantees, have been made.  

If the user frequents an on-chain-intermediary, who records the users’ account balances with a public key on the blockchain, there is a risk that stored tokens might get lost due to a cyberattack. In this respect, the user might want to claim damages from the on-chain intermediary. But the user can only substantiate claims for damages if the intermediary did not take sufficient precautions against such cyberattacks. This might be the case if the platform had unsuitable or insufficient security measures.

These cases show similarities to the (in-)famous cyberattack on a blockchain platform called 'The DAO'. 'The DAO' was one of the most successful crowdfunding projects of all time. It was launched via the Ethereum blockchain and quickly raised funds in the amount of about 60 million EUR. However, 'The DAO' was hacked due to a breach in the programming and the investors’ funds could only be secured with a so-called hard fork.  

As a further example, the cryptocurrency exchange Binance shows that secondary crypto-trading platforms are not spared by hackers. Binance became the target of a cyberattack in early May 2019. In the process, the crypto exchange suffered a loss of 7,000 Bitcoins which equalled about 40 million USD at the time. The stolen Bitcoins had been stored in a so-called hot wallet, which is connected to the Internet.

Currently, no national jurisdiction stipulates special liability for damages caused by cyberattacks on blockchain networks. Therefore, a solution must be found via the general

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82 For more information about 'The DAO' and the respective cyberattack see Mehar and others, 'Understanding a Revolutionary and Flawed Grand Experiment in Blockchain: The DAO Attack’ (2017) 21 Journal of Cases on Information Technology, 19 et seq.


provisions of the respective national law of obligations, contract or in some cases tort law. In any event, the intermediary would be liable for user tokens lost through such attacks. Insufficient security measures generally lead to breach of duty and liability for damages. In practical terms, users’ losses are usually replaced at least by the larger, reputable intermediaries. To hedge risks, explicitly of cyberattacks, Binance launched a so-called Secure Asset Fund for Users (SAFU) in July 2018, in which 10% of its transaction fees are collected in a separate ‘cold’, i.e. offline, wallet. Those funds are deemed a contingency reserve to compensate losses explicitly caused by unforeseeable cyberattacks.

II. Off-Chain Intermediary

65 In general, there are no substantial legal differences between on-chain and off-chain intermediaries with respect to further obligations. In these cases, general legal rules for breach of contract apply as well. Since the transactions are not tracked via blockchain, but only through bookkeeping of the intermediary, off-chain intermediaries do not have similar problems of unwinding contracts as on-chain intermediaries. If a user wants to withdraw from or terminate the contract, the tokens can be refunded without further ado. The off-chain intermediary is also contractually obliged to do so. In advance of a refund, the off-chain intermediary can demand proof of the (legitimate) withdrawal. But since the users interact exclusively via the platform, this will not be an obstacle: Either the platform’s infrastructure provides a corresponding mechanism or communication between users can serve as proof.

66 From a user’s perspective, claims against the platform may primarily arise as claims for damages due to the loss of user tokens. Although tokens only exist on a bookkeeping level and are only stored as a booking status on the off-chain intermediary’s website, the equivalent of the tokens allocated to the users is often actually held by the off-chain intermediary. Depending on the type of wallet chosen for these ‘safety’ tokens, involuntary losses are possible as well. For example, cold wallets can simply be stolen or lost. Additionally, hot wallets can be hacked. Depending on the specific contractual obligations of the platform agreement, the user could have claims for damages or an unlimited contractual redemption claim against the intermediary.

E. General Terms and Conditions

67 By registering on the platform, the user is forced to accept a comprehensive catalogue of general terms and conditions. These terms are pre-formulated and unilaterally provided by the platform operator. The user has no influence on their substance. Therefore, they qualify as contractual terms which have not been individually negotiated according to Art. 3 para. 1 and 2 of the GTC-Directive. They become part of the platform contract between user and intermediary and define the rights and obligations of the parties in more detail.

68 Lately, the EU released the Regulation on promoting fairness and transparency for business users of online intermediation services (P2B-Regulation). The Regulation...
not only reaffirms the need for terms and conditions drafted in plain and intelligible language. It also redefines additional obligations considering availability of said terms and conditions as well as the availability of information regarding any respective changes. Any non-compliant provisions are deemed null and void according to Art. 3 para. 3 P2B-Regulation.88 However, the Regulation is limited to platform-to-business relations. Thus, the Regulation will not have a deep impact on secondary crypto trade. Nevertheless, the extension of a fairness control of standard terms to business to business relationships is a remarkable new step.89

The provisions of the general terms and conditions do not simply state the rights and obligations of the user or the intermediary. Rather, they set an additional framework for any future transaction concluded and implemented via the platform’s infrastructure. These so-called framework agreements contain binding obligations which may result in the formation of further contracts, usually between the same parties, whose provisions are determined by the (firstly formed) framework agreement.90 Therefore, the legal implications for any subsequent agreements between user and platform are determined by the platform’s terms and conditions. This legal framework91 enables the intermediary to set all terms for any future contracts carried out and concluded in its ongoing business relationship with its user.91

Additionally, further provisions stated by the general terms and conditions have direct impact on user contracts. Although the platform’s general terms and conditions accepted within the platform agreement are set between intermediary and user, they directly affect user’s legal transactions (→ para. 57, 73). If user contracts or legally relevant behaviour of users’ need to be interpreted, the platform’s framework can be an indication and need to be considered when interpreting the behaviour of and contractual relationships between users.92 Thus, the platform’s provisions are indirectly included into these contracts, unless the users explicitly deviate from these regulations.93


I. Frequently Used General Terms and Conditions within Platform Agreements

Platforms between intermediary and user often introduce clauses which (should) lead to limitations or exclusions of liability for the benefit of the platform. These clauses might be regarded as unfair according to Art. 3 para. 1 GTC-Directive and its Annex I, para. 1 (a) and (b). Therefore, these terms are subject to legal considerations for general terms and conditions, without any particularities. In this context, general terms and conditions may be used to limit or describe the intermediary’s obligations in greater detail. Terms stating that the intermediary does not provide any advisory services were already popular and frequently used within crowdfunding schemes and are likewise implemented by token trading platforms. Such terms are used to limit the platform’s liability: If it is not obligated to provide a specific service, it cannot be held liable in case of ‘breach of duty’. Whether these clauses can effectively limit the platform’s obligations has not yet been conclusively determined by the courts. However, scholars doubt the lawfulness of this practice, especially if the platform creates expectations about a specific obligation.

The intermediary’s general terms and conditions will also often contain agreements on jurisdiction or the right to choose a jurisdiction. The validity of such clauses must be assessed in each individual case (§ 3 para. 17 et seq).

II. General Terms and Conditions with Implication for User Contracts

As mentioned above, the general terms and conditions often contain provisions with implications for the contracts concluded exclusively between users. For instance, most platforms regularly determine which behaviour constitutes a binding offer. In practical terms, users will mostly not be able to deviate from these provisions. The interface of the intermediary’s website is regularly programmed accordingly. Therefore, an arbitrary deviation from the intermediary’s specifications is hardly feasible.

94 For the general admissibility of liability exclusions from a European perspective Loos, ‘Standard terms for the use of the Apple App Store and the Google Play Store’ [2016] Journal of European Consumer and Market Law, 10 (13); from a German perspective Grundmann, in MüKoBGB, § 276, para. 183 et seq. with additional references; see Schulze, in Dannemann and Schulze (eds), German Civil Code (BGB), §§ 276 para. 12.


Many general terms and conditions prohibit the user to withdraw from or unwind exchange/purchase agreements. This is common practice in blockchain-related platforms and transactions. The technical reason for this frequently used term is the fundamental immutability of the blockchain: Once a transaction has been included in a block, it is no longer possible to retroactively delete it. The inclusion of a transaction on the blockchain is therefore permanent. Instead, a reversal (→ § 1 para. 14) can only be achieved by means of a second, opposing transaction, which in turn incurs transaction costs.98

To avoid these practical difficulties and additional costs, especially on-chain intermediaries include provisions that exclude the users’ right of withdrawal. However, such clauses can be problematic under the GTC-Directive if the user qualifies as a consumer. As a result, such terms can be deemed unfair according to Art. 3 para. 1 GTC-Directive. More specifically, a term shall be regarded as unfair if, contrary to the requirement of good faith, it causes a significant imbalance in the parties’ rights and obligations arising under the contract, to the detriment of the consumer. The Annex of the GTC-Directive lists examples for unfair terms. For instance, a clause which enables the supplier of services to increase his or her price without giving the consumer the corresponding right to cancel the contract, is deemed void. The actual evaluation is subject to a case-by-case decision and deeply influenced by national law. Therefore, depending on individual circumstances, single terms might be non-binding for the user according to Art. 6 para. 1 GTC-Directive.

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**§ 6 Data Protection**