

Editorial – From President to President

Pavel Exner, President of the EMS

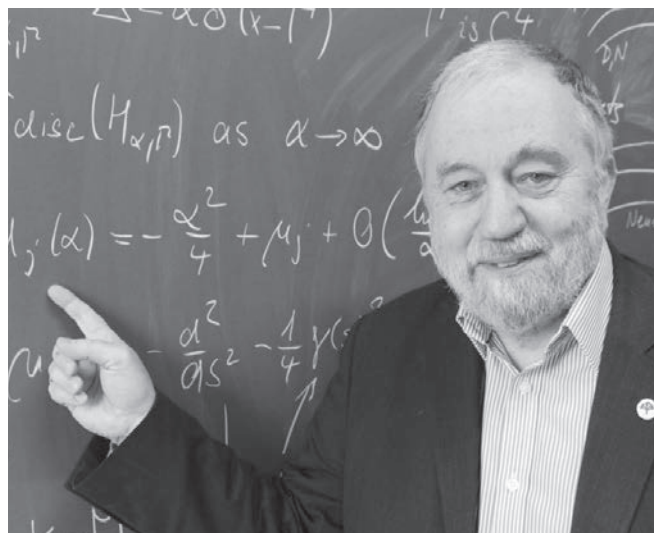
Dear colleagues,

This is my last message in this capacity: by the time this Newsletter issue reaches your hands, I will have passed the EMS leadership on to Volker Mehrmann. I wish him all the stamina necessary for the job. Having worked in close contact with Volker for the last four years, I have no doubt that the society will be in the best possible hands. This is also a fitting opportunity to thank him and the other members of the EMS Executive Committee, as well as the broader community involved in the full range of EMS activities, for the pleasure of collaboration, in the hope that it has brought some visible results.

I hope you will agree with me that our society is not in bad shape overall, although there is never a shortage of things to improve through our collective effort. We have a good number of active members, both corporate and individual, and our topical committees dealing with various aspects of mathematicians' lives are generally functioning very well. We have 10 of them, each broadly defined, which we regard as a better option than having over 100 as our American colleagues do, many with a rather narrow scope. This is not to say that our list could not be amended. One particularly important area where we could do better concerns young mathematicians. They face specific challenges at the start of their careers, which we, as older people, may sometimes not fully appreciate.

A related question concerns an even younger age group. The competition between different branches of science (and, more generally, different areas of intellectual endeavour) may be friendly but it is fierce. The future of mathematics stands or falls with the number of gifted children who choose it as their *métier*. Many factors may influence a choice of life path but the pecuniary aspect cannot be neglected. Very few get rich doing mathematics and we need to be able to show that intellectual excitement can outweigh more mundane drivers. The task is not easy, of course, especially when many among those who gain public attention, for whatever reason, are happy to trumpet that they succeeded despite being weak in mathematics.

Speaking of talent, another thing comes to mind. EMS life has its cycles. We have passed the mid-point between European Congresses and are heading for the eighth, which will convene, as we know, in Portorož (Slovenia) in July 2020. Now it is time to think about nominations for the prizes to be awarded there, starting with the 10 EMS Prizes for young mathematicians. In their not so long history, our prizes have achieved considerable renown, illustrated by the fact that of the 70 laureates so far, 12 have subsequently been awarded the Fields Medal. This is a sure sign of the strength of European mathematics – a tradition we certainly wish to continue. Hence, I encourage you to look for worthy nominees.



Some changes are less regular but no less important. The EMS is glad to have its own publishing house offering a palette of journals, several of them highly regarded, and beautiful books recognisable from afar by their blue covers. We are grateful to Thomas Hintermann, who built up this enterprise from scratch, bringing it to its current firm place on the global map of mathematical publishing. Nothing lasts forever, though, and Thomas is now approaching a well-deserved retirement. The future of the publishing house was always one of our main priorities and we are currently reforming it to ensure that it can continue to develop and serve, under a new director, the needs of the mathematical community even better.

This brings me to a larger theme. You will have certainly noticed – unless you arrived from Mars this morning – the debates about changes in models of academic publishing, in particular the obligatory gold Open Access scheme that the European Commission is planning to impose *de facto* from 2020 onward. It is presented coated in pleasing political sauce: nobody should be barred access from scientific literature by financial walls, especially if the work in question is supported by public money. It does not mention, however, that people may face the same walls when trying to publish their results. Older people with experience of living outside the Western world remember all too well the necessity of sending each submission with an accompanying beggar's letter, explaining that one has no way to pay the publication fee. That was an accepted game and I remember the editor-in-chief of a high-class journal telling us around 1980 that close to one half of the papers they published came with such a plea. In the brave new world of today, I am afraid, nobody would be spared.

The EMS has repeatedly said that we are aware that publication costs something and would be glad to see a

serious discussion about the ways in which the present model could be transformed to better fit the needs of all the parties involved. Should such a dialogue be successful, though, it must be balanced. This is not the case currently, as the voice of big commercial publishers commands the most attention. The biggest was even chosen – in a legally crystal clear way, of course – to monitor the community’s adherence to the aforementioned noble principles. This may open a can of worms. Strong and rich countries may strike a deal with the big publishers, shielding their researchers, but there is some doubt that all others would follow. The effect would be amplified in disciplines that are not rich and we know well that mathematics belongs to this category. The result may be a new wave of brain drain, with all the consequences that flow from that. Somebody recently called these plans “the new censorship of the rich” and I am afraid that this expression is painfully fitting.

It is vital to bear in mind that these problems don’t just concern mathematicians. Finding a reasonable solution is in the interests of the whole academic community, in Europe and worldwide. We must seek a common language with colleagues in other areas, from those traditionally close, such as physics, to those far away, including the social sciences and humanities, remembering that there are values we all share. Of equal importance is the need to talk to politicians. This is not an easy task, especially noting that the negative consequences of major decisions may take much longer than one electoral term before fully manifesting. Nevertheless, one must keep reminding those elected to steer public affairs of their civic responsibility (a long shot, I admit).

Returning to the EMS itself, I can say with pleasure that it maintains active links with most parts of our continent’s mathematics community, including places where the life of mathematicians is sadly more difficult. One example to celebrate is the revival of the Ukrainian Mathematical Society over the last two years, representing a large number of colleagues and a strong tradition. On the other hand, we have lost as corporate members two smaller societies that were not willing to accept

even the bare minimum of duties that EMS membership entails. Still, I believe that sooner or later they will find their way back.

The world is a strongly connected space and mathematics is undoubtedly a universal language. One of our aims was to strengthen relations with mathematical communities beyond those we had already established. We have recently concluded cooperation agreements with mathematical societies in Japan, China and Australia. We exchange information and articles in our newsletters but we want to go further. We proposed the idea of common Euro-Pacific conferences, similar to what we have had (and will again) with the Americans; they could alternate between European and Far Eastern locations. Our partners found this a promising proposal and we have agreed to pursue it further.

To conclude, let me finally look at the activities of the EMS in the broadest context. The world’s political tectonic plates are shifting ever faster; many of these developments influence the lives of our colleagues in various countries around the globe. We are a professional organisation, not a political one, but sometimes we must speak up. In addition, strengthening relations between mathematicians, especially in troubled regions, is itself a way to reinforce society’s fabric. It may not be the strongest political medicine but its effect is not negligible either. We had a very positive experience with the Caucasian Mathematical Conferences and I believe that similar meetings “over troubled waters” could be organised elsewhere. As I said when opening the 2016 European Congress in Berlin, we remember the serious harm in previous generations when mathematicians bent to political pressures and ceased talking to each other. We are a closely interconnected community with common goals, culture and vision, and we must stick together, whatever political shocks the future may bring.

Having said all that, allow me to raise a toast to you on the occasion of the 2019 New Year, to wish you health and happiness and, above all, plenty of pleasure and satisfaction in mathematics.