
Report from the Meeting of Presidents of Mathematical Societies in Lisbon, 1–2 April 2017

Richard Elwes, EMS Publicity Officer

The annual meeting of Presidents of EMS Member Societies took place 1–2 April, in the elegant surroundings of Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in sunny Lisbon. The Gulbenkian Foundation is of great cultural importance in Portugal (Jorge Buescu, President of the Portuguese Mathematical Society, told us that the Foundation is known informally as the “real” ministry of culture and education). It is also a special place in the history of the EMS, as the location for the first of the society’s Joint Mathematical Weekends in 2003 (we are now on the 10th incarnation of this sequence).

The meeting was opened with words of welcome from the Chair, EMS President Pavel Exner, and addresses from two special guests. Guilherme d’Oliveira Martins, Administrator of the Gulbenkian Foundation, told us about its work and history. Manuel Heitor, Minister of Science and Technology of the Government of Portugal, then warmly welcomed all visitors to Lisbon, and spoke of his ambition for Portugal to become ever more a top-flight country of science, whilst calling for greater levels of scientific activism. He also drew our attention to Portugal’s Position Paper on Horizon 2020, “On the evolving nature of EU research funding”.

After a Tour de Table, in which everybody introduced themselves and their society, Jorge Buescu again welcomed the assembled company, and gave a short address about the Portuguese Mathematical Society (SPM). Founded in 1940, the SPM inhabited a “Schrödinger” existence for many years, due to Portugal’s difficult political environment. It was fully reborn in 1977 and now represents a rapidly growing mathematical community (doubling in size each decade for the last 40 years), with a deep commitment to internationalism (including being

a founding member of the EMS, as well as ICIAM, ICMI, ECMI, EU-MATHS-IN,...).

EMS business

The EMS President Pavel Exner delivered his report, noting the dramatic political changes the world has seen in the last year, in the USA, Turkey, UK, and elsewhere. He noted that there are increasing demands on the EMS to participate in political protest, and commented that this needs to be done selectively in order to be effective, remembering that one of the society’s principal duties is to defend the mathematical community. For example, the EMS was a co-signatory in February 2017 of the open letter from European Science Organisations calling for the USA to stand by the principles of “transparency, open communication, and mobility of scholars and scientists, which are vital to scientific progress and to the benefit of our societies”. The meeting supported this stand, and agreed that future calls for political protest can only be considered on a case by case basis.

The President also took the opportunity to remember the physicist and former Portuguese Minister for Science and Technology, José Mariano Gago who died in 2015, one of the driving forces behind the creation of the European Research Council.

The year 2016 was also a significant one for the EMS, with the quadrennial European Congress of Mathematics being held in Berlin. At the Council meeting beforehand, the Executive Committee enjoyed a major renewal after a properly contested election, surely a positive sign for our society. (All candidates for the Executive Committee that were not elected were invited to become members of one of the EMS’s standing committees.)

Pavel asked the assembled Presidents to spread the news that Council approved a change to the society's by-laws, which now allow students to enjoy a three-year introductory period of free membership. He drew attention to the fact that members of the EMS have special benefits at MathHire.org, a site to advertise and apply for mathematics jobs, supported by the EMS and German Mathematical Society.

In another recent development, the Simons Foundation is now supporting mathematics in Africa through the EMS, with a fund of 50,000 Euros per year for five years. A scheme to distribute this money has been developed by the Committee for Developing Countries (CDC).

The President continued his report on the Society's wide range of scientific activities, and encouraged member societies to submit proposals for activities such as Joint Mathematical Weekends and Summer Schools.

The EMS Treasurer (and mathematical biologist) Mats Gyllenberg then delivered a short presentation on the forthcoming Year of Mathematical Biology in 2018, a joint venture of the EMS and the European Society for Mathematical and Theoretical Biology.

The President completed his address with a round-up of recent developments around Horizon 2020 and ERC, notably running calls, the open EU consultation on Mathematics, and the High-Level Group of Scientific Advisors of the European Commission Scientific Advice Mechanism. He concluded with a brief discussion of bodies of which the EMS is itself a member: the Initiative for Science in Europe and International Mathematical Union.

Presentations

The meeting then enjoyed several presentations. First, Klavdija Kutmar delivered a report on preparations for the 8th ECM (Portorož, Slovenia, 5–11 July 2020). Ian Strachan, President of the Edinburgh Mathematical Society (EdMS), then told the meeting about that society. Founded in 1883, the EdMS was initially geared towards mathematics schoolteachers (although the knot theorist Peter Guthrie Tait was an early member). Reflecting on a tempestuous political period in Scotland (two referenda and a general election in the last 3 years), Ian ended his report with a challenge: How can we get members of our professional communities to engage with policy issues, funding mechanisms, and politicians?

Albert Erkip, Vice-President of the Turkish Mathematical Society, presented an update on the organization of the second Caucasian Mathematics Conference (CMC-II), to be held in Van (Turkey), 22–24 August 2017.

Waclaw Marzantowicz, President of the Polish Mathematical Society, announced a joint meeting of the Italian Mathematical Union, the Italian Society of Industrial and Applied Mathematics, and the Polish Mathematical Society, to be held in Wrocław (Poland), 17–20 September 2018.

Christian Kassel, representing the Société Mathématique de France, presented a report on that society's work. He announced an ambitious extension to CIRM (Centre International de Rencontre Mathématiques), already one of the largest mathematical conference cen-

tres in the world (co-funded by SMF, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), and Aix-Marseille University). He reminded the meeting that CIRM's calls for proposals are already open. The SMF organises conferences for researchers and competitions for University students, and also campaigns for mathematics. For example, in the run-up to the 2017 French Presidential election, the SMF co-authored with other French scientific organisations a letter in *Le Monde*, calling on all candidates not to forget the importance of science to France.

Discussion

There followed a session of wide-ranging open discussion, which focussed first on Open Access publishing and related topics. With the publishing landscape having changed with innovations such as ArXiv.org, the principal role of journals is now to provide a trusted stamp of quality. Technology may offer new mechanisms, for instance via overlay journals such as *episciences.org*. However, there are dangers lurking in this changing landscape, notably in models where the author pays to publish, and in the fact that many learned societies currently derive much of their income from journals. The EMS's new Publications and Electronic Dissemination Committee (see separate report from the Executive Committee meeting in Bratislava) will be actively considering such matters, and member societies are invited to make their views known. Likewise, the EMS's Education committee will be contemplating the perennially controversial subject of mathematical education; ideas for suitable lines of investigation are again welcome from member societies.

Close

On behalf of all the participants, the Chair thanked the local organizers for their impeccable preparation and warm hospitality. Before departing, the participants enjoyed an exhibition at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian by the artist José de Almada Negreiros, whose giant mural *Começar*, 1968–69, contains many tantalising geometrical details.

The next meeting of Presidents will be held 13–15 April 2018, in Dublin.