



Euro Land

A language lab for all Europe

The European Centre for Modern Language (ECML), set up in Graz (Austria) a few years ago as an offshoot of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages section, is embarking on an ambitious programme. It plans to become a first-class centre for language learning and teaching throughout Europe.

Malta was among the first eight countries to support ECML. Our education ministry (goaded by former director Andrew Buhagiar) contributed financially to its establishment. Rightly so because Malta, like Luxembourg and other small states, attaches considerable importance to language learning. The number of countries supporting ECML has now risen to 28.

The Council of Europe (CoE) consists of 41 member states, with six or seven others on the waiting list, including Yugoslavia and possibly Belarus. It is hoped that all member states will eventually sign the partial agreement (i.e., open to all those who wish to join) establishing the ECML.

The CoE seems bent on insisting that all its member states should ideally adopt and abide by its main enactments (175 conventions, over a thousand recommendations, and partial agreements like ECML). A "pause" in its traditional norm-setting, think-tank capacity to better concentrate on a monitoring, operational, assistance and implementation strategy has been suggested at higher quarters. I think it's an excellent proposal.

Graz has now generously offered a new building spread over 1000 m² - thus showing that the enchanting southern Austrian region is not so chauvinistic and xenophobic as the media have depicted it. The new premises are situated in the heart of the city (see Website <http://www.ecml.at> and the hyperlink on the CoE portal <http://www.coe.int>).

"This change has a special meaning," the centre's dynamic director Michel Lefranc wrote in the CoE newsletter Education last August. "It gives concrete expression to more than five years' worth of effort and commitment. It also symbolises a decisive stage in the ECML's evolution, reflecting the shift from an annual programme to a medium-term programme based over three years, with motivated teams of experts and participants from different countries committing themselves for several years..."

"In other words, the ECML will be shifting from one system of activities comparable to the hundred metres hurdle to a more general system similar to a long-distance race which relies on the continuity and monitoring of projects."

At four times its previous size, the new ECML will surely provide a better service to its members. Offices will be available for co-ordinators, researchers, working groups, fellowship holders and trainees (Maltese educational authorities please note). "The centre aims to become in the near future an essential reference point for those who seek documents and up-to-date information on the state of languages in Europe."

The inauguration ceremony on November 17 will be attended by the CoE permanent representatives (Dr Joe Licari will probably represent Malta), led by the Council's Secretary General, Dr Walter Schwimmer, who hails from Vienna. Numerous linguists, textbook writers and senior government representatives from Austria and other CoE member states have also been invited.

The programme will kick off with a guided tour of the city's historic centre, declared by UNESCO as a world heritage site. It will be followed by a tour of the new premises, which will house a photographic exhibition for the occasion.

A press conference will be held by Dr Schwimmer, Mr Lefranc, executive director Josef Huber, the Austrian Minister of Education and the mayor of Graz. A musical programme by the renowned local music university will cheer up the official ceremony.

"Which languages will our children and grandchildren speak?" will be the title of an introductory lecture by the German linguist Herta Müller. A round-table chaired by the Swiss linguist Rolf Schürer will follow.

Participants will then divide into working groups, followed by a plenary session led by Rolf Schürer and Josef Huber. To cap it all, the Austrian authorities will finally invite participants to a tour of the Route du Vin on the Slovenian border.

The new ECML augurs well for the future of language learning in Europe. It fits well with the various activities to be carried out jointly by the EU and the CoE's Modern Languages section in 2001 (<http://culture.coe.int/AEL2001EYL> and <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/languages/index.html>).

Future of books

Thanks to the Internet, culture and especially books are now accessible all over the world. "I hate to think that the whole world is closed in a computer box," Alberto Sordi once said. But so it is. The Internet has brought about a revolution similar to, or greater than, the introduction of printing 550 years ago.

"How can we encourage a diversified supply of, and democratic access to, libraries and electronic publishing?", several ministers of culture asked themselves during a meeting which coincided with the opening of the Book Fair in Frankfurt on October 17.

Hosted by the German State Minister for Culture and the Media, Michael Newmann, in collaboration with the Council of Europe's culture division, the meeting was a veritable success (for further details write to giuseppe.vitiello@coe.int and visit Website <http://culture.coe.fr/epba>).

CoE/EU restructuring exercise?

A Sicilian journalist rang up three times from a Council of Europe office saying each time - despite my warning him - that he was at the European Parliament. If confusion reigns even in the minds of journalists, how can one expect the man in the street to clearly distinguish between European institutions?

It seems to me that there is a trend on the part of the Council of Europe to get closer to the EU. And that's as it should be. They are the two highest and most important European institutions. They work with the same basic aim in view: European unity.

Through intergovernmental co-operation in the realms of democracy, the rule of law and ethical values in the case of the CoE. Mainly through a tight political, economic and monetary policy in the case of the EU.

The CoE's main asset is pan-European character. It has managed to (loosely) bring the whole of Europe under one roof - including Russia. The EU should, sooner or later, realise the unique experience accumulated by the CoE and the contribution it could give to the EU's rapid enlargement by paving the way for some 26 member states to attain EU membership.

All CoE member states from central and eastern Europe have one eye on Strasbourg and the other

on Brussels, an ambassador told me. They are not to blame. The CoE's annual overall budget of d155 million is what the EU spends in something like 13 hours (repeat, hours).

Russian President Vladimir Putin was on an official visit to France last week. Among other things, he said that the economic situation in his country precludes any chance of EU membership in the foreseeable future. "But we are strongly in favour of fully-fledged economic and political relations with the EU. The EU's eastward expansion does not create any problem to Russia. And I do not rule out the possibility of requesting EU membership for Russia in the long run," he added.

All this is extremely interesting and warrants a better restructuring of relations between European institutions like the EU, CoE, NATO and OSCE.

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