

Editorial: If Mathematicians Unite...

Betül Tanbay (Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey), Member of the EMS Executive Committee

IMU is not quite the abbreviation of the title – but bringing mathematicians together is certainly the mission of institutions such as the IMU and the EMS. The first objective in the IMU statutes is “to promote international cooperation in mathematics” and the EMS similarly aims “to foster the interaction between mathematicians of different countries”.

Globalisation may have brought a hope of general peace but today we see its failure in the sense of a world without borders. Yet there are two “success” stories to highlight at opposite ends of the spectrum, one fortunate and one extremely unfortunate: mathematics and terrorism. Thanks to technology, we are able to be present in Oslo and have a research partner in Cape Town. But also due to technology, we can be blown up on the metro in London or during a football game in Istanbul. How can we save mathematics and delete terrorism from the planet? Today we have to push the limits of our thinking processes and our imagination. We could not have carried out any mathematics had we not used our ‘imagination’. So, aren’t ‘we’ well-equipped?

In August 2017, the IMAGINARY exhibition (<https://imaginary.org>) will open in Van, one of the easternmost cities of the westernmost country of the East (Turkey) and the cradle of many civilisations, including some of the first Christians (Armenia), as well the Urartus, Byzance, Kurdish and Turkish cultures. The occasion is the second Caucasian Mathematics Conference (CMC, <http://euro-math-soc.eu/cmc/>), which has been organised under the auspices of the EMS by the mathematical societies of the Caucasian countries and their neighbours: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Russia and Turkey. When the steering committee met during the very successful first CMC in Tbilisi in 2014, after a lot of “math and dance”, it seemed very natural to all of us to have the second CMC in Turkey (in 2016). However, the unfortunate developments of that Summer made us postpone CMCII. Although the situation for

locals was no worse than usual, several invited speakers changed their minds over the year and some even requested that the EMS boycott Turkey.

I fully respect an unwillingness to travel to a place where one does not feel secure. But let us think twice before we announce this reluctance as an academic boycott. It might also be good to remember that certain governments can be alike in their degree of authoritarianism, violence and funding of wars but very different in terms of their respect for academia and academicians or their support for mathematics.

A lot has been said about the controversy of academic boycotts but let us remember what Noam Chomsky, prominent supporter of the Palestinian cause, said about the calls for a boycott of Israel. He supported the “boycott and divestment of firms that are carrying out operations in the occupied territories” but he stated that a general boycott of Israel would be “a gift to Israeli hardliners and their American supporters”.

So, mathematicians of the world ... unite! We have a lot to lose!



*Professor Betül Tanbay
Member of the EMS Executive Committee*