

Like a family celebration - 30 years of Netzwerk Deutsch

By Reinhard Boest

30 years of the European German Network! A round anniversary for this joint initiative of the Goethe-Institut and the Federal Foreign Office, which aims to encourage employees of the European institutions to learn Goethe's language. Not without success - around 3000 "Eurocrats" have completed the program since it began.

So there is every reason to celebrate this birthday in style. The hall of the Baden-Württemberg State Representation (the Goethe-Institut's own hall before the [major renovation](#)) was well filled. Many alumnae and alumni had also come, some even from far away. There was special applause for Margit Pfänder, who led the program for 25 years until 2020. Katrin Schmidt and Isabel Stüker have now taken over her role at the Goethe-Institut.

It all started with Jacques Delors and Klaus Kinkel

Even if the focus was ostensibly on the German language, the evening ultimately revolved around the importance of language in general. The director of the Goethe-Institut, Elke Kaschl-Mohni, recalled the founding of the network, in which Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995, and the then German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel played a decisive role. It has brought people from different countries together, and the contacts often continue to this day. It is therefore also a contribution to a Europe united in diversity, "which is also a matter close to our hearts". This can be experienced in the border regions in particular, which is why she also thanked the German-speaking Community of Belgium, which contributed a great deal to the success of the program by inviting the participants. It was therefore no coincidence that the moderation of the evening panel and the concluding cultural highlight were hosted by East Belgians: BRF Director Alain Kniebs and spoken word artist Jessy James LaFleur - both no strangers to events in Brussels.

German Ambassador Martin Kotthaus also recalled the early days of the program. The fall of the Berlin Wall was only five years ago and the European Union only had 12 member states. At that time, Kotthaus said, many believed in the "end of history" - today we know what a big mistake that was. In an increasingly confusing and unpredictable world - recently documented by the election results in the USA - Europe must focus on its strengths. "We are the best networked region in the world, and we need to bundle these relationships," said Kotthaus.

The German ambassador emphasized that the major challenges such as climate change, energy, migration and security could not be solved at a national level. After all, there is more that unites the EU states than divides them. Kotthaus explained that language plays a very important role in mutual understanding. Of course, everyone prefers to speak in their mother tongue; even an East Belgian prefers to receive his parking ticket in German. However, access to the mentality and culture of others can only be gained through knowledge of their language. He can confirm this from his own experience, not only as a diplomat, but already in his youth as the son of a civil engineer who worked in many countries around the world. You can also learn Portuguese in Brazil by watching dubbed Batman films, Kotthaus said with a smile.

According to the ambassador, the European network had contributed to more German being spoken in the EU institutions. More importantly, however, it had increased the program participants' understanding of Germany and its concerns in the EU. The offer had been accepted and had been successful.

Do we still need to learn languages now that AI exists?

The role of language - not just German - for mutual understanding was a recurring theme in the exciting panel discussion that followed with two participants in the program, a linguist and a former diplomat.

Moderator Alain Kniebs began with the provocative question of whether it was still necessary to learn foreign languages at all in view of the ever more perfect translation programs. Heiko Marten from the Leibniz Institute for the German Language in Mannheim firmly disagreed: human contact could never be replaced by artificial intelligence. Only through language can you gain access to the culture and reach the heart of your counterpart. This even applies to business contacts, as former ambassador Heinrich Kreft emphasized from his experiences in Japan, where you have to be able to read between the lines.

English as a lingua franca has become the global standard - but who really speaks English well, Kreft asked. This even applies to diplomats, for whom language acquisition is part of lifelong learning. Nevertheless, it can be observed that the Federal Foreign Office is increasingly relying on "born" multilinguals in its recruitment practices. When things get "serious", for example with legal texts, interpreters are often still indispensable - which also gives the interlocutors a little more time to think things over, as Kreft noted with a wink.

When asked whether German plays an appropriate role as a foreign language, Merten said that it cannot keep up with English. At the beginning of the 1990s, German still carried weight in Central and Eastern Europe, but was then quickly displaced - partly due to the commitment of the British Council, for example. Now it is important to promote German as a "complementary language" alongside the native language and English. Overall, there is a backlog in language policy in Germany; this also applies to learning the languages of neighboring countries, especially Dutch, Polish and Czech.

From Richard Wagner and "Himmel un Ääd"

The two participants in the network program reported on their very positive personal experiences on the podium. Not only had they learned the language, they had also made new and lasting contacts. This was emphasized by the Italian Francesca Siniscalchi, deputy head of department at the European Commission. When she meets alumni from other countries, they automatically speak German. She said that she found her stays with the courses "on site" in Germany particularly formative; for example, she had a completely different approach to Richard Wagner after a visit to Dresden and the Semperoper. Discussions at Chemnitz University of Technology put the view of East Germany, which is often strongly influenced by Pegida or right-wing extremism, into perspective.

Jorg Kristijan Petrovič, Slovenian member of the European Court of Auditors, gave a simple explanation as to why he - like many people from small countries - learned foreign languages: "Who speaks Slovenian?" He himself has been a member for 20 years and remembers the beginnings, in particular a visit to the Court of Auditors of North Rhine-Westphalia. A one-hour meeting with a German colleague ended up lasting almost the whole day - and he learned a key German term in the process: the "Schuldenbremse".

This apparently made such an impression that this instrument has now also found its way into the Slovenian constitution. Petrovič said with a wink that this date might have made more sense for a Greek network member at the time. And he would never have gotten to know another - culinary - Rhenish cultural asset without the German language: "Himmel un Ääd"...

Migratory bird in flight over the Europe of 24 languages

The program concluded with a short performance by the "language artist" Jessy James LaFleur from Kelmis, who had already caused a stir last year as part of the Week for German at the embassy in Brussels (see <https://belgieninfo.net/woche-fuer-deutsch-zwei-liebeserklaerungen-an-ostbelgien/>). Unfortunately, she was only present via video as she was unable to come to Brussels herself due to a severe cold. However, it was important to her to personally congratulate the network on this milestone birthday.

As a "migratory bird flying over the Europe of 24 languages", she feels closely connected to the

idea of the network. Language creates identity, but also builds bridges. "Every language opens up a new culture," she said, confirming the insights conveyed during the evening. In an increasingly segmented world, we need to talk to each other more rather than less. Also and especially in Europe, a tree with many (linguistic) branches.

The evening ended with a reception where many participants were able to celebrate a reunion with other alumni. The network seems like a family connected by the German language. A great success that we would like to wish a long future. Especially in a Europe where political forces that instrumentalize language and culture for demarcation rather than cohesion are gaining weight.

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