

## VIRTUAL EUROMAL – 9TH EUROPEAN CONGRESS OF MALACOLOGICAL SOCIETIES

### CONFERENCE REPORT

At the last meeting of the Scientific Council of the Euromal, when KAREL DOUDA asked me to conduct some discussion that would allow him to count the votes regarding the new conference venue, I admit, the request surprised me, so as a joke I proposed to DAVID ALDRIDGE to discuss yesterday's Poland-England football match ... because it is impossible to summarise such an event ad hoc. I can try to do it now, from a distance.

**Scale.** Undoubtedly, thanks to the virtual form of the conference, its range, a parameter so valued in the Internet world, has exceeded the previous congresses. A total of 437 people from all over the world participated in the Euromal in Prague! It was definitely the best score so far, and only 68% of the participants came from Europe. Participants from both Americas and, at the same time, from Asia, were included which undoubtedly increased the impact of the event and advertised European achievements, but it had some consequences – the sessions in the European time zone started at noon and ended in the evening, which for many people was not convenient, but since I participated in these kinds of overseas meetings before, I realise that it cannot be done otherwise. It is worth emphasising that this type of large congress was for free, there were no fees which, together with travel and accommodation costs, often constitute a barrier for young scientists or those from poorer countries – one of the reasons for this very high interest. I know from experience that managing a conference budget is also a huge burden for the organisers, which was avoided here.

**Participation.** How many participants actually watched the presentations, and how many watched them just in the background, dealing with their own affairs and reducing their participation to a minimum, is impossible to judge. Undoubtedly, the virtual form increased the active participation of scientists: three parallel sessions allowed for presentation of many oral papers, which is certainly an advantage of this form of meeting. The participation in the sessions I was watching was variable, but it never dropped

below 30 people, which is probably a success. A large number of sessions also generated difficulties, for example with recruiting chairmen; probably it would have been better to do it earlier, before the conference. It was a good idea to assign each chairman of the session a technical assistant who looked after the speaking time and technical issues, allowing the chairman to focus on the scientific side of the speeches.

**Meetings.** Conferences help people meet and get to know each other. Not only to see people presenting their research, but also to meet collaborators, recruiting new ones, establishing individual contacts. Meetings allow free exchange of thoughts, building trust, even friendship. This aspect was absent because of the pandemic. Probably, like me, someone met with colleagues on a separate virtual session, an event of this type always gives an opportunity to do so, but it is not the same. It is likely that at a real conference I would have had the opportunity to approach a few people and it might have given us an occasion to organise a new research project. This time, I exchanged e-mails with a few people, but this is not the same as a personal meeting that allows getting to know each other and building relationships. For many people, a virtual speech reduces the level of stress and stage fright, which can also be included in the advantages of this form of conference. But it also takes away the opportunity to experience great satisfaction from young authors receiving awards at a great scientific meeting.

**Science.** I believe that it was a very good idea of DAVID ALDRIDGE, who was the advocate of shifting the Euromal conference organisation also to the countries of the eastern part of Central Europe. Such conferences undoubtedly stimulate the development of malacology in scientific centres located in this part of the world, as evidenced by the huge scale of participation of malacologists from the Czech Republic and Poland, reporting research at a very high scientific level. With regard to scientific topics, it was undoubtedly a problem of some sort that recent Euromals were somewhat dominated by buoyant freshwater mussel groups, but at the last conference the scientific cov-

erage was very wide and the marine mollusc research groups were undoubtedly well represented, as were those dealing with snails or palaeontology. It is not for me to judge the scientific level of the speeches, but I heard many opinions that it was high and many original scientific ideas were presented. The plenary lectures certainly did not disappoint, they were all very interesting and provided important “take home messages”, at least for me. In individual presentations, the methodological and technological progress in the research was striking, which was successfully crowned with the award for the best poster by a young participant from Poland, AGATA BONK. For me, it was very interesting and I personally looked forward to see people from other disciplines engage in malacological research; an example may be a very interesting paper of an interdisciplinary nature, presented by a group of hydrologists from Belgium, represented by QUINTIA VAESSEN, honoured with an award for a short presentation.

**Trips.** In virtual conferences there were no field trips, but organisers can always trip over some unpredictable events, when something suddenly goes wrong. Where have they not occurred, and who has not experienced them! Certainly, it is nice for the organisers that during a virtual meeting, no one will question the taste of risotto served during a long break, or whether the chairman has to be ashamed for the delayed delivery of ice to cool drinks for the poster session, but also the opportunity to get to know the local culture, including culinary aspect, is lost, something that has a special meaning in Prague. However, the virtual form of the congress sets some traps that are difficult to predict, because one has to use solutions that have not been tested before. In Prague, the organisers stumbled over the problem of a virtual poster session, because many authors simply did not take the trouble to prepare virtual recordings of the posters, a form they had not known before. I would justify them with the time costs and an innovative form of such poster presentation – many were surprised that, for example, they did not have time to study and record films on YouTube. Moreover, the essence of the poster session is a direct meet-

ing and exchange of views, it seems that watching a movie about the poster will not replace this. How could this be solved in the future? Sure, as part of the conference management, by setting up a separate room for each poster, for the purpose of a direct meeting, but I understand that the number of staff needed for this exceeded the possibilities of the organisers. Something to be resolved.

**Summary.** Could it have been better organised under the conditions of an epidemic threat? It is said that hybrid meetings would be a good solution. However, this means doubling of the organisational effort and it should be remembered that the epidemic threat in the time preceding the congress was completely unpredictable; one can complain now that the vaccinated people could have met, but to organise the event for them, one would have to know – for sure! – in early spring that the population would be largely vaccinated, and no one had such certainty. The virtual form remained, which was perfectly carried out in EXTREMELY difficult conditions, which is a GREAT MERIT of the organisers. The discussion about the future of the congress is still open: virtual or personal meetings? Virtual ones are cheap but less effective than face to face meetings. I know from previous Euromal experience that the main part of the budget is the buffet: coffee, snacks, meals. This is not a problem in virtual conferences. On the other hand, below a certain number of participants, a personal conference becomes expensive for the participants. A solution is a mixed conference, but then the virtual participation should also be paid. A difficult choice. The next Euromal will take place in 2024. Teams from Portugal, Bulgaria, Russia and Greece were candidates, the last venue was chosen, the Greek group decided to organise the conference in Crete. See you then.

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