

## NOTES FROM AROUND EUROPE

# Tilting at windmills

## *The charge of the Macedonian Association of Translators and Interpreters*

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The Macedonian Association of Translators and Interpreters (MATA)—formerly the Macedonian Translators' Association—was founded in December 2010 by ten eminent translators and university professors. Its foundation arose from two chief reasons: the fragility of a legally unprotected job done mostly by freelancers and the continuous professional development that it necessitates. MATA is the first national translators' association that aims to advocate for the translation profession in Macedonia in its entirety.

And there is plenty to advocate for. Being a translator in Macedonia is often fraught with challenges, some of which are faced by translators worldwide, while others are endemic to the specific economic and legal climate that surrounds translation professionals in the region.

Firstly, the high unemployment rate in the country makes it difficult for professionals of any field to obtain full employment, and thereby exercise their labour rights, particularly the right to health insurance and a retirement plan. Currently, the law

allows individual translators either to establish their own translation companies or to register as trading physical entities, neither of which can fully accommodate the specific traits of the freelancing profession. In an attempt to address this, in 2016 MATA members drafted a self-employment model for all freelance professions to be incorporated within the new Labour Relations Bill. MATA representatives met with the Minister of Labour and Social Policy to negotiate the terms of the proposed model, but with the intensification of the political crisis and the subsequent change of government, negotiations came to a halt. We still hope to create more equal employment opportunities for freelancers of all kinds and, while we may be tired, we are by no means defeated.

### **Translator behaviour**

However, it would be fair to admit that, more often than not, the existing issues are exacerbated by trends in the behaviour of translators themselves. Many often do not know their legal rights and means of protection, they disregard professional standards, agree

to work without signed contracts, or fail to recognise their limitations by accepting to translate topics for which they lack expertise. On top of that, many refuse to commit to their own professional improvement and advancement, and to get involved in activities that may not offer immediate reward but are aimed at improving the status of the profession in the long run. For instance, MATA has been struggling to mobilise its already small membership, a good portion of which remains passive, its immense potential untapped, and many of the Association's plans continuously postponed.

Yet, considering the conditions in the Macedonian translation market, the focus on immediate reward is quite understandable. In recent years, unfair competition from amateur translators, dubious yet massive government translation projects, and the willingness of otherwise employed language professionals to translate literature for a fraction of the recommended cost have brought about unprecedented drops in translation rates. The overproduction of university-educated translators working with major languages, such as English and German, further complicates this problem.

### Encouraging young translators

Furthermore, the translation market in Macedonia can present a daunting environment for young, burgeoning translators. Landing the first translation contract, particularly for literary works, seems especially tricky. The market is small, so publishers rarely fund translations themselves, and rely on external funding sources, which

make using experienced translators a condition for granting subsidies. With this in mind, in 2013 MATA and the Delegation of the EU in Macedonia cofounded the Babylon Best Young Translator Award, which has since promoted over a dozen young literary translators. The competition targets students and early-career translators up to 26 years of age. More importantly, unlike any other translation competition we know of, Babylon invites translations from multiple source languages (all official EU languages) into multiple target languages (all languages spoken in Macedonia), and allocates separate awards for each target language that entries have arrived in. Traditionally, the award is presented on the European Day of Languages, 26 September.



*From Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote by Gustave Doré, 1863*

In our continuing efforts to give future translators a leg up, in these past two years we have been running a mentorship programme in collaboration with the Blaže Koneski Faculty of Philology from Skopje. Students are given the opportunity to do practical work with an experienced translator or interpreter for which they can also receive credits for their university internship requirements. Unlike during internships in translation agencies, they receive individualised attention from seasoned freelance professionals, and are assigned a mentor who specialises in their translation field of choice.

**“We are particularly proud of the voluntary commitment of our members”**

Our crown achievements in professional development, however, are the international conferences for translators and interpreters that MATA has been organising for six years in a row. The 2018 conference focused solely on court translation and interpreting, and next year's, which will once again cover multiple areas, including literary translation, is already in the works.

### **Collaboration**

Additionally, MATA succeeded in joining professional networks and forming partnerships with a European or global relevance. MATA is now a member of the **TermNet** network, as well as a partner organisation of **IAPT** (International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters), and a member of **CEATL**, the European Council of Literary Translators' Associations. MATA also maintains close relations with the Macedonian Association of Macedonian Language Editors, the Croatian Association of Literary Translators, the Croatian Association of Professional Court Interpreters, and the Serbian Association of Court Translators and Interpreters. MATA is the first and only Macedonian association to represent translators in this fashion and to make these valuable connections. We are particularly proud of the voluntary commitments of our members and working groups, especially since all our results have been achieved with no external funding apart from the modest membership fees, no infrastructure or permanently employed staff.

In summary, although the bulk of the work is currently being handled by a handful of dedicated members, who often feel as if they were tilting at windmills, considering the limited resources, infrastructure, and manpower, the prospects of changing the legal framework for freelancers' employment, the Babylon competition, the mentorship programme, and the growing number of the international conferences represent no mean achievements. The current active members are aware that they are sewing seeds that will most likely be reaped

by future generations of activists and supporters. The obstacles are many and seemingly unsurmountable, but someone must strike the first blow and break the first block of the wall that divides us. This, above all, is MATA's greatest mission—to advance the profession by shifting perspectives: rather than competition, we constitute a community.

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Association des traducteurs de la République de Macédoine

Асоциација преводачиков Републики Македонија

马其顿共和国翻译员协会

Translators Association of the Republic of Macedonia

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Здружение на преведувачи на Република Македонија