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[This bimonthly English-language newsletter covers a broad range of Foyer activities.](#)

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Foyer International Newsletter: Foyer Goes Europe

Over the past few months, Foyer has stepped up its European activities, participating in the International Platform on Roma Inclusion, inviting Herman Van Rompuy to open the refurbished exhibition "Palace of the Normal and the Strange", and mapping, for the first time, its own European network. Another boundary-breaking initiative was the development of pioneering didactic materials that introduce language awareness in the curriculum of secondary school students with special needs.

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Language Awareness for mentally disabled students

Foyer has a 10-year experience in using the Language Awareness (LA) approach, the aim of which is not to teach languages but to work on positive attitudes towards languages, to increase knowledge about languages and to enhance plurilinguistic skills.

On the look-out for innovative practices, in 2009 we came up with the idea of including LA in secondary schools for students with mild mental retardation, a pioneer project, since LA materials have never been developed for this target group before. In this project the LA aims were combined with the specific curriculum objectives such as sense of public responsibility, health education, ICT, social-emotional education, environment education, ...

The project started with one school in Brussels. LA materials were prepared by Foyer with two teachers of the cooking class after observations had been carried out. The pedagogical materials were then piloted. Our first observations were that the students and the teachers were very responsive to the new teaching approach including LA.

Based on our evaluations of this first project we developed further activities. The following year a working group with teachers from seven schools in Brussels and Flanders started at Foyer. We developed an in-service training session on LA for them and presented the experiences and materials developed in the first school.

Three meetings a year were organised at Foyer, during which the teachers reflected critically on the pedagogical materials presented and developed more teaching materials, all containing a plurilingual/cultural dimension, for the specific courses provided by the schools: hairdresser's assistant, bricklayer, gardener,... The collaboration with the working group lasted for three years.

From November 2013 on the created didactic materials (in Dutch) will be available on our website www.foyer.be. [Contact us](#) for more information.

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Eighth International Platform for Roma Inclusion with a critical note

On 27 June, Foyer's Roma and travelers Service participated in the 8th International Platform for Roma Inclusion, organized by the European Commission. The platform offers a forum for the exchange of experience and good practices in all of Europe.

The theme for the 2013 meeting was "It is urgent to make change for Roma children and Youth", since young Roma constitute a particularly vulnerable group in society.

In this context, Foyer's Roma and Travellers Service presented its successful collaboration with the Foyer Training Centre (*Vormingscentrum Foyer*).

In 2012-2013, another 61 young people followed a "personal development pathway" at the Training Centre. 46 of them were Roma, predominantly of Romanian origin. 19 youngsters supplemented their training with real-life work experience through a so-called "bridging project".

Roma Mediators working for the Roma and Travellers Service make an important contribution to the framework that the Training Centre offers to these socially vulnerable youths. In addition to this, Mediator Biser Alekov told the forum of the visit that Foyer's Roma and Travellers Service made to a Slovak school on the occasion of a recent Grundtvig exchange: Roma pupils were taught on a separate floor in the building, and children whose parents were unemployed were not allowed to have lunch in the school canteen.

The fact that the school had received European subsidies and yet practices active segregation, clearly demonstrates that there is a long way to go before equality becomes the norm. It also shows the urgent necessity of greater vigilance and more rigorous controls of the way in which subsidies are spent, which are at times difficult to put in practice.

Speakers at the eighth International Forum came from various countries, including Spain, Hungary, Germany, Finland and Romania. Livia Jároká, a Hungarian anthropologist who was the first ever Roma woman to become an MEP, sent a video message. She could not be present due to obligations relating to the MEP Award that she had just won for her excellent contributions in 2012.

The most noticeable presence was that of an international group of Roma activists. Campaigning together with Amnesty International, they called on the Commission to monitor the implementation of anti-discrimination directives more closely. The campaigners had brought a petition with 93,165 signatures to boost their claims, and appealed directly to Viviane Reding, European Commissioner for Justice and Human Rights, who also spoke at the meeting.

Reding told the activists to take action and file a complaint with their own national courts and administrations. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent, if at all, that will happen. In order to file a complaint concerning a matter as complex and sensitive as discrimination, one has to fully trust one's legal and administrative institutions. Yet recent reports by organizations such as [Freedom House](#) and [Fundamental Rights Agency](#) indicate that in countries such as, for example, Bulgaria and Romania, that remains less than self-evident...

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Democracy At The Palace

Last June, European President Herman Van Rompuy reopened the gates of Foyer's interactive exhibition on prejudice, The Palace of the Normal and the Strange, which is aimed at children between 10 and 13 years old.

Founded in 1998, the Palace could do with an update. On this occasion, Foyer added a new theme to the exhibition: democracy. Since our society is becoming ever more diverse, we believe it to be important that children and youth, too, manage to grasp a fundamental concept such as democracy and that they understand its value. After all, democracy helps create the ideal conditions for a multicultural society in which people can live together, respected by and respecting others.

Who better than Herman Van Rompuy could open the new version of the Palace of the Normal and the Strange? After the opening ceremony, the President of the European Council was more than happy to be interviewed by pupils of a nearby primary school.

"One girl surprised me," he said, "She asked me: We now have a European government, but when will there be a world government? That is no trivial question, rather, it is a question to make us stop and think."

In his own talk on democracy, Van Rompuy emphasized the importance of dialogue: "Democracies are not ruled by a handful of people. In a democracy, everyone gets to have their say. That also means that we have to accept that others may hold different views. The point is that we have to learn to live and work together well, in the European Union, but also in local administrations and within our very own families. I think it is fantastic that you can learn that here at the Palace of the Normal and the Strange."

[Télé-Bruxelles](#) made a short report of the visit.

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Mapping Our European Network

Establishing a network at the European level is becoming increasingly relevant, also within the integration sector. This is why we wanted to have an overview of how Foyer is embedded in Europe. The results surprised us!

We listed all existing contacts organizing them in four categories:

1. European countries where Foyer staff presented their work at (international) conferences;
2. European countries where Foyer staff run projects, have project partners or act as project partner;
3. European countries where Foyer staff published articles or books;
4. European countries belonging to active networks of Foyer staff.

It turns out that Foyer is active in all European countries, with Denmark as a remarkable exception. In some countries the contacts are limited to one project, such as the Grundtvig-exchange of Foyer's Roma-mediators and their colleagues from Turkey, but in other member states Foyer staff members maintain networks as well as publishing, participating in projects and

presenting Foyer's work. This applies to our neighboring countries the Netherlands, France and United Kingdom but also to Austria, home base of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML, Graz).

At the ECML Foyer participated in several projects ([LEA](#), [Carap](#) and [Maledive](#)) and was a co-coordinator of the [ConBaT+](#) project (Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in Content Teaching), evolving in several publications and conferences. Take a look at the map [here](#).

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