

Presidential Letter - George Simons, 2025-2026

George Simons | Reporting period: 2025-2026

The report on the activities of SE since the last GA would normally be given by the President or the Vice President. As neither of these people were in office for the whole of the period, I have been asked to take on this task - not as a member of the Executive Committee but as a Member of the Board of Directors representing SIETAR Deutschland.

It has been a tough year for those contributing to the work of SIETAR Europa, but we have made progress in re-setting the organisation. We took difficult decisions in order to avoid financial jeopardy and to set the organisation on a more sustainable course.

Elections and Executive Committee

The period to be reported on began with the General Assembly on June 23, 2025, at which the results of the elections for the posts of Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer were announced. This election was necessary following the resignation of the previous office-holders in January 2025 and the subsequent appointment of interims. Fathima Beckmann was elected as Vice President, Hendrik Nobbé as Treasurer and Lena Zeger as Secretary.

In the first meeting of the Board and Executive Committee after the summer break, on the binding nomination for appointment by the GA, they were duly appointed by the Board of Directors in accordance with Article 10 of the Statutes.

The three new members of the Executive Committee spent some time familiarising themselves with their respective tasks and awaiting developments on the main upcoming task, namely the organising of the next Congress.

Congress planning and cancellation

In September the Board voted in favour of the only Congress venue presented to it for approval, namely Valencia, and thus also approved going ahead with planning the congress.

In the following monthly board meetings, however, details about the planning for the Congress were not presented to the newly elected Executive Committee members and the Board of Directors for discussion and approval. In particular, and worryingly, a contract with the proposed venue to be signed by both parties was not presented for approval.

The Board became particularly concerned about the lack of an overview of the expected costs, the expected income from participation fees and sponsorship, the lack of a Congress title and call for proposals and of course the continuing lack of a formal contract signed by SIETAR Europa and the venue.

In the December Board meeting, the Board passed a motion requiring that at the meeting in January 2026, the Board should be presented with the title of the Congress, a call for proposals ready to be sent out and a budget detailing the expected costs and income.

The Board's concerns were compounded in late December 2025 when the Treasurer Hendrik Nobbé issued a financial risk notice underlining the jeopardy threatened by entering into financial obligations of unknown dimensions.

The Board, which according to the statutes is of course accountable to the General Assembly, took note of this warning with the seriousness it deserved.

At the January Board meeting, the requirements of the motion passed in December were not met: a congress title, call for papers and a budget were not presented to the Board for approval. Some time later, it emerged that a draft call for proposals was in fact ready but at no point was this shared with the Board or Executive Committee.

And this lack of information occurred at a time when the Treasurer had issued a financial risk advisory notice. While SE had reserves to cover the running costs of three years, the Board considered it unacceptable to continue with the preparations and saw itself compelled to cancel the Congress.

Leadership changes

This regrettable decision, which was only taken after long and careful discussion and consideration, brought the already troubled relationship between the Board and the President of the Executive Committee to breaking point. It signified an irretrievable breakdown of relations, long marked by a lack of information and communication. The Board invited the President of the Executive Committee to resign, which he duly did on January 9.

The remaining members of the Executive Committee and the Board invited George Simons, as a long-standing and respected member of the world-wide intercultural community, to step in as interim President. We are very grateful that he kindly accepted and we have appreciated his steadying hand on the leadership tiller.

Coinciding with this period of reorganising the leadership of SIETAR Europa was the resignation of Vice President Fathima Beckmann for personal reasons. We thank Fathima for her valuable contributions to the work of the Board and Executive Committee. Dawid Rutkowski was appointed as interim Vice President.

Congress 2027 and financial sustainability

We are very aware as a Board that the cancellation of the Congress disappointed many of our members.

And so the first and most urgent action of the Board in this difficult period was to trigger the stipulated processes for organising the SIETAR Congress 2027, recognising that this was the most important need of SIETAR Europa members. A call for expressions of interest was issued followed by a request for full proposals.

In addition, a financial sustainability committee was set up. The committee noted that SE had reserves sufficient to ensure its medium-term viability covering three years of its running costs and came up with ways of using the surplus - over and above a reserve necessary to cover any loss resulting from a Congress.

The committee recommended an immediate reduction to zero of the membership fee paid by National SIETARs due for 2024. This was approved by the Board. It recently approved a fee for the year 2025

payable in 2026 of 8.75%, a halving of the fee until the time that we can demonstrate clearer value to the national SIETARs. This fulfilled the terms of a motion proposed by SD and passed at last year's general assembly.

At the end of 2024 SIETAR Deutschland was concerned about the transparency of the financial reporting for the year 2023 and requested a second audit. This second audit has been completed and no irregularities were found.

Activities for members

In the second half of its period in office SIETAR Europa has expanded its offer to its members. Alongside its

- very successful D & D monthly meetings under the able leadership of Victoria Spashchenko it has started
- a webinar series entitled 'Let's talk about it' organised and facilitated by Lena Zeger and
- a series of cooperative webinars organised by SE and the National SIETAR's, amongst them an online event 'Intercultural competence and dialogue in troubled times' and the recent webinar featuring Adam Komisarof on Hofstede's newly reassessed individualism and collectivism dimensions. Lidia Wisniewska and Grazia Ghellini are playing a key role in this demonstration of the will to bring SE closer to its members in the National SIETAR's.
- Cynthia Milani has organised a series of events especially for the 69 Direct Members of SIETAR Europa.

Strategic goals towards 2030

A further very important action was to convene in April 2026 the first in-person Board meeting since October 2024. The main objective of this long overdue meeting was to initiate a process of developing strategic goals and measures to be achieved by 2030.

The three strategic goals generated were:

- SIETAR Europa is seen as a centre of intercultural expertise
- SIETAR Europa is a platform for collaboration and networking
- SIETAR Europa has a diverse membership and board

We are aware that these are goals which the new leadership of the Executive Committee will want to contribute to but the Board sees them as a necessary first step to fulfilling its statutory duty to shape the strategic path of the organisation.

The meeting was perceived by all participants as a significant step forward after a troubled and emotionally taxing period of crisis management.

So, I can report that the Board, having navigated SIETAR Europa through troubled waters, is now on course to renewal and in particular to delivering what its members appear to want most: a Congress.

A personal note and a call for engagement

A personal note: SIETAR Europa must take the opportunity of the Congress to ask and answer uncomfortable questions which are especially important to the National SIETAR members, which incidentally make up the vast majority of SIETAR Europa's membership (609 as opposed to 69 direct members) and finance its work:

- What is SIETAR Europa for? What is its purpose?
- And how can it achieve its purpose in a period of demographic change and declining volunteer engagement?

We are optimistic that we will have a successful Congress in whatever form and wherever that may be.

But for its success and also for the continuing successful existence of SIETAR Europa we are calling for our members to engage more with the hard work of providing what members seek. A volunteer organisation depends on its volunteers and a reinvigorated, purposeful SIETAR Europa - and its network of National SIETAR's - depend on these volunteers, depend on you.