

VOICE OF THE BOARD: CHRISTIAN GRIMM

At a pivotal time for GÉANT and the NREN community, CONNECT spoke with Christian Grimm, CEO of the German NREN DFN, and since 2015, Chairman of the GÉANT Board. Already a director of the DANTE Board since 2013, following the merger with TERENA in 2014, Christian became one of the first members of the GÉANT Board of Directors. We approached him to talk about the micro- and macro-economic changes during his time in his current role and the Board's priorities for the coming years.

Recent years have seen many changes for GÉANT, the NREN community and the European environment. Which of these do you think will have the biggest impact in 2019?

We had to deal with several challenges since the birth of GÉANT in November 2014. The first obvious one was the completion of the TERENA and DANTE merger. During that process, although additional resources needed to be reassigned to handle the unexpected outcome of the British referendum in 2016, I believe we successfully managed the change of priorities required by this event. In the same year, the EC unveiled its European Cloud Initiative and we were able to overcome our initial skepticism

- also shared by other organisations - about this EC ambition, further to our investment of time and resources to better understand the implications for GÉANT. In retrospect, I am glad that we embraced this initiative and delighted to have achieved an almost optimal position with regards to this matter. Without the shadow of a doubt EOSC and EDI have become important factors for the development of GÉANT! Today, GÉANT is a partner in key EOSC and EDI related projects, it will lead the "Open Clouds for Research Environments" (OCRE) project starting in 2019 and is engaged with other e-Infrastructures more than ever before.

I am also confident - and this is a view that I share with the entire Board - that the growing positive impact of GÉANT's management team has given life to a more harmonious atmosphere - both within the organisation and the community - since the merger, and this bodes very well for the future.

So, in simple terms, although I do not expect significant or radical changes for GÉANT in 2019, I believe that we



may be affected by the EC's plans for Horizon Europe: these are rapidly developing and we are working side by side with the EC to learn more and gain a better insight into these plans. There is a possibility that around 2020 we might find ourselves relying more than ever on the support of our members to agree on the best approaches and courses of action.

Instability in the European political environment is another major unknown that may cause some unpredictable developments for NRENs and ultimately, in my opinion, undermine the relationship between society and research. One possible scenario which, albeit fictional at present should not be ignored, could feature the growing isolation of some European countries with a consequent negative impact on such a consensus- and collaboration-driven community. On a more optimistic note, I still firmly expect Research & Education to continue to collaborate beyond borders in the years to come. This is where we build the networks!

Do you feel that GÉANT and the community are ready to deal with the changes ahead?

GÉANT is established, respected and recognised at a global level, so in my opinion, as long as we keep having a say and are involved in all relevant international discussions, changes in this arena do not represent a major cause for concern. It's fair to say that work in all NRENs is dominated by constant change and the same applies to GÉANT. We do not trigger change for the sake of it; our job is to address the developing needs of R&E globally and to better support this, we often succeed in experimenting with and deploying the most recent technologies and services. One of the strengths we share with the community is the experience and expertise in dealing with change, and I am confident that with continuous support from the EC we will continue to handle change management successfully.

What should be the Board's priorities for the coming year?

In 2019, with the planned kick-off of the GN4-3* and Indefeasible Right of Use (IRU) (to be referred to as GN4-3N*) projects, we might need to develop further the successful cost-sharing concept we established over many years. This is likely to become a major challenge as it requires all members' solidarity, which relies on the principle that our community can survive only if all NRENs flourish! GÉANT must be in the position to facilitate this forthcoming change and work hard to keep the community's core spirit of collaboration and solidarity alive.

Over the last years we had to deal with unplanned events, both internal and external, but now, thanks to the stability achieved, the GÉANT Board is in the position to better fulfill its role and focus on more strategic priorities. My expectation is that we will present our members with a new GÉANT vision and strategy, which will of course address, among other areas, what is happening at the EC level, in the short term regarding EOSC and EDI, and in the longer term regarding Horizon Europe.

Notwithstanding GÉANT's impeccable management of public funds, I believe we need clearer and more effective communications to demonstrate to our members the cost benefit impact of GÉANT and gain from them stronger support and trust. The objective is to manage and demonstrate

cost efficiency, but also to be in a position to mitigate the impact of a possible future reduction of funds, which could be the outcome of shifted priorities at the EC or budget pressure within the NRENs.

From the perspective of DFN, how is GÉANT catering for the science and education needs worldwide?

DFN has for many years been carrying out most of its global science and education activities via GÉANT, which is irrefutable proof that the relationship and the service offered is very successful. In addition, it strengthens my confidence knowing that the science and education needs and expectations of many other member organisations are fulfilled in a similar way.

Looking further ahead, where would you like to see GÉANT in 2025?

2025 is not as far as it may appear, although by then Horizon Europe will already be in its fourth year of life and some of our activities and initiatives under this programme may already be well underway. My view for GÉANT in 2025 is to be an even more stable, reliable, acknowledged and trusted pan-European organisation supporting R&E with future-proof services, governed by a strong European NREN membership, well-embedded in the EU ecosystem and a significant and influential player in global collaborations.

Tell us something personal about you: a memorable book, your favourite hobby.

It's not surprising that GÉANT has had an impact even on one of my most recent reads, "The Capital" by the famous Austrian writer Robert Menasse. The book is a satire, an essay and a crime story about the EC and revolves around the question of whether Brussels and, by extension the European Union, can be more than just the sum of their parts. I received this book from a member of our community with

deep insight into the European Union, who described it as a very precise observation of how it all works. On a more serious note, in conjunction with last year's celebrations of the Treaties of Rome's 60th anniversary, I had been trying to read as much as I could on how the constitutional basis of the EU was established, and what really happened behind the scenes. To me this is an astonishing lesson on how different political systems – only six at that time, but open from the start to incorporate more - agreed on a common vision, managed to set very high level objectives and build consensus on specific actions towards that vision. Being part of that process must have been an amazing and exhausting experience at the same time, taking place only a little over ten years after Europe's darkest times. What was achieved since then is immense, and also helps to illustrate a strong parallel and correlation with GÉANT, whose members and associates represent over 40 countries of Europe.

GÉANT currently takes a great deal of my spare time, so, when my Chairman mandate terminates, it will be difficult to find a more reasonable hobby to keep me busy and occupy my time with the same intensity and a similar purpose.

About GN4-3

In GN4-3, the GÉANT Partnership will continue to contribute to the effective European Research Area by making Europe the best-connected region in the world. GÉANT must offer European researchers the network, communications facilities and application access that ensure the digital continuum necessary to allow them to conduct world-class research in collaboration with their peers.

Throughout GN4-3, GÉANT will maintain the operational excellence of the established GÉANT services, while still achieving economies on the costs of the backbone network. The overall reliable, secure and state-of-the-art network services offered to researchers and other network users across Europe will remain exceptional. Planned developments are also guided by the vision of a future where a set of coherent and integrated European e-infrastructure services will offer convenient, seamless access for the end users through a common service catalogue, which will facilitate the adoption of services offered by einfrastructure developments, such as the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC).

About GN4-3N

The aim of GN4-3N is to go beyond the state-of-the-art by restructuring the backbone network through exploration and procurement of long-term Indefeasible rights of use (IRUs) and associated equipment to increase the footprint, stimulating the market in cross-border communications infrastructure whilst decreasing the digital divide and reducing costs.