Behind the walls
Written by Angel Alvarez Alberdi

The College of Europe: Europe as a State of Mind?

I was skipping a lecture behind the Law School Building while feeling rather at a loss with respect to my studies. The city was full of lawyers and I did not have too many perspectives. I was just looking forward to going abroad as an Erasmus student in a few months. A former professor of mine passed by and started talking to me. We soon addressed my lack of motivation, and then out of the blue she said: "You have to continue being a good student. Good students can do many great things when they finish their degrees - good students can go to the College of Europe."

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She knew I was a kind of Europe junkie, but she probably wasn't aware of the effect of her words. That night I devoured all information I could find about the College on the net. The first description I got said that the College was the oldest existing postgraduate centre for European Affairs, conceived together with the Council of Europe during the Hague Congress in 1948. Its aim was to create a bond between students coming from countries that a few years before were fighting each other in the Second World War. A place offering a masters just focusing on hardcore European subjects and allowing top students from all around Europe to study and live together? It just sounded too good to be true. Excited as I was, I decided that it was the only place to go. The College or nothing, I dramatically told myself.

Angel Alvarez Alberdi

After graduating from the College of Europe, Natolin, in 2008, Angel became a trainee in the European Commission's Secretariat-General. Then, he gained professional experience in his fields of expertise - interest representation and energy policy - in a public affairs consultancy. Currently, he is a project manager in a European industry association in the renewable energy sector.

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to be sent both to the College and to an authority from your Member State, usually the Ministry for Foreign Affairs or an equivalent body at the regional level.

The interviews are held in the College languages, French and English, and you sit in front of a board of interviewers – I had seven people in front of me - from the College and the national authority. They are basically hoping to meet dedicated students with a good knowledge of European affairs, ambition and some coherent thoughts about what European integration should be. But be prepared for some tricky questions. I always wonder how my face looked when one interviewer asked me about the interaction between the EU's common foreign and security policy and the incipient European energy policy… no comment!

There is a common perception of the College as an elitist institution, a label most European connoisseurs would use. I think that this has to be put into context, because I see it as the consequence of combining three factors: an impressive faculty employing some of the best European Affairs professors and professionals coming from around the globe, extremely motivated, bright students who've been carefully selected and comprehensive, wisely designed study programmes.

Indeed the College of Europe has an attractive offer of master programmes at its two campuses, Bruges in Belgium and Natolin in Warsaw, Poland. The Bruges campus hosts around three hundred students and provides a broad academic offer, with masters focusing on Law, Economics, Political and Administrative Studies and EU International and Diplomatic Studies. Natolin, with a capacity of one hundred and twenty students, offers a single masters programme, European Interdisciplinary Studies, which has a common first semester covering Law, Politics, Economics, History and Sociology and a second semester in which you have to choose between four majors, European Governance, Single Market, EU as a Regional Actor and EU as a Global Actor.

Photo: Zeljka Babic
A game between the football teams of the Natolin campus and the Bruges campus.

Lectures at the College are intense and engaging. I guess the average European student never goes to lectures so happy and in a such a state of excitement. Everything is fascinating: the topics, the professors' different approaches, political stances and ways of
challenge to study at the College, with intensive lectures that last for five or six hours, even on Saturdays, long compulsory reading lists, papers and papers to do, tight deadlines, exams and, of course, a master thesis you have to research and write just before the January exam session.

Life is not too tough at the College though. There are many extracurricular activities available - cinema, debating, yoga, etc - and most brainy, nerdy wannabe eurocrats turn into party animals when it is appropriate to do so. The national student parties are quite an institution and always exploit a somehow stereotypical theme: Spanish beach party, Dutch techno rave party, Germany roaring 20's party, French May 68 Party, just to mention some I attended. But probably the nicest ones are those that just happen, often starting spontaneously in someone's room around a bunch of students complaining about the workload and finishing the next morning, with a couple of these students maybe complaining about an unexpected headache.

The peculiarities of both College campuses also contribute to making your stay a very interesting experience. Being the best-preserved medieval city in Europe, Bruges is simply astonishing. Its evident hanseatic heritage, the beauty of its canals and its manageable size makes it a nice place to live. Plus, the city centre is the campus itself, since the seven student residences are spread around the old town. But let me say a bit more about Natolin, which was my campus. Inaugurated in the early nineties as the College was waiting for and backing the EU Eastern enlargement, Natolin takes its name from the Park and Palace in which the two student residences, library and lecture theatres are located. It is worth pointing out that 'park' here means a proper forest, a protected natural reserve in fact, closed to outsiders, where you can relax by taking long walks, spotting some Polish fauna - hares, foxes, even deer - or admiring unexpected features which are hidden in the thickets – such as a Doric Greek temple or a Roman aqueduct - built by the eccentric noblemen who used to own the property.

"Nearly half of my promotion fellows came to Brussels straight after graduating"

When Natolin is not enough, the centre of Warsaw in about half an hour by metro. Warsaw is an amazing city: full of life, culture and contrasts, it shows how Poland has left its Communist past behind and is looking to the future with confidence. Funnily enough, my favourite spots in the city are examples of pure Soviet architecture: the Marszałkowska street complex, which leads to the magnificent Palace of Culture, Stalin's infamous gift to the city, and the gloomy communist buildings you can find in Praga, an extremely interesting popular quarter on the outskirts of the city.
The Natolin campus, including the student residences, is located in a park which is half an hour metro ride distant from Warsaw.

Probably the thing that makes the College so special is the intense social experience, the people. The College community does not only include students from the EU, but also from beyond, including Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Russia, Lebanon and Palestine, among many other countries. You establish strong links with the people from your course and begin some everlasting friendships. It is difficult to explain, but the College takes a bunch of people with similar profiles and builds up a micro-society that follows its own rules, has its own routines and worries, and ultimately creates a certain community feeling.

I think this feeling is a powerful reason behind the College’s success. Nearly half of my year came to Brussels straight after graduating. The career path of a Natolin graduate in Brussels would, in most cases, start with a traineeship in a EU institution, consultancy or trade association. A traineeship dealing with highly specialised legal, economical or political affairs in a new working environment, in a new – and bloody wet! - city might be extremely exciting, but also a tough experience in many ways. Furthermore, finding a job during the internship is an additional complication. This is why starting in Brussels with a social network of friends and acquaintances working in different policy fields and places helps a lot, in personal and in professional terms. Not only is there always someone to share a beer and a couple of thoughts with, but also, and especially in a place like Brussels where informal channels of communication make the difference, there’s always someone who heard about someone else hiring…

Anyhow, there is a before and an after going to the College of Europe. The experience is so intense that you just smile and immediately feel somehow connected to any alumnus you randomly meet. You have been through the same thing, no matter if there are thirty years difference between your graduations, you both understand what Jacques Delors meant when he said that Europe is a state of mind.

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