



BullsEye

The magazine of European Democrat Students



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EUROPEAN ELITE'S FACTORY



BY JULIEN SASSEL

In a time of rising and triumphant populisms around our continent, it has become increasingly difficult to accept the

term of 'Elite', especially if there is a linkage with the term 'European': the terms throw back into the public's face the image of unelected, yet powerful civil servants and Sherpas sitting in the European Commission's offices in Brussels. Nevertheless, an Institute has sought to shape future European leadership since the very first days of the European integration process. The College of Europe based in Bruges, Belgium, and Natolin, Poland, has been educating hundreds of students every year since 1949. Defined by the media as Europe's Ecole Nationale d'Administration or as the European Oxbridge, the College of Europe retains a set of specificities which distinguish it from the general European Studies curricula that one can find in most universities.

Anticipating and Accompanying Europe's developments

As World War Two left Europe in shambles, it had transformed what had been the centre of gravity of international politics for centuries to the object of litigations between the East and the West. Several initiatives were launched to prevent new conflicts and attempt to create the basis for a united and pacified continent. Among them was the Hague Congress in May 1948, which served as a basis to the Council of Europe. Another conclusion coming out of the Congress was the need to educate and train future European leaders, with the aim of preparing them to a political, economic, intellectual and social supranational entity, as would read the College Statutes in 1950. This

element sets apart the College of Europe from other European Studies programmes as European integration is not only considered as an academic field of study but also as an aim *per se*.

However, it appears that the College of Europe which nowadays focuses most of its teachings on the European Union and its policies actually anticipated the Schuman declaration and rather resulted of efforts linked to another International Regional Organisation, the Council of Europe. The apparition of the European Coal and Steel Community and its further developments led to a slow shift of focus from Interdisciplinary Studies on Europe to the inclusion of European Policy Analysis. This has implied further diversification, with the number of master's programmes increasing from one to five. At the same time, the number of students increased more than ten times, from the 35 students of the first promotion to the more than 450 students in the last promotions.

Besides the increased diversification of the academic offer and the multiplication of students, accompanying the European integration process implied its anticipation by taking into account geopolitical changes. This is why the creation of a campus with a dedicated Master in Natolin, in Warsaw's outskirts, in 1992, can be seen as an anticipation of the EU enlargements of 2004. At the same time, the College increased its focus on the European External Action by creating a specific Master and

increasing the number of students coming from non-EU countries from Europe and beyond. In recent times, this new focus for the external action has also meant a strong focus on Brexit.

A Social Experiment

In order to achieve these aims, the promoters of the College opted for a location which would favour promiscuity within the body of students and limit external contacts for a year. The Belgian city of Bruges seemed ideal to this purpose as Belgium lays in between France and Germany, and the reasoning that would eventually bring the European institutions to Belgium applied to the College as well. Furthermore, Bruges had several characteristics favouring its candidacy: it is a rather small city with a historic city centre enclosed in its walls and a network of canals, making it a very quiet city except for the most touristic areas. Also, at that time it lacked proper Higher Education institutions, with most locals studying in Brussels, Ghent or Leuven. This implied there would be fewer contact with local youth. Finally, the local language, Dutch, has a limited diffusion outside native speakers, limiting, even more, the contacts between students and the local population than it would have happened in an English, French or German-speaking environment. The scene was set for a bilingual English-French post-graduate institute in a Flemish city, creating a bubble.

The students' living environment reinforced the isolation coming from the location. Students are expected to do everything together: they go to lectures, they live in a small number of residences whose size ranges between 25 and 50 rooms, they eat in the College canteen, they study in the library, and they go out together to residence parties, the College bar or in the few bars scattered in the city centre. At the same time, it is a policy of the College to discourage any activity unrelated to the life in Bruges. Students are expected to devote themselves not only in their studies but also in various thematic groups, clubs and sports. As such, when not studying, students would remain together.

By taking into account these elements, it is not surprising that such hyper-socialisation between youth from all over Europe and beyond leads to a high number of relationships among students. While many relationships will not outlast the end of the academic year, many continue or emerge after the College. This can be seen with some famous College alumni, as former Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, former Finnish Prime Minister Alexander Stubb and former British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg have met their future spouse in Bruges.

Maintaining the Primacy

In many aspects, the College of Europe fell victim of its success, as many universities launched their programmes in European Studies or European Affairs, ensuring the access to such studies

to a wider public as they would not apply as strict and lengthy selection procedures than the College do. As such, the study of European Affairs became more popular. At the same time, several prestigious universities in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom developed programmes dedicated to specific policies of the European Union. Such a phenomenon is unsurprising as the EU's role increased and the bloc enlarged, attracting more students from various horizons.

Nonetheless, this implies that the College is now facing an increasing competition at two stages. Part of the response to this competition lies in the distinctive aspect of the College's life: studying at the College of Europe is not only a matter of choosing an academic programme but also living an experience. This experience is kept alive by an important network of alumni which is kept alive by many activities taking place in Brussels and around the world. This, together with the shared experience in Bruges or Natolin, shapes what is called the *Esprit du Collège*. This element is instrumental in understanding how such a relatively small Institute with few hundred students per year has been able to provide such a large number of personnel to the EU institutions and the rest of the Brussels European environment.

In conclusion, by setting apart the usual catchwords used to define the College (lifetime experience, challenging yet rewarding, unique, ...) that one can find on the advertising leaflets and

websites, it appears that the goals and the characteristics its founders made of the College of Europe something more than a simple institute for postgraduate studies. The insistence in ensuring that students build a strong *Esprit de corps* may recall, in certain aspects, the camaraderie expected within military units. To a certain extent, this comparison is valid as College's graduates are trained and called to fight for a united and pacified Europe.

This text was published in Bullseye issue 73 - 20 September 2018