



FLANDERS TODAY

The Bruges mafia

The College of Europe draws yet more visitors to Bruges, though not of the usual sort



Few are left unimpressed by Bruges' pulling power for political heavyweights. Presidents, prime ministers and kings have all delivered speeches in the city, ranging from German Chancellor Angela Merkel last year to the president of the European Council Herman van Rompuy the previous year and, before them, then French president François Mitterrand and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher. This year, on 26 October, it will be Giorgio Napolitano, president of the Italian Republic.

What brings them to Bruges is a tiny post-graduate institute that, since its foundation in 1949, has been the leading place to study European affairs. Each year, students from all over the continent – and increasingly further afield – relocate to this ancient Flemish town for a one year masters in European Union law, politics, economics or diplomacy.

Among its alumni, the College of Europe counts the new Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the UK deputy prime minister Nick Clegg and an array of other ministers, secretaries of state and high-ranking members of the European Parliament or officials at the European Commission. They are often said, due to their friendships and connections, to form something of a “Bruges mafia” in and around the EU institutions.

Young ambassadors

In line with tradition, the current academic year is named after a notable European, famous Polish-French physicist Marie Skłodowska Curie. It will officially be opened by the Italian president, though classes began in September. He will deliver his speech to a class of 53 different nationalities from all over Europe and, reflecting the growing number of scholarships for non-EU students from Turkey, North Africa and Belarus, amongst others. Of the 300-odd students enrolled, around 10 are Flemish.

Yves Roose, alderman for culture and education in Bruges, is convinced of the college's value for the city. “The students become ambassadors for Bruges,” he says. “They are enthusiastic about the city and regularly come back.” To reflect their ambassadorial role, students are made honorary citizens of the city when they graduate. Roose adds that “the College of Europe has helped to give a certain intellectual and diplomatic status” to the city, which, for historical and political reasons, has never had a university of its own.

Christophe Christiaens agrees: “It's blasé to say that the future leaders come to the college, but the city benefits from the fact that many of the students go on to hold important positions.” Among all the Poles and Italians, he is the only *Bruggeling* at the college, where he's reading for a masters in European politics and administration. “The atmosphere is very good,” he says. “It's intellectual and very competitive.”

In Bruges

The institute ended up in Bruges thanks to the vision and determination of local Europeanists and politicians. The original idea of creating a European university to bring students together to study from a European perspective was floated after the war by leading politicians, including Winston Churchill, Henri de Spaak and Salvador de Madariaga. However, it was the Flemish priest Karel Verleye who was the first to suggest Bruges as a suitable location, stressing the city's role in European history and humanism, and that there was no “rival” local university.

This echoed with the townspeople, leading Bruges to make funding and buildings available for a successful trial run in 1949. Since those early days of 20 students, the college has grown and now occupies several buildings across the city. The college's seat is a beautiful 18th-century building in Bruges' historic heart along the Dijver canal, whilst another of its buildings, a large, renovated former Jesuit school, offers modern teaching facilities. This year's 317 students are spread across nine residencies in the north of town, providing a certain flamboyance to otherwise sleepy streets and squares where, centuries earlier, rich European merchants had lived and traded.

A canteen reminds the students to attend to their physical needs; a college bar, in the cellars of a 17th-century merchant's house, is the place to discuss the EU's latest gossip. Otherwise, when not frantically studying or dutifully attending the talks of the many luminaries that pass through, the two semesters are punctuated by national weeks, organised by students to showcase their home country's culture (often with particular attention given to the various beverages).

The number of College of Europe marriages is not insignificant: both the Danish prime minister and the UK deputy prime minister met their spouses here. It has led one commentator to observe that the college was an enthusiastic motor for European "horizontal integration".

Local meets global

Integration into the local community appears, by general consent, to be more problematic. "I feel a bit sorry that students integrate so little in local cultural, artistic and intellectual life," says Roose. He attributes the fact to the brevity of students' stay in Bruges and the intensity of the programme. Others complain that the students, who study in English and French, make little effort to speak Dutch (though classes are offered by the college) and are often uninterested in Bruges' historic past or dynamic present.

The responsibility for bridging the gap between town and gown falls to Bertil van Outryve d'Ydewalle, a true *Bruggeling*, alumnus of the college, and president of the local committee for the College of Europe. As part of a hosting project, they've convinced 50 local families to welcome the students into their homes for the occasional Sunday lunch. Elsewhere, joint concerts, sporting events and guided tours are organised to bring the two sides closer together.

Paul Demaret, the college director who first took charge of its law department in 1981, has been won over by the city. He lauds it as "safe and welcoming" and underlines the support that the college has received, in particular, in the form of generous indirect subsidies. For if the college's funding comes from tuition fees and the EU, Belgian and West Flanders governments, the city has made several large, renovated and central buildings available for it to use.

Yet the shortage of available public buildings has, it is claimed, led to millions of euros having to be spent on renovating and extending other public buildings in Bruges, most recently in the case of school buildings. This has given some local politicians cause to call for the college to be axed from the city budget, which is already under pressure. "No, this view is quite exceptional and only on the fringe of the political debate," asserts Roose, who adds that "the majority of the local population is proud to house the college."

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