My College Experience

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The initial flame was kindled by attending lectures as part of the Cambridge diploma in English and EU law programme I followed during my law degree studies in Bulgaria between 2007 and 2009. From that time on my interest in EU law has only grown stronger and when one day a friend of mine whispered ‘Bruges’ into my ear something must have definitely stirred somewhere in the universe. Two years ago, an average tourist wandering through the misty walks of a picturesque medieval town, I said – I’ll be coming back here. And here I am now.

The ‘ancient’ traditions of the College of Europe – the oldest university institute for European studies – dating back to 1949 when, its founders, including such luminaries as Salvador de Madariaga, Winston Churchill, Paul-Henri Spaak and Alcide de Gasperi, had the idea to create a place to établir les fondements solides et les bases morales stables afin de bâtir un avenir meilleur et plus heureux non seulement pour l’Europe, mais pour le monde entier.

Nowadays the students experience the famous ‘esprit du Collège’ on its two campuses in Bruges and Natolin (Warsaw) where, according to the College’s first rector Hendrik Brugmans, they have ‘for a task’, firstly, to get to know the economic, political, institutional and psychological sociology of our continent; secondly, to familiarise themselves with the problems of the hour, those of tomorrow and those of the day after tomorrow, taking as a guideline the principle of subsidiarity (understood as a multiple authority as opposed to a unitary power); and finally, in their capacity of future executives of Europe, to face the indispensable moral imperative of fundamental rights inherent in European history.

The four programmes in Bruges (European Legal Studies, International Relations and Diplomacy, Politics and Economics) and the European Interdisciplinary programme in Natolin (Warsaw) unite young graduates from around 50 countries in Europe and beyond, all sharing a common passion to learn about and perhaps even work for the EU. The objective of the European Legal Studies programme as described by the current Rector of the College Paul Demaret is to present the young jurists/lawyers/law students with a knowledge of both the law surrounding the European integration process (institutions, internal market, competition law, external relations), as well as of the law produced by this process (harmonisation, coordination of national laws). Its ultimate goal is to develop within students both the spirit of synthesis and analysis, coupled with teaching a method of induction and the precision of deduction, arousing the capacity to connect the details to the totality and to teach students to confront the dogmas and the facts. There are a significant number of courses to choose from.
reflecting the different backgrounds and professional interests of the students which vary with the years in accordance with the national, European and international trends. The famous ‘flying faculty’ of the College brings together visiting professors who are amongst the best in their fields – as university lecturers or professionals – and are attracted by the reputation of the College and the quality of the students and teaching assistants.

It would be difficult to summarise ‘the College experience’ as I saw it but there are several highlights which are particularly important to me. The first thing that strikes one in Bruges is the unique harmony of nature and architecture. The whole town seems to be overcast by a mysterious and yet enticing cloak which no tourist can penetrate, and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to explore its secrets. You feel even more honoured by the welcoming ceremony organised in a gorgeous mural-painted wedding hall of the municipality (accompanied by local beer, naturally) and even start getting close to the local people through the ‘host family’ programme organised by the College (a chance to meet Bruges families over dinner in the atmosphere of their homes) and through the every-day breakfast chats with the residence ladies (who take care of the student residences but also, with thoughtfulness and consideration, of our needs).

The speech for the opening of the academic year delivered by Chancellor Angela Merkel already brought us a sense of common purpose – reminded us that we bear a shared European responsibility for the long-term stability of the EU and the importance of the peoples’ support backed up by stable institutions which render the Union capable of acting; presented us with a vision of Europe founded on the values of freedom, responsibility and dignity of the individual in which old rivalries are put behind and democracy, as the opportunity to be presented with a diversity of opinions from which then one course of action can be chosen by majority; a Europe of rational thinking but also a Europe of the heart. And these two sides indeed complement each other in every aspect of our lives here: the fervour and positivism with which the professors would introduce their knowledge and experience to us, the inspiration with which we would continue discussing the hot legal topics even after classes.

The dilemma before me was an immense range of subjects to choose from and not enough time to do everything that interested me. But the methodology of the courses was thorough and I had an opportunity to follow an interdisciplinary and practical approach throughout. I was touched by the enthusiasm of certain professors and sometimes three hours long lectures would pass unnoticed. The current issues were part of our schedule involving analysis of the latest Court decisions and Advocate General opinions. Problems like the financial sanctions imposed on individuals, the accession to the European Convention on Human Rights, the consequences of the financial crisis, the interaction of the EU legal order with international law were discussed in different seminars giving us a broader understanding of the stakes and of the possible solutions. For me personally, the opportunity to visit the institutions and to actually sit in court rooms in Luxem-
bourg and Strasbourg was also a crucial complement in creating a dimensional situation of my knowledge.

Important parts of the common College spirit were the national weeks. The idea of having 7 days to recreate your country’s politics and culture translated into a magnificent quilt of traditional costumes, songs, dances and food, together with intriguing conferences on hot regional issues. In the role of a receiver you are given a unique in-sight into ancient Belarusian and Ukrainian ethnic holidays, you run from ‘bulls’ on San Fermín’s day, you learn salsa, waltz, belly-dancing, sirtaki. As a giver you share your precious time, efforts and sponsors with your co-workers from neighbour countries to make a week to remember. And when you see what great collaborators France & Germany or Turkey & Greece might be, you cannot help but smile at the possibility of a future without fear.

The effect that the multicultural environment had on us was amazing – in less than one year we not only made a trip around the world without even leaving the Ring (the central part of Bruges where the spirit of the College wanders) but also intimately conversed with all these countries’ nationals, exchanged ideas and passions and lived together through political issues like the Libyan and Egyptian revolutions, the Belgian elections, the Turkish accession, the Macedonian question. We shared and related to our colleagues’ personal and national values which in the end are always reflected in the political events of their states. And all this in an informal atmosphere of a coffee break or a bar evening, before we would dive again into the vast expanse of the library.

You would often hear the remark that all the national stereotypes were confirmed by the national representatives. Naturally in this miniature model of Europe similar inter-nations conflicts could also be observed. But stereotypes were more than confirmed, they were embraced and appreciated and even where differences could not be overwhelmed by some, the grand majority of people would support a firm position of principle and would stand behind the weaker party. The differences, when uncomprehended, might be scary but when we know each other they are not threatening anymore, and this is part of the beauty of communication between people and between peoples. One of the common symbols created by the College would always bring back this feeling of unity and affiliation – the patron of our promotion Albert Einstein. And it is him that said:

“All intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage – to move in the opposite direction.”

I believe my College experience taught me to see things ‘simpler’ and I believe this process of not just watching but seeing one another went beyond tolerance – it created a shared understanding of the world and a desire to work and build our future in Europe together.