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Evaluating Report

On The

New Europe College, Bucharest

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the Basis of a Visit to Bucharest from October 8 to October 11, 2009)**

I Introduction

In 1989 the participation rate of the population in higher education in Romania was (together with Albania) the lowest in Europe: around 600 – 700 students per 100.000 population.¹ Admission to universities was strictly restricted, and the Romanian state - as did other Communist states - primarily favored engineering studies. Seventy-four percent of the university students were inscribed in engineering.² In this situation of a marginalized academic sector without relevant humanities and social sciences (many academic subjects such as sociology and psychology had been abolished in the 1970s) the establishment of the 'New Europe College' in 1994 was an unusual step as it did not look for an incremental improvement in a fledgling university system. Instead it implanted into the system an 'Institute of Advanced Study', independent from the system of universities and from the institutes of the 'Academy of Sciences'. This new institution was closely linked to other European 'Institutes of Advanced Studies' (especially the 'Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin') and its main function was from its first day to change Romanian higher education and scholarship via establishing social and intellectual links to institutions of global relevance and to their intellectual traditions and academic standards.

In this main intention – and looking only to the fields in which it operates: the humanities and some of the social sciences – the NEC seems to be remarkably successful. Since 1994 NEC supported 354 (mostly) young scholars from Romania and some from other countries in South Eastern Europe. It organized or co-organized many conferences and invited a significant number of foreign scholars for lectures in Bucharest. Furthermore, most of the NEC fellows made use of their stipend for visiting an impressive array of foreign institutions in Europe and North America. And there is an interesting list of the present positions of former NEC fellows which shows a significant number of persons in the governance of academic institutions and a significant number of persons in positions of political responsibility or in foreign policy responsibilities (for example as Romanian ambassadors in other countries). From this one might derive in a first approximation that NEC succeeds in its main intentions of building academic standards, establishing international connectedness and contributing to the formation of an educated elite in presentday Romania.

¹ Cf. on this and on the following remarks Reisz 2006; Reisz 2005; MacGregor 2008.

² Cf. Fernández Darraz et al. 2009

Since 1989 the number of students in Romania has grown nearly sixfold (now 3.500 students per 100.000 population). There are now more than 600.000 students in 49 public universities and in more than 50 private institutions which enrol 20 to 25% of the student population.³ I find it interesting that the private institutions were never mentioned in our talks. In this Romanian university system which is much bigger than it was in 1989 there seem to exist significant quality problems demonstrated among others by practices such as “diploma washing” sometimes done by public universities which immatriculate students from private universities and then upgrade their “unclean” degrees.⁴

II The Interviews

In the two days we spent at NEC we talked to 15 former fellows of NEC; to Adrian Curaj, the director of the ‘Executive Agency for Higher Education and Research Funding’; three rectors of universities in Bucharest (one of them is a member of the advisory council of NEC; the other two were former fellows), and, of course, with the three leading persons of the ‘New Europe College’: Andrei Plesu (Rector), Marina Hasnas (Executive Director), Anca Oroveanu (Academic Director). These conversations with 22 persons were very instructive and I try to reconstruct from my point of view the central informations as I perceived them and the main conclusions I am going to draw from them.

In beginning I would like to register that without an exception all our interview partners spoke about NEC somehow enthusiastically. Of course, it is easy to discount such an impression, as the interview partners had been selected by NEC and it is easy to surmise that among 354 fellows there have to be some who did not get something from their contact to NEC or who did not like the atmosphere there. But nonetheless the consistency of the impression and the unanimity of our interview partners affirming that they consider NEC to be the primary academic address in Romania and look at it as a very important and continuing influence on their careers allows the plausible hypothesis that there is something real behind the enthusiasm.

There were some concepts which were mentioned again and again in our talks. Among them the most frequent one perhaps was *interdisciplinarity* which in many western countries has become a commonplace term which does not mean much. In countries such as Germany and Switzerland the rhetorics of interdisciplinarity is a necessary part of every successful research proposal. In Bucharest and Romania it seems to be different. The concept of interdisciplinarity was closely coupled in our interviews to terms such as ‘dialogue’, ‘community’ and ‘collaboration”, and the academic culture in which these attitudes flourish

³ Cf. Reisz 2005; Nicolescu 2005.

⁴ Cf. on the recent rescinding of 100.000 degrees given by a private university ordered by the education ministry, Dan 2009.

was contrasted to a culture of scientific disciplines and specialized institutes in which one looks with enmity and envy at neighboring disciplines. People from other disciplines are then often perceived as enemies. NEC however seems to instill in its fellows a communicative openness to other cognitive ventures which introduces a new element into the Romanian situation. It is easily to be seen that under these circumstances interdisciplinarity is not only a cognitive orientation of the individual researcher but induces motives for discussion and collaboration and thereby shapes a wholly different behavioral style.

A second core term which we heard very often was *selection*. NEC is obviously seen as nearly the only place where success – the granting of a fellowship – is based on real achievement, and that is success results from a serious selection process which tries to find out and to support only the most valuable projects. If someone gets a fellowship at NEC this really means something and can set the person on a path which changes the trajectory of a whole academic career. One has to relate this to a career structure in Romanian universities in which lifelong employment is often granted before the Ph.D. dissertation. In such a situation there are no strong achievement motives induced by institutional structures. It is especially the case that in such a situation in which you need not switch academic institutions to advance in an academic career it seems probable that further progress depends more on outward conformity to social - somehow non-intellectual - standards than on scientific achievements. If this really is the case it should make a significant difference if there is an institution such as NEC with a demanding selection process.

There is a further interesting fact which should be added at this point and which I only understood from the interviews we had. Before going to Bucharest I had supposed NEC to be a kind of 'Wissenschaftskolleg' similar to the institution I know from Berlin. By this I mean an institution which moves you for some time from your normal place of work to another city and to another workplace at which the results you are going to achieve depend to a significant amount on this social distance from your normal work environment. I learnt from the interviews that this is not the way NEC functions. Only few of the fellows live and work at NEC for the time of their fellowship. Because of limitations of space (eight or nine places for fellows to live at NEC) but much more for the reason that fellows have to fulfill their normal teaching obligations even while being fellows at NEC and that they have to do this because they need the income from these obligations, they spend only a limited amount of time at NEC. The main occasion at which the fellows are present in the physical premises of NEC is the colloquium on Wednesday morning at which they are expected to participate. Looking at these aspects it might be said that membership in the community at NEC is more virtual than is the case in other comparable institutions. It is more about the knowledge of being a member of a community. As such a membership based on knowledge it may be more persistent than your membership in other 'collegia' which normally is mainly finished after you have left the institution. However one looks at it it is remarkable anyway how strong the effects of being or having been a member of NEC obviously are.

A further observation may be apt at this point. Support by NEC primarily happens at that point in your academic career at which you still write your PhD dissertation. In comparison to other 'Collegia of Advanced Studies' this is more at the beginning of an academic career than is mostly the case in other institutions which either focus on the post-doctoral level or even mainly recruit full professors in late stages of their careers. The reason for this structural decision by NEC is obvious. NEC is not about adding a level of excellence to an established academic world. It is much more about transforming an academic system by giving the careers of a sufficient number of junior academics a direction which often would not have been possible otherwise. As one of our interview partners said: The doctoral level is in Romania "the worst level of academic qualification". The reason he cited was that the doctoral level of academic education is still in the hands of an older group of professors many of which have not so much been influenced by academic practices elsewhere in Europe. The focus on young scholars in the doctoral stage can plausibly be justified by such descriptions of the present situation. And, of course, a shift of focus can easily be prognosticated from these observations and this shift was already clearly visible in our interviews. As NEC somehow accompanies its fellows through their careers new types of support and cooperation will arise from this, having a stronger focus on events and projects in later career stages.

Another feature of the Romanian situation can be and has been 'unpredictability'. On the one hand you are formally secure early in your career in some expectations. You know that you have a permanent position although its value in money terms may be limited (and besides it happened regularly - especially in the nineties - that the salary was not paid). On the other hand the research grant you get even today may be unreliable as the grant has been attributed to you but you will perhaps never see the money. In describing this situation to us NEC was called by one of its former fellows a 'safe heaven'. Of course, it can not cushion these unpredictabilities but it did succeed in its own funding to evade these instabilities. That is a considerable success.

I finally come back to the intellectual milieu at NEC. I already pointed to interdisciplinarity, to selectivity and to internationality as important features of this milieu. A related point – made by several of our interview partners – is that NEC is experienced as a place where intellectual problems and research really matter and where you meet other people who share with you this experience and where you furthermore – perhaps for the first time in your career – meet people you only knew from the literature before and who are internationally well-respected, even famous people. One of the former fellows made an interesting argument regarding the effects of this milieu. He said that NEC is a place where you 'become more relaxed' and at the same time 'you dare more'. This is a relevant point because it describes an interrelation which may happen to arise in any institution which succeeds to combine academic liberty, intellectual stimulation and a demanding atmosphere

III The Documents

1 The Academic Programs

If one looks at the individual programs NEC organizes or had organized in earlier years one gets to see a picture which once more gives the impression that we have to do with a well-conceived institution. Programs are clearly described; it is easy to see the functions and differences; and in their main features programs seem clearly to be focused on the main mission of NEC: Upgrading and improving the Romanian situation in higher education and especially in the humanities and the social sciences.

There are at the core the NEC Fellowships: a small but probably a significant support for those who get it – a stipend for nine months and the possibility of staying at a foreign academic institution for one further month. This addendum plausibly is a very important part of the experience of the fellow.

There are secondly the Stefan Odlobeja fellowships given since October 2008 by the Romanian state as something which adds to the money NEC organizes for its own fellowships. The intention seems to be to give one Stefan Odlobeja fellowship for each NEC fellowship. If this program remains stable it can prove to be a significant addition.

A third program is the NEC-LINK Program which supports cooperative teaching among at least two academics from different universities who together (there are some exceptions) give a course at one of their universities (sometimes they offer two courses). This obviously fosters cooperation, interdisciplinarity and a modernization of curricular contents. There are some more components to this program: Ph.D. students who function as assistants; foreign guest lecturers; money for buying books related to the course. Again this seems to be a well-rounded program. In the list given to us there are 55 courses in 13 semesters with an interesting spectrum of subjects and a broad disciplinary diversity of participants which supports the very positive impression.

Then there are the smaller fellowship programs. There are the Europe Fellowships (since 2006) which take the place of the former NEC Regional Fellowships. Both programs look or looked at regional integration in South-Eastern Europe by offering fellowships to researchers from these countries. I am not completely convinced that the new thematic focus of the program (*“A Prehistory of European Integration in South-Eastern Europe”*) is a better idea than the former program which only had a regional but not a thematic focus. ‘Europe’ as a subject is strong enough in all programs of NEC. Therefore I would prefer a regional program which once more is willing to support a diversity of subjects but is primarily concentrated on linking South-Eastern European scholars to NEC and to connect them among one another.

2 The Fellows

Studying the lists of Fellows does not bring any big surprises. From the nearly 100 Romanian universities (49 of them public universities) only about 10 appear on these lists. This points to the asymmetries in the Romanian university system. There is the strong position of the University of Bucharest and the other universities (art, music, architecture) in Bucharest to which around 50% of the fellows with Romanian addresses seem to belong. Another strong place is Cluj-Napoca with a significant number of names, and then around ten further Romanian institutional addresses are to be seen (besides there are a number of institutes most of which probably belong to the Academy). Only in the last two years since 2007 one perceives some scholars from Western countries who mostly work on Romanian subjects. This will happen more often in the future I presume. But the focus will stay on the improvement of the Romanian situation.

3 The Events

There is an impressive list of guest lecturers and public events for the years 2003 – 2009. In the list of guest lecturers art historians figure very prominently. This is probably due to financing available from the Getty program. Otherwise one can see from these lists as from all the other documents that NEC is more a Humanities institution than an institution with a focus in the social sciences. Fields such as economics, psychology, sociology, even anthropology (at least the more theoretical variants in cultural and evolutionary anthropology) do not play a really strong part. This tendency towards an exclusion/self-exclusion (?) of the systematical social sciences is a tendency often to be seen in 'Institutes of Advanced Studies'. In each individual case one has to look at the causes and to examine if it is necessary and if it is possible to do something about it.

4 The Publications

Several yearbooks were sent to us. Of course, one likes to look at these books, even if one does not find the time to read them. But I ask myself, as I did in other comparable cases, if such yearbooks do get any readers at all. These kinds of publications without thematic coherence disappeared from universities a long time ago. They are still published by 'Institutes of Advanced Studies' and they are probably collected by former fellows. But perhaps there are no readers. Therefore I ask myself if NEC would not invest its resources better if it only published collections with a clear thematic focus. For the normal fellows perhaps it would be better if the core obligation of the fellowship would be formulated in a different way: Publishing an article based on work done in the year of fellowship in a well-received scholarly or scientific journal.

5 The Library

In former evaluation reports the library played a very prominent part. This was not the case in our visit. To me it is not entirely clear how to react on this altered situation. What is the precise function of the library? My suggestion is that NEC should try to develop a strategy for the future role of the library. We only made a short visit to the library and besides going around I looked at the books in my field, sociology. In this case, but I presume it is not a good test case, the books present look like having arrived at NEC by chance. The only sociological journal I saw was "Comparative Studies in Society and History" which is a good journal but probably not among the first twenty sociological journals in the world. On the basis of these resources a sociologist with a fellowship at NEC could not do a serious piece of work (but I did not examine the electronic resources). I am not sure what to derive from such an isolated and therefore not well-founded observation, besides asking for a clearcut strategy for the place of the library in the future life of NEC.

6 The Host Institutions

NEC gave us a list of all the host institutions visited by fellows of NEC during their one---month stay abroad in the years 2003 – 2009. For me this list is a clear indicator of the cosmopolitan perspective present at NEC. Of nearly all of the institutions present on this list it could be said that they are first-class- institutions and from this one might derive a optimistic picture regarding the connections between Romania and other places of scholarship and science arising on the basis of these stays.

7 The Self-Reporting

There were two "Rechenschaftsberichte" (2008 and 2004) sent to us. I only want to make one remark regarding these two very informative texts. They are written in a spirit of critical self-observation without traces of the self-aggrandizement one often finds in this genre of text. From this and from many other observations I am optimistic that NEC functions as a self-observing and self-correcting system rather well and that probably all of its bodies and publics are part of this. That makes the job of the evaluator much easier because he knows that the system does not need so much external intervention.

IV Conclusions and Recommendations

It is easily to be seen from this evaluation that I have no serious objections to the history and present state and to the functioning of the New Europe College. It is a very small institution that with a small amount of financial means occupies a strategic position in the Romanian system of science and higher education and contributes significantly to the modernization, cosmopolitanism and humanization of these two systems. NEC has furthermore shown that it is a learning system which constantly adapts its practices and therefore may be trusted to change continuously in reaction to changes happening in Romania and elsewhere. I have only a few concluding remarks to make.

1. Leadership and succession. My impression is that one of the conditions of success of NEC is that there exists a somehow rare combination of some persons who succeed to practice cooperative leadership on the one hand and the presence of a charismatic founder-director on the other hand. Therefore one has to be very careful in looking for a succession. For leading NEC you need a mixture of thematic universality, personal strength and permissiveness in dealing with differences which is not easily to be found. Perhaps it would be better not to look for a successor immediately but to strengthen the leadership of NEC by recruiting three or four younger scholars who should be very experienced and very innovative at the same time and who could function as core and continuous academic advisors for the present leadership. These three or four persons could at the same time function as specialists for broadly defined disciplinary fields and could thereby strengthen the disciplinary mix of NEC (see remarks above), for example in the direction of a stronger inclusion of the social sciences. If need should arise one of these persons could later on take the role of the present director.

2. Finances. As much as it is possible for them the foundations and states and political institutions presently supporting NEC should not try to disengage themselves from NEC in the next ten years. Even if the Romanian state begins to invest some resources into NEC (and the indicators are there), NEC strongly needs a pluralistic financial basis with a number of different sources of funds to hold to its independence and originality. What might be a very attractive strategy is to look not only at the stabilization of the yearly budgets of NEC but to start furthermore a separate campaign which aims for adding to the financial basis of NEC an endowment of say 10 million Euros. The present yearly budgets of NEC do not amount to more than around 1.3 million Euros a years. That means an endowment which could contribute around 0.4 million to 0.5 million a year to the budget could function as a very sound basis for the yearly budget process.

3. Learning and Flexibility. The success of NEC rests on constant adaptation to changing situations. This is the most important recipe for the future of the institution: to observe

constantly the Romanian situation, to adapt to changing circumstances and redefining continuously the role one is able to play with very limited means, and only to cling to scholarly and scientific cosmopolitanism and to thematic universalism. These are from my point of view the major and only invariable value premises.

4. Résumé: NEC occupies a singular key position in the system of higher education and science in Romania. This is among other reasons due to NEC incorporating principles such as interdisciplinarity and a strict quality-conscious selection of candidates in a way other Romanian institutions do not try or cannot afford to do. A further aspect which is more strongly represented by NEC than by other and bigger Romanian institutions is internationality and international connectedness. Therefore I perceive NEC as a very small institution which succeeds with modest means to give surprisingly effective impulses to a much bigger system. Regarding finances in my view it is obvious that the independence of NEC demands a mix of external sources to which a strong foreign component is indispensable. To push the nationalization of the finances of NEC is not only something which does not promise success but should not be tried at the moment to safeguard the autonomy of the institution.

One should examine regularly the disciplinary mix of subsidies given by NEC. Furthermore it would be interesting to undertake a review which tries to find out for a number of relevant scientific disciplines if there already exist places and groups in Romania which are near to an internationally competitive state of knowledge and on the other hand which are the disciplines in which one would need an intervention as in the presentday situations Romanian research groups are still very much behind international standards. Such a review could improve the strategic component in funding decisions by NEC. Finally it should be said once more that NEC would profit from slowly internationalizing its population of fellows and thereby coming nearer to the practices of other 'Institutes of Advanced Studies'.

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