

EVALUATING REPORT

on the

NEW EUROPE COLLEGE, BUCHAREST

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by

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The New Europe College within the framework of the Romanian university and research scene

The Romanian educational system is being subjected to intense reforms from above. Since autumn 1996, the government has been preaching openness and acclimatization to the West, and generally pursued policies aimed at courting foreign investment. Since 1990, numerous changes have taken place on the educational and scientific scene. Some of the changes were deliberate and greeted with approval, while others tended to be less rational and even chaotic. The current Minister of National Education (since 1997), Professor Andrei Marga, has vigorously championed the drive towards reform. His vision is to create first-rate autonomous universities, which are viable and able to compete in an international arena. The “brain drain” – scores of outstanding young Romanian scientists have been enticed abroad – is acknowledged as a serious problem, since the chronic shortage of resources means that the loss of highly qualified human capital is not a temporary one. The total budget of the Ministry of National Education being extremely modest and imposing tight restrictions on new initiatives, the Minister feels that the New Europe College, particularly its RELINK-initiative, will help convert the brain drain into a brain gain.

Teaching and research sectors in Romania are still highly polarized (universities versus institutes of the Romanian Academy of Sciences). In future, the Academy may be expected to continue its steady course of decline since no perceivable steps are being taken to revive it (discussion partners refer to it as an “historical museum” or “even poorer relative of the poor universities”). The teaching sector is generally considered more dynamic than the research sector. In 1996/97, twice as many students enrolled in Romanian universities than seven years earlier, i.e. in 1989/90, which implies an urgent need for competent teaching staff. In future, research will be relocated to the universities, and public funding will be allocated on the basis of competition between the various research units. A new law governing the universities is currently being drafted.

One of Minister Marga’s projects is the development and specification of the currently underdeveloped area of (post-)graduate and advanced studies. Romania has far too few institutions of higher studies: under the former regime, the number of doctoral candidates was very limited, and even today, in a country of some 23 million inhabitants, only a handful of universities are eligible to confer doctoral degrees. In a short memorandum issued in the summer of 1998, the Minister stated that “the new policy of the universities encompasses options such as [...] the extension of scientific research and the strengthening of scientific competitiveness by the founding of centers of excellence, postgraduate schools, centers of technological transfer, and the instituting of grants for excellence.”¹ In the discussion with us, the Minister spontaneously said that, as the first international Institute for Advanced Study, the New Europe College complements the program of reform for the Romanian universities which remain focused on the diploma level. He finds the way fellows are selected

¹ Andrei Marga: *Guidelines for the Reform of Education in Romania*. Ministry of National Education. Tipografia Multiprint, Iași 1998.

excellent, and the opportunities resulting from the interaction of young Romanian scholars with senior academics from Western institutions very rewarding. “The New Europe College is an entrepreneurial success”, the Minister told us. Nonetheless, current laws and regulations (such as recent draft acts) make no provision for an institution featuring the specific academic program and organizational structure of the New Europe College. This makes it difficult for the college to emerge right now as an official partner.

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The institute bridges the gap between the research and teaching sectors by enabling assistants, lecturers and professors to pursue independent research, helping them to become more qualified. It counteracts excessive specialization by uniting young scientists with their peers from other disciplines. Thus, ultimately, it makes an active investment in Romanian science by sponsoring outstanding young scientists.

Functions and benefits of the New Europe College

What special benefit does the New Europe College offer to Fellows, and, in the broader sense, to Romanian science as a whole? This question dominated discussions, above all with the grantees – both the NEC Fellows and the RELINK grantees of various years and “generations”. The following is a summary of the key points.

The *culture of communication* fostered by the New Europe College is consistently acclaimed as one its most valuable features. It is a place where intellectual dialogue and keen debate are seen to flourish. The atmosphere of trust and respect which reigns throughout the house and is exemplified and endorsed by the College’s scientific director, fosters honest criticism and a readiness to acknowledge weaknesses. The institute fulfills the role of an intellectual club, too, where scientists – but not only the NEC grantees – meet, get to know one another and develop new networks. The New Europe College counterbalances the narrow curricular training in Romanian schools and universities, which are still characterized by an excessive polarization of areas and subjects, leading to premature, inefficient specialization. The NEC Fellows maintain that the joint seminars with their Co-Fellows foster an understanding of the concerns and approaches of other disciplines.

The institute’s *multidisciplinary nature* is unanimously seen as one of its major assets, facilitating mutual stimulation and a general broadening of perspectives. Presenting one’s work to Co-Fellows, who are generally from other disciplines, is seen as a valuable challenge. /.../ At Romanian universities, the contents of lectures and seminars are largely dictated by the curriculum, and very few events allow the scientist to incorporate his/her personal research interests. By contrast, the New Europe College encourages scientists to reason through and clearly explain their research topic, and to consider its general relevance to the immediate present (the latter doesn’t seem to have been an issue for Romanian academics in the past). The nature and ambiance of the New Europe College inspires joint projects, the formation of discussion groups, and helps to counteract the tendency towards inertia and isolation prevalent in so many research institutions.

Virtually all current NEC-grantees have benefited from study and research sojourns abroad. Most of them have or could have the option of pursuing their work abroad, or switch to more prosperous jobs within Romania itself (foreign firms, international organizations, etc.). The New Europe College offers them a material incentive, at least for a limited period, to remain in the field of science and devote themselves to serious research. In the course of the talks, however, the grantees stressed above all the value of the intellectual support they received at the New Europe College to their individual situations. A Fellowship at the institute cushions the *reverse culture shock* for scientists who return from abroad and are forced to adjust to – more or less – unchanged

conditions (RELINK-grantees). For such individuals, the NEC acts as both a *magnet* and a *buffer*. To quote one particular grantee: the College is a bridgehead between the old and the new world, combining the virtues of both. The New Europe College tends to have an invigorating influence on its Fellows, instilling them with the *drive* and *confidence* to embark on reforming their own scientific institutions. At any event, all of the grantees interviewed by the committee seemed highly motivated and capable.

Through its *international guest program* (seminars, lectures, round-table talks), the New Europe College has created an attractive intellectual forum, which can also benefit other local institutions. Several Fellows have expressed profound gratitude for the funds provided by the New Europe College, which, for instance, enables them to invite international supervisors and scientific colleagues from abroad to Romania, and introduce them to their home institutions. The directors of the NEC draw up the invitation program in conjunction with the Academic Board. Nevertheless, the grantees too are encouraged to nominate guest professors, which they eagerly do.

The New Europe College is clearly perceived, both externally and internally (by the Fellows), as a center where international standards are applied, with a high premium placed on *competition*. It is public knowledge that international scientists sit on the selection and advisory committees. It is commonly agreed that the Fellow selection process is tough, but fair. Two of the Fellows we interviewed had been admitted after the second trial only. The fact that they tried again, after a failure, illustrates the fairness of the procedure. As a result, the institute enjoys considerable prestige among academics. This esteem has escalated over the years, and an appointment to the College is generally seen as a distinction. This has occasionally – and expectedly – provoked resentment, but apparently on a much more modest scale than could be anticipated.

The New Europe College also supports young scientists preparing their doctoral theses. The situation of a number of Fellows shows that structures or facilities for this stage of study scarcely exist in Romanian universities. Once a doctoral candidate has been accepted by an authorized professor, the work – apart from two preliminary exams and the final procedure – is carried out personally between the tutor and the student. The majority of doctoral students in the humanities and the social sciences work in extreme isolation. The New Europe College counteracts this situation in a number of ways: it integrates these researchers into a scientific framework, provides supportive criticism, and sponsors research trips abroad. In this way, the institute underpins the supervisory task of the universities without infringing upon their authority. This subsidiary service provided (to the universities) by the NEC could be further developed and institutionalized as a *'farming-out' model*. Government agencies should be aware of the fact that this important function of the New Europe College may be considered an innovation in the Romanian higher education system and well deserves consideration of material support, if at least a tax exemption for stipends.

Gaining *access to specialized research literature* is not always easy for Romanian scientists. The university and academy libraries carry a very limited range of western literature produced after the Second World War, and, since 1990, the money generally hasn't been available to purchase expensive books or journals. Besides, the lending conditions are not user-friendly. Therefore, the New Europe College library, granting easy access to the latest reference and selected works, is highly rated by the grantees. It is important that the Fellows have a say in the literature purchased.
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Finally, the institution is an exemplary administrative unit: The New Europe College receives unqualified recognition from both the scientists it has sponsored and its institutional partners as an efficient, *smoothly functioning organization*. Agreements are honored, payments occur on time, and the staff are friendly and helpful in all matters. Repeatedly, the "reliability" of the NEC was stressed in interviews as a rare asset, as this type of solid administrative structure is by

no means the order of the day in Romania. Moreover, the technical infrastructure is state-of-the-art and the interior design is tasteful.

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As a whole, the assessment of the New Europe College and its activities by the grantees was strikingly positive. The impact of the institute, even though it is not formalized, appears important for the Romanian system.

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