

LETTER FROM BRUGES

In the workshop of EU rebirth

Beda Romano *IlSole24Ore* 14-2-2021

Alexander Stubb remembers that when he was studying at the College of Europe in the mid-1990s, there were few non-European students in Bruges: «One Russian, two Turks, a few Americans and Canadians...», says the former Finnish Prime Minister on the phone from Helsinki. A few years later, he discovered that one of the American students, Valerie Plame, was a CIA spy. Different times. Today in the mists of Belgian Flanders, the academic institution attracts students from all over the world.

Founded in 1949 in the rubble of war, the college was born with two objectives: to prepare the administrative class of the future Europe and to promote the community project. Over the decades, the post-graduate institution has trained dozens of European officials, national diplomats and politicians. Every year it welcomes 350 students in Bruges and 140 more in Natolin, the campus that was created just outside Warsaw after the fall of the Wall. Many of them, about two thirds, can count on a scholarship from their government.

The latest figures leave their mark. For the next academic year, almost half of the candidates come from countries outside the European Union. Together, young Tunisians and Moroccans number over four hundred, beating all previous records. The Chinese number seven, as do the Americans. There are four Brazilians. The Turks number as many as one hundred, the Azeris more than seventy. Nearly ninety nationalities from the over 2,200 applications received in recent weeks.

At the head of the College of Europe is the former High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Federica Mogherini. In 2020, the appointment caused a stir, in the absence of academic experience. Responsible for the choice, Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council between 2010 and 2014, argued instead that the «international reputation» of the former Italian Foreign Minister would benefit the college. In inaugurating the current academic year, the new rector described the institution as «the laboratory of the European renaissance».

If dozens of Tunisians, Moroccans, Azerbaijanis and Turks want to study in Bruges today, it is because the school has become a safe haven where they can learn how the European institutions work and master the many intricacies of EU law. While the Union perpetually doubts itself, on other continents the EU is considered a world-class regulatory player. Its environmental standards, manufacturing norms and competition law are imitated in dozens of countries.

Anu Bradford is a Finnish lawyer who teaches at Columbia University in New York. In a recent book, *The Brussels Effect* (Oxford University Press, 2020), she argues that 'the European Union rules the world'. Strengthened by their internal market, the Twenty-Seven have the extraordinary ability to unilaterally impose their regulatory choices. Anu Bradford describes two forms of the Brussels effect. The first, *de facto*, emerges when firms opt to apply EU rules not only in Europe, but also in other markets around the world. The *de jure* Brussels effect materialises when third countries decide to replicate the same European rules in their legislation.

Many criticise the Brussels tendency towards regulation. It may be over-regulation, but it has proved indispensable for the emergence of a single European market from twenty-seven national markets. The new 750 billion euro Recovery Fund, which is to be used for the economic revival of the Union after the viral pandemic, will strengthen the regulatory task and the political weight of Brussels, home to many EU institutions, starting with the Commission and the Council. The young students of Bruges or Natolin are not the only ones who have understood this.

Enrico Ponzone, a Partner at Avisa Partners, an international consultancy, notes: «Despite the difficult economic context, we have noticed a growing interest from companies and governments, particularly from third countries (...) Asian counterparts, who in the past viewed London as the real capital of Europe, consider it necessary to be present in the European debate directly in Brussels». Alain Hutchinson, the city's head of international relations, confirms: 'The growth in interest worldwide is constant. In the last five years, the evolution has been very positive».

In this context, the College of Europe offers a one-year postgraduate programme in English and French with specialisations in, among others, European economics, EU law and international diplomacy. In Bruges, students live in various residences scattered throughout the medieval city. The Natolin campus is housed in a large park on the outskirts of the Polish capital. According to the latest statistics, a quarter of graduates will pursue careers in EU institutions and another quarter will work in the private sector. The rest will find work in international organisations, national diplomacies, or legal departments.

The hope of the students is to walk in the footsteps of their predecessors who later became ministers and prime ministers, commissioners and ambassadors. In essence, in the international projection of the Union, the role of Bruges (and of Florence, where the European University Institute is based and where Alexander Stubb himself heads the school of transnational affairs) is as important as the decisions of the Commission or the choices of Parliament. The American writer Faith Popcorn says that in order to predict the future, one must listen to the questions of the young. In their own way, the many applications for admission to the College of Europe are an act of faith in EU building.

Beda Romano is Sole 24 Ore's Brussels correspondent, after many years in Germany. He teaches a course on Franco-German relations at Sciences Po, Paris.