

## **The Schools of Politics: Training Europe's New Elites**

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### **1. The Background and the Philosophy**

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has meant not only the beginning of a new opening for countries of Central and Eastern Europe and for their leaders towards the outside world, but also the strong rejection of the «past» political class as inadequate, corrupt, selfish and unpopular. In spite of the initial euphoria and immense hope for change generated by the new geopolitical situation, in most Eastern European countries – particularly in the war-torn South-East European area and in the former Soviet Republics – internal political processes have been slow to catch up with the requirements of democratic governance. Changes have indeed tended to order and overwhelm the new emerging political elites, rather than them being able to anticipate, lead and master the bumpy transition towards democracy.

During the past decade in most of these countries, coalitions have been formed and have often alternated in the exercise of power, new faces have emerged, rethorics has changed. However, the gymnastics, the ABC of politics has been skipped by the decision makers, too much in a hurry to discover and apply the Western ways of political and economic life. The reasons for this state of affairs are manifold. Whilst a great deal of the former «apparatchiks» have easily espoused the need to reform and have been able to prove their new democratic credentials, their political style and behaviour have too often been a clear reminiscence of the past system. On the other hand, for many enthusiastic young leaders, going for a political career has been often seen as making the choice to tamper with a corrupted and dishonest group and a deviation from the idealism and thirst for justice and transparency, which they reckoned had brought down the Berlin Wall. This has lead, *inter alia*, to an important brain-drain from Eastern European countries to Western aca-

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democratic institutions or international organisations, where these young resourceful and talented people have found refuge. Furthermore, internal political conflicts, which have taken a violent turn in South-East Europe, have polarised politicians and top officials along nationalist/ethnic lines for a very long time, preventing the emergence of a modern European leadership.

**a) From the Kitchen of a Russian Dissident  
to the «Palais de l'Europe»**

The absence of a modern and democratic leadership is particularly evident in the case of Russia, where the demise of the Soviet Union brought about perhaps the most dramatic changes to an already impoverished and anaesthetised society, showing how both the old-style and the new rampant politicians were so unfit to take up the challenge ahead.

Watching from her kitchen window Boris Eltsin riding on the tanks in front of the «Biely Dom» to counter the attempt at reinstating the past regime, was too much for Lena Nemirovskaya. She realised all of a sudden that without a political leadership prone to dialogue and discussion rather than violence and aggression, episodes such as this were bound to re-occur and her country would never really begin its democratic apprenticeship. This was in 1990.

Lena Nemirovskaya is an historian, with modest means, married to a philosopher and close to other European intellectuals such as Ernst Gellner, Dominique Moisi or Timothy Garton-Ash. Based on her profound conviction that the new Russian politicians, though remarkably bright, lack exposure to the fundamental principles of the rule of law and basically ignore what human rights are all about, Mrs Nemirovskaya wants to create a school without walls, a sort of Greek agora in which young Russian politicians, civil servants, businessmen, and journalists discuss about basic democratic concepts whilst being exposed to top-notch lecturers chosen amongst lawyers, philosophers and professors from Russia as well as other parts of Europe, America, Asia.

The idea is presented to Catherine Lalumière, then Secretary General of the Council of Europe during one of her stays in Moscow. Mme Lalumière has just met President Eltsin for over an hour at the Kremlin reminding him that the Council of Europe wants to support a Russia fully committed to respect

for the rule of law and where human rights are not baffled in the name of security and order.

The Council of Europe invites Lena Nemirovskaya to begin a first year-long program with a series of national sessions and a final one to be held in Strasbourg at the seat of the European institutions. The success of the trial year is considerable: the members of the Duma, governors of the Republics, magistrates and academics who take part in the «Moscow School of Political Studies» are active and committed: the exchange with the outside world is for once based on open discussions on an equal footing and not on patronising messages or, worse, on shady economic deals.

The Council of Europe, for its part, is very keen to support such an enterprise given its grass-roots character, its strong emphasis on the organisation's core values and, furthermore, the originality of the project, combining academia, politics, economics, law in an attractive mix of participants and lecturers. The Council of Europe decides to give its political umbrella to the Moscow School (badly needed to keep its independence) and some financial support, soon to be matched by a more substantial contribution by the European Commission and a whole series of private foundations, including that of George Soros.

### **b) The Ingredients that Work**

But what makes Lena's school so different from so many other training programs organised since the early 90s all over Eastern Europe?

In today's world of assistance programs, many international organisations devote large parts of their budgets to training projects for various categories of actors, be they young politicians, magistrates, journalists (possibly the most «trained» category). Training programs can be on many different topics: from the arcane of how to run a newspaper to the complexities of constitutional law to minority rights. It is often claimed that such courses are an investment in the future, that their value and usefulness cannot be proved, in essence that no evaluation is yet possible. However, when looking at the results of such costly operations, one can hardly escape the feeling of frustration and impasse for the very little impact these «transfers of knowledge» have had in the countries concerned.

The interesting experience of the Moscow School has proven that its civil societal character, the emphasis put on the quality

of the speakers, the balance between national and international lecturers, the careful mix of participants, the interactive methodology and, last but not least, the rather secluded locations at which it takes place are all ingredients that work.

Indeed, the key requirement for such a school to be credible and attract students is to be based on a local, *grass roots* driving force capable of sensing and interpreting the needs of the country and of helping shape the curriculum. Key is also the quality of the invited *speakers* (both national and international) who must excel in their field of work and present the state of the art reflections on a given topic in order to allow for high-level debates amongst participants. But the most fundamental of all requirements is the *selection* of participants. This must be done in such a way as to include all that the country counts amongst professional, responsible, motivated leaders whilst ensuring the widest possible representation in terms of political credos, geographical provenance, as well as professional, social, gender, national/ethnic and religious origin.

## **2. Towards a Common European Curriculum**

Already since the first years of its functioning, the Moscow School has welcomed amid the Russian participants a few students coming from neighbouring countries, in particular from the South Caucasian Republics. First few Armenian, Azeri and Georgian members of the Parliament, then a couple of Ukrainians and later young Bulgarians have come to attend the Moscow School sessions. They have all been conquered by the openness and the quality of the exchanges, used as they all were to the patronising Soviet style in vigour just a few years earlier. A young member of the Georgian Parliament, Armaz Akhvlediani decides to begin the «Tbilissi School of Political Studies» based exactly on the model of the Russian one, but with the additional interesting feature of gathering participants from the three South Caucasian Republics thus providing for an increased dialogue between Armenian and Azeri leaders whose relations are still dictated by the logic of the frozen conflict over Nagorno-Karabach. Schools cannot resolve conflicts, but the remarkable contribution that both the Moscow and the Tbilissi schools bring to the debate over Chechnya and Nagorno-

Karabach is instilling in the participants the idea that such problems can be faced, discussed and handled in a democratic way. As in the case of the Moscow School, the careful selection of participants, the choice of speakers, the genuine commitment of its director and the external support of both the Council of Europe and of the European Commission make the Tbilissi School a successful project.

#### **a) A School in South East Europe:**

##### **One School for All vs. Many National Schools**

We are in 1999, the Moscow School has now been functioning for 7 years and the Tbilissi School for 2 years. The formula has been tested and works well. So much so that many believe it ought to be tried in another vulnerable area of Europe: the Balkans. In 1999, following a German initiative, strongly backed by the USA, a Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe is solemnly drawn up and signed with the aim of providing democracy, economic growth and security for the region. At the first meeting of the Stability Pact in November 1999, the idea of a common South-East European school of politics is tabled. The project is presented by a Bulgarian foundation led by Dimitri Panitza – a retired journalist and staunch human rights defender – as a «travelling» school of politics for all the Balkan countries to be held each year in a different country. The first reactions to the idea are rather negative. The representatives of Croatia and Slovenia at the Stability Pact see no chance and no point in bringing together students from countries which they believe have left very little in common. Would anyone else in the region accept to be taught by the Serbs about democracy? Apart from the still vivid resentments and prejudice, a number of difficulties stem from the practicalities of such a project. The costs of interpreting from and into all the languages spoken in the region are immense and finding the equivalent of the Bulgarian foundation to run each individual yearly session is not easy. At the funding conference for the Stability Pact held in Brussels on March 2000, the Balkan school of politics receives virtually no support.

However, in many circles and organisations including the NGOs fora which are created around the Stability Pact, the discussion over «a» school of politics in the region makes headway. Nobody denies the need to train the political elites of these countries in the

knowledge and exercise of democracy, but there is no agreement on the opportunity to train collectively a «South-East European leadership», each country believes to be a special case deserving to have its own school or, better, to send its students abroad.

### **b) Bulgaria Tries Out**

Given the cold shower received from the donors, Dimitri Panitza decides to use the modest funds obtained from the USA to create the «Bulgarian School of Politics». He reckons something has to be done at least in his own country first, with the hope of involving other countries once the funding situation improves. Dimitri Panitza comes to the Council of Europe to ask for political support: the organisation offers to provide speakers, to place it under its auspices and, as in the case of the Moscow and Tbilissi schools, to hold the final session in Strasbourg. The first year of the Bulgarian school is yet another success. Dimitri Panitza is particularly skilful in selecting the first group of participants in which one third are members of Parliament, one third are civil servants and one third are liberal professions and businessmen – all thirsty for new ideas and ready to engage in discussions about the meaning of power, its exercise, its possible abuses, about consensus-building, the limits of freedom of expression, etc. The three annual sessions are held in a pleasant mountain resort, where participants spend time outdoors in endless, reinvigorating walks and in experimenting survival technics with a trainer who teaches about learning how to rely on others, how to combine strengths to win, etc.

Whilst based on the model of its two predecessors, the Bulgarian school adds a touch of its own with particularly appreciated interactive teaching methods, including problem-solving technics, oral presentations by the participants on the basis of written compositions, but also singing contexts, tennis-table matches, etc. The novelties thus introduced to the basic ingredients that work, contribute to setting a very interesting curriculum which can be easily adapted to other schools in the region.

Watching the evolution of the «Bulgarian School of Politics», the Council of Europe's Secretary General, Walter Schwimmer is ever more convinced not only of the value of the schools in general, but also of the importance of affording them the full support of the organisation with a view to making them self-sustainable. The search for other partners and donors begins.

### c) Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Moldova, Kosovo

In November 2002, the Moscow School celebrates its tenth anniversary and holds a joint session with the Bulgarian students at the traditional end-of-the-year Strasbourg session. At the same juncture, the Council of Europe invites a Serbian professor, a Moldovan intellectual and college trainer and a representative of a Bosnian NGO, all interested in creating a school of politics in their respective countries. Some private foundations and other international institutions are also invited to take part in the schools' final session with the aim of building a stronger political and financial support to the new schools which are ready to begin classes. The meeting turns out to be rather disappointing: the project for BiH is presented by a retired German colonel in the name of a Sarajevo professor, the Serbian project is academic too, the Moldovan one is only in its fledging phase.

The lessons learned following the meeting are clearly that such schools cannot be imagined, wanted and shaped from the outside, but that they need to spring from a local initiative and that their principal aim should be to discuss the essence of democracy at work and not to provide post-doctoral or equivalent teachings to the brightest of students.

A casual meeting with a civil society centre in Mostar, gives a new impetus to the project of a school in *Bosnia and Herzegovina*. One of the main difficulties in a country which has witnessed conflicts between all its communities is to create the conditions to attract participants from all the various ethnic and political communities whilst sticking to the other basic ingredients as set out by the Russian, Tbilissi and Bulgarian schools. The heavy construction of the Office of the High Representative for BiH, which keeps maintaining still a strong international presence in the country, tends to give a reassuring feeling, including the belief that all sorts of training schools and inter-community meetings are frequently held. However, in its first trial year (2002-2003) the «Bosnia and Herzegovina School of Politics», has attracted young politicians from all over the country who have decided to continue to meet regularly in more «neutral» locations, such as the coastal city of Neum or the Brcko district, in order to assuage their appetite for discussion and exchange of ideas in a congenial environment.

*Moldova* is a country forgotten by all, it does not fit in the

European waves of accession, nor in the Stability Pact for South-East Europe and its ties with Russia are more than controversial. The international presence and attention it receives are rather slim, the brain-drain is considerable and the political situation vulnerable to authoritarian temptations, not to speak of the unresolved trans-dniestrian conflict. Only few other countries seem to be so unlucky with their politicians. The need for a school of politics in Moldova is evident also for Nicolae Chiortaga, a bright intellectual and head of the «Invisible College», a post-doctoral training centre partly sponsored by George Soros. Moldovan politicians and elites are profoundly polarised along political lines, the Communist party is still strong and powerful and the transition towards a new set of parties has not yet been completed. The «European Institute for Political Studies», led by Mr Chiortaga and based in Chisinau, takes up the challenge of gathering all these highly antagonised parties under one umbrella. Although the debuts are not easy, the first year has already shown the need to continue relentlessly. In *Kosovo* the new political class which has appeared since 1999, date of the beginning of the UN Mission to Kosovo (UNMIK), is very weak. Be they former UCK leaders, more moderate Rugova followers, or Belgrade-sponsored Serb political party leaders, their inability to come to terms to one another and work constructively for the future of the province is patent. The transfer of powers from the UNMIK governorship to the locally elected officials has consequently been very slow. In such a situation, the only valuable investment seems to be working with the younger generation of politicians. This is the approach chosen by the «Kosovo School of Politics» borne in early 2003 and led by an international NGO called the «European Centre on Minority Issues» with a branch in Pristina, but originally based on the German-Danish border at Flensburg. Reaching out to both Albanians and Serbs in a common school project has proven arduous. A more active support by the Council of Europe has been necessary in order to get the school started. The first year has just been completed with the end-of-the year Strasbourg session showing the importance also of involving the local and regional authorities of Alsace and of neighbouring Baden-Württemberg. As Kosovo is experimenting a new decentralisation plan, debates about transfer of powers, local ownership and subsidiarity are key to the education of its future leadership.



2003 has seen the birth of these three new schools, their success has been contagious. *Serbia and Montenegro* has just set up its «Fund for Political Excellence» under the experienced guidance of Sonja Licht, one of the best advocates of democratic Serbia. The school was launched on 11 November 2003. *Macedonia* has also begun its own «Skopje School of Politics» whose first session has just been held.

### **3. Building a Network of Schools**

In the debate over the opportunity to have one South-East European joint school or, instead, many individual national schools, the most sensible and practical solution has turned out to be keeping the local specificity of each school, whilst building a network connecting them all. By now, with six schools up and running, the networking operates at different levels: first of all between the directors, who meet regularly to compare notes and exchange good tips; secondly international lecturers are shared from a common roster where the top personalities are chosen; thirdly and most importantly, small groups of students visit each other's school for a few sessions (in the Balkans this is facilitated by the fact that some of the languages are close enough to allow for participation by neighbouring students without translation). The possibilities offered by such networks are many, they can certainly be extended and multiplied.

#### **a) The Role of the Council of Europe**

If these are all local civil society initiatives, then what is the role of the Council of Europe?

The Council of Europe is very close to the schools: they are the forum *par excellence* where the seemingly abstract concepts of the rule of law, human rights and pluralism are debated and applied to concrete case studies, where the fundamentals of democracy are never taken for granted and where nobody is really lecturing but everybody is exchanging. The schools need the political support of the Council of Europe not only to underscore these close links, but also to defend the free space they create and the independence they need to enjoy in sometimes rather hostile environments. On the other hand, for the Council of Europe the schools are a living proof of the rele-

vance of its principles for the training of today's European elites. Though they ought to remain clearly the expression of civil society, the schools can nevertheless identify in the Council of Europe their «home-base». The organisation in fact ensures the harmonisation of their curricula, a kind of «quality check» through the provision of a number of speakers, the yearly Strasbourg sessions and the active support to the various schools' networks. The European Parliament, Commission and Council also contribute in terms of financial, political support to the schools, thus fostering a firmer institutional anchorage.

### **b) Towards Similar Schools in Western Europe?**

Since the start, the Moscow School has already «graduated» more than 5000 among members of Parliament, high officials, journalists, magistrates, etc. The relations, both professional and human, established through the school are strong, a certain degree of confidence is instaurated, deals are done, compromises are reached, and discussions, albeit tough, tend to replace aggression. Lena Nemirovskaya seems to have won her gamble. Coming back from attending one of the Moscow School's sessions, European Commissioner Chris Patten, enthusiastically called for the setting up of similar schools in other countries, even outside Europe! Indeed, the very interesting feature of the schools is that they address a need which, at varying degrees, can be indentified not only in Eastern Europe, but also in Western European countries. The formula combining high-level debates and the mix of participants coming from various walks of the politcal, judicial, economic and media life of a given country and the international umbrella of the Council of Europe can certainly be tried elsewhere. However, the *sine qua non* condition for its success is the existance of a motivated and corageous motor for the school with a deep understanding of the society and sufficient credibility to be accepted even by highly antagonistic parties and personalities. When then the creation of an «Italian School of Politics»?

### **Useful Links**

Moscow School of Political Studies: [www.eng.msp.su](http://www.eng.msp.su)

Bulgarian School of Politics: [www.schoolofpolitics.org](http://www.schoolofpolitics.org)