

**EVALUATION REPORT**  
on the  
**NEW EUROPE COLLEGE - Bucharest**

by  
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in co-operation with

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***Initial Situation***

What HEINRICH URSPRUNG and PETER WEINGART wrote about the *New Europe College* (henceforth *NEC*) in their evaluation report in 1999 is still valid today: this is the first and only *Institute for Advanced Study* (henceforth *IAS*) in Romania. The *NEC* was founded with the help of the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin and is fully accepted in the world-wide and well-organized circle of *Institutes of Advanced Study*. Its goal is best described by the Rector and founder of the college, ANDREI PLEȘU, in his Ernst Reuter speech at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin in 2001. PLEȘU'S project to confront the continuous destruction of the Romanian elites with new elites (especially in research and teaching) and to create healthy conditions for the growth of these elites seems to me, ten years later (the *NEC* was founded in 1994), to have succeeded. ANDREI PLEȘU wanted "to create an ambience where elitist talent would be identified, re-established, encouraged and supported in the process of its realization. The research Fellows should receive what they were not offered either in the times of the dictatorship or now, during the transition period – a decent financial support, full freedom of thinking and expression, modern working equipment, contacts to the international scholarly elites. They are expected to participate weekly in an informal colloquium where everybody's projects are discussed in turn. The main aim is to re-acquire the intellectual skills that were on the verge of withering or even disappear, as a consequence of the marginalization (in certain cases of the illegality), the isolation, and the abuse imposed by the old way of life". This is the driving idea behind the core program of the college, and I very much advocate that this program should be continued unchanged. It is surrounded by other distinct programs (that have various sponsors), without watering down the core tasks. The individual programs have various working emphases. The interdisciplinary character of the college, the links to the international scientific scene, its informal and at the same time performance-orientated and performance-promoting atmosphere create the basis for the various emphases.

It seems of importance to me that the college attempted to gradually involve the "region" (that is, South-Eastern Europe) in its efforts to start up a discussion among nations that are mistrustful (often even hostile) to one another. The college is trying to create elite consciousness in the *region* and to spread the kind of hope that South-Eastern Europe needs more than anything else.

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Elite consciousness rules in the *NEC*. This is primarily demonstrated by the strict and quality-controlled selection of the Fellows through a multi-level procedure following the call for applications. Members of the Scientific Advisory Board, of the management of the *NEC*, as well as

other outstanding scholars are involved in the selection of the short-listed candidates. The final selection of the Fellows is decided in the yearly meeting of Scientific Advisory Board, that takes place every spring. The number of applications is always many times larger than the number of the available positions. The institute sticks to its decision to enable its Fellows a “decent standard of living”. As the grant amounts currently to € 460 per month, and given the Romanian income brackets, as well as the working and living conditions offered by the NEC, its Fellows are sometimes envied for having the luck to be able to pursue their work for some time on this research island in the middle of the transition turbulence. The institute itself is subject to the envy of other research institutions. It is necessary to have strong nerves and enormous negotiation skills to protect the *NEC* from damage. It seems to me, however, that this kind of astuteness is the main characteristic feature of the Rector, under whose charge the *NEC* flourishes and is going to flourish further on. My question, whether ANDREI PLEȘU would not get tired and would not one day withdraw from the leading position of the institute alarmed the members of the Scientific Advisory Board. Nobody at the *NEC* wishes to think of such a withdrawal.

Greater difficulties for the further development of the *NEC* result, as far as my observations go, from the fact that (1) the Romanian state treats the work of the institute at best with benevolent indifference. I cannot see any *active* state support taking shape. On one hand, this encourages the independence of the *NEC*, on the other hand, however, it places enormous pressure on constantly ensuring new financial means (including upholding the infrastructure), thus hindering long-term planning. Yet the possibility for long-term planning is of vital importance for such institutions. (2) The conditions regarding the support of research and the engagement of sponsors have, as is well known, considerably changed of late. Due to the EU extension towards the East and the relatively small amount of available funds, the European interests are concentrated upon supporting the Brussels framework programs and the establishments of the Union. Countries like Romania that are not (or not yet) included in the expansion towards the East disappear increasingly from the sphere of interest of the Union states, that are struggling with the enormous problems of the unification. (3) The economic collapse has considerably lowered the readiness of a number of sponsors for a (here necessary) long-term engagement. All these difficulties firstly affect the domain of research and teaching, and foremostly the arts and the humanities (and thus also the *NEC*), since these domains cannot offer any quick and immediately visible compensation for the donated funds. The fact, however, that an engagement is definitely worthwhile, since with the support of institutes like the *NEC* foundations are laid for a lasting rallying, for the building up of an entire ruined country, is unfortunately an argument that tends to be brushed aside in times of economic weakness.

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To sum up, I would like to emphasize the following: *If the efforts made until now -- that have pushed all those involved to the edge of their strength -- should be visibly rewarding, it will be necessary to have another decade of intensive funding and support for the creative enterprise that is NEC. Within this decade, efforts should be made to transform NEC into a permanent institute.*

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[Interviews with] *Members of the Advisory Board*

The two [interviewed] members of the Advisory Board (MIRCEA DUMITRU, Dean of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Bucharest and GABRIEL LIICEANU, publisher and university professor /.../) emphasize unanimously the high status of the *NEC* in the intellectual life of Romania, and mainly in Bucharest. The support of highly talented young people (under 45 years of age) is a sign of hope in a world that is not otherwise spoiled by hope. The *NEC* is the only place where the arts and humanities, which are neglected in South-Eastern Europe, would be sponsored

generously and without reservation. The institute has the effect of a magnet in the intellectual life of the country: All important figures of the country and all outstanding guests come eventually to the *NEC*.

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##### 5. *The Research Fellows*

The discussions with the 21 research Fellows from the various programs of the *NEC* were variations of the same repetitive melody: the high esteem, the affection, the gratefulness they feel for the *NEC* and the research opportunities they are offered. The often-used metaphors for the institute were “paradise” and “island”. It is a “paradise” (this symbol has been chosen many times) in the wasteland of the academic life in Romania, stifled by strict administrative hierarchies and encumbering bureaucracy, *a beautiful island of peace and tranquility* in a sea of stones full of career regulations, promotion rules and lack of services all around. A high-ranking official at a Romanian university underlined the fact that in the *NEC* he has found the only “rational bureaucracy” in the country. The Fellows coming from the region, who find Bucharest a foreign, rather unfriendly and cold city, have felt themselves in the *NEC* hospitably accepted and at the same time involved in the omnipresent interdisciplinary context of the scientific and personal dialogue.

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The relatively small library (according to Western standards) and the (again according to Western standards excellent and primarily excellently maintained) technical equipment, that are available to the Fellows free of charge are felt to be helpful and valuable, mainly because of the difference in quality as compared to the conditions at the universities. There is scientific literature and journals in the library of the *NEC*, which cannot be found in any other library throughout the whole country. The Fellows’ needs are taken into account on enlarging the holdings of the library. /.../ The Fellows mention repeatedly the highly supportive services offered by the institute administration. The *NEC* is called the absolute example of *best practice* in terms of academic administration. Within the context of the country, it is almost miraculously reliable, obliging and incorruptible.

One cannot overhear in all these discussions and interviews the dimension of feelings. The *NEC* is experienced as a place of cordiality and care, even friendship; the spirit of the *NEC family* is often spoken of. The question of whether this could be some kind of a “Mafia” receives a spontaneous reply: “Yes, but with the difference that in the case of the Mafia it is the rule of keeping silent that reigns, in the *NEC* it is the rule to speak and discuss publicly.” With the atmosphere outlined here, the institute helps those who have returned to the country, the beginners, and the Fellows from outside Bucharest and from abroad to overcome the foreignness, the loneliness, and the hopelessness. For more than one of the interviewees this feeling of encouragement to achieve a new scientific start was the best that the *NEC* has to offer. This feeling of encouragement is triggered, however, not only by the friendly atmosphere that is cultivated in the college, but also by the fact that the College has been organized in all its structures as model for a future Romanian scientific scene.

The Fellows’ reports make it clear that many of them have achieved a higher step in their career through their stay at the college and through its support, and that the stay at this *IAS* is seen and recognized as an award, which, actually it really is. It is also clear that in the peaceful working atmosphere at the *NEC* it was possible to complete important publications, that the stay there increases the chances to be invited to international conferences, that Fellows receive invitations for research stays at foreign institutes, that they can participate in larger international research projects by invitation, that in the *NEC* therefore they are able to finally make the connection to the world of

science. The still young *NEC-LINK* program is often pointed out. The wish to maintain and optimize it in such a way as to have the effect of a sourdough at the universities is often voiced. This program offers the opportunity to bring about the spirit of reform and the spirit of the self-determined scientific debate to the universities.

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Overall, I was left with the following impressions: the *NEC* does such a good job, that it has to be on its guard against an excessive demand on its efficiency on the part of the Fellows. Exactly because of the fact that it is an “island” in the academic world of Romania, that is slowly recovering from the devastation of the dictatorship, the Fellows have hopes and demands, that cannot be realized with the reduced powers of the College. The confidence of the Fellows in the (seemingly) unlimited capacities of the *NEC* is often unrealistic. The Romanian scientific scene at the universities and at the Romanian Academy cannot be fundamentally reformed by the College; the *NEC* can only offer a model for such a reform. The *NEC* can hardly participate in the training of doctoral students, in introductory courses or summer schools in a number of disciplines; it is financially not in a position to fund branches outside Bucharest or even to function as a center for applications focused on attracting funds from the European Union. All these suggestions and a number of others, which were even less realistic, were made during the discussions with the Fellows and Alumni. It would be good for the College to concentrate on the core mission formulated by ANDREI PLEȘU (the creation of elite through research) and to equip this elite with the skills to cultivate – once the “paradise” has been left behind – the stony field full of thistles and thorns, just by relying on their own strength.

### ***Assessment***

The *New Europe College* in Bucharest is an *Institute for Advanced Study* that can be compared – without having any second thoughts – to the best institutes of this type in Europe and the US. Within the first decade of its existence, it has won worldwide recognition, so that nobody could say that they know Romania, if they do not know this institute. The *NEC* is trimmed to the needs and conditions of a transition country; it is going, however, to easily achieve the transition to the everyday life of a *IAS*, after the its construction and consolidation phase, which I estimate to last for about two decades. It fulfils its core mission in an exemplary way – to create a new science elite through research, to stimulate interdisciplinary dialogue and to pave the way for international research co-operations. The grants received there are appropriate to the situation in the country.

The college budgets the entrusted funds economically and with responsibility. I fully respect the efforts on the part of the Rector and his comrades-in-arms to constantly acquire new funds and new programs that do not contradict, but strengthen the core mission of the institute. The fact that this could sometimes result in the establishment of a program that cannot be fully integrated belongs to the mechanisms of such a *fund raising* based enterprise. Nevertheless, the institute should later on give up the testing of programs that are practically impossible to integrate. Especially the conception of the *NEC-LINK* program with its mixture of grants, funds for books, as well as modest funds for guests and symposia, seems to me to be designed and planned in such a way that it is impossible to miss its influence on the universities. /.../.

I should repeat here that the administration of the college and the services it offers are admirably unselfish, reliable, and incorruptible. They are fully oriented towards the needs of the Fellows. The main aim of the administration is to facilitate the best possible working conditions for the Fellows, to provide them with the infrastructure they need, and to offer them the possibility of working and living in a caring, secure, and cultivated atmosphere.

The *NEC* is a relatively small *IAS*. I am convinced that it should not strive to expand extensively, since only the current size makes that atmosphere of friendly solidarity possible – the atmosphere that defines the charm and the radiance of the institute. It is, together with the Collegium Budapest, actually the only institute of this type in the South-East of Europe and should therefore be supported by the sponsors with special attention and financial contributions.

The strict, quality-based conditions and regulations for selecting the Fellows, the high-ranking supervisory boards and last, but not least, the personality of the founding Rector himself guarantee the high level of the work done at the College. It is a model for the country and its scientific scene; in the future, however, the state and the politicians in Romania should make a greater effort than to date to appropriately acknowledge the increased international reputation attributed to them through the richness of ideas, the working force of the personnel, and the acquired funds of the institute. That means (*ceterum censeo*): they have to contribute to the work of the *NEC* in the foreseeable future, yet without intervening in its self-defined work. Even the strongest hope could die, if there is no shimmer of light to be seen at the end of the tunnel.

By all means, the transparent regulations of the institute (the creation of a stimulating discussion atmosphere, the Wednesday seminars, the guest presentations and other events, the contacts with foreign institutions, the strong infrastructure) present in their integrity and solidity a basis for a scientific *center of excellence* that could hardly be improved, yet which urgently needs to be stabilized, so that the *Strada Plantelor 21* in Bucharest becomes one of the best addresses of the scientific scene in Europe.

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