

# Sixth form scholars from Central and Eastern Europe



**Andrew Boggis** (HMC Chairman, 2006) reports on the bright, ambitious and talented sixth formers from former east bloc countries who contribute so richly to the schools that host them

**It began in 1992. Schools were opening doors to boys and girls from behind the erstwhile "Iron Curtain". The Berlin Wall was down and the frontiers of Europe once again open enough to allow the general population to rediscover their continent and one another.**

It was at this exciting time that an HMC scheme to enable talented students from the former communist countries to spend a year studying in a UK boarding school was established, "to foster bonds of understanding, trust and friendship between

some of the most gifted young people across Europe". Unashamedly the scheme sought to identify the ablest of applicants from less affluent backgrounds.

In September of this year 90 new students started at 50 schools, mainly HMC but also some state boarding, GSA and Society of Heads' schools. 60 of this year's scholars have been awarded 100% scholarships; 30 are in the UK on generously subsidised places. From 13 countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine) these students are the

latest in a line of nearly 1,400 young people who since the scheme was established have spent one or now increasingly two years of the sixth form at a UK boarding school.

Former HMC Projects scholars, now in positions of influence, have an understanding of and affection for the British way of life and share some of our values; and the real and lasting benefits become clear only years later. For Marta's experience (see below) compare those of Razvan from Romania (ex Epsom College) who has been a Minister in the Romanian Government or Doina from Moldova (ex Chigwell School) now with the World Bank or Sergei from Latvia (ex Whitgift

## Marta Zaoralova from Prague spent two years (2000-02) at Rossall School

She speaks of "a culture shock, which went both ways". I was keen to tell them of my country, but my national pride got hurt a few times when I had to explain that, no, we do not speak Russian, and yes, we do have electricity... One of my UK teachers must have missed 1989, as he thought the Czech Republic was still communist – and my favourite, the concerned parent who asked what it was like to grow up during the war...referring to the break-up of Yugoslavia. Today Marta works for the Czech Foreign Ministry and is a EU civil servant. "At the time I was not able to grasp the significance. My one year in Britain turned into seven and has affected the course of my life and career." Having focused on relations with sub-Saharan Africa and developing countries she is now responsible for EU trade relations with China. "Thanks to Rossall School Britain has an anglophile Czech in Brussels....and on a lighter note, the Chapel Choir introduced me to the English choral tradition and I still sing today!"



HMC Projects Scholars at the Orientation Course at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

I was in Belgrade at half term, writes Richard Maloney, Headmaster of Bede's School.

Many of the applicants from backgrounds we in the UK would not consider to be affluent (the average monthly wage in Serbia is 300 Euro) had travelled hundreds of miles to attend these interviews. In total we saw 22 (many more had applied). We were bowled over by the quality of the young people we met. They possessed an exceptional command of English and an immediately discernable humanity. It is an especial delight to know that the three young Serbians we chose will have their lives transformed as they in turn enrich the schools they join later this year.

students is done *pro bono* by former and serving HMC heads and senior staff.

Many independent schools successfully recruit full fee-paying students from some parts of eastern Europe, but HMC Projects has established networks (principally through personal contact and through those who act as its agents) which enable it to identify very able, interesting and distinctively different young people from far less privileged backgrounds, who in turn bring an enormous amount to the schools which host them. Combined parental income for applicants for these full scholarships must be below £25,000 *per annum*.



John Lever, former Headmaster of Canford School, before the interviewing starts

However there is clearly greater prosperity now and arguably some erosion of the differences in economic terms between the UK and some of these countries. Hence for HMC Projects the introduction of the reduced fee scheme alongside the main full scholarship scheme.

Schools that support the schemes do so for both pragmatic and idealistic reasons and in all cases scholarships are provided thanks to the beneficence of the schools themselves.

They in turn testify that the scholars who join them are outstanding academics and exceptional human beings.

The HMC scheme was established just over twenty years ago as a way of investing in the peace and security of the world in which our pupils will live in the decades to come. Nothing that is happening in Europe today suggests that that aim is any less relevant today than it was twenty years ago. ■

School) now on Wall Street. Time and again former students who have gone on to great success refer to their experience of British education as life-changing.

Someone who has grown up during a recent war is 16 year old Nikolozi Abzhandadze from Batumi, Georgia's second city. Son of a Georgian priest, he (along with several other Georgians now at UK schools) has just started at New Hall School. Officially Georgia remains at war with Russia and opportunities for travel for Nikolozi had been very limited.

## Twenty years on

The situation in Europe today offers little cause for complacency. Recent horrifying events in Ukraine (quite apart from political and social unrest in several countries) have focussed the spotlight once again on former east bloc countries and highlighted the fragility of some of these fledgling democracies. This in turn re-emphasises just how relevant and noble are the original aims of the scholarship scheme.

Today HMC Projects is a charity with a board of trustees, mainly serving heads and chaired by Keith Budge, Headmaster of Bedales School. There is a part-time executive of three. Much of the work including the interviewing and selecting of successful



It was cold in rural Ukraine