

Franck Biancheri

Already halfway there. “I want to work actively for European integration for 20 more years, until 2025. This will make a total of 40 years, as I started with AEGEE-Europe 20 years ago. Then I’ll let the next generations take over,” says Franck Biancheri, who founded AEGEE in 1985. The energetic French think-tank leader will be 64 years old by then, but he was already listed by Time Magazine as one of the “Top 20 European Heroes” in 2003 – joining a group of famous personalities like Nelson Mandela, Zinedine Zidane and Pope John Paul II. The reason for this recognition was the New Europeans Democracy Marathon, organised by Franck.

However, no one would have predicted this success when Biancheri started his studies in the early 80s. His reason for entering the elite French university Sciences Po did not suggest a future leader of European integration. “I was mainly a scientific person, made my baccalauréat with a focus on mathematics,” he recalls. “I did not want to become an engineer. But I was still unsure exactly what I wanted instead. While I thought about it, I decided to enter Sciences Po – mainly because it is located in the centre of Paris.”

Soon he became involved in university politics and served three years as president of the “Bureau des Elèves”, the student office of the university. This was when Franck developed the idea of creating AEGEE. “I missed quite a few classes because of my activities. The teachers were often flexible though, adding the missing points out of respect for my commitment,” he remembers. Franck Biancheri graduated from Sciences Po in 1984 and registered himself for the preparatory classes to enter the Ecole Nationale d’Administration (ENA), but for three years he never attended a single class. By now, Franck knew what he wanted to achieve. “AEGEE and all its activities were what I was looking for, not ENA.”

What followed is history. Years filled with ambitious events – and great fun. “We often travelled by car to the events. I had an R5, and we went with five people and no reimbursement.” For three years, Biancheri led AEGEE as its first president – an enormous achievement, never equalled by any of his successors.

It hurt a lot to leave AEGEE after dedicating three years of his life to it, but Franck’s involvement in European matters did not end at that point: In 1988, he was already involved with several other initiatives, such as the Prometheus-Europe network and the Initiative for a European Democracy (IDE), an initiative connected with the 1989 European Parliament elections in Spain, Holland and France. For all these activities, Franck needed more than just ambition. He also required a clear vision, lots of energy, communication skills and a very good instinct. Franck himself credits his success to his efforts to be a pragmatic and independent thinker. “My aim is always to solve problems. I want to be as independent as possible, from other people and from political parties and institutions,” he states. “This is what I always tried to do, first with AEGEE and now with Europe2020. We want to solve the problems that we can see, not the questions that others try to impose on us.”

This forces him to be better informed than others. “By staying at the heart of networks of many thousands of people, I get the relevant information very quickly, because I always avoid having more than one intermediary layer between me and the people concerned,” he stresses. “However, I rarely read books about the EU, since most of them just repeat what has already been said”. Biancheri has ten people working for his think tank Europe 2020 as permanent staff. There are also many volunteers, depend-

ing on the activities to be carried out.

20 years have passed since AEGEE was created, but some things never change: “I still go abroad very frequently. There are periods of several months when I am away almost every night.” Franck is still a master networker. “I keep in touch with many people even from the first years of AEGEE.” As he says this, Franck begins to smile. “When I visited the Baltic States during the New Europeans Marathon, I went to Riga for the first time. Entering a lift in a building, I met another young man who asked me ‘Are you Franck Biancheri? I am the founder of AEGEE-Riga and am glad to meet you!’ My father, who was with us at that moment, told me later that he would never have believed the story if he had not seen it with his own eyes.”

Olivier Genkin

The mission is not over yet

How do you see AEGEE’s mission today?

AEGEE has played an important role in the democratisation process of the EU and the rest of Europe, mainly by integrating students from every country and faculty. The fact that AEGEE can now look back over two decades of history proves an impressive level of continuity in its activities. This is already valuable in itself. AEGEE’s main goal today should be to develop methods for creating true Eurocitizens. It should also continue to build bridges within the EU, and between the EU and its neighbours, both on the European continent and on the world stage.

What do you think of the recently drafted European constitution?

This document doesn’t really spark my enthusiasm. The European Convention involved nobody younger than 45 years, keeping it mainly oriented towards the past. The draft constitution tries to solve the problems of the past 10 or 15 years, but ignores the predominant question of how to involve 500 million ordinary people in the management of Europe. I feel the draft represents progress, but it is still far from sufficient.

What do you think about referendae as a tool of democracy regarding EU matters?

I appreciate the principle of referendae a lot, since it is essential for the people to decide. But we have to be aware of the fact that calling a referendum on the accession of new members to the EU may in practice mean the end of further enlargement.

What do you think about the proposal for a “privileged partnership” with Turkey?

It should not be forgotten that we, via Prometheus and Europe2020, first presented that idea in 1995.

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCK BIANCHERI

reflecting on the first years

1 Where did your idea to form AEGEE originate from and what were your intentions in doing so? Why was AEGEE established and where did you get the name from?

Since I was a teenager, I have been interested in politics. And for years, I had this conviction that, in the future, either Europe will be united and then there will be means

and possibilities to influence our destinies; or, it will not be united and then it will be more interesting to do anything else other than politics.

In the beginning of the 80s I realized that our European Community was everything we had and as well something which enabled the Europeans

to grasp their destiny. It was when I saw the practical occasion to do something for Europe, which was rooted in citizens and not in dull administrative structures, I jumped on it.

The practical occasion of doing something was therefore offered to me when a rare cooperation between the „Bureaux des Elèves“ (Students' Boards) of five Parisian „Grandes Ecoles“, gave to me the opportunity to drag these five „Grandes Ecoles“ into the project of making a congress (EGEE I) of 500 European students in April 1985 in Paris. As President of the Sciences-Po's „Bureau des Elèves“, I could seize this occasion and use the huge potential of contacts and credibility that these „Grandes Ecoles“ have in France.

For most of those who worked to prepare the EGEE I congress, it was just a matter of organising a congress; they were not thinking about a future association.

Only a few weeks before the congress the idea of making a follow-up was openly discussed. As more and more people were getting interested in our project, some members of the team, feeling that it would be a very important congress holding huge promises for the future, began to ask „what's next?“. Then, there was time to discuss and plan the future with those European students who came to EGEE I and in the end it led to AEGEE-Europe.

Concerning the name AEGEE there is a lot to say about our own spirit, which refers clearly to the assembly which ignited the French Revolution in 1789. So, softly and without throwing stones at anybody, we were trying consciously to start a new innovative movement.

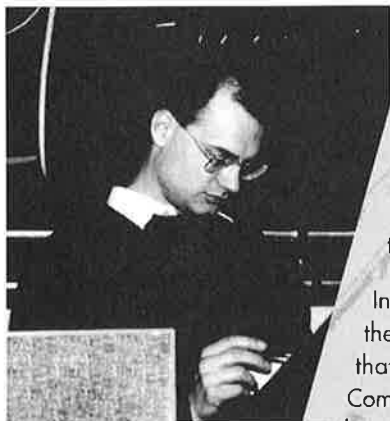
2. Why was AEGEE founded at that particular time? What was the situation in Europe like in those days?

The question of date has to be linked with the question of place. So, I think that if it happened in Paris in this period of time (84-85), three main reasons can be identified:

The fact that in France we were living the first years of disillusionment of national politics. Part of the population and especially the youth, understood or felt that if there were any hopes for the future they would not come anymore from national politics. So, the door was open to try something else, why not Europe? And ones should not forget that since the first day of its preparation EGEE (as it was named till 1987) played with politics; at least, to get patronage from both sides, right and left. And this was a „premiere“ in France. We were clearly thinking that „national politics“ as a whole had to be a tool serving our European project.

The fact that we were in Paris, the capital city of the most centralized state in Europe. means for me that AEGEE

Johannes Heister at an EGEE event, 1986



could have never started elsewhere due to its unique environment filled with the „Grandes Ecoles“, the ministries and the city itself.

Among the initial group of people who prepared and organised EGEE I, a handful of them accepted to take in charge the huge deficit we faced at the end of the congress (80.000 ECU). Nobody was obliged to do so, but this group stayed and fought. Without them and their efforts to find money, AEGEE would have ended to exist immediatly after its first congress.

The situation was dull and boring concerning the European construction. The EC was caught in what was called „Eurosclerosis“. In fact, among students, Europe was not a topic at all. It was just something nobody was interested in besides a few pro-European fanatics. And, we were not this kind! Europe was a means to the improvement of our fellow citizens, not a holy spirit that will one day come to us!

This is why we created something new and why we did not try to join any existing organisation.

3. Where did you and do you see the role AEGEE had then and has now to play?

The answer is clear and simple. I will say the role of AEGEE is the same now as it was 10 years ago. In fact the only very new parameter inside AEGEE environment is the fall of the Soviet Empire and thus the freedom of Eastern Europe.

Well, ask yourself the question: what can a generalist student movement bring to its environment (e.g., other students, other young people, more aged people, universities, institutions, companies, medias...)?

Anyway the main role of AEGEE was and is to create conscious European citizens by exposing them to other Europeans and to train active European citizens by making them work with other Europeans (these two situation correspond to a more passive or more active implication in AEGEE). Other roles will require another organisation.

Of course, locally or in certain occasion, AEGEE can develop secondary roles. But,

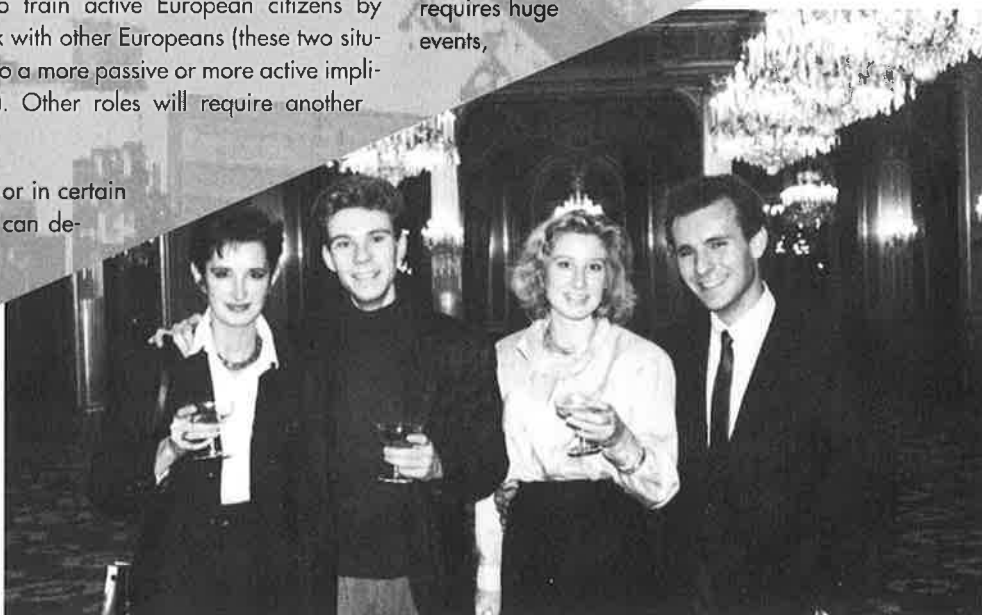
one should also keep in mind that the „benevolent“ status of AEGEE executives prevents any form of „large service provider organisation“. Its role is definitely not in the „market“ but in the Agora (in the old Greek meaning).

Practically, the list of exciting topics waiting for AEGEE to play its role is long:

- ◆ contributing to help the Eastern European countries to integrate with the EU in near future; building links with students from Mediterranean Muslim countries,
- ◆ controlling the way EU education programmes are implemented,
- ◆ supporting initiatives in favour of more influence for citizens in the European construction process,
- ◆ developping new links between Europe and the outside world in order to define possible contributions of Europe in the future reorganisation of world institutions,
- ◆ assessing the EU potential role in the struggle against global problems,
- ◆ thinking of potential EU answers to unemployment and exclusion from society,
- ◆ discussing the issues at stake in the new information society.

These topics go along very well with problems more centred on students lives or local preoccupations. They are the general frame in which the rest can find its coherence, and AEGEE its cohesion.

As means are always close to roles and objectives, I will just add that the first kind of topics requires huge events,



from left to right: C. Mayenobe; B. Establie; U.v. Lonski; V.Bracco

visible by all type of partners as they are general problems which interest all of them and affirm the generalist nature of AEGEE.

They also have to be big because the quality of student events is generally assessed in quantitative terms: how many students were there? The more you are in one event, the more credible you are to your environment.

4. You created other bodies to continue your vision. Can you please describe this?

In fact, I created two other bodies, with other former AEGEE-Europe responsables. One was IDE (Initiative for a European Democracy) which presented lists to the '89 European elections in Spain, Holland and France. Our message was concentrating on European citizenship, education, language teaching, Eastern Europe, communications, ... not surprisingly a message very similar to AEGEE's one at the time. We had no money and we knew we would get nobody elected.

But, as it was a goal I set to myself since the first day I thought of creating AEGEE, I was willing to make it. I was feeling it was a necessary path which was conducting directly to an autonomous capacity of action in the EU system. We wanted to show that we could do it when everybody was telling us it was impossible.

This move was coherent to what I always said: „The European construction is first of all a political process“. If citizens want to have a say on its development, they have to enter (which means to create in fact) the European political arena. So, in 1989, we gathered about 100.000 voters (which is a ridiculous percentage on three countries ... but a great success when you look our lack of money, means, time and experience).

Then we developed PROMETHEUS-Europe, a European think-tank as we realised during the '89 campaign that there was no European-wide organisation trying to identify long-term problems that the European construction will face. Based on a purely benevolent basis again (nobody is paid), but dealing now with young professionals starting families, starting careers and spread everywhere, it was very difficult to get started as they had very little time to dedicate to PROMETHEUS. We also had huge difficulties to find them but in the end we could succeed. At the present time we focus our work on the prospects and information (on the identified problems and solutions) in three fields:

- ◆ education
- ◆ external relations
- ◆ European administration.

We decided to deal with the EU external relations by following the same way we took to develop AEGEE-

Europe, that is going to other countries to work together with the people on common questions. This has been a tremendously successful strategy which means that we have now developed an Eastern European network and extra-European PROMETHEUS networks in CIS, non EU Mediterranean countries and Latin America. PROMETHEUS develops its worldwide activities whilst keeping the European Union identity of PROMETHEUS-Europe.

PROMETHEUS thus goes on with this idea of training active European citizens and inventing new tools and methods of common work.

5. Did you enjoy your time within AEGEE?

Well most of my memories I have published in a little book, which includes most of my experiences from the period 85-88 of AEGEE-Europe. Therefore one realizes that I have a lot of memories from AEGEE ... enough to fill a book. Anyhow most of my memories are very good, some are bitter. All of them were very instructive. A big number of my current friends come also from those times.

6. Do you believe that it was worthwhile to put all your efforts in, establishing AEGEE? Can we be proud of what AEGEE has reached in the last 10 years?

I think it was worthwhile because we achieved a lot, we achieved things nobody else did: like our crucial support to ERASMUS which opened a new era in terms of access of citizens to the European dimension, like the fact that in 10 years it is something like 100.000 students which have attended AEGEE events and are more aware of European affairs.

The fact that AEGEE, through you, is able to ask this question (not only to me but to many other anciens) is already a reason to be proud. First because it still exists; second because it is a movement questioning its past which means it is a movement having a future. If AEGEE can just go on while keeping merely this idea in mind, I will be proud all these years because I will know that AEGEE will play a big role on the European scene every year!

And, if I am proud today of AEGEE its because I know how difficult it has been for this movement to go through these ten years with this complex organisation that young students had to understand and to manage with only a few weeks or months of training. Being a few years ahead of you in life, I can assure you that accepting to follow this difficult path is a very good way to enter your future professional life. Europe needs people like you.

This interview was held by Michael Merker.

Franck Biancheri