

My EVS Story

Hello. My name is Telmo, I come from a little big country in Western Europe called Portugal, and this is my EVS story.

In fact, it's something that I'm doing because I was asked to. I've written a lot of different things during these last 6 months, in my mother tongue, but since English is the official language of the project in which I've been working, maybe now it's the right moment to write something in the language I've spoken in a daily basis since last July, and the one that, finally, I'm quite proud of speaking more fluently and with more accuracy than before. I would like to write it Bulgarian but, unfortunately, my basic and discreet level in this language doesn't allow me to do it. For now.

And why now? Well, because all this is, unfortunately, coming to an end. I would like to highlight that I learnt from everything I'll write about in this diary, but some episodes are more personal than others. For this reason, but also to keep a bit of secrecy that all diaries should have (if everything is told, the text loses its challenging character and the reader loses his interest), I should warn that not everything will be written. Because it's my right, I decided to keep for myself the moments whose sharing I didn't consider crucial.



Let me give a beginning to all of this. Evening of 6th July 2017, at the Lisbon Airport. I was waiting in the line to check my luggage and, at the same time, watching around, trying to find the person who has been present in almost every single moment of this adventure – the one who, over the months, we can consider the most active character of this story. I was looking for a girl with a 21-year-old looking. Her name was Maria. But the truth is that, besides her age, I didn't know anything else about her.

I didn't have to wait much more than five minutes to see my curiosity satisfied. I met her family and her on my way to the luggage control and, of course, the farewell was a fully melancholic moment – as all farewells. It's not hard for me to admit that it's distressing to say goodbye to someone we like, even if the distancing time is no longer than 6 months.

I was about to set sail for my second international experience, after having spent 7 months working in France, 2 years ago. I was under completely different circumstances than the ones I was when I moved to Paris, though. I was going to Bulgaria (BULGARIA!), an Eastern European country from which I knew little or nothing, whose official language I ignored at all. However, to be honest, the feeling of facing the unknown wasn't making me that nervous. I don't know why... maybe I was growing up, or perhaps just accepting that the World is the place we should call 'home'. The fact is that I was truly enthusiastic with the idea of learning a Slavic language, something completely new and challenging for me in terms of personal goals.



On the first day, 7th July, Bulgaria represented the unknown, but also the stereotype (in general, these concepts go hand in hand). The stereotype claiming that Slavic people are mostly cold, unfriendly, aloof. I felt, on my own, the consequences of that stereotype - when I told my family and friends I would come to Bulgaria, they got quite sceptical and didn't understand my decision; and yes, I should admit, on my arrival, Bulgaria (or Sofia, at least) seemed everything but welcoming. My first feeling was that everyone in that city wanted, somehow, to squeeze money out of me: the taxi drivers chasing some naïve tourists at the airport; the controllers on the metro (who wanted me to pay them 40 leva because I couldn't find my ticket); the worker at the station who asked 1 lev for helping us to reach the

right counter to buy the bus tickets to Razlog; the lady behind the window who refused to speak in English with us... STOP! I needed to arrive to Razlog as quickly as possible. This slight cultural shock was making me feel that I needed to leave Sofia and finally know the place, in Southwestern Bulgaria, that would be my home for the next 6 months.

Despite those situations in Sofia, I was creating a good link with Maria. I think the fact we passed together by the same struggles brought us closer to each other and provided us with a special energy to start working in our project, Summer Youth Academy. Instead of agitation and stress characteristic of big cities, my first weeks in Razlog would show me that I was in a really peaceful place, and my body and soul should adapt to it.



My stay in Bulgaria has been closely related to music – actually, music is one of the most important elements in my life, and of course I wouldn't lose this opportunity to get to know some Bulgarian music (such a rich subject!). The first (and probably the most) inspiring moment I've lived since I arrived,

happened in a rock festival on 8th July. I neither remember the name of the festival, nor the location where it took place. The only thing I can remember is that at the end of the evening, all musicians and the audience sang the song 'Нека бъде светлина', from Vasko Krupkata, which means 'let it be light' in English. Such a delight! From that

moment, I started loving Bulgarian language, its musicality, the way how sounds are pronounced. I realised that music is universal and we don't need to understand the lyrics to understand a song. This song was also the proof that not all 'modern' Bulgarian music is shoddy, as I had often heard.



Regarding the work itself, the first weeks were particularly hard in terms of understanding what Tina and Leo (the Spanish volunteers who were already there) had been up to. They were very nice and smart people, but undynamic and unmotivated. Little by little, we managed to integrate in the group and we felt our ideas were well accepted by them. Leo had a big talent for drawing and Tina for photography! She was such a good photographer! Thanks to her, after almost three years, I updated my profile photo on Facebook. She was always listening to *El Arrebato's* songs, a Spanish singer whose existence I totally



ignored until I met her. I didn't become a big fan of this man, but I kept in my memory the refrain of one of his songs (you will know which song I'm speaking about at the end of this story).

In summertime, we developed our activities in the Museum of Razlog, in Banya and in Gorno Draglishte. I enjoyed working in all those places and I will remember all the good moments lived in each one: the chairs' game, the hidden ball, the face painting, the

homemade flubber! I'll miss those sweet children from the home for kids, I'll miss that delicious pizzas we used to have in Banya (made by the lady of the school's bar); I'll miss those *banichki* made by Deshka and Rositsa's willingness! I'll miss hitchhiking and all those priceless fun moments while we were waiting for someone kind enough to give us a ride!



Tina would abandon the project at the end of July. Leo would also come back to Spain in September. However, in August, we welcomingly received new volunteers: Luis (from Spain), Zane (Latvia), Lori and Mayra (Italy). Luis became my roommate and one of the nicest people I've met during my EVS. He studied Psychology and from the first day, I thought he was good at analysing characters. In fact, we had a lot of interesting conversations (in Spanish) about it. Zane was a childish 20-year-old girl, whose native languages were Latvian and sarcasm. Over the weeks, I started ignoring her ironic comments; it was the way I found to not have problems with her.

Lori and Mayra joined our project and we did everything we could in order to integrate them in the team, so they feel comfortable working with us. At the beginning, Mayra could hardly spoke in English. For me, that was a good opportunity to practise my Italian and to learn a lot of new words in Roman dialect! Over the months, Mayra has learnt English and now she can speak much more confidently. Maybe I haven't told her yet, but I'm really proud of her. I like her way of being, her spontaneity and humour.





In August, we went in 2 trips: one to Halkidiki and Thessaloniki (Greece) and another one to Plovdiv (Bulgaria). I have great memories of both trips: new contacts, new cultures, summer, hot weather, paradisiacal beaches. Those 2 first months of my EVS were probably the ones I will keep with more affection in my heart.



During those months, we shared our house with a group of volunteers from Turkey. The majority of them couldn't speak English properly, but we managed to communicate effectively between us. I had a closer relationship with Esra and Ebranur – they taught me a lot of words in Turkish and cooked delicious Turkish dishes for us. I miss those moments!



As of September, besides Yane Sandanski School (in Razlog), Dobarsko's School and Banya's School, we started working in MOGA, an association/centre for people with intellectual disabilities. We were guided by Krasi, a very dedicated person who does everything she can to help those special people.



Wednesday and Friday mornings were totally dedicated to our new friends Tanya, Stoyan, Ivo, Radi, Hristinka, Tsvetelina and Naska! We helped them making crafts to be sold in the Christmas bazar. It awakened my sense of creativity, even if I've never been endowed to arts!



In December, Turkey was one of the last adventures of my EVS. We went to Izmir and Istanbul – completely different cities, but both amazing, each one in its own way. Izmir has a good vibe, a proper identity, and it's the most liberal place in Turkey. We met new friends there and they showed us most of the city. Istanbul is overcrowded, but charming and breathtaking. It was really enjoyable to meet Ebranur there again as well!





And as I said in the beginning of this story, it's coming the day when everything will end. I knew it, and that's why this diary is being written with such a feeling of melancholy. 15th of January is my last day in Bulgaria (at least, for now). On this day, Bulgaria represents, among many other things, home. From now on, when I think of Bulgaria, I will think of nice people, nice food, beautiful nature (also crazy trains moving with the doors opened, by the way) and friends!



It's impossible to list all the things I will miss when I go back to Portugal. Let me try... I will miss Kostadinka, with her catching smile; I will miss David and his assertiveness, but also his particular sense of humour; I will miss Reni and her (positive) obsession with cleanliness; I will miss Radoslava and her brilliant and funny Bulgarian classes; I will miss playing with Alexandar and Kostantantin. And I think I will even miss Radio Melody when I will henceforth listen to songs like 'I have nothing', 'Shape of my heart', 'Can you feel the love tonight?' and 'Ain't no sunshine'; perhaps I will even miss a bit our poor and inefficient washing-machine, or our minuscule kitchen, where I've been so happy and uncovered a hidden talent of mine. And of course, I will miss *rakia*!

By way of conclusion, EVS taught me a lot of things: I learnt that communication is much more than language. We don't need to speak a language to communicate. In July we couldn't speak Bulgarian at all with the kids, but we arranged a way for them to understand us – at the end, it was all about improvising!

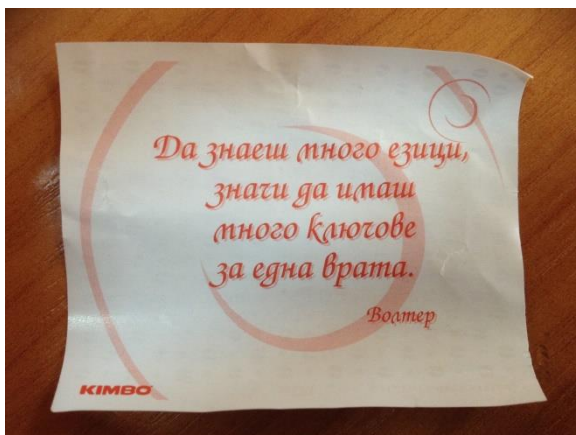


Nevertheless, the most important thing I've learnt is that it's worth living; it's worth leaving our comfort zone, travelling, starting a conversation with someone unknown; it's worth learning new languages, dedicating part of our time to help people who need it more than us. Finally, it's worth being a European Volunteer!

От България, с любов,
Телмо Родригес

'Don't ask me where I'm from. Ask where I'm a local'

Пух, знаеш ли каква е разликата между „харесвам“ и „обичам“?!
- Не, Прасчо... Не знам... Каж ми...
- Разликата е там, че ако „харесваш“ едно цвете ще го откъснеш, но ако го „обичаш“ ще го поливаш всеки ден!



¿Cuánto vale oír las olas del mar?
¿Cuánto vale un amigo de verdad?
¿Cuánto vale ser el dueño de tu vida,
tener tu propia verdad?
Dime cuánto vale tu dignidad.
Dime cuánto vale tu libertad.

El Arrebato - Me hace falta dinero