

Erasmus+ internship report, Black Sea Institute Association, Burgas, Bulgaria

Dear colleagues,

I am Neli Kirilova, PhD Candidate in International Relations and Security Studies at the Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB), Hungary. My internship was at the Black Sea Institute (BSI) Association in Burgas, Bulgaria. It combined both academic work with practical NGO activities, which were particularly tailored to my field of research and academic interest.

First, in terms of academic work, the Black Sea Institute Association provided a great opportunity for me to acquire practical experience in the field of my academic interest, therefore improving the knowledge database for my PhD research. My PhD thesis explores the competition vs. cooperation in the Black Sea region, more specifically the intergovernmental games of power between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the local states which are currently non-affiliated to neither of these three regional powers. It was significant for me to observe the current state of play of the relations between academic NGOs in several of the regional countries. Particularly interesting for me was to be part of a Bulgarian academic NGO, which operates in the field of Black Sea regional cooperation with the neighbouring states. This allowed me to experience the difference of organizational values within a country which is EU member state since 2008, for 11 years now, and those countries which are currently not EU member states, but close EU neighbouring states.



The Black Sea Institute Association is working with the Burgas University 'Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov', which provides a very good field for academic development of my work. It organises several round-tables and conferences on yearly basis. I participated in one of them, the Round Table 'International Cooperation within the Black Sea, Baltic Sea, and Mediterranean Sea', which was devoted to the latest developments of maritime security strategy of the EU. Particularly, I prepared a presentation on the currently active International Maritime Norms and Conventions and their effects to the regional frozen conflicts and security crises. The conference was divided in three panels, respectively devoted to the International Security, Energy Security and Environmental Security in the Black Sea, Baltic Sea, and Mediterranean Sea. Among the participants were leading experts in academic research, career diplomats, politicians and active citizens working on the Black Sea regional cooperation. This experience was essential for my further career development, as it gave me the opportunity to meet leading experts in my field of research.

Second, in terms of the on-going work of the NGO, I was supporting the international communication with NGOs of the Black Sea region, including such of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Armenia, Belarus. I contributed to establishing new partnerships and continuing the ongoing international cooperation projects. Third, regarding the national activities of the NGO, I provided contribution to the draft proposal for National Black Sea Strategy, particularly in the sectors related to Energy Security and International Youth Cooperation. Through my internship I acquired knowledge of the current stage of the people-

to-people contact within the Black Sea regional countries in practice. This is helpful within the process of writing my PhD thesis, because it will let me better set the limits within which my research would bring valid conclusions.

As a result of my practise, I conducted a number of expert interviews for my PhD thesis. One of my papers has been published, namely ‘The Blue Growth Strategy in the context of the Bulgarian Presidency to the Council of the EU. Bourgas Declaration for the Black Sea region’, pp.9-13 of *The Sea – A Border or A Door*, edition ‘Bryag’, 2019, ISBN 978-954-8752-36-7, http://blacksea.bg/site/templates/assets/img/the_sea-border-or-door-2019.pdf What is more, I am working on my next contribution to be published in a further edition of the BSI, which will be devoted to the Maritime Security in the Black Sea region.



I was lucky to work under the supervision of the former MEP Prof. Dr. Marussya Lyubcheva, founder of the BSI, and its director, Mr. Milen Dimitrov, both of them very skilled and knowledgeable on Black Sea maritime affairs. I would be happy to continue our cooperation, and I would embrace the idea of guiding further trainees in their research interests through the opportunities which the Black Sea Institute provides.

Life in Burgas:

Bulgaria is a friendly country, with very good climate and natural resources. Burgas is located at the cost of the Black Sea, which makes it perfect for field research for those students who study the intergovernmental relations within the region. Furthermore, as Bulgaria is a EU Member State since 2008, while the neighbouring Black Sea countries are still under the process of negotiation, it is a very good example to observe how much closer to the rules and regulations of the EU is a Bulgarian NGO, compared to NGOs of other regional countries. Therefore, it provides a good basis of studying how a country could progress for 11 years EU membership, if accepted that its way of functioning before entering the EU could have been similar to this of NGOs within other regional states. However, a student coming from a Western country should expect to track features of cultural life which are typical for a South-Eastern country, influenced by post-Ottoman and post-Soviet beliefs. The positive side of it is that the culture is rich and diverse, but it needs a profound understanding.

Burgas is a calm and friendly place to live. It is the second biggest city at the Bulgarian Black Sea cost, after its sea capital – Varna. The city provides friendly atmosphere, green parks, beautiful sea garden and long beaches. Although Burgas is an industrial city, it is attractive summer destination for tourists. Also, it is possible to easily travel to the nearby smaller towns during the non-working days, which a trainee would enjoy.



In the summer season, from June to September, Burgas is warm and welcoming for tourists from all nations. The weather is perfect for outdoors activities, between 20-35 degrees, sunny, with fresh marine wind. It provides opportunity for attending the beautiful beaches in the

weekends, or out-of-office hours. The public transport is efficient, but often biking or simply walking could be enough, as the distances in Burgas allow eco-friendly transportation. The prices of daily expenses are slightly higher than the provided E+ grant could cover, so good planning is needed in order to fit the budget for accommodation, transport, and food. Any extra costs should be additionally calculated, approximately 200 euro/ month more are needed for a good standard of living.



The social environment in Burgas, especially during the summer, is very international. Although most people speak English and Russian, it is always a plus if the trainee decides to learn a bit of Bulgarian language. It is incredible how the people open their hearts for foreigners trying to learn and speak a bit of the local language. The cultural life is quite diverse – Burgas is full of festivals of music, dance, open-air theatre, opera, live performances, yoga and sport classes. For example, I got a healthy routine of visiting the beach on sunrise in the early morning for practicing physical exercise. It is recharging and fills up one's body and mind with positive energy during the day, ready for further challenges.

Working hard but having the opportunity to efficiently relax, substantially increases the quality of life. For this reason, I do recommend selecting Burgas as a destination for academic research.

In a nutshell, I am happy with my choice of field research internship and I recommend it to all those students, who would like to acquire practical experience of how the countries within the Black Sea region implement their academic and non-governmental cooperation. Also, I recommend it to those who are interested in comparing the social and organisational functioning of a relatively recent EU member, Bulgaria, with neighbouring non-EU countries, like those of the Black Sea region.