

## **My experience in European Voluntary Service**

Ten months abroad changes you a lot, both in ways that are directly visible but also in ways that are a little bit harder to realize. Macedonia is probably as different as possible from Sweden when it comes to the culture. When I came to Macedonia almost everything was new and different compared to what I was used to. I've never before been forced to settle down and adapt to another culture. When I met this new culture and started to be a part of it I got a better understanding in how things are connected, how things aren't connected and how the world looks like outside of Sweden. I have been facing things that didn't excited in my life before, such as poverty, a totally new level of racism and people with completely different opinions than I and the people who have been around me all life have.

Since I've been working with children who come from families with a lot of social and other problems I have not only seen the poverty, I have also in somehow experienced it. Under the period of ten months I've got a strong connection to the children I've been working with, and because of that I've also got a knowledge in what kind of lives they are living, how they are feeling and how they are treated by the society. I have experienced a total open racism and I've seen people refusing the children because of their ethnical background. People have been starring me out when I'm holding these children in the hands, when I'm playing with them, when I laugh with them and when I hug them. This kind of open racism is something I haven't experienced before since it's more discreet and hidden in Sweden, and it have opened my eyes for how big this problem is in other parts of the world.

During my time in Macedonia I've also discovered a lot about prejudices, both about my own prejudices towards other people but also about the prejudices other people have. Since I have been proved so many times during this time that prejudices are most of the times totally wrong, I now have a better knowledge about it. I have met a lot of people who have totally different opinions than I have, in some cases it's about prejudices I know is wrong and in some cases it's about people having a opinion that totally goes against my own personal moral. I have discovered and learnt to understand how much impact the culture and the society that you're living in has when it comes to how you're thinking and acting. This has helped me to better understand and to accept other people's opinions, even though they go against everything that I personally believe.

Since I've met both local people and people from all around Europe, there has always been a cultural exchange. I'm more aware of the situation around in Europe; how people are living and what kind of problems that exists.

The organisation I've been working in has worked in a different way than I've been used to, and it has been a challenge for me. I've now seen and experienced another way of working which I know is useful for me. I've learnt to adapt to a new and different way of working and I've also realized how I want things to be and what I think is important in a working place.

Since I've had some challenges during my time in Macedonia I now feel better in both handling and finding solutions to problems that comes in my way. I've faced a lot of problems my the work in the day care centre and in that way I've improved my way of finding solutions to different kind of problems. Also in other situations, for example in the procedure of getting the visa and in the procedure to adapt to another culture, some problems have appeared and I've been practising to handle and to find solutions to different problems.

Because of this new way of working I have also become better in communicating with other people. I've become better in saying how I want things to be and to suggest changes, but I've also been better at listening, understanding and to be flexible towards other people.

For approximately six months I was having Macedonian lessons to learn the basics in the language. Since the children I've been working with have mainly been speaking roma-language and some Macedonian it has been a language-barrier between us. In most of the situations, and mainly in the beginning when I didn't know any Macedonian at all, it has been hard for us to communicate through the language. We have found other ways in expressing ourselves, and I've been shown that it's possible to get a strong connection and to express more than I thought without using a language.

To spend a longer period abroad has of course improved my English. I can without any problems communicate in the English language, and even though I had a good knowledge in English even before I went, I'm no longer afraid of using the language in any situation. Now I feel totally comfortable with using and communication through the English language.

After all I have experienced I feel that I can handle my emotions in a total new way. It's a big difference to move to a country with a different culture and to face people I care about living in poverty. This has brought up a lot of strong emotions in me. I've been frustrated, happy, sad, and grateful, I've felt power- and helplessness, satisfied, and guilty. It have been really hard for me to see what kind of lives people I truly care about are living, and knowing I can't do too much about it. I've been through a lot of emotions, and I've been forced to learn how to handle them all without getting pulled down.

I've also got a better knowledge in how people and humanity works. I've experienced too many times when people have prioritized unimportant things for themselves instead of

necessary things for others. Even though it sounds cliché I now more than ever realize that humanity has to be prioritized more than comfortableness.

With moving abroad and with the whole experience I've of course become more independent. I've faced a lot of challenges and I've been forced to go through them more or less on my own. That has given me a totally new confidence. I feel that I can stand up for myself in a different way than before. I've learnt a lot about myself and how I react in different situations. I now know how to do bring out the most effective side of me and how to use my resources in the best way.

There have been a lot of times and situations when I've been forced to go outside of my comfortable-zone. In that way I'm now better in handle situations that I before experienced as difficult. Since I had to rebuild my whole network when I moved to Macedonia my social skills have developed a lot. Everyone I've met in Macedonia, both through the work and in my free time, have been a new acquaintanceship and that means that I've all the time been practising and improving my social skills.

I've changed a lot during my ten months in Macedonia. I've got a better knowledge and understanding in how another part of the world works, how people in a different culture are thinking and acting and I've got to learn myself better. I feel more secure and I know that I will have advantage of all the new skills I know carry with me.

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