

Welcome to the 5<sup>th</sup> blog post on the effects of international volunteering projects that are being written regularly by the researcher Jonathan Robertson from Scotland in the frame of the research, which has started in March 2017 and will continue until November 2018. In the frame of his research, Jonathan is following volunteers participating in different volunteering activities all over Europe and finding out how volunteering is changing their lives and helping them in building a career and in personal development. Apart from volunteers, we are also following the work of their hosting organisations. We are interested in how they see the added value of volunteering projects for their organisation and how international youth work has changed their local communities.

Reading this blog will take you: 5 minutes

## **BLOG #5**

### **Volunteer stories – Combatting long-term unemployment in Italy**

What significant dates in your life do you remember?

The birthday of a family member? A wedding anniversary? When someone close to you died? The day your football team finally won the cup?

“I remember very well when I arrived in Bulgaria – it was the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2017. I remember going together with Renata for 2 or 3 days to get to know Bulgaria and the organisation and where I was staying. She was with me. It was OK for me this new adventure.”

I am in conversation with Paulo, a young man from the north of Italy, a few weeks after coming back from a 12-month volunteer project in Bulgaria. It's the way he says it: slow, precise and unprompted - “it was the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2017” - no passing detail.

“Renata” is Renata Dolega, volunteer co-ordinator from Paulo's sending organisation in Brescia, Atelier Europeo. Later, I speak with her about her work with Paulo. She explains how he had been unemployed for 5 years before going on this project. “It was very important [for me] to be there, otherwise he would have had a crisis in those first days.”

Paulo was volunteering full-time for an environmental organisation on projects to improve local polluting. “In Bulgaria, when I arrived it was a really tough experience”, he tells me. “But through 1 year, it improved. When it started it was a disaster – I understood nothing, only Google Translate!”

Going to Bulgaria was no doubt a big challenge. As Paulo says, “When I started I had a difficult time. When I started a new relationship with other volunteers it was hard for me to begin. But this became easier for me – making new relationships.” He goes on to acknowledge the support of the staff at his receiving organisation, AKSELS, in particular Liliya Georgieva, Project Development Manager. “Thank you very much Liliya the supervisor. She was the master for showing me lots of things.”

When I ask Paulo the biggest thing he gained from his time, he tells me, “The most important was meeting new people. Now I know people in Slovakia, in Spain, in Greece. I learned a lot from different people outside of the project.”

I ask Renata what she thinks Paulo gained. “I think the more important result for him was that he did something that was successful. He could see that he can manage. That's a really winning situation for a person that comes from a path of life that is 'not successful'. It's a new chance – they can see with their own eyes. Internally he feels that.”

Paulo talks about learning a lot about computers from his Polish room-mate; learning about his own strengths and weakness; and how his English “really improved”. “I also improved my force of will for getting a job. Before returning to Italy I spoke with Liliya and she was saying how I have now more this force of will - 'you have fire in your body, Paulo' - ah yes!” These points lead Paulo to conclude that “there are a lot of connections” between Volunteering Activities and employability.

Renata goes further: “With the situation in the job market and with schools we say that there is a big gap between the current school experience and being prepared for the world of employment. And I think there is a lot of space with Volunteering Activities to develop soft skills and some professional skills – not just in theory but in practice.” Renata continues, “I think all the transferable skills that they get are really strong there. It is not just about the 6 or 7 hours volunteering, it is about the 24 hours of life abroad. In this sense they come back as other people. I think this is the real impact.”

6 months later I speak with Paulo again. “I have good news for you”. He tells me that over the summer he returned to Bulgaria on his own to meet again with the people he had got to know and the new volunteers on the project. In Brescia, he has got a job, after 5 years unemployed, working in a restaurant very close to his home.

I ask his opinion on how his employer perceived his Volunteering Activities experience. “I think my boss has admiration for me – about the Volunteering Activity. They see the person who has more force of will – not to surrender in life, not ever. Never surrender. Now, maybe in the future I will become the right arm for my boss”, helping with the management of the restaurant.

On his first shift at his new job, he faced another big challenge: “The boss says: 'I have a job for you as dishwasher and cleaner'. OK. I remember on the first night it was – I don't remember the right term - very *big*. But for evolving in the job, for the organising, now it is easy for me. When I go to the job for work I have my way of organising the things, yeah it's really fantastic.” Listening to Paulo I can understand what Liliya was saying about having 'fire in his body'. He concludes: “I am really, really happy. And you?”

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Written by Jonathan Robertson, freelance researcher and youth work trainer, currently working on a research project on how Erasmus+ volunteering activities contribute to the employability of young people.



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