

## Discovering interculturalism

I still remember the day I first entered my high school. It was a rainy day. Somebody called out: "Follow the river of people so you don't get lost!" I do remember feeling lost but in a sense of not knowing what lies ahead of me. So, I followed the river of people for a while until I found myself familiar with all the hidden halls of the Diocesan Classical Gymnasium. I still walk past these halls almost every week for my choir practice and they always tell me a story from my past. For example, when I had to present a Latin saying in my Latin class. The words "*Non scholae, sed vitae discimus*" resonate with me till this day. The sentence translates to "We do not learn for school, but for life." Perhaps now, being busy with my studies I finally understand it fully.

In my fourth and final year of high school, however, my mind was somewhat preoccupied with the words "*Carpe diem!*" and "*Gaudeamus igitur!*". Nonetheless, I embarked on an interesting journey. I applied for an Erasmus+ project called AFIRME and after two years of strict Covid-19 restrictions I had a lot to look forward to.

The first AFIRME meeting was held online, and it looked a lot like one of the four EUCI Seminars. We first received some greeting words from our coordinators and were then split up into smaller breakout rooms to get to know more about ourselves. When it comes to meeting new people, I can't decide whether it's better to meet them during an activity, which doesn't necessarily include the act of introducing, or is it better to find everyone familiar with each other in the first place. The latter is more efficient while the other is perhaps more natural. In the case of the AFIRME project, I was more comfortable with the non-introduction activities. I think this feeling arose from the fact that I spent most of my days behind the computer screen at that time and haven't really had the chance to do anything else but to press the camera and microphone button in Teams. The second AFIRME meeting, which was set in Graz, was, therefore, anxiously expected.

A week in Graz surprisingly started in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, where the Slovenian applicants (including me) welcomed the Italian applicants from Modica, Sicily. The number of Slovenian applicants was scarce due to Covid-19 infection and the rest of us were advised to keep a safe distance. The first few hours of the Graz experience were a bit challenging. Because of the great toll that Covid-19 took on the Italian people you could smell fear among the Italian applicants. Looking back, I think the fear was present on both sides. Even though my Covid-19 tests were negative, I was afraid to approach Italian applicants because I feared their reaction. After the EUCI Seminars I wondered a lot if I could handle this situation better. After all, interculturalism supports cross-cultural dialogue. Had I reached out and discussed how they experienced the Covid-19 pandemic, I might have realised I had nothing to fear. Instead, I formed my opinion of them based on my fears, much like someone who hasn't had many experiences with interculturalism.

After a day, the ambience became lighter. Thanks to Austrian applicants, the students from Graz's Bischöfliches Gymnasium, who designed a handful of interactive activities and interesting seminars. In my opinion, one of the more obvious distinctions of a certain culture is social order. During the Graz experience, I had the opportunity to hear about the city's recycling policies and green transition agenda. These values really lie at the heart of this city. I was astonished by the number of cyclist and bicycles I saw during my stay. The recycling network in Austria is very complex and I couldn't believe it could get more complex than in Slovenia. I expected Graz's city centre to be busy but as soon as the clock struck eight in the evening it became very quiet. Among AFIRME applicants, however, there was more talk about the food. Italian applicants missed seasoning – they thought Austrian food was bland.

Their tastebuds were further challenged when we participated in a cooking activity. We were supposed to cook a traditional Austrian lunch, which consisted of a pumpkin soup and *Kaiserschmarrn*. Both dishes were known to me because they came to Slovenia during the reign of the Habsburg family. The cooked dishes, however, reminded me nothing of the familiar taste. They were both bland. I like to think that preparing a tasty dish needs more than skill. It needs a deeper understanding of the food. Since the food is connected to cultural identity, the strive to understanding different cultures i.e. interculturalism might have been the missing ingredient. On our last day in Graz, we finally found common ground regarding food. We visited Zotter's chocolate factory and were all equally delighted about the chocolate-tasting. Apparently, chocolate is a sort of uniting force. In the spirit of uniting, we finished the Graz experience in Slovenia. We climbed on top of a hill in northwestern Slovenia called *Tromeja* (Threeborders), where Italy, Austria and Slovenia share borders.

The last AFIRME meeting took place in Modica, Sicily. Modica is set among the hills, away from the sea. I found out Modica was once a Spanish colony famous for its tilemaking and ceramic works. Its famous neighbour, Siracuse, is located only a few kilometres away. Ceramic works still present a large part of the city's identity as does community. In the past, Modica faced problems with the Mafia. Now free of its influence, I had the chance to witness the resilience of Modica's people in a completely different way. Upon our arrival in Modica, we were greeted with a festive sight. It was the weekend of San Giorgio, a local festival celebrating Modica's patron, St. George. This old tradition is characterised by a long procession of St. George's statue slaying the dragon. Since we arrived late in the evening, we were able to see the last part of the procession, when St. George was returned to the church. I was completely mesmerized by the scene. There's a general opinion among Central Europeans that the life in Southern Europe is much more vibrant, loud and relaxed. On the day of San Giorgio, I finally understood it. The fairytale scene of Modica offered me to experience "*la dolce vita*". My now Italian friends showed me where to get the best *gelato* in Modica and generously accepted me in their cheery company. Instead of coffee I drank a cup of pineapple juice every morning and never felt better. This time around, however, it was the Austrians who missed their home cuisine. They couldn't get used to eating sweet pastries and fruit for breakfast. Their bread and salami shortening was quickly forgotten when we spent a day at the sea. April was nearing to an end, and the water was quite warm. Still, there wasn't a single local bathing in the sea. I later found out that the locals don't consider it a bathing season till July.

Speaking to Italian applicants living in Modica made me realise there is a side of Modica beyond its *la-dolce-vita* exterior. Many young people wish to leave the city in search for better opportunities. Problems like poverty, domestic and sexual violence are still present in these regions. Through the AFIRME project, however, I met many inspiring people who bring hope to their communities. Many of them were professors and local artists. I also visited a youth centre and Women's home in Modica, where women share their stories by preparing Modica's signature chocolate. Before I came to Modica, I never experienced community in a sense of family. I will be forever grateful for this experience.

The AFIRME project revolved around active citizenship. It also connected three neighbouring countries – Slovenia, Italy and Austria. Back then, I thought this connection was formed to strengthen neighbouring relations. Italians, Austrians and Slovenians share a lot of history, but it wasn't until after Slovenia's independence that they started to look for ways in which their common history unites them rather than divides them. This might have been partly true, but I know now that the reason for this connection was simpler. It answered the question "What is active citizenship?". I had to answer the question while I was applying for the project. In truth, I was completely clueless about the broad meaning of being an active citizen. Hearing stories from my Italian, Austrian, and Slovenian peers about their own experiences in active citizenship helped me broaden my understanding of the phrase. This

experience also left me with a better understanding of them, my peers. It's funny how one can experience something without ever giving much thought about it and then years later reflect on it in a completely different way. This happened to me during EUCI Seminar 2. I realized that I left the AFIRME project with so many friends because I had the opportunity to get to know them beyond the cultural stereotypes.

Before the EUCI Seminars, I never thought about interculturalism. Yet, I realised that I use its principles in my everyday life. Because, in my opinion, a culture goes beyond a nation. For example, Slovenia is one of the smallest countries in the world. It has more than 30 dialects that can be roughly divided into 7 groups. Some dialects are completely unrecognizable to me, even though they're thought to be Slovenian language. So, when I applied for my university, I found myself in a very diverse group of Slovenian friends, who only shared an interest in biochemistry. Whenever I am unfamiliar with a word, a tradition, or a point of view they express I am in no hesitation to politely ask them about it. I am more and more comfortable in doing so when it comes to people of other ethnicities and nationalities. But why should I experience discomfort in the first place? Biology would explain this feeling as a fear of unknown, a primal mechanism that keeps us safe. Safety can be, therefore, found in the familiar – in a familiar place, face or even a concept. I think nationality and ethnicity are such concepts because they give us a sense of belonging and are usually the first common trait we notice from talking to a new person. Perhaps I am more comfortable talking to my Slovenian friends because I think we already have something in common. Still, is my entire identity based on my Slovenian passport? When we were asked to introduce ourselves by telling a typical tradition from our home country in the EUCI Seminar 3 I couldn't remember a single thing. In fact, I struggled with my national identity before. I don't spend my summer holidays in Croatia like most of Slovenians do. I am very bad at cycling, and I've never been a fan of Luka Dončić. I mix Slovenian words with English and English words with Slovenian, I read books in German, and I listen to Italian music. Does that make me less of a Slovene? On the other hand, I love Slovenian desserts, and on almost every Sunday my family gathers for a typical Slovenian Sunday roast. Does that make me a Slovene?

While searching for my own national identity I realised I never really bonded over my nationality with anybody. I bonded over experiences and my preferences. These bonds last. In terms of an iceberg, what matters lies below the surface. I learned from the EUCI Seminar 2 that storytelling enables people to look beyond the surface. The traits which appear on the surface are usually those which put us in boxes and in a way divide us. While traditions unite people who identify themselves with a certain culture, interculturalism has the power to unite everyone through feelings like joy, hope. Moreover, through interculturalism I can understand different traditions and cultures better. When the last EUCI Seminar came to an end I was once again quite unaware of its influence on me. Reflecting on it reminded me of my introductory words. And yes, my life will be forever marked by the knowledge I received in such a short time.