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SIMILAR, DIFFERENT, EUROPEAN - IN EQUAL MEASURE.

Differences. Similarities. Stories. Differences merge into similarities, crafting stories.

My story begins in 2010, a top-ten year with an experience to match. Coming, as I do, from a tiny provincial town, the opportunity in each and every project was explored and appreciated to the utmost degree. We were constantly involved in an obstacle race with Bucharest and the country's larger towns and cities that had access to more alternative informal development resources, and we were extremely conscious of this handicap. When it all started, I was a pupil in Year 10 of the "Unirea" National College in Turnu-Măgurele, Teleorman - the best educational establishment in the town - and I was invited to become involved in projects and take part in national competitions and contests.

The Euroscola Project came along at a time when I was dreaming of Europe - dreaming that Europe was dreaming of me. They were the simple dreams of a teenager who did not know all that much about the European Union, but who had an awareness of European cities, hoping one day to lose myself on the well-trodden backstreets of Italy, to overcome my fear of heights by climbing to the top of the Eiffel Tower or to dip my toes into the waters of the Mediterranean.

Euroscola is a project aimed at school pupils, conducted under the auspices of the European Council and it seeks to promote European cultural values amongst young people. Euroscola made me face up to Europe. It forced me to get to know Europe, to discover a Europe that differed from my country and one that differed from my dreams. I discovered the history of the European Union. I heard stories of Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman and I was fascinated by their determination not to give up on the struggle to build what was needed.

Dream. Believe. Take action. That is how everything begins. That is how Europe was built. That is how our project began. Euroscola taught me a great deal about Europe. It was like a child. I witnessed the birth of Europe. I studied each stage as it grew and I was so happy that we became friends in 2007. Romania had joined the European Union, and my European dream seemed closer and more real. Despite this, the hang-up of coming from a small town still loomed large. We were a team of 25 little people searching, documenting, writing and recounting with and about the European dream. We wrote up our project passionately and sent it off apprehensively, keeping our faith, as much as we could, in what we had put together.

Christmas arrived with the first flakes of snow and unexpected news. We had won. Not only were we one of the 10 teams that were due to set off for Strasbourg for the working visit to the European Parliament, but we were to be in first place - first in the whole country. That moment was like an ice-cold shower - the realisation that passion and hard work make a difference. Far beyond the name of our town or the number of its inhabitants, the value of our project was all



that mattered.

With my luggage packed full of dreams, I set off for Strasbourg. It was the first time I had left the country and everything seemed different. Every building looked impressive, just because it was "out there" - in Europe. That Europe that you read about in books, where everything seemed better made. The baroque-style buildings of Strasbourg, the wonder of its lights, the cleanliness of the city were the elements that made me fall hopelessly in love with France.

The eagerly anticipated day had arrived: the day in the European Parliament. In the course of one day, we were going to be there in Parliament, holding mock parliamentary sessions alongside 26 teams from every country in the European Union. All of us meeting under the same roof - school pupils speaking 23 languages, brought up in different cultures and from different educational backgrounds. I set out on the journey with the same thoughts in my head that I had had when I signed up for the competition. Once the denizens of Bucharest had been our superiors. Now there were the French, the Germans, the British.

The day began with breakfast in the company of international students, which was followed by an initial parliamentary session. It was the time for competing ideas. Transcending native language, transcending the size of the country that you came from, it was ideas that took centre stage; pure creativity was the order of the day; the spotlight was on you, as a human being. It was the moment when I felt European and similar, and yet different from those alongside me. Similar because I have the same rights as all the others and different because cultural background and experience of the education system up to that point were evident in the basis of our thinking.

It was the day when I discovered my identity. I am Romanian and I am European. I have similarities with, and differences from my neighbours in Romania and my European colleagues. My way of thinking was transformed on that winter's day in the European Parliament in Strasbourg. It was a day when my Europe diverged from that of the Greeks, because Romania has the Danube, which Greece does not - although, a cruise on the Mediterranean may sometimes be more tempting than one on the Danube. My Europe became the same as that of the Bulgarians, as we joined the European Union in the same year and experience the same difficulties in becoming part of the Schengen Area. My Romania is unique, because we celebrate the Transylvania region, with Dracula and Nadia Comaneci with her perfect 10. The breath-taking landscapes even enchanted the Prince of Wales, who was adamant that Romania held treasures that must be preserved in their natural environment.

Euroscola was an experience that filled my bags with memories and my heart with friends. It taught me that I am European, that I am different, that I am unique. And it taught me that my Europe is different from yours, and yet it is also the same.

Europe's beauty lies in its diversity. In the simplicity of the smallest little things. In the details that set us apart. In the similarities that make us up as a whole. In our European identity. In traditional culture. In us.