A Journey in the Baltic States
*By Francesco Melito*

**Introduction**

When I travel, rather than a touristic guide, I use to bring with me a novel related to the history or the culture of the country I visit. This kind of books has the power to offer a different perspective on a country. These novels will not tell you which the most stunning monument of the country is, where you can find hipster bars in town, and which hostel you should book. However, if you want to have a privileged perspective about your destination, they will drag you into its genuine reality. For my journey in the Baltic Republics, my choice has fallen on “The Czar’s Madman” (Keisri hull) by the Estonian writer Jaan Kross. Based on a parallelism between the tyranny of the Tsarist Empire and the dictatorship of the Soviet Union, Kross tells the story of a Livonian nobleman, Timotheus von Bock, and his idealistic fight for equality and freedom in the occupied homeland. Behind Timo’s criticism toward the Tsar, Kross hides his desire for independence that the Soviet Union has taken away. Timo’s revolutionary ideas are considered as a symptom of madness. How can a nobleman marry a peasant? How can he criticize the Tsar? How can this madman claim that human beings are equal and free?

Like Timo, Jaan Kross spent almost ten years in jail for his ideas. Like Timo, he is a dreamer. Years later, their dream has become true. Estonia and the other two Baltic Countries have achieved independence and, most importantly, they have obtained freedom. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and freedom of movement. Following their path, I have travelled through Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia for almost a month. Following their example, I understood the importance of being free.

**About Travelling and Freedom**

*Warsaw, July 18, 2017.*

What does travelling mean to me? Travelling is movement. It is curiosity. It is freedom. Imprisoned in his manor house, my travel companion, Timo, longed for escaping abroad and for his freedom. When he got the chance to run away and start a new life he hesitated and decided to stay “to be a thorn within the Russian Empire and to fight for everyone’s freedom.” The same lack of freedom kept the Baltic people “imprisoned” in the Soviet Union for almost 50 years. Finally, in 1991, Timo’s dream came true. Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania regained independence and, by joining the European Union in 2004, they completed their process toward freedom.

The airport of Vilnius is closed. A quite unusual choice, closing the main airport of the country during the summer. Some will tell me later that working in winter in Lithuania is not the easiest option. Understandable. Only after having spent my first night in Vilnius, I realized that the only jumper I have would not be enough. A typical problem for us, people from South. My journey starts, therefore, in Warsaw, 500 km from Vilnius. I just have time for some pierogi and a beer, before catching the night bus to Lithuania. This morning I had breakfast in Rome. Now, I am drinking a beer in a bar in the center of Warsaw. I cannot find my short espresso here. “Too short! This is not a coffee, this is the bottom of a coffee,” the Frenchman said. The Frenchman is a hip-hop singer that came to the bar where I work a couple of days ago. He played in Barcelona on Friday, had a concert in Rome on Saturday and, then, danced in Lyon on Sunday. It is a flow. It is freedom. Traveling makes life an endless spring. Traveling means to be born again.

If I had to find a reason to say why I love travelling, I would point to the big man with a big bushy moustache and a red t-shirt sitting in front of me in this bar. He just went to grab his umpteenth beer. Or to the girl that just walked next to me smiling. Why is she smiling? I have no idea but it is not important. My father would ask, ‘Could you not see the same things in Italy too?’ No, he misses the point. In ‘The unbearable lightness of being’ by Milan Kundera, Tomáš sees sex as the secret to
understand the differences among people. We are more similar to each other than we think. Sex is the key to discover that one-millionth part dissimilarity. How would she behave in bed? He thinks. For me, traveling is the access to that part. How do people behave in Poland? What do they eat in Estonia? What are their stories? By traveling, I can snip another strip off the infinite canvas of the universe. This is what my father does not understand. This is why I travel.

Even though Poland kept its formal independence during the Cold War, the influence of the USSR limited its freedom. Like the Baltic Countries, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant a new era for Poland and, along with the Baltic Countries, Poland shared the process of EU integration. Today, Poland is facing a difficult challenge. The government led by the conservative party Law and Justice is pursuing policies that, according to the opposition parties, are undermining that freedom regained in 1989. Discussing Polish politics is not the goal of this story. However, I am still drinking my beer and reading my book when I hear people shouting from the street. "Wolność, Równość, Demokracja! Wolność, Równość, Demokracja!" My Polish is not that good and it takes a while to understand what the thousands of people marching in front of me are loudly proclaiming. I hear them a bit more. “Freedom, Equality, Democracy,” that is the meaning. Many of them are waving Polish and European flags.

I rush into the street to understand what is going on and I chase a man waving a European flag to ask him some questions. He explains me the reasons of the protest. They are marching against the government and its policy aimed at interfering in the Constitutional Court’s decision.

“So why are you waving a European flag?” I ask.

His answer is significant. "I am not a European federalist, actually. However, this flag is way more than a political entity. This flag is a symbol of freedom and democracy. It represents the European democratic tradition against authoritarianism. A feeling of belonging to the same area of freedom”. Wolność, Równość, Demokracja. I did not ask him his name. He will always be the man waving the European flag in my memories. His Europe is my Europe. A symbol of freedom and equality. A freedom that will lead me to discover three European countries. No matter the differences, no matter the borders. We are free.

Travelling and freedom. These two words will be the core of my journey. Too often, we give for granted the possibility of travelling. We feel entitled to a right that is precious and rare. Especially for my generation, used to live in a free Europe, moving across borders is the most natural fact. Too often, we do not realize the importance of this right and the awful consequence that closed borders entail. This story will try to explore the reality in three countries that have obtained this right only a few years ago and how mobility has changed concretely people’s life.

About Vilnius
Vilnius, July 19, 2017
Vilnius is green. Well, it is also white. The guide of the ‘free tour’ explains that many buildings in Vilnius were designed by the architect Laurynas Gucevičius, following the neoclassical style in vogue.
at the time. Gucevičius can be considered as a pioneer of the Erasmus Program. He was granted a scholarship from the King of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth that allowed him to travel to Rome to study classical architecture. Later, he traveled to Western Europe where he could learn from the most important architects of the time that shaped his neoclassical taste. We do not know much about the Erasmus life of Gucevičius. Surely, we know that he imported the predominant neoclassical style to Lithuania and, therefore, Vilnius, today, still looks a little bit white. Nevertheless, viewing the city from Gediminas Castle the green is striking. Green trees emerge from each roof. The hill behind me is green. The lawn along the river Neris is green and so is its reflection on the windows of the modern skyscrapers that surround the historical center, on the other side of the old castle. Green is the Republic of Užupis and its gardens. Yes, there is an independent Republic in Vilnius but you need to wait to know more about it.

The guide is telling us the history of Lithuania. Few people know but when Lithuania was unified with Poland, it was one of the biggest countries in Europe, running from the Baltic coasts to the Black Sea. Then the Russians came. Lithuania does not share the same history of Latvia and Estonia. It is mainly a Roman-Catholic country and, during the Russian domination, it was part of a different governorate. However, after a short, ephemeral period of independence during the interwar period, the three Baltic States were united in the same fate and became part of the USSR. Getting rid of the Soviet yoke represented a turning point in their history and an opportunity to re-join Europe.

“Since 1991, we are trying to catch up with the Western World,” the guide says.

This feeling of having been left behind during the Communist era is common in all the countries that were part of the Warsaw Pact. It is the same feeling that the man waving the European flag described.

“We feel Europeans. We were just kidnapped for 50 years and now we want to fight for keeping our freedom.”

The possibility of moving freely within Europe is the most visible part.

Senamiestis means old town. This part of the city in Vilnius is characterized by a maze of narrow streets where you can easily and pleasantly get lost. Different architectural styles stand side by side. The medieval atmosphere that pervades the small alleys fades when massive gothic churches appear behind the corner. Elaborate baroque buildings resemble Mediterranean towns. And, of course, sometimes you can encounter Neoclassical edifices that our friend Gucevičius left us as a legacy. The Vilna Jewish Ghetto stands in the heart of the Old Town. Today, the Ghetto is easily recognizable because an empty space has replaced the buildings and the narrow alleys of the Old Town. Everything was destroyed during the war and its inhabitants were exterminated. The wounds of the war and of the Holocaust are still visible in this void left in the heart of Vilnius and remind the atrocities occurred.

Vokiečių Gatvė is an elegant boulevard that was used by the Nazi to divide the Ghetto into two parts to better control the Jews. Ironically, in Lithuanian Vokiečių means ‘German’ and, today, next to the Lithuanian road sign, a plaque installed here reads “Deutsche Straße.” A sign that the divisions that the war caused within Europe have been overcome. Vokiečių Gatvė has become, today, one of the main touristic attraction in Vilnius. However, I am here for another reason. The Institute of International Relations and Political Science of the University of Vilnius is located exactly on this street and I have to meet Professor Inga Vinogradnaitė to discuss the impact of EU integration on Lithuania.

It is my first meeting with an academic during this trip and I am pretty excited. Travelling is curiosity. Travelling with a purpose of research is like a treasure hunt. I have studied a lot about EU integration in Central Eastern Europe but I do not know much about Lithuanian politics and society. I never organized this kind of interview and even she looks a bit disoriented about what actually I want to know. My hunt has just started, how would I know?

“Even in Lithuania, there is this feeling of belonging to a European cultural area. The importance of the Russian influence is diminishing but Lithuania still needs to reorient its interests,” she breaks the ice after formal introductions. “In Lithuania, Eurosceptic parties are still weak but there is an
effort to mobilize them. Especially with regard to the Euro. There is a certain feeling of losing sovereignty after 50 years of Soviet domination.”

“Nevertheless, I can see that Lithuanian economy is growing since the country has joined the European Union,” I point out.

“Sure. In general, there is a positive feeling toward the EU. And yet, it is hard to measure who is actually gaining from EU integration.”

“Well, talking about the actual topic of my research. Can we say that, at least, opening borders brought advantages to the Central-Eastern Europe Countries?” I ask.

“That’s a perfect example. How can you measure that? It really depends on different generations and different social classes,” she answers. “Obviously, if you ask a student in Vilnius they are happy they can travel freely in Europe. However, try to go to a small village in a rural area. Do they care about open borders?”

The conversation goes on about politics in Lithuania but I got what I needed, that is a general overview about Lithuania. However, the last question gave me a lead to follow for my treasure hunt.

Do EU integration and open borders have an impact outside the big capitals? This is what I will have to find out.

Vilnius, July 20, 2017

I am not a huge fan of skyscrapers and modern buildings but I must say that Šnipiškės, the New City Centre of Vilnius, perfectly fits in the context of the Lithuanian capital city. It lays on the bank of the river Neris opposite to the historical center and it looks like a new kind of walls around the old city. My quest for understanding whether mobility has also an impact on local communities needs to start from the most evident sign of EU integration and the modernity that it brought. At the 24th floor of the Europa Tower, the tallest skyscraper of the Baltic States built to celebrate EU membership, there is the joint technical secretariat of the Interreg V-A Latvia – Lithuania Cross Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020. Living in Central Europe for some years has diluted some of my Italian features and, surprisingly, I am there on time to meet Ms. Inga Ringailaitė, the information and projects manager of the Lithuanian branch office of the LatLit Programme. This time, I have clearer ideas about what I need to know and the LatLit Programme is an excellent example of the importance of promoting cross border cooperation to help people concretely.

Ms. Ringailaitė welcomes me warmly with a wide smile and leads me to an empty room. Windows act as walls of the room. The skyscraper itself is made of glass. From this empty conference room, I can see the cathedral of Vilnius. Somehow, this should give a feeling of transparency. Ms. Ringailaitė is willing to help me, and she gives me an overview of this EU funded Programme. The LatLit Programme aims at contributing to the sustainable and cohesive socio-economic development of border regions in Latvia and Lithuania. By doing so, the European Union funds public institutions or NGOs that are willing to develop projects aimed at attaining the Programme goals.

My academic background obliges me to give some numbers about the Programme. The total funding for the 2014-2020 period is €51.6 million provided by the ERDF and equally shared between Latvian and Lithuanian partners. The partners are public institutions or NGOs that need to be based in cross border regions. In the previous cycle (2007-2013), more than 100 projects were implemented.

“Look, 2,300 people improved their skills to compete in the labor market. 6,000 people were trained. We improved communications between harbors. I think these are impressive numbers aren’t they?” she states proudly, listing all the achievements of the Programme.

The Programme sets four priorities: It aims at promoting sustainable and clean environment through cooperation, supporting labour mobility, facilitating social inclusion and territorial development, and improving the quality of living through efficient public services.

“Each project needs to fall under one of these priorities,” she explains.

“How would that promote mobility in practice?” I ask. The Programme sounds great but I do not really understand how it facilitates people to mobilize. Except for the fact that those institutions receive a lot of EU money, of course.
“Partners from different countries have to work jointly. There are exchanges of information, joint training, and common activities. For instance, promoting tourism in a cross border area means that Latvian and Lithuanian partners need to deal as it was a single region.”

The concept is still fuzzy. However, I understand that, by pumping money into the market in those regions whose economy did not fully enjoy the advantages of the transition, the LatLit Programme aims at creating more job opportunities and improving the economic situation of rural areas. What is not clear is how that has something to do with mobility.

“Of course, funding these projects means more opportunity for people living in these areas. Where is the cooperation between Latvia and Lithuania though?”

“I will make some call,” she says with her wide grin. “You definitely need to visit one of these projects.”

I am ready to leave Vilnius and explore the rest of Lithuania. From the last floor of the skyscraper, I can enjoy a view of the entire city. This is not a typical spot for tourists. My hunt led me to an unexpected place and I can just admire the green and white profile of the trees and the buildings of Vilnius.

Vilnius, July 21, 2017

I am still in Vilnius. I promised to tell more about an independent Republic within the city so here I am. On the other side of the Vilnia River, there is the scenic neighborhood of Užupis. During the Soviet times, Užupis was one of the most neglected and deprived areas of Vilnius. Many buildings were abandoned and the suburb was characterized by criminality and poverty. As a typical Bohemian neighborhood, Užupis started to attract artists looking for a cheap place to stay. Slowly, Užupis was transformed from a poor neighborhood into a creative and artistic area. However, what makes Užupis special is the bizarre idea of the poet, musician, and film director Romas Lileikis that, in 1997, declared Užupis independent. Along with other people living in the neighborhood, Lileikis provided the new state with its own president (Lileikis himself), flag, Constitution, Parliament, and even a small army. Obviously, Užupis’ people did not want to fight against Lithuania. The new Republic aimed at promoting art, creativity, tolerance and, social and artistic activities. Its values are stated in the forty-one articles of its Constitution, which is affixed to a wall in Paupio Street in several languages.

Some articles sound like a joke (article 1 reads “Vilnia River has the right to flow”), other articles entitle animals of rights and duties (article 13 says “A cat is not obliged to love its owner, but must help in time of need”). However, many articles invite people to enjoy small things and to live in a more spontaneous way. Rather than a hippie manifesto that seeks to liberalize any behavior and action, the Constitution is an encouragement to the people of Užupis to not take life too seriously and to live according to their feelings (articles 16 and 17 read “Everyone has the right to be happy” and “Everyone has the right to be unhappy”).

Some compared Užupis to the district of Christiania, in Copenhagen. Nevertheless, the differences between the two independent neighborhoods are striking. While Christiania keeps its hippie and anarchist atmosphere, including an active market for marijuana, Užupis underwent a gentrification
and, today, it is something in between a community of artists and a place where tourists can take a selfie to post on Instagram. However, Užupis is still an attractive and relaxing place, where the slow flow of the Vilnia is accompanied by the sound of some experimental instruments played by a local musician. Where behind a trendy bar you can find a mermaid. Where Lithuania caught up with the Western world but where, even within a mass society, you still can be yourself. Because in Užupis, as the article 32 says, ‘Everyone is responsible for their freedom’.

About Happiness

Kaunas, July 22, 2017

Artūras the yogi. On this journey, I have decided to travel by hitchhiking. I have read that people, in the Baltic Countries, try and help hitchhikers and, as a legacy of the past, hitchhiking is quite usual. It takes a while to reach the highway to Kaunas. My ‘hitchhiker’s guide’ suggests me to cross the highway to get to the best spot but, once there, I assume it is a little bit dangerous (crossing a highway???) so I decide to go around and find the closest bridge. It is an extremely hot day and, after thirty minutes of walk, I arrive at the café where it is supposed to be easy to get a ride. Luckily, I do not need to wait much before the first car stops.

“Hi, I am Artūras. I am a yogi.”

“Are you a bear?” I timidly ask.

“No, I am a yogi.” I keep staring at him doubtfully. “I teach yoga.”

Artūras is a Russian born in Lithuania and wears a light scarf that gives him the appearance of an artist. He would be a perfect inhabitant of Užupis.

“I am a yogi and that’s awful, it’s like a drug. Once you start to practice yoga you get to know yourself so deeply that you’ll understand that we, as human beings, are horrible people and it is impossible to change.” It is going to be an interesting ride.

I explain to him why I am travelling in the Baltic Countries. The conversation turns into politics quickly.

“Since we have the euro, the economy is going bad. Prices are just getting higher and higher,” he complains.

“I am not an expert in economy, it’s hard to judge. I can see that Lithuania looks like a growing country,” I argue.

“It’s hard to say who is actually growing.”

“Well, talking about the topic of my research. At least mobility has been useful to Lithuanian people.”

“I don’t know. I don’t even like travelling too much.” Politics is not our common field.

What I like about hitchhiking is that if someone stops most of the time he is an interesting person. Artūras shares his wisdom with me and tells me that if he could come back in time, he would have done everything for his daughter. What children need is their parents’ happiness, not money. He took some choices that did not make him happy and compromised his relationship with her. Happiness is your children’s happiness. I will take note for the future.

We keep talking about our lives. He was married thrice and, finally, he understood that people should spend their life with someone that speak your own mother tongue. After two Lithuanian women, his third partner is a Russian girl, from Israel that lives in Thailand. The airport of Vilnius is closed so he is going to Kaunas to pick her up.

“Isn’t it complicated to have a relationship across two continents? I remember my experiences, awful.”

“I know. We are actually thinking to move together to Barcelona.”

“You see, Artūras. Being free of moving around is not too bad. Even for your personal life,” we smile.

Kaunas is a student city, 100 km west from Vilnius. It is a Saturday so I did not plan any meeting. I can just walk around and visit what this town has to offer. Kaunas is a nice place. The atmosphere
is more relaxed and quieter than Vilnius. Many people enjoy the nice weather walking along Laisves Aleja, a scenic tree-lined avenue that links the Church of Saint Michael the Archangel to the old town. What I notice is that, unlike Vilnius’ buildings that are perfect and clean, this church still needs to be renovated. Investments have not reached Kaunas yet. I notice that people, in Lithuania, are quiet and they always keep their voices low. I happen to enter the Cathedral of Kaunas during a mass. Even here people barely participate and pray. The songs and loud prayers I am used to hearing in Italy are absent here. Lithuania is a silent country.

The Šaltibarščiai I am eating in a restaurant in Donelaičio Gatve is incredibly tasty. I have no idea how to pronounce it but I know it is a shocking pink cold soup based on beets and sour milk. The Cepelinai are potato dumplings named after the Zeppelin airship because of their shape. They are also very good but, served with butter and bacon, they are definitely too heavy for me. Accidentally, I meet in the restaurant Kevin and Dave, two people that I previously met in the hostel and I have dinner with them. Kevin is a Flemish boy that has left his job for traveling around the world with his bike. He started in Asia and, after 8 months, he is almost at the end of his journey. Freedom and happiness, this is what he was looking for. Dave is from Melbourne. He is not traveling. He came to Europe to work here as a massage therapist or something like that.

“Can you work wherever you want in Europe?” I ask remembering how complicated was for me to go to work in Australia.

“Not yet, actually. But I found out I have some ancestors from Italy. I think they were from Piedmont, not sure though. Soon I am going to obtain an Italian passport.” Power of passports.

Dave is always laughing; I can barely take him seriously. Kevin has many nice stories to tell. Definitely, the right people to go around in Kaunas’ night.

Hayk is from Armenia. I meet him in a bar. Researching is useful when you both need info about your hunt and want to meet new people. He tells me why he is in Lithuania and how his life has changed in Kaunas. Hayk comes from South Armenia, not far from the border with Nagorno-Karabakh. He had the opportunity to take part in the Erasmus Program and, for the first time in his life, to go living abroad.

“Erasmus gave me the possibility to fly to another country and it opened my mind. It was just the best experience of my life,” he tells me. “It made me happy.”

As a former Erasmus student myself, I totally understand him. My first stay abroad was with the Erasmus Program in Krakow, Poland. This was an insightful life experience, which was invaluable to my education and personal growth. When I see the excitement in Hayk’s eyes when he talks about the year that he just spent in Kaunas it feels like I am back in time. When the very fact of being in a different country, with people from different cultures, made me happy. When everything was new and fed my curiosity. And, also, I see sadness, as his Erasmus is about to finish.

Since then, I always gave for granted the opportunity of moving around the world. I have lived in four different countries in Europe. I have visited almost every European country and I never thought how to get a visa. Last spring I have decided to go to live in Spain in a week. I booked a flight and I went there. Nothing could stop me. Listening to Hayk’s words, I realize that this right, which I regard
as a natural fact, is precious. He cannot just keep living in Kaunas or move wherever he desires. I feel grateful for having this freedom. Now, I understand what I have read in Užupis: I am responsible for my freedom and I have to preserve it.

About (Ex)Change
Klaipėda, July 24, 2017

Marshrutka, maršrutinis in Lithuanian or maršruts in Latvian, is a minibus that in former USSR countries functions as public transport. What I like about marshrutkas is the people that use them and the absolute anarchy of their routes. In some countries, a marshrutka only leaves when it is full. Sometimes it just goes around picking up people. Once, in Yerevan, Armenia, it took about three hours and an entire tour of the city before filling all the seats and leaving for our destination in South Armenia. I assume there are rules but foreigners are precluded from knowing them. For me, marshrutkas represent the passage from Western Europe to Eastern Europe. From a comfortable way of travelling to a messy one, and yet more genuine.

The people that use them. On the marshrutka Tiraspol-Odessa, I asked to my travel companion, “Where is this humanity going?” What are the stories behind every face? Techno music in the background, passengers packed like sardines unified by the same destination and by the potholes of Ukrainian roads. This is a marshrutka. Stories, memories, faces. I do not know where this humanity is going but every face is a story. The marshrutka is our journey.

Marshrutkas in Klaipėda, a Lithuanian town on the Baltic Sea Coast, are modern and comfortable. Even though it stops wherever people request it to stop, Lithuanian marshrutkas follow a prearranged route. A sign of change. Lithuania is shifting from East to West.

The marshrutka I am in is taking me to Sasha’s house, on the outskirts of Klaipėda. Sasha is a Ukrainian man who is going to host me for three nights in Klaipėda. His wife has to run some errands in the village of Karklė so we have the chance of having a chat on the beach. Finally, I meet the Baltic Sea. Sasha explains to me that he left Ukraine because of the revolution as it created difficulties for his construction business. He visited Europe several times and, finally, he decided to move his company to Lithuania. The reason why he is hosting me and other travelers is the need of practicing English.

“We are expanding our business to other countries too. We built houses in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and we have requests from Ireland too,” he proudly says.

“Can you just go there and work?” I ask. I know Ireland is not part of the Schengen area but I give for granted that I could freely move there.

“Sure, we have a lot of business in Latvia. While working in the UK or Ireland would be more complicated because with my visa I can only work in the Schengen area.”

I am impressed by his initiative. He is only 31 and he has run his company for almost ten years already.

“I am happy to be in Lithuania. I have many opportunities for my business, there is good infrastructure, and I like living by the sea. I like the people too, even though they don’t work as much as the Ukrainians,” he says smiling.

“Don’t you miss Ukraine?”

“Yes, but I can go there quite often. Actually, the visa regime just changed, a month ago. Now, Ukrainians can come to Europe without a visa and that will change things. Especially old people were somewhat scared of requesting a visa for coming to Europe. They don’t really know how this stuff works. Now, it will be easier and that will make easier for me to meet my family and it will improve the lives of thousands of Ukrainians.”

I have lived abroad for many years and I never thought about that. My family visited me several times and I came back to Italy every time I wanted. Again, I took for granted something that is not. Sasha showed me how deeply mobility affected his life. The possibility of moving across Europe is a reward for his entrepreneurial spirit.
Liepāja, July 27, 2017

The club “Fontaine Palace” is an institution in Liepaja. It is actually more than a club. It works as a bar, restaurant, hotel or venue for concerts. In brief, it is the place to be in Liepaja, a town on the Latvian coast. Jānis, a local guy, and I are drinking a beer in Fontaine Palace and we are talking about change. The idea of Janis is clear.

“I don’t want Liepaja to change. I don’t want buildings to be renovated. I don’t want our beaches full of people.”

In fact, my first impression of Latvia, in this case of Liepāja, is that there is a different atmosphere, compared to Lithuania. Now, I understand what Sasha meant when he said that Latvia is not clean. The atmosphere. What I like in Liepāja is its wooden houses next to the harbor, the unpaved streets, its authenticity. I can feel Jānis’ speech and it belongs to me. This town is not to be changed. The charm of immobility rather than mobility. What does mobility mean to me? The possibility of travelling has had a crucial role in my life. My studies, my jobs, even my ex-girlfriends. All of this was given to me by mobility. However, I have lost my roots. When I was living in Poland, I met a man from Lesotho that simply stated, “There is something wrong in this system. People should stay where they belong!” Where do I belong? This is mobility for me. It is opportunities. It is freedom. Exchange, rather than change. Mobility should not mean homogenization. To be considered as a strength, mobility shall not change Liepāja. Opening a border is progress, preserving their own identity is culture. Knowing ‘the other’ is richness.

The Travel School is a project of the Travel Club, a Balkan NGO, that aims at promoting a sustainable way of traveling. Nina, the girl that devised the idea, explains that, at first, they established a Travel House where travelers from all over the world could meet and spend time together. Every summer, the Travel House found its place in a different city. Istanbul, Athens, Tbilisi, and Granada. Finally, they thought to change the concept of the House in something more than a simple meeting place for travelers. Rather than a house, it would have been a school for travelers where volunteers could offer workshops to the guests. Through a mutual friend, Nina and her friends got in touch with an NGO from Portugal and they worked to a common project. The project aimed at promoting an intercultural and educational experience for young people and it was approved and funded as an Erasmus+ Programme. Last year, the Travel School was settled in Aveiro, Portugal, and it hosted more than 80 travelers from 25 different countries.

This year, following the same scheme, the Travel House takes place in Liepāja and I am their guest. Nina told me more about the purpose and the functioning of the Travel School. When the Travel Club was founded in 2005, their goal was to teach people how to overcome the problems that made almost impossible to travel for the people of former Yugoslavia, such as great poverty and the prohibitive visa regimes. The mission of the Travel Club was to teach people how to get out of the cultural isolation that the war had brought and remove the obstacles that prevent them from traveling. As the political situation in the Balkans improved, they expanded the concept of the Travel Club to the rest of Europe.
“Our mission is to help our guests to travel, to move, to meet new people. Most importantly, we want them to exit their comfort zone by creating a multicultural community. We want to build a global travel culture – a culture of solidarity and understanding of this planet we all share.”

Talking with the inhabitants of the School I am learning the importance of sharing our experiences, comparing our cultures, and meeting new friends. The workshops are more like a mixture of stories of people that have travelled the world and that know what exchange means. You might think mobility is just moving to work in another country. However, this is mobility too. We can break down the cultural barriers that keep people apart and get richer.

About Love

On my way to Riga, July 29, 2017

It is my lucky day. On the road that links Liepāja to Riga, I only need one minute before the first car stops. Dalius is a musician from Lithuania and he lives with her Swiss wife Kathrin in Switzerland.

“Come on in! We are also travelers!” she shouts at me. I did not expect to get a ride so quickly. Their story is a beautiful example of a love made possible by open borders. Right before leaving Denmark and going back to Lithuania because he lost his job, Dalius decides to go to a jazz bar. That night, Kathrin is in Copenhagen on holiday and she goes to the same bar where they met. After a week, Kathrin has to go back home.

“In that moment, I realized that I was blessed not to have a job anymore. I could just go with her to Switzerland,” Dalius tells me. “I am so glad that I had this chance and I was free to take it.”

Since then, they are together and they live and work in Switzerland. Dalius has lived in Italy for a while and he fell in love with some Italian traditions. He decides to have a break.

“I know you miss it,” he tells me pulling out a camping stove and a moka pot. Finally, in the middle of a Latvian forest, I can have my short espresso.

About Cooperation

Riga, July 31, 2017

Some days ago, Ms. Ringailaite gave me the contact of Natalja Sterhova, the responsible of a cross border project. The project involves six partners from Latvia and Lithuania, including the Latvia University of Agriculture of Jelgava where Ms. Sterhova works. Luckily, Ms. Sterhova is in Riga today so it is easier for me to meet her. It is a sunny day in Riga and we go for a coffee in the Dome Square of the Latvian capital city. The Old Town of Riga (Vecrīga) is incredibly beautiful. The medieval profile of Riga has been well preserved and reflects the richness of the city when it was part of the Hanseatic League. As one of the main port city of the region, the history of Riga is the history of a city that found its prosperity in trade and commercial activities. Due to its history, Riga is also one of the Latvian cities with the highest concentration of Russian people (about 40%). Although there are still barriers between the two main ethnic groups in Latvia, the coexistence between Russians and Latvians is peaceful.

From her surname and her accent, I can guess Ms. Sterhova is Russian too.

“The idea of the project is to help young people studying in the partner universities to start a new business,” she introduces the project ‘Ready for Business’. “In particular, we want to show that it is possible to run an enterprise in both countries.”

I have already visited two LatLit projects in Klaipėda and Liepāja but I am still interested in how this exchange works.

“I understand what the project aims to teach. Does it implicate mobility?” I ask.

“That’s the most significant part and what I like the most for our students,” she answers. My curiosity is stimulated and I feel my treasure hunt is moving forward. “We organize simulation games where students from each university meet and try to solve a simulated business situation. Of course, it is not real but they can see how it looks like to work in another country and they need to find a solution to a set of tasks. In addition, we offer joint seminars conducted by businessmen of the region.
I believe they can provide ideas to our students and inspire them. The EU funds are fundamental otherwise we would not be able to organize these exchange events and the seminars."

“How does it help the students in practice? What is the goal of the project?” I ask.

“I think that new ideas bring new possibilities. Especially in this field, it is important for them to go visit another region, see how it works and be inspired. So they will be prepared to enter the market of another country. Latvia and Lithuania are small countries so they need to expand their horizons. We want to enrich our students’ formation by showing them the importance of mobility and the possibilities of developing a business in both countries."

Before leaving, she asks me to take a picture. She is happy I am interested in the project and she is proud of what they are doing for helping students’ life. I do not have much time to think about the implications of the project. My train is leaving and I have to run. Three days in the city were enough. I need to enjoy Latvian nature.

Cēsis, August 1, 2017

Kunterbunti is the name of the farm of Bruno and Ilze. Bruno is German and he moved to the small Latvian town of Cēsis almost ten years ago. Here, he met Ilze and they married. Artūras would not agree but these multilingual relationships seem to be working quite good. They will host me for two days in Kunterbunti, in what they call ‘The Presidential Suite’, which is actually an old barn. I do not mind and, actually, sleeping in such a calm place, in a silence broken only by the rustle of the breeze that filters through the wooden beams, gives a nice feeling. Waking up in nature, touching the grass, smelling the sun. Ilze gives me a ride to a nearby lake. Even though it is August, summer has not visited Latvia yet. It is starting to rain and it is quite cold. Yet, I never had a bath in a lake and, after some moment of hesitation, I jump in the water. Well, to be honest, I slowly enter the cold water, terrified by the possibility of freezing. However, the cold water and the rain falling from the sky make me feel awake. I have grown up in a big city and nature has always been something out of my world, something far from my daily life. Now, I feel its call. I take a walk in the bog around the lake with bare feet. I like feeling the soft wetland soil under my feet. I am used to the asphalt of my city. Finally, I feel as part of this nature.

Back in the farm, Bruno and Ilze have organized a barbecue. They tell me that three more couchsurfers are coming. First Coincidence. The three guests are three girls that were among the organizers of the Travel School. The world is small. Second coincidence. Alise, Ilze’s best friend, has joined us for the barbecue. Talking with her, I find out that she is responsible for a cross border project between Latvia and Estonia. It is part of the EstLat Programme, which is clearly the Estonian-Latvian
version of the LatLit Programme. Goals and functioning are pretty much the same of the LatLit Programme so I can focus on her project.

“I am sorry you have to talk about work here but I feel lucky and I can’t stop my hunt,” I apologize.

Alise works for the Vidzeme Tourist Association, the project lead partner of the Green Railway Project. The aim of the project is to create a new non-motorized tourism route for both locals and visitors, using old narrow-gauge railway causeways in South-Estonia and North-Latvia.

“By creating Green Railway tourism routes we create a trail, that can bring additional development potential to local regions,” she explains to me.

Finally, I can have a direct understanding of the example that Ms. Ringailaitė gave me in Vilnius.

“Why is important to cooperate? Couldn’t you just promote tourism in your region?” I ask.

“I understand what you mean and, in fact, there is not a direct advantage. It is just normal for us working with the Estonians. As we are part of the EU, we consider borders as non-existing. So we can easily learn from each other and we can understand our shortcomings.”

Suddenly, what she is saying has become more interesting than the vegan burgers that one of the girls has prepared.

“We can really see the importance of open borders by seeing how easy is to cooperate with foreigner partners. The very idea of green railways came up by communicating with each other. We proposed this kind of active tourism to Estonia and now it is actually working. They did not have green railways before. The other side of the coin is our cooperation with Russia. There are many possibilities of developing green railways and touristic routes between Latvia and Russia and we look forward to cooperating with them. However, it is way more complicated and I don’t know when it will be possible. Let me eat now,” she concludes laughing.

We continue our barbecue sharing stories and telling jokes around the fire. Then, when our bellies are full and Kunterbunti is silent, we walk slowly to our Presidential Suite.

Some considerations about these projects: What that professor told me in Vilnius is somewhat right. Not everyone can see the importance of open borders. However, the cooperation between people from different states has a strong impact on the economy of the area that, sometimes, people hardly recognize. Maybe, in the future, a Latvian former student from Jelgava will be able to run a company in that region employing a Lithuanian from Siauliai. Maybe, an Estonian family will get a living from a hotel that will host bikers that wanted to spend their holidays along the green railways. All these stories will be possible because cooperation makes them possible. ‘Open borders’ does not only mean to have the opportunity to cross a border without a visa. ‘Open borders’ means also that we get richer by having the opportunity of cooperating.

About Borders
Valga/Valka, August 3, 2017

I am having lunch in ‘Jumis’, a restaurant in the Latvian side of Valka. It reminds me a Polish bar mleczny, literally ‘milk bar’. Actually, this place looks much cleaner, just to give an idea of what some bar mleczny are. My solyanka soup is good though. Valka, in Latvian, or Valga, in Estonian, is a border town split between Latvia and Estonia. The concept of ‘border’ in this town is very blurred.

“I just need to go to Estonia to buy some milk because it’s cheaper there,” Mara, my Latvian host, told me this morning. Meanwhile, a large amount of cheap beer goes the other way around. Just next to the border, there is a huge liquor store where Finns and Estonians buy their supplies of alcohol.

Between 1990 and 2007, there was a real border in Valka/Valga. Then Latvia and Estonia joined the Schengen area. Today, a border would be unthinkable. To go to the other side of the town people needed to wait up to one hour. And one hour to go back. Some couples had tremendous problems just to meet.

Mara’s husband, a robust Danish man, says that restoring the border would be catastrophic for his firm and for the economy of the twin towns. He employs some Estonians in his large-scale farm and
there are many Latvians working on the other side. Mara tells me that, next year, it will be inaugurated a new city centre in the border area so that it will belong to both states.

“Finally, on New Years’ Eve, we’ll have only one firework display in the main Latvian/Estonian square. Every year, we never know which one is going to be the best and we always pick the wrong one,” she says. Matter of priorities.

I have found out that even the new city centre is an EstLat project and 3 million euros has been allocated for building it. Unfortunately, the responsible of the project is not in town. However, I do not need to know more about it to understand the importance of open borders here. The feeling that the open border between Valka and Valga has changed people’s lives is everywhere.

_Narva, August 07, 2017_

300 km northeast of Valga there is Narva, a small city on the border with Russia. Like Valga, Narva is a border city next to the Russian Ivangoord. Unlike Valga, the two towns are separated and people need a visa to cross the bridge that links them. Some observers consider Narva as a possible ‘New Crimea’. In fact, about 90% of its inhabitants are Russians. This morning, Ilya, a Russian guy with Estonian citizenship, gave me a ride from Jõhvi to Narva and we discussed the situation in Narva. Even though his mother tongue is Russian, he has been to Ivangoord only few times.

"I am Russian but I have spent my whole life in Estonia,” he explained. “This border just fosters smuggling of cigarettes and other goods.”

“Is there, in Narva, a secessionist movement? Don’t people want to join Russia?” I asked him.

“Most of the people are Russian and some don’t even speak Estonian. However, I am happy to hold an Estonian passport. It gives me many more opportunities and I can freely move around Europe.”

Walking in Narva gives me a different feeling, compared to Valga. The two castles on both the banks of the river are amazing and they stare at each other like two soldiers, ready to protect their town. Whom do they need to protect from?

The view of the river is stunning but the fact that I do not have a visa for entering Russia makes me feel confined. From the map, I can see there are many bridges between Narva and Ivangoord. I walk south. I have never been to Russia and my curiosity pushes me to look closer.
I walk about one hour but I cannot even get close to the river. Walls, closed gates, and barbed wires prevent me from going any further. All the other bridges are closed. Finally, I arrive at the Narva Reservoir and I cannot walk more. The golden onion domes of an Orthodox church reminds me that the other side is Russia. So close, so distant.

A world without borders is unthinkable. I believe that it is not even a matter of economy. It is about culture. Thinking about what Jānis said, some things shall not change. I would not even call it nationalism. Rather than nationalism, I would say that it is an attempt to preserve his traditions. A refuse of the change. Because ‘Jumis’ is a nicer place than a chain of fast foods. Nevertheless, refusing the change does not mean refusing the progress. ‘Opening borders’ means progress, in its very meaning. ‘Progress’ means moving forward. The example of Narva and Valga made me understand it clearly. In Narva, I felt confined as if the difficulty of any exchange between Narva and Ivangorod is hindering their growth. In Valka, removing the border meant a new era for the two towns that made everyone richer. In Valka/Valga, I found my treasure.

About the Sea
Viinistu, August 8, 2017

Viinistu is a small village on the Pärissqa Peninsula on the coast of the Gulf of Finland. The sea is all around. The Baltic Sea is the common element of the three Baltic Countries and, as it shapes the daily life of the few inhabitants of Viinistu, it has always played a crucial role in the history of the three states. On this rock, the northernmost point of Estonia, I can think about what the sea means to them and what it means to me.

Some days ago, I have visited two more LatLit projects at the Lithuanian Maritime Academy of Klaipėda and at the Liepāja Marine College. The functioning of these projects should be clear already. Both schools aim at educating professionals in the maritime field. Because of the geographic position of the Baltic States, this sector is fundamental. At the Lithuanian Maritime Academy, Inga explained to me how useful the project is.

“In terms of equipment, knowledge, and education this project is fundamental. Some of our teachers went to Cyprus a few weeks ago and they could upgrade their knowledge. We have a new library and new equipment and, cooperating with other institutions from Latvia, everyone can enjoy these facilities. That would be hardly possible without this cross border project.”

In Liepāja, Jekaterina explained me the importance of the project for her institution. Thanks to the project, students from both universities can share the equipment needed that would otherwise be too expensive. She showed me the maritime simulator that was bought with EU funds.

“Students and teachers from Klaipėda can come here and use the bridge. And our staff can go there and use their equipment. And this is just about practical gains.” She said.

“What else do you obtain from the project?”

“Our students can understand the importance of mobility. As they will probably work with an international crew, mobility will prepare them. Similarly, our teachers that can go abroad can deal with other students and improve their teaching skills. Mobility does not only give practical gains and more job opportunities. Mobility changes people.”

On this rock, in the deep North of Estonia, I think about my journey and about the sea. Mobility changes people. Mobility changed me. From this rock, I can observe the island of Mohni. Today, I was lucky and I got a ride on a small boat to Mohni. I am one of the few tourists that had the chance to go there and enjoy its uncontaminated nature. Now, only the guardian of the island and his wife are there and from here, I can observe them. From here, I contemplate the calm of the Baltic Sea. Its color, white and blue. The hazy sky of the north. This is beauty. Looking at the sea is beautiful. What I like the most is the limit posed by the sea, rather than the sea itself. I like walking until the very end of the earth. Here, I have to stop. I cannot go further. Ending my journey at the extreme of the earth...
makes me feel calm and peaceful. I cannot keep traveling. I cannot keep wandering. My twofold soul, restless and calm, finds a balance. The sea is the only border I cannot cross.