Final Nominations for Bulgarian Fulbright Grantees in AY 2012-2013

The following candidates for Fulbright scholarships and Civil Society Scholarship in AY 2012-2013 were nominated by the Commission Board:

**Senior Scholars**

**Principal candidates:**
1. Snezhina Dimitrova – phonology/Bulgarian civilization and language
2. Reneta Bozhankova – e-literature and e-publishing
3. Irena Atanassova – chemistry
4. Yantsislav Yanakiev – sociology
5. Dobrinka Georgieva – logopedics

**Alternate candidates:**
1. Ivelin Sardamov – political science
2. Ivan Tchalakov – sociology

**Research Scholarship for the Study of Civil Society**

**Principal candidate:**
1. Daniel Vankov – road safety

**Alternate candidate:**
1. Lyubomir Lyubomirov – journalism

**Graduate Students – Degree Programs**

**Principal candidates:**
1. Georgui Yankov – organizational psychology (Fulbright-Thanks to Scandinavia Grant)
2. Antoaneta Assenova – law
3. Veselka Petrova – law
4. Nurhan Redzheb – urban design
5. Boryana Djambazova – journalism

**Alternate candidates:**
1. Svetoslav Dimitrov – law
2. Eduard Sariev – business administration
3. Valentin Kambitov – finance

**Fulbright-Oklahoma Grant**

**Principal candidate:**
1. Boryana Balkanska – business administration

**Non-Degree Grants for Doctoral Students**

**Principal candidate:**
1. Milena Mihailova – business management

**Alternate candidate:**
1. Shaban Darakchi – gender studies
2. Sonya Georgieva – folk singing
During the twelfth annual International Education Week in Bulgaria (November 14-18, 2011) a number of useful activities were carried out attracting the attention of students, professors, high-school teachers, educators, professionals and parents. The Executive Director Dr. Julia Stefanova, the educational adviser Snezhana Teneva and other staff members visited 20 high schools hosting ETAs giving presentations and engaging in productive discussions about educational opportunities in the US with over 1100 high school students, including teachers and administrators.

Over 3900 students and professionals visited the Fulbright stand at the JobTiger 2011 National Career Days, the Technical University of Sofia Career Days and the Education Beyond Borders International Education Fair in Sofia.

During and around the IEW, the Fulbright advising centre in Sofia was visited by representatives of three US institutions of higher education: Stanford University, CA; St. John’s University, NY and Wellesley College, MA. They presented their institutions, the undergraduate application process and the opportunities for international students at American liberal arts & sciences colleges at the Fulbright Advising Center, the National Math & Science High School in Sofia, the Sofia High School of Mathematics, and the 1st English Language High School in Sofia.

To sum up, over 5000 individuals and representatives of institutions interested in international education and exchange activities attended 2011 IEW events and learned about study opportunities in the United States.

Visits of Fulbright Commission Staff Members to English Language Schools Hosting ETAs
Official Launch of 2013-2014 Fulbright Grants Competition

Presentation of EducationUSA adviser Snezhana Teneva at the JobTiger 2011 National Career Days in Sofia
Outreach to Pazardzhik

Pathways Center for Education and Entrepreneurship

Foreign Language School

High School of Economics

High School of Mathematics

Participation in International and National Education Fairs

JobTiger 2011 National Career Days, Sofia

Education Beyond Borders International Education Fair, Sofia
U.S. University Visits to Bulgaria

St. John’s University at the Fulbright Advising Center

Stanford University and Wellesley College at the Fulbright Advising Center

Stanford University and Wellesley College at the National Math & Science High School in Sofia

Stanford University and Wellesley College at the Sofia High School of Mathematics

FULBRIGHT

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On December 16, 2011, the Fulbright Commission staff organized a meeting with U.S. grantees to discuss the progress of their projects in Bulgaria.

US scholars and graduate students presented their teaching or research projects, covering a wide range of topics: creative writing and historical novel research, creativity and entrepreneurship in business, Bulgarian folk music, screenwriting for documentary movies, and contemporary art practices in Eastern Europe.

Twenty Fulbright English teaching assistants based in language schools in Sofia, Pernik, Kurdzhali, Vidin, Vratsa, Pleven, Lovech, Montana, Blagoevgrad, Stara Zagora, Sliven, Bourgas, Varna, Dimitrovgrad, Dobrich, Rousse and Shoumen shared their creative approaches to teaching, professional achievements and outreach to the local community.

Fulbright alumnus Ivo Danchev, recipient of the scholarship for the study of civil society, presented a photo essay of his experience with the Crow tribe in Montana, USA.

The program concluded with a Christmas party at the Fulbright Language Center.

Fulbright Accomplishments
Fulbright Senior Specialist Wins the Fred Conrad Koch Award

Samuel Refetoff, Professor of Medicine and Pediatrics and Director of the Endocrinology Laboratory at the University of Chicago Medical Center has received the 2012 Fred Conrad Koch Award from the Endocrine Society in recognition of exceptional contributions to endocrinology.

In 2011 Prof. Refetoff visited the Medical University of Sofia as a Fulbright Senior Specialist.
On November 9-12 the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission hosted a three-day workshop for Fulbright English teaching assistants based in Central, Northern and Eastern Europe. The workshop was conducted by two regional English language officers and two English language fellows. Participating in the event were 45 ETAs from 8 countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

The workshop focused on teacher training and teaching English as a second language. The cultural program included a bus tour of Sofia and a farewell dinner with a folkstyle program. The seminar was a successful event that allowed young American teachers to improve their professional performance and share their experience with fellow Fulbrighters from across Europe.

Regional European Workshop for English Teaching Assistants
November 9 - 12, 2011, Park Hotel Vitosha, Sofia
Miam was my first stop in the United States. It all started there - on the Atlantic coast in Florida, where the sun was so strong it made me feel like an ice cube, and the sky was so beautiful it looked surreal. According to the American journalist Carlos Miller, Miami got its nickname "because it seemingly became a city overnight without ever being a town" (Miller, n.pag.). For me Miami is a wonderful symbol of the potential for growth that America offers.

Sometimes we can give the exact dimensions of change, and then we feel like we have described it all in a very sensible, conventional way ("Grown-ups like numbers") (Saint-Exupery, p.15). I do not have the tools to measure the transformation that has taken place in my life. I will try to describe it in words and images, and if I do succeed, you will understand why anything can happen here - even if that "anything" is so wonderful that it seems magical.

I went to Miami for a Fulbright Gateway Orientation. There I felt for the first time how special it is to be a Fulbright student in the United States. Fulbright is the entry ticket to a social network that never ceases to develop and flourish. The experience of a Fulbright student in the United States is very different from the experience of a regular international student.

A regular international student usually needs to make an extra effort in order to develop a sense of belonging to a community. A Fulbright student already belongs to the Fulbright community. When you are starting a different life in a new country, the sense of belonging acts as a compass that keeps you from losing your way. Its significance is exceptional.

A regular international student will probably attend the orientation sessions organized by the university. He/she will hear tips on adjustment to a new culture. Fulbright students learn that adjustment is only the first step they need to take. They are in the United States to enjoy the diverse American culture and the beauty of the country, to excel as students and to share their culture with others. A long journey is ahead.

New York City

As I am writing this, I am looking at the ocean and wondering how a single city can offer you a micro version of the world.

Many times I have tried to explain what makes New York unlike any other city on earth. Sometimes I describe images: in bad weather Manhatan looks like a borough made of blue and purple paper, with shadows of grey outlining the silhouettes of buildings; in sunny weather all the colors come to life and call for your attention. New York sounds like jazz, but you can also hear country, oriental rhythms, songs from India and Nepal, dozens of different languages. It smells like caramel nuts, but you can taste Thai food, specialties from the Philippines, Himalayan and Italian cuisine, French fondu. It moves faster than your thoughts, but there are moments when time freezes. You can feel the city breathing, living, running, dancing, making you go out of your skin and become a part of the endless carnival of desires and surprises.

Other times I tell stories. I was going to school, when a mother with her three kids entered the train I was riding on. One of the kids saw a nickel on the ground and picked it up. His sister started crying, yelling that she was the first to see the coin. The boy ignored her and carefully put the coin in his pocket. He had just started climbing up one of the poles, when the train reached its next stop and a group of musicians got in. One of them spoke to the boy: "Go, boy! Do a pull-up! Try a bit harder, you can do it." The boy tried to do a pull-up but failed. The musician said: "It is okay, you were very close, you'll do it next time." They started playing. The boy was looking at them with admiration. He took the nickel out of his pocket and gave it to them. New York is full of inspiring stories.

I remember Mr. Carl De Angelis, a native New Yorker, saying: "New Yorkers are not rude. They just don't have time." This is the most accurate description of New Yorkers I have heard so far.

New Yorkers speak fast, walk fast, eat fast, act fast. They will praise you for your talents before you know it and they will immediately let you know if you are on the wrong track. They will teach you how to be a real New Yorker. "For real New Yorkers the so-called 'Avenue of the Americas' is '6th Avenue'" or "When you're on a train and the voice coming from the loudspeaker advises you to transfer to a different train because this one will be significantly delayed due to traffic, just ignore the message. This is for tourists. Stay on the same train, and it will leave the station in no more than five minutes." They will not, however, take you on a tour around the city. They expect you to be able to find your way, and to explore all the opportunities on your own. You are an independent individual here. Thriving in your own independence, you will be able to achieve a lot. Otherwise, you will soon realize that New York is not the place for you.
I came to New York in August. It was pouring outside. Because of the strong wind, umbrellas are not very useful here. I spent the entire orientation week feeling very cold and very scared. Then my classes started, the sun made its way through the clouds, and I realized that if there was a Wonderland on earth, it was in New York, and if there was a university completely right for me, it was The New School.

The New School is located in the heart of downtown Manhattan, mainly between 5th and 7th Avenue. Its most famous division is Parsons The New School for Design. In addition to Parsons, there are seven more schools: The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music, Mannes College The New School for Music, The New School for Drama, The New School for Social Research, The New School for Continuing Education, Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy, Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts, and The New School for General Studies. The university is a place where musicians, actors, designers, writers, social scientists and business people come together to form a diverse and very creative community. I belong to the group of the filmmakers.

I came to New York to study in the Media Studies and Film program at The New School for General Studies. I was interested in critical thinking and media content analysis. While exploring the amazing resources of the university, I discovered that in my program theory and practice went hand in hand. I was taken over by an intense interest in filmmaking.

Filmmaking is challenging. It requires both creativity and superb management skills. You cannot avoid asking yourself if you have any chance of succeeding in a field where your creativity is put to the test of time and money.

I have a B.A. degree in International Economic Relations. I know how to negotiate, I know how to conclude a deal, I know how to advertise a product. Art is so much more difficult than business. It is impossible to draw the line between personal and professional life. You are what you create. You create what you are. You want it to be meaningful not just to you. You want it to make a difference. Even so, you create what you are. You need to overcome the limitations of your own personality. You need to get out of your skin and to take a different form. It might be the form of someone else, or the form of a country, or the form of a continent, or maybe even the form of the world. You never know if you can succeed. You do not even know what success is.

A week ago I finished my first project in Film Form: a collection of scenes unified by a single mood. With the help of the Bolex camera, film lights, 1 roll of 16 mm film, and a light meter, I managed to create a specific mood. My classmates knew immediately what the project was about, even though there was no narration to it. I had made them feel what I wanted them to feel when watching my collection of scenes. This is one version of success.

The theoretical part of my program very much depends on my own interests. I can choose both my classes and the topics of investigation. So far I have conducted an interview with an Iranian refugee in Bulgaria as a part of my research on “Life in Exile,” and I have developed an extensive plan for a content analysis of the representation of Roma people in Bulgarian newspapers. I am planning to conduct a research on Bulgarian cinema for my thesis, but I still have not managed to specify the topic.

In addition to my studies, I am working as a teaching assistant for a class called “Music, Idealism, and the Multimedia Work of Art.” This is a privilege I truly enjoy. It gives me the chance to see the academic life at The New School from a different perspective. I know what goes on “behind the scenes;” and I know how difficult it is to always keep your audience engaged.

Apart from my program, I am trying to be involved in the community life in NYC. I remember my first community service experience - I went to the Coney Island beach clean-up and spent a day picking up trash. The sun was shining and people from all over the world had come together to work for a cleaner city. We were sharing stories and laughing, and at the end of the day we all enjoyed a special reward - the chance to watch a fascinating indigenous dance on the beach.

Even more interesting was my involvement in the Global Classroom Program. The One to World website describes the concept of the program in the following way: “Global Classroom programs are led by One To World educators and “Global Guides,” trained international college and university students and Fulbright scholars from all world regions who incorporate their unique first-hand perspectives into every Global Classroom session. As role models for recently arrived immigrant students and American-born students alike, Global Guides also inspire and enable teachers to incorporate diverse global perspectives in reaching their curricular goals.” (Global Classroom - What We Do, n.pag.). As part of the program, I developed and presented a workshop on Bulgarian culture in a public school in Brooklyn. For me it was truly fulfilling to watch how eager the kids were to learn more about Bulgarian customs.

I also had the chance to attend a workshop on Intercultural and Inter-religious understanding. One of the seminar sessions was held at The Interchurch Center in Upper West Side - a building that provides office spaces for different religious organizations. It reminded me of the Square of Tolerance in Sofia. Without tolerance, the existence of this fascinating building would not have been possible.

Now I am looking forward to attending a Fulbright Enrichment Seminar on Environmental Issues in April. I know for sure that it is going to be a great experience.

Last night one could see the biggest and brightest moon in 18 years. Manhattan is such a strange borough - you look up at the sky and you see more building tops than stars. I walked alone at night, looking at the sky, trying to see the moon. I was starting to wonder whether I could not see it because of the high buildings or because of a cloudy sky, when I reached the Pier 17 seaport and froze with astonishment. There it was: a huge moon above the lights of the Brooklyn Bridge, bright and intoxicating, and its beautiful reflection in the water, constantly following the waves, constantly changing its form. I spent half an hour standing on the dock, feeling that I was in the right place at the right time, and that there was not a single thing I could change to make the view more perfect.

This image of New York at night and the huge moon shining above it made me think about the beauty that we can create. We have no control over the moon, but that magical city of lights was our creation. It was alive because of all the people who got up every day to make it breathe. It was progressive because independence was a value here, and because people were passionate about their work. It was so fast, because it matched the pace at which New Yorkers lived. It was not the place; it was the manifestation of human grace and dignity that made the city so appealing.

Some people say that New York is not America. I think it is. New York is America not in the sense of being a typical American city, but in the sense of being a magnificent, interesting and always developing place. If you are here, you cannot stay the same. The city will trigger a transformation in your perception of yourself. Your aspirations will grow bigger, and your fears will grow smaller. Welcome to the United States.

Disclaimer: The text is published in its original and unedited version.
On my first day in my new classroom, I asked my students what their regular teachers do. The unanimous response I received? Lecture. While I am not against lecturing and find it quite useful in a variety of situations, I wanted to expose my students to something different and more suited to my own style of teaching. I decided to incorporate student creativity into as many lessons as I could.

I graduated from Luther College with a Bachelor of Arts in history, English, and secondary education, and I have spent four years learning a variety of teaching tools for incorporating creativity into a classroom. More importantly, I have spent four years watching teachers from the perspective of a student, trying to learn what is engaging and what is not, what is conducive to learning and what is not. I do not pretend to be a perfect teacher, and there are days when I feel like my lessons have not worked at all, but I know what worked for me as a student. Further, I know that what worked for me does not work for everyone. I went into this year of teaching looking to design lessons that would allow people to use a variety of skills and be as creative as they were able and willing to be.

I teach three sections of three different grades – ninth, eleventh, and twelfth – once a week. That means I have nine different classes that I see only one time a week, and each grade is working on different tasks. Because the twelfth graders are focused primarily on preparing for their end of year exams, I do the least amount of creative work with them. Instead, we focus on fluent conversation and the ability to focus on a given topic and argue one side of that topic. The ninth and eleventh grades, however, are places where I am able to bring out the innate creativity of my students.

My eleventh graders are focused on American literature in my class. They read excerpts from a variety of texts, and they are responsible for reading one full-length novel as well. But I wanted to present the texts in a way that allowed them to connect with the reading. To do so, I brought in activities that would ask them to interact with the texts in a new way. They read poetry out loud. They acted out scenes from *The Great Gatsby*. They drew pictures of imagist poems. They wrote short stories using the characters from *White Fang*.

At first, I was met by blank stares and reluctant movement. My students did not want to have to participate. They were used to a classroom environment where they could sit still and not have to acknowledge what was going on around them. At the end of the first semester, I asked them to write reviews of the activities we had done so far. Over and over again, I read, “I did not think we could learn from anything but lectures. I did not like the activities at first. But now I know that I can learn from acting, reading out loud, listening to music, and drawing pictures. I really enjoy what we have read in class.” It was a change that I had observed in them myself. They went from reluctant participants to eager ones. By the end of the first semester, they were coming to me with drawings they had done outside of class and wanted to give to me because they were proud of the work that they had done.

Now, they have settled into the second semester, where they will be reading full-length novels in literature circles. As part of the literature circles, they are asked to contribute illustrations, questions, comments, and a number of other responses to the text once a week. At the beginning of the year, they would have rejected this task, but most of them now embrace it as a chance to show off their creativity.

My ninth graders are a slightly different breed from my eleventh graders. Their regular English teacher asked me to work on their conversational skills. Those were my only real instructions. At first, I was a little intimidated by the freedom of my instruction with the ninth grade, but
over time, I have come to relish it. It has allowed me to work with them on a variety of creative projects that give them room to express themselves while learning to use English.

For several weeks, my ninth graders worked on improv theater. I taught them a number of theater games, which we played for weeks. Games like Questions, where students had to speak in only questions, taught them to be faster in their responses in English. By my rules, anyone who hesitated more than thirty seconds was out of the game. By the end of the class period, my students had begun to master the ability to think quickly and respond readily. Although not every single student was able to master every single game, all of them were able to practice their English, and they did it while laughing. Even those students who were waiting for their turn in the game were practicing their English as they translated the words of those onstage in order to understand the progress of the game.

Following a month of improv games, I have recently moved my students towards a more set script. We are working on a game called Twisted Fairytales. Working in groups of four to six, students take a well known fairytale and twist it. While they were given some time in class to prepare, the idea is for the performance to be somewhat improvised. I have been astounded by the outpouring of creativity from my students. They have taken classic fairytales and modernized them, made them funny, and made them their own. From a rendition of "The Three Little Pigs" that involved one of the pigs joining the mafia, a second pig dying of a drug overdose, and the third pig becoming paranoid and locking himself in a highly secure mansion to a version of "Hansel and Gretel" where the Tooth Fairy came to the rescue of the imprisoned children, my students have found countless ways to make me laugh and marvel at the level of their English. Some of my students who are too shy to speak in class have suddenly found their voices through a skit in which they can play a gangster pig.

My style of teaching is messy. It involves a lot of noise, the shuffling of desks, students moving around the room. The actual lesson often starts several minutes late as the first few minutes are consumed in arranging the classroom and students forming into groups. Yes, I have had a number of students use my class as an excuse to read magazines in the back corner while chatting with friends or ask to use the toilet and never return. But that number is surprisingly low, and it is likely that those magazines would be read even if I was lecturing. Being strict and yelling at my students will not change who they are. If they are going to read a magazine in class, they will do it with or without me. But for those who are not reading magazines, I like to believe that I am engaging them in a new kind of learning, one with which they are not familiar. It is a chance for them to express themselves in new ways, and the majority of my students have taken advantage of my style of teaching to gain a new fluency and confidence in the English language.

My colleagues have asked quite a few questions about my teaching methods, and many of them disagree with me completely. I have been told that I need to be harder on my students. I have been told that students should have to respect me as an authority and that I undermine my own authority by allowing them to be loud and expressive. I have had the deputy head of the school stop by my classroom to discipline my students because he heard their noise from the hall and assumed that they were out of control and disrespectful when they were actually just doing as I had told them. While some teachers seem to think I am a little bit crazy and idealistic, other teachers have asked me for more information about what I am doing. I have garnered some genuine interest from teachers who would like to use some of my techniques in their own classroom, and as the year has progressed, more and more teachers have expressed an interest in learning about what I am doing. Once that dialogue began, we were able to participate in an equal exchange of information about our teaching styles and techniques, and while I gave them information about my style of teaching, they also taught me a great deal about theirs as well.

In addition to teaching my classes, I am directing a play this spring, and when I first mentioned the idea of a play to my students, many were apathetic. By the time I held auditions in December, I had a significant number of my own students involved. Many told me that they had never acted before or even been interested in acting, but they loved what we did in class and wanted to see if they would like being in a play. I hope that they walk away with a love of acting and creative expression, but even if they do not, I hope that I have taught all of my students that they can learn in ways other than rote memorization of facts. I do not pretend to have the influence of Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society or even Robin Williams in Good Will Hunting (what can I say, I love Robin Williams), but I know that when I walk away from my year here, I will have made some slight difference in their lives. I have taught them that sometimes, learning is best achieved by playing.

Disclaimer: The text is published in its original and unedited version.
Bulgaria, sad to say, is one of those countries that Americans know nothing about. I would tell my friends where I was moving, and they’d be excited that I was going to be living in South America. No, this is not Bolivia. After I’d explain that Bulgaria was a large country in Eastern Europe, they would ask me why in the world I’d want to live in Eastern Europe. Why not?

The Fulbright was not my first experience in Bulgaria. I arrived in August of 2007 for the first time for a month long course on the Bulgarian language in Veliko Turnovo. I had been studying at Boston College, one of the few universities in the states that offers Bulgarian lessons, and was excited to practice my new language skills in a natural setting. I have to admit that on my first day in VT I was depressed. I was staying in Bulgarian style dorms, with a tiny little bed in a tiny little room, and didn’t know anybody. My classmates from Boston College had gone off to the Black Sea for the weekend, and I felt supremely alone. To keep myself busy, I walked around the old town of VT and quickly fell in love. The city is charming, and a must-see for anyone that comes to Bulgaria. Best of all, the old town does not have any of the horrid communist-style blocks. Before I knew it, I quickly made friends with a group of international students and the Bulgarian organizers of the course. We studied during the day, and enjoyed delicious, and cheap, Bulgarian food at night. My favorite part was learning traditional Bulgarian dance at night. Drinking rakiya, dancing in large circles with friends, trying to adjust to the uneven time of Bulgarian music, and sweating like crazy. What’s not to love?

During this first visit, I also learned a little bit about Bulgarian politics. I especially was interested in one political party: the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. A leftist political party, it mostly represents the interests of the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria. Comprising around 10% of the population, the ethnic Turks have arguably been successfully integrated into Bulgarian politics, and some people have argued that the MRF helped stabilize Bulgaria and protect it from the ethnic violence that took place in other countries in southeastern Europe. I wrote my undergraduate thesis about this party, and its effect on Bulgarian politics. My research in Bulgaria is an extension of this.

I arrived in September, having just spent a year in Korea. In Korean, yes is ‘ne’ and you shake your head up and down. In Bulgarian, ‘ne’ means no, and you also shake your head up and down. When I got to my apartment, my landlady kept asking me if the apartment was fine, and I would just nod my head and say ‘ne’. It took me a couple of minutes to remember that I was no longer in Korea, and was disagreeing with everything my landlady had to say! After ensuring her that I didn’t have any problems, I moved into my new flat and asked myself: what now? I was in a foreign country by myself without a schedule. I didn’t have classes to attend, and I didn’t have any concrete obligations. So I decided to explore Sofia.

The major difference in my experiences this time around in Bulgaria is my location. While I was in VT in 2007, I’m now living in Sofia. The capital is not a very beautiful city. While there are a few attractive buildings, such as Sveta Nedelya and Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the city is full with utilitarian apartment buildings that leave much to be desired. It doesn’t help that a lot of Bulgarians ask me why I’m living here. Young Bulgarians desire to leave the city; this is one of the bigger problems here. The brain drain is going to have a huge effect on the future of the state if it is not addressed.

As time passed, I developed a sort of love/hate relationship with the city. I hate the pollution, I hate the traffic, and I hate the archi-
tecture. But I love a lot of things. I love how close the city is to the Vitoshas, and how easy it is to go skiing in the winter, or hiking in the summer. I love the parks in the city, especially the ones with free wifi, or when they have festivals or free concerts. I love that I can go to a Starbucks in a huge mall if I am missing the states. I love the art galleries, the theater, and street shows. I also get a kick out of the nightlife here, which sometimes is amazing, and sometimes feels like I’ve jumped back into the early 1990s. Finally, I love how all the other charming and interesting cities in Bulgaria are easy to get to from Sofia. To make it even better, other Fulbright scholars and teachers are scattered around these cities, which makes traveling even better.

Plovdiv is perhaps my favorite city in Bulgaria. There is a lot of beautiful architecture from the National Revival, as well as ruins from the Greek and Roman empires. It still is a decently large city, so it has the nightlife of Sofia without the perpetual grey. The Black Sea coast is also beautiful, and I’m excited to go back during the summer and relax on the beach. The smaller villages are also great, and give visitors an idea of what Bulgaria was like during the 20th century. Koprivshtitsa is especially beautiful. It was the center of the April Uprising in 1876, which eventually led to the autonomy of Bulgaria. Various political and artistic figures had their homes in Koprivshtitsa, and these houses have been transformed into museums, giving us an image of how Bulgarians lived a hundred years ago.

I also had the chance to travel around Europe. Istanbul was an exciting destination, only a night-train away from Sofia. Although it is Bulgaria’s next-door neighbor, the food, language, and culture are incredibly different. A group of us also went to Macedonia, and explored Skopje and Ohrid, a beautiful lakeside resort. The language is similar to Bulgarian, which made it an easy vacation. My favorite destination outside of Bulgaria, however, was to Belgium and Luxembourg where I attended a conference on the institutions of EU and NATO. Understanding how these organizations work helped me comprehend Bulgaria’s position in Europe.

One of the best aspects of Bulgaria is its cuisine. Compared to other countries in Eastern Europe, Bulgaria is especially delicious. A typical meal might start with tarator (cold yogurt and cucumber soup), which is followed by a Shopska salata. This salad is typically made with tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers, then topped with a white cheese. You should drink a small glass of rakiya with the salad in typical Bulgarian style. After the salad, you might have Bulgarian barbecue pork meatballs or sausages. Otherwise, there are delicious chicken and vegetarian dishes made in clay pots. If you don’t want to drink rakiya (which is quite strong), Bulgarian wine and beer are also cheap and delicious. Bulgarian cuisine has tons to offer, and most of the time it is delicious.

The people are also warm-hearted and welcoming. Although they do not smile at strangers, and may come off as cold, they are kind and hospitable once you get to know them. Many Bulgarians have helped me with my studies and have become closer as the year has gone by. I now have several good Bulgarian friends that I hang out with during the weekend, and practice my Bulgarian. I will surely miss them next year.

Of course, I have not been solely traveling, eating and making friends. My first plan was to improve my Bulgarian. Luckily, I had a couple of friends in Sofia, and they helped me a bit. The problem is that most young people in Sofia know English, and they want to practice! I spent a lot of time at home memorizing vocabulary and practicing grammar. A little boring, but useful in the long run. I also took a Bulgarian language course in March and greatly improved my grammar and confidence. I also met some other foreigners that are studying Bulgarian, and will continue meeting them in the future.

Studying the language has helped with my research. I have been focusing on reading newspaper articles and translating Bulgarian political articles into English. This work has been slow, but interesting. I’ve attended parliament, but have a hard time understanding what is going on. Luckily, these are also available online, so I have used this resource to further my research. I also have been working on a survey that I will be administering in May. This will help me analyze the MRF from the perspective of the average Bulgarians. The MRF has been particularly interesting this year. The second-in-command, Kasim Dal, resigned from the political party in January. He slammed the MRF and its leader, Ahmed Dogan, of leading the party in an authoritarian manner and Dal’s resignation has created rumors that the party may fracture. How this plays out continues to be important in my research, and hopefully I’ll be able to include it in a final paper on the party.

I have had a mixed experience in Bulgaria. Although I have not been entirely happy with the city of Sofia, in the long run it has been fun and exciting. I have met many interesting people from around the world, and hope that we can stay in touch. My parents will visit in May, and I am excited to show them around the country. The Fulbright has been an enriching experience, and I hope that others will have the opportunity that I had.

Disclaimer: The text is published in its original and unedited version.