

BULGARIA - Geographical and Cultural Aspects

Thanks to the Erasmus + KA 229 project dedicated to students – *Students Actively Learning Entrepreneurial Skills* (Reference No. 2020-1-BE02-KA229-074685_2) I, together with a group of 4 teachers and 7 students of the Bogdan Voda Theoretical High School Hălăucești, had the privilege to carry out the first mobility in Razlog, Bulgaria, between 25th and 29th October 2021.

Bulgaria occupies an eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula, bordering five countries — Greece and Turkey to the south, Macedonia and Serbia to the west, and Romania to the north, and the Black Sea to the east. The total area of the country is 110,994 km², which ranks it 105th in the world, a place where it is also in terms of population (about 7 million in 2020).

Bulgaria has a varied relief, mountainous in the central and south-western part, hilly in the north-east and lowland in the north and south-east. The most notable relief units are *the High Danube Plain, the Balkan Mountains, the Upper Thracian Plain* and *the Rhodope Mountains*. In Bulgaria lies the highest point on the Balkan Peninsula, *Musala Peak* in the Rila Mountains at 2,925 m, and the lowest point in the country is sea level (0 m). The state's climate is dynamic, resulting from the meeting on its territory of Mediterranean and temperate-continental influences. The country has a dense network of about 540 rivers, many of which are relatively short and with low flows. *The Danube River* borders Romania in the north for 470 km and the longest river in its entirety on Bulgarian territory, *the Iskar*, is 368 km long. Other major rivers include the Struma and the Marița in the south. South of the capital, at *Sapareva Banja*, there are Europe's hottest thermal springs (104⁰ C) and a geyser, which spews columns of steam and hot water up to 7 m high.



Physical map of Bulgaria and location of Razlog city

We spent most of our time in the city of our partners, **Razlog**, located in the valley of the same name in south western Bulgaria, in the province of Blagoevgrad, 150 km from the capital Sofia. The positioning of the city between the Rila Mountains to the north and northwest,

the Pirin Mountains to the south and southwest and the Rhodope Mountains to the east made us liken it to the city of Brasov, giving us a sense of familiarity and delighting our eyes with the snow-capped peaks wherever we were.

Until 1925 the town was called Mehomia, and was first mentioned by this name during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II (b. 958 - d. 1025). Among the more recent historical events it should be mentioned that during the Second Balkan War (1913) the area around Razlog was a main battlefield between the Bulgarian and Greek armies. The town was captured by the Greek army on 9th July, recaptured by the Bulgarians on 17th July and then recaptured by the Greek army on 18th July 1913. After the ensuing peace treaty, Razlog was ceded back to Bulgaria.

Today Razlog, together with the neighbouring town of Bansko, only 6 km away, has developed into an important centre of winter sports tourism due to its geographical position. The municipality of Razlog comprises several villages (Banya, Gorno Draglishte, Dolno Draglishte, Dobarsko, Bachevo, Godlevo and Eleshnitsa) with a total population of 20,410 inhabitants, each village having its own charm.

In order to enjoy the wonderful view over Razlog, our partners organized, on one of the days, a hike on Golak Mountain, a place visited by both locals and tourists eager to walk and relax. The trail with more than 600 steps is equipped with 54 resting places and 30 observation points, swings and wooden deckchairs that make the place even more attractive. A metal tower 12 meters high is built at the top of the mountain, providing a wide view of the valley and the city of Razlog.



The Metal Tower on Mount Golak



View of Razlog from Mount Golak

We were pleasantly surprised to learn from our discussions with our Bulgarian colleagues that the municipality of Razlog and the Razlog Valley have a rich heritage of cultural monuments from different eras and civilizations. Among these monuments can be listed the

Christian temples “St. Georgi Pobedonoset”- built in 1834 in Razlog; “St. Georgii”- built in 1834 in the village of Banya; “Uspenie Bogorodichno”- built in 1835 in the village of Dolno Draglishte; in the village of Dobarsko there are the temples “Sretenie Gospodne”- built in 1860 and “St. Georgi Pobedonoset”- built in 1834 in the village of Razlog. Theodore Tiron and Theodore Stratilat” - built in 1614, with unique wall paintings and a cultural monument under UNESCO protection.

There are also 70 houses in the municipality of Razlog which are declared archaeological monuments. Activities on Tuesday 26th October included a visit to one such house in the village of Banya, where children learnt how to make bracelets from coloured yarn and tried out Bulgarian folk costumes. These costumes are an intrinsic part of Bulgarian lifestyle and culture. The basic item of clothing is a white shirt with long sleeves, worn under vests and coats of various shapes, materials and decorations. There are four types of women’s national costume: the single apron, the double apron, the tunic and the sarafan. The delight of this visit, however, was the preparation and tasting of a specific Bulgarian culinary product – *banitsa*. This is bread made only from flour, water and salt that is usually prepared for the winter holidays and is rolled in a spiral.



Due to its age, Razlog is a city with rich cultural traditions and customs preserved over centuries that reflect the spirit of original Bulgarian values. Two of the most significant folklore events in Bulgaria are held in Razlog: *the Kukeri New Year Carnival* and the folk art festival, “*Songs of the Pirin*”.

Kukers are Bulgarian men dressed in elaborate costumes who perform traditional rituals designed to scare away evil spirits. The term Kuker derives from Proto-Slavic where *kuka meant “evil spirit”, to which the agent suffix *-aŕь was added (i.e. literally meaning “hunter of evil spirits”) or from a pre-Slavic deity called Kuk.

Kuker costumes cover most of the body and include wooden masks decorated with animal skins (sometimes double-sided) and large bells attached to the belt. Around the New Year and before Lent, Kukers walk and dance through the villages to scare away evil spirits with their costumes and the ringing of bells. This ritual is also believed to ensure a good harvest, health and happiness to the village during the coming year. Kukers traditionally visit people’s homes at night so that “the sun doesn’t catch them on the way”. After parading through the village, they usually gather in the village square to dance wildly and entertain the people. Similar traditions can be found in Romania, and can be associated with the masked or wishing bands that walk on New Year’s Eve.

The notoriety of these groups has crossed the borders of Bulgaria. The proof of the original traditions of the Kukers is the badge of honour given to the Razlog Municipality in May 2004 by Henri Van der Kroon, President of the International Federation of European and Mediterranean Carnival Cities. Also in 2018, National Geographic magazine published an extensive article about Kukeri.



Kukeri New Year's Carnival – Razlog

The Folk Art Ensemble “*Songs of the Pirin*” is also unique; it consists of a folk orchestra, a folk dance troupe and a women’s choir. It was founded in 1954 and since then has been striving to preserve Bulgarian culture by performing traditional music and dance from all over the country. It has performed over 6500 concerts in 50 different countries and has produced numerous LPs, CDs, videos and song books. The ensemble has received numerous awards such as the Golden Record in Nashville in 1982, the Grammy Award for participation in Marcel Cellier’s second album *Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares* in 1990, awards at the International Festivals in Carthage (1965), etc., being one of the most important ambassadors of Bulgarian folk art in the world.

During this mobility we had the opportunity to discover the beauties of **Bansko**, which we visited on Tuesday, 26th October, situated 160 km from the capital Sofia and only 6 km from Razlog. Bansko is the most modern ski resort in Bulgaria, located at an altitude of 925 meters, in the north-eastern part of the Pirin Mountains, just below the highest and most beautiful part of them.

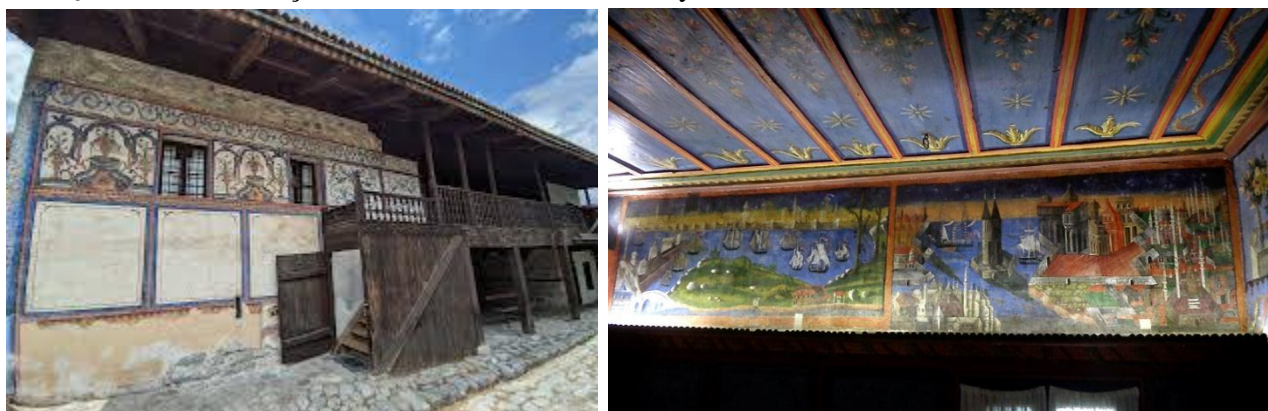
However, Bansko is much more than a ski resort, and has a worthy place among the settlements with a rich cultural and historical heritage in Bulgaria. It is no coincidence that some historians call it the “spiritual capital of the Pirin”. Bansko was established as a settlement after the unification of several villages during the 15th and 16th centuries, and the first documentary evidence of this can be found in the Ottoman register of Djelepkesians (sheep breeders) from 1576.

Until the 18th century, the Bansals were mainly animal breeders who relied on the vast pastures and rich forests of the Pirin Mountains. In the period of the national revival, Bansko developed as an urban centre of trade and crafts, and the resulting economic prosperity is also reflected in the features of the residential folk architecture of the 18th and 19th centuries. Built of stone, the houses in the old town centre give a monumental impression of a fortress. This is the main reason why they differ from the residential architecture of other settlements in the Razlog Valley. The outstanding wood carving and mural decoration should be added to these features,

which testify not only to the material possibilities, but also to the high artistic culture of the Banskals.

During our time in Bansko we visited a house that is a typical example of traditional local architecture: *the Velyan House*, a monument of Bulgarian national culture since 1967. It was built in the 18th century and is one of the oldest town houses with two floors, thick stone walls, underground hiding places, inner and outer towers, and small windows with iron grills. In the basement there is a cellar and two interconnected hiding places. During Ottoman rule, many Bulgarians built fortified houses with secret rooms to hide from Turkish raids. A stone staircase in a room used as a hiding place connects the basement to the residential level of the building where the dining room, drawing room, women's room and work room are located.

What impressed us most about this house were its decorations: wall paintings and carved wooden ceilings by Master Velyan Ognev, a member of the Debarsko School of Art. Velyan Ognev came to Bansko to work on decorating the altar of the Holy Trinity Church, and the house was given to him by the locals as a symbol of gratitude for his efforts. The master decorated the interior and exterior and turned them into true pieces of art. The murals in the Blue Room, drawing room and living room, the exquisitely carved wooden porch, and the geometric and floral ornaments on the southeast façade of the house are extremely valuable.



The Velyan House – Bansko

Another symbol of the city of Bansko that we visited is *the Holy Trinity Church*, situated in the centre of the resort. It is in the form of a complex that includes the church itself, the bell tower and the surrounding wall. The whole complex is considered one of the most remarkable achievements of Bulgarian culture during the National Renaissance.

The church is a three-nave basilica built in 1835 by local masters on the initiative of the Bansko merchant – Lazar German. Above its main entrance, we were amazed to see a Christian cross and a Turkish crescent close to each other - a symbol of tolerance between the two religions during the Ottoman rule. As mentioned above the church was decorated by one of the most important masters of the Bansko and Debarsko School of Art - Usta (Master) Velyan Ognev, who created the unique carved iconostasis, the original murals on the columns and dome, the bishop's throne and the twelve columns symbolizing the twelve apostles.

The bell tower in the churchyard was built a little later - in 1850, by usta (Master) Gligor Doiuv. It is 30 m high and is considered a symbol of the city of Bansko. In 1866, a clock was installed on the tower.

What we found very interesting is the fact that this church is one of the largest churches in Bulgaria. Until the construction of *St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral* in Sofia, the Holy Trinity was the largest church in the country and in the Balkan Peninsula.



Holy Trinity Church – Bansko

I must admit that a great joy, during our time in Bansko, gave us the opportunity to “visit” the many souvenir and cosmetics stores. Bulgaria is also called the ***Land of Roses***, being known worldwide for the cultivation of these flowers. 80% of the world’s rose oil production comes from this country. Rose oil is nicknamed Bulgaria’s “liquid gold”, being used mainly to make perfumes, cosmetics, chocolate, liqueur and jam.

On Friday, 29th October, before returning home, our partners organised a trip to the Bulgarian capital, **Sofia**. It is located in the western part of the country, at the northern foot of Mount Vitosha, in the Sofia Valley, which is surrounded by the Balkan Mountains. The valley has an average altitude of 550 meters so that Sofia is the second highest capital of the European Union (after Madrid) and the third highest capital of Europe (after Andorra la Vella and Madrid).

With just over one million inhabitants, Sofia is one of Europe’s oldest cities, so it is no news that it boasts countless historical monuments. Known as *Serdica* in ancient times and *Sredeŭ* in the Middle Ages, the city was named after *the St Sophia Church*, one of the oldest places of worship here (dating from the mid-6th century) and was designated capital on 3rd April 1879.

Apart from the historical monuments, we noticed during our visit to Sofia that the city has many green parks, lively boulevards and, last but not least, sumptuous architecture from the communist regime that houses the main state institutions: the buildings of the National Assembly, the Presidency, the Council of Ministers and all ministries. They are all concentrated in the centre of Sofia. The only preserved mosque in Sofia, *Banya Bashi*, is also located here. The creation of Mimar Sinan, who also designed Istanbul’s legendary Blue Mosque, it dates back to the 16th century and attracts up to 400 Muslims daily for prayers.



Council of Ministers (left), Presidency (right) and the future National Assembly building



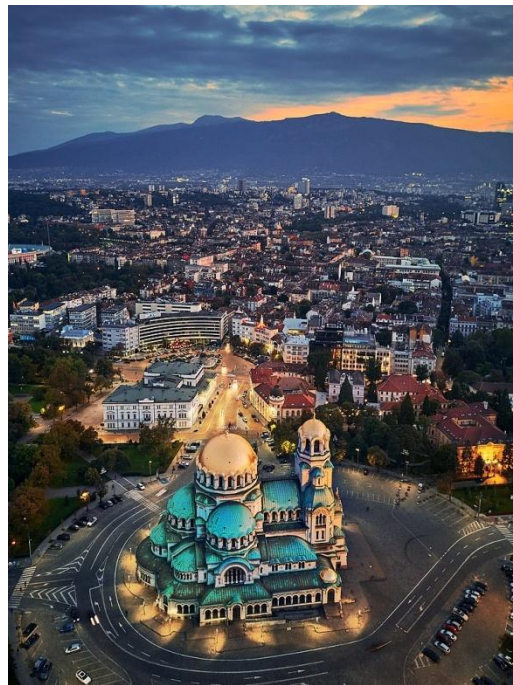
Banya Bashi Mosque

We could also admire another important symbol of Sofia - *the Ivan Vazov National Theatre*. This is Bulgaria's national theatre and the oldest theatre in the country. But the strongest impression was left by *the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral*, which is in fact the largest building of its kind in the Balkans.

Built in neo-Byzantine style, it serves as the cathedral church of the Bulgarian Patriarchate and is considered one of the 50 largest Christian churches in the world. It was erected at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries as a memorial to the Russian soldiers who fought during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, which liberated Bulgaria from Ottoman rule. The mesmerising illumination, the interior richly adorned with onyx and alabaster simply enchanted us. Part of the church is also Alexander Nevsky's underground vault, known as the Museum of Icons, which contains a collection of 300 church icons



Ivan Vazov National Theatre



Alexander Nevsky Cathedral

The greatest joy for the students participating in the mobility was visiting the *Museum of Illusions* in Sofia. The museum's exhibition covers an area of 400 m² where illusions are interwoven with scientific inventions, and physics and optics are displayed alongside mysterious works of art and classic riddles. Visiting this museum was, in fact, an exceptional educational

experience enriched by interactive entertainment. Students drew on a wall with laser light, played with a plasma globe, and took numerous photos in the upside-down room.



Visiting the Museum of Illusions, Sofia

Instead of concluding, I will refer to the article in this issue of the magazine containing the views of the students participating in this mobility. You will find in their lines the surprise of discovering a new country, with its wonderful places and friendly and open people; the enthusiasm and excitement of meeting their colleagues from the partner countries who became their friends by the end of the week; the joy of successful teamwork but, above all, you will understand how valuable it is for our students to participate in such Erasmus+ projects.

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