

# R E P O R T

## URI EUROPE STUDY TRIP IN ODESSA MAY 2018

In the period 20-27 May 2018 3 representatives of Bulgarian URI Cooperation Circles from Plovdiv: the URI Europe Global Council Trustee Dr. Petar Gramatikov (“Dialogue Center – Bulgaria”), Dr. Adriana Lyubenova (“Seeds for Change”) and Elena Shopova (“Trans Defi”) visited Odessa, Ukraine, as a step towards the expansion of United Religions Initiative Europe eastwards.

We had met a variety of people from different social, ethnic, religious background, incl. grassroots and religious leaders to spread wider the message and principles of URI. The strategy to enter into this new for the interfaith work territory was through the huge Bulgarian ethnic Diaspora (204 000) living since the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in nowadays Ukraine and especially in the city and region of Odessa. For that purpose the period was chosen intentionally to be around one of the most popular feasts for all Bulgarian worldwide and for all Slavic nations as well – 24<sup>th</sup> of May, the Day of the Cyrillic alphabet and Slavonic literature and culture. We have been assisted for the preparation of the trip by the Honorary Consulate of the Republic of Ukraine in Plovdiv (Bulgaria) and by the Consulate General of the Republic of Bulgaria in Odessa (Ukraine), by members of various non-governmental (cultural, educational) organizations of Bulgarians in Odessa. The URI delegation took part in all events and celebrations organized on the occasion of 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2018.

After the arrival in Odessa on the 20<sup>th</sup> late evening, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May we started our day by organizing the logistics, maps, procuring local mobile phone SIM cards, etc.

The first visit we paid was to the icon-painting department of the Odessa Theological Seminary - a special spiritual educational institution of the Moscow Patriarchate, which prepares icon painters. We met in the iconography department, male and female persons with secondary or higher education (many of them also with art education). Odessa Theological Seminary produces icon painters and craftsmen of church artistic sewing for all Ukraine. The head of the icon painting department, Mother Taisia, said that the students of the seminary have different education and the level of artistic preparation. Teachers teach theological disciplines, and special subjects are taught by mothers with higher artistic education and 20 years of experience in the icon painting workshop. “The icon is a representation of the future man. This is an

ideal to which every person should strive. The church gives various means to achieve this ideal, and the icon helps us understand the ideal. To represent the icon you need to understand what a canon is. The icon painter is not just an artist. The canon does not take away freedom, but guides along the spiritual path.”

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May afternoon Dr. Adriana Lyubenvoa has traveled alone by minibus public transport 250 km from Odessa to spend day and a half in the city of Bolhrad in Odessa Oblast (province) of southwestern Ukraine, in order to meet the students in the biggest Bulgarian school there - the Georgi Sava Rakovski Bolhrad High School founded in 1858, the oldest high school of the Bulgarian National Revival in 19<sup>th</sup> century. She met on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May with around 60 school pupils from 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade and promoted different opportunities for ethnic Bulgarians to study in their Motherland Bulgaria, more specifically in the Plovdiv State University “Paisiy Hilendarski” where Dr. Lyubenova is an assistant professor in Christian art and iconography in the Chair “Theology” at the Faculty of Philosophy and History, she presented printed materials of URI PPPs in Bulgarian and Russian translation for those who’re interested to research the work of the our interfaith network in Europe and worldwide. Some rare editions from the Plovdiv University Press have been presented to the director of the school. Bolhrad was founded in 1821 by Bulgarian settlers in Bessarabia, under the direction of General Ivan Inzov who is "revered" by Bolhrad residents as the "Founder of Our City." The surrounding Bolhradsky district is predominantly populated by ethnic Bulgarians (a majority of 61%). Bolhrad itself is inhabited by a large number of Bessarabian Bulgarians.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May in the All Bulgarian center of the Bulgarian culture of the Bulgarian Language Philology Chair at Odessa National University in Odessa has taken place philological conference on the life and deeds of st. Cyril and st. Methodius, the Enlighteners of Europe.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May the small delegation has been welcomed in the Consulate General of the Republic of Bulgaria in Odessa by Mr. Todor Vitev, Councillor and Head of Consular Department. We exchanged information about our mission and received invitation and directions about the programme of different NGOs during the week in order to meet and to explore their work and potential interest in regard of interfaith peace building activities.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May evening we visited the All-Ukrainian Center for Bulgarian Culture to meet the director Mr. Dimitri Terzi, to present for the Bulgarian library books in Bulgarian, materials on URI core principles and activities in Bulgarian and Russian, and also we attended a fantastic authentic Bulgarian folklore song and dance concert performed by children of various ages and Sunday schools from Odessa and the region.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, the very date of the feast, a laying of flowers was organized at the monument of the Holy Equal to the Apostles Cyril and Methodius at the Odessa National University. The event was attended by representatives of the local authorities in the city and the region, the President of the Association of Bulgarians in Ukraine and the People's Representative, Anton Kisse, the Rector of the University Professor Igor Koval, the Consul General of Bulgaria in Odessa Dimitar Tuchkov, as well as many Bulgarians and Ukrainians. Students studying Bulgarian at the 31st High School of Secondary Education delivered a literary and musical program. That evening in summer leisure club "Ithaca" was held a big celebration on May 24, which was attended by over 1,500 people. Amateur groups in Odessa region presented to the guests a rich artistic program. The event was organized by the Bulgarian public organization "Bulgarian National Assembly", and guests at "Itaka" Club were also representatives of other national communities from the city of Odessa. The diplomats from the Bulgarian Consulate General Todor Vitev and Kralio Dimov also attended.

25<sup>th</sup> of May started with a long trip by taxi in the wide Odessa city region (Suhoy liman village) for a visit to the Spiritual Centre for Vedic Culture in the City of Odessa at the headquarters of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. We've been met by Aruna Nayana, who introduced us to the activities of that tiny religious minority group and analyzed the existing current interfaith cooperation on a grassroots level, as well the absence of any interreligious events on religious leaders level in Odessa. He has reacted positively to the possibility to check for representatives of 3 different religious traditions for founding Cooperation Circle of URI Europe in the future for the Odessa district. For that purpose we provided more information on the URI Charter, Preamble, Purpose, and Principles, in English and Russian.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of May afternoon we have been invited by His Eminence Diodor, Vicar Bishop of the Odessa Diocese, with whom we met on the 24<sup>th</sup> of

May for the celebration of the Day of the Bulgarian alphabet and culture, to special visit Odessa Theological Seminary - the oldest educational institution in the south of our country. We had the unique chance with the blessing and permission of Metropolitan Agafangel of Odessa and Izmail to visit the seminary ecclesiastical museum with rare and precious medieval icons and early printed books. The Seminary is a spiritual educational institution that provides training for the clergymen and clergymen of the Orthodox Church, theologians, and teachers of church schools, church choir regents and masters of church sewing. The seminary is on the picturesque shore of the Black Sea in the immediate vicinity of the Holy Dormition Patriarch's Odessa Monastery, which houses the greatest shrines: the footstep of St. Andrew the First-Called, the miraculous image of the Blessed Virgin Mary "Mammal", brought by St. John the Baptist. Gabriel from the holy mountain Athos in the XIX century, honest and miraculous relics of the Monk Kuksha of Odessa; in the monastery performs its feat of the well-known elder Shiarchimandrite Iona. On the territory of the monastery is the summer residence of His Holiness Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. Father Andrey Sulakov, assistant professor in Patrology, provided for us a guided tour in Bulgarian language (himself an ethnic Bulgarian) in the seminary and the monastery.

26th of May was marked by one extraordinary meeting on the Greek square of Odessa with the National Coordinator of the Pagan Federation International for Ukraine Adalruna Rediviva, who is a painter of non-conformist Mandalas, coming from a family of renowned painters from Odessa. He has been recommended as a contact person there by the PFI International Coordinator and General Editor Magazine Pagan World Morgana Sythove from URI-Netherlands. Adalruna accepted with great enthusiasm the idea to establish Cooperation Circle of URI Europe in Odessa city. Same night he planned to distribute the URI materials he received from Dr. P. Gramatikov to PFI members attending a Slavonic paganistic ritual outside the city. PFI is planning an international conference to take place most probably in Plovdiv (Bulgaria) in spring 2019 and there shall be as a side-event an exhibition of the wonderful and powerful Mandalas painted by Luna (the artistic pseudonym of Adalruna Rediviva).

On the 26th of May, evening, we attended an event of the literary Odessa at Odessa Museum of Western and Oriental Art and met the purple of the local poets and writers at the literary premiere of the new book of Ivan Dermendji, who is of Bulgarian origin, and presented the new title “52 hertz” together with a family produced Merlot wine named also “52 hertz”.

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