Placement Report

Placement at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bulgaria, Sofia.

Security Policy Directorate

OSCE and Regional Security Department

REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Placement Report

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International Security Track, MA International Relations
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Introduction

In this placement report I discuss my experiences and activities during the internship at the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was conducted from the 15 February until 17 April. The two months I spend there were the most exciting and practical application of the knowledge I have gained during my studies. I believe the experience I gained will serve me throughout my career. In the report I will discuss how and why I choose this placement; my expectations and personal goals before the placement started; the tasks, responsibilities and atmosphere during my time there; the practical implications of living in a large city where all the essential state institutions and foreign embassies are located; and conclude by assessing how this opportunity will affect my career development before giving some tips for other students and final thoughts on my overall experience.

Preparation Process

Orientation

When I first started to think about what sort of a placement I would be interested in, my mind jumped straight away to the major international organizations like the UN, NATO, OSCE and the EU. The process of successfully applying for one, however, is a difficult one. After a few rejections and no-replies I started to reevaluate my options and decided that the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be a good fit for what I was looking for. The placement opportunity there offered me some major advantages: the reduced financial cost of living in Bulgaria, where an average monthly rent is around 100-150 Euros; knowledge of the native language; an already somewhat developed network of social and professional contacts, friends and acquaintances; and the opportunity to work a position that I plan to apply for in the future. The work, I thought, would also be a direct application of my knowledge in the field of International Relations, International Law, European Union Law and International Security. I saw this as an opportunity to gain invaluable insight in the day to day operations of a public administration, foreign ministry and an institution that is involved with all the major international organizations, for which I wanted to apply. Lastly, my thesis is about the relationship between Turkey and NATO, given that Bulgaria is heavily involved in regional politics and the fact that the Black Sea has become an arena of contestation between the Russian Federation and the Alliance, I thought it would be a perfect opportunity, one that can give me an understanding of the intricate security politics of the region that I would not be able to gain elsewhere. Despite the fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a major institution and employs a lot of staff. I was given
the impression that I would work in closely knit team, since my department in particular does not employ a lot of personnel. This made me think that I would be involved in team effort that has practical implications and will be useful to the Foreign Ministry. It was the last bit of motivation that tipped the scale in favour of applying and so I did.

**Application**

The process for applying was a straight forward one. I had to write a letter of motivation and send a CV. I had confidence in applying because of my strong academic background and the belief that the head of the directorate was someone who favored young individuals who were eager to learn and apply themselves. My application seems to have been lost or misplaced and that delayed the start of the placement. After one phone call the issue was quickly resolved and my application was presented to the head of the directorate and the department, after which I got a return call. It confirmed that I was selected for the opportunity and I only needed to confirm my intent. They did, however, state that the Foreign Ministry, either because of a domestic law conflict or their own policy, could not sign a contract with a University, but they also suggested that it was possible to work something out with my supervisor.

**Preparation**

Since my application was for the *NATO and Regional Security Department* I spend a couple of weeks preparing for the topics I thought were important. My preparation involved looking at regional security organizations, the role of NATO in the area, commitments and initiatives made by Bulgaria in the security context of the region and some catching up on domestic political affairs. Accommodation was arranged in a relatively timely manner, but there was a lot of demand and very few offers, because of that I consider my case to be fortunate. I contacted a couple of friends that had previously undergone an internship at the Ministry to get their opinion of it, the tasks they were given and the attitude of supervising staff towards them. Their input was very helpful in creating a picture of what to expect and how my day would go. It must be mentioned that they were interns at other directorates and departments so there was obviously some differences in the working process and the tasks I was expected to be given.
**Expectation**

My main focus in the application was on NATO and I expected to be working mainly with material related to the organization. I thought that I would experience difficulties or provide incomplete analysis due to the classified nature of a lot of the documents and the fact that the short (8 week) duration of the placement did not allow clearance for confidential material. I thought I would take part in meetings and conferences as an observer or to make a report. I hoped to be able to directly work with or assist the head of the department or directorate. Due to the destabilization of Ukraine and the conflicts in the larger Black Sea region I expected to have a lot of work coming my way. These expectations were based on personal conclusions and perspective gained from the input from my friends. The ministry gave me very little information besides stating that I needed to be present at the Ministry on the agreed date with identification.

**Goals**

My first goal during the placement period was learn how to effectively and efficiently convert the theoretical knowledge I have gained during my studies into practical applications and results that further the position of the Republic of Bulgaria in a geostrategic and political context. I was particularly curious whether my studies of international law would come into play and how useful they would be.

My second goal was to gain an excellent understanding of the workings of the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry. Knowledge on how a public administration and a foreign ministry functions I thought would provide me with an insight into policy making that would improve the quality and applicability of my work.

My third goal was to develop a network of personal contacts and relationships that would be useful when I try to apply for a position in the future. As with many other things networking seems to be the most important element when applying for a job in Bulgaria.

My fourth goal was to further my knowledge of the region (the Balkans and the larger Black Sea region) and the security threats towards Bulgaria as a member of the NATO Alliance. While attention was given to the Western Balakns (Kosovo, Bosnia, etc.) my studies in the UK and Netherlands did not discuss the position and importance of Bulgaria in the security context of the
region. I thought that this was a gap that I needed to fill in order to have a more complete understanding of the security situation in Europe.

**During the Placement**

*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria: intake meeting and initial orientation*

In order to explain some of the differences in expectations and the tasks and responsibilities that followed I need to give some information on the Ministry in general and also provide a brief overview of my intake meeting conducted with the head of the directorate and the department of *OSCE and Regional Security*. Due to the instability of the domestic political scene in Bulgaria I a new temporary government was appointed to serve until new elections can be organized. The directorate, which I applied for was *NATO and Regional Security* was now named *Security Politics* and was split into *NATO and Regional Security; OSCE and Regional Security and Disarmament* departments. The head of the directorate explained to me that due to the classified nature of a lot of the documents I would get more out of being appointed to the *OSCE and Regional Security* department and my work in *NATO and Regional Security* would be limited to when there were enough open (non-confidential) materials available. This was somewhat unfortunate due to the fact that I did not focus on researching the OSCE and the commitments of Bulgaria within the framework of the organization. Among the huge array of responsibilities of the Ministry are directing and receiving information and communications from all embassies, international organizations, foreign countries, domestic institutions and many more. I thus had the opportunity to read a lot of incoming and outgoing communication, which kept me up to date on a lot of issues in international and
especially regional affairs. I was given an office, which I shared with a senior analyst and I spend my first couple of days doing basic research to familiarize myself with some of the regional economic and security organizations (South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial - Coordination Committee; The Black Sea Economic Cooperation; Turkish national Operation Black Sea Harmony; and others), the OSCE and other region specifics.

**Tasks and Responsibilities**

(1) Analysis of the Security Situation in the Black Sea

This is not doubt the most interesting project I undertook during my time at the ministry. I was required to assess the security environment in the Black Sea from the perspective of Turkey and provide conclusions and recommendations on what the position of Bulgaria should be in regards to the issues and conclusions I highlighted in the paper in the paper. The report was to be based on materials available to the staff of the Ministry and further research that I conducted on my own.

For the first couple of days I took the time to familiarize myself with the position of Bulgaria in various security and regional organizations in and around the Black Sea. The organizations were the following: South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process (SEDM) and the associated with it SEEBRIG; BLACKSEAFOR; Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC); Confidence and Security Building Measures for the Black Sea;. I did not know a lot about them before I started the placement so initially it was somewhat difficult to put everything together in the correct context. But after a few days everything fell into place and I started to understand the dynamics and decisions of regional states more comprehensively.

The next step was to analyze the legal security environment in the Black Sea. I looked at a few international instruments like the Open Skies Treaty, the Montreux Convention and the legal agreements establishing all the previously mentioned organizations. I had to do a careful and detailed analysis of these legal instruments, it was very important to assess whether Bulgaria can be forcefully involved in a legal dispute that might lead to serious international consequences like an unintended recognition of the annexation of Crimea.

In the analysis of the security situation I adopted a realist and balance of power perspective. I did not strictly apply the theory, but used its assumptions and insights to provide an understanding of issues that were either classified confidential or where no information was available on the decision making
process. The fact that the position of Bulgaria on a lot of issues is not expressly and comprehensively stated anywhere created a lot of difficulty in the conclusions and recommendations made in this paper.

During my work on the report I had meetings with colleagues from my and other departments to discuss possible recommendations, points to be added or subtracted and to generally get some insight from diplomats who have decades of experience. This was among the more interesting parts of my time at the Ministry. I felt a lot of respect for those people and was somewhat nervous before I spoke with them. I was worried about the way I would express myself and whether I would be able to convert all the knowledge I had gained during my studies in the UK and Netherlands in a way that makes a good impression on me and the people who have taught me throughout the years. I believe I was somewhat successful in that, being a little bit of a perfections, I always feel I could have done better or see things that I could have improved or done differently, so I am unsure whether this is an accurate assessment or whether I am just being too hard on myself. I was able to convey information clearly and coherently, I did stumble a few times mainly because I would be searching for a word or translating it from English to Bulgarian in my mind, which disrupts the flow of my speech and makes me look less competent. That being said I must admit that I am generally happy with how things went I only wish I had seized a few opportunities that I did not take full advantage of.

There were a lot of terminology and abbreviations that I had never encountered before in Bulgarian. I left Bulgaria right after high school so I never got the chance to get an education in politics or international relations in my native language. Combining that with the fact that, for the last 8 years most of the news, academic articles and other media types that I have watched, read or listened to were in English, I had a rather difficult time adapting. Reaching the proficiency level of use I had before for Bulgarian took at least a couple of weeks and I still have not completely smoothed everything out.

(2) Preparing materials related to conferences, meetings and summits

During my stay at the foreign ministry I had the opportunity on a few occasions to help out with the preparation related to conferences, meetings and summits. The first such occasion was for the Twenty-Seventh Vienna Document Annual Implementation Assessment Meeting. The work I did was only related to the politico-military dimension of the OSCE. It mainly involved research on how the document can be amended in order for it to reflect the changing security situation in the world,
the security threats posed by hybrid war and new military technologies like unmanned drones and vehicles. I also worked on talking points related to that and other issues. The most interesting to me were the ones on the protracted (frozen) conflicts in the OSCE area. Although I knew a great detail about the conflicts, with the exception of Nagorno-Karabakh, I found it challenging to formulate statements in Bulgarian. In a way, initially it was easier for me to come up with a sentence in English and then translate it as opposed to the other way around.

(3) Writing of letters, memos, statements and archive work

The work in the archive was the most tedious part of my placement. The task I was given seemed fairly easy at first, as all I had to do was sort documents into their respective category. Reading the documents was the only interesting part, there were a lot of transcripts/memos of meetings of diplomats and ministers, letters to international institutions, inquiries on political questions from embassies, etc. The issue was that, in my opinion, there were far too many different categories, some of them very specific other’s not. This made things go very slowly at first, but while doing the work I started to memorize more and more of the category list, which made things go a lot faster and smoother. Despite that I still came across documents that I could go in two different sections or ones that did not belong anywhere. This made me second guess some of my decisions or made them feel subjective.

Evaluation and Reflection

1) My first goal during the placement period was learn how to effectively and efficiently convert the theoretical knowledge I have gained during my studies into practical applications and results.

While not completely satisfied with the results I believe that this was the most useful experience I have had in reaching that goal. The fact that there was a lot that was not familiar to me and that I had to do mostly everything in a language that I have not used academically or professionally for the last 7 years certainly somewhat complicated things. I am, however, very happy that I managed to find use of my knowledge and interpretative skills in international law, which is something that I have always wondered how useful would be during my studies. As far as the international relation aspect, I strongly believe that had it not been for the great education I got in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands I would have had a much tougher time understanding and analyzing the security
situation in the region. While it might seem obvious the reason I am stating it, is because I believe I am taking for granted a lot of what I gained during my studies as it has been a lengthy period of over 7 years of gradually accumulating knowledge.

2) My second goal was to gain an understanding of the workings of the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry.

I cannot say with full confidence that what I learned of the policy making process is applicable at other foreign ministries and international organizations, but I believe I have achieved this goal. The entire process of a letter or inquiry or another type of document coming in, responding to it and then creating policy based on it occurred multiple times. It was also not only an internal process, but also heavily involved consultations and contacts with the Ministry of Defense, which as expected plays a big role in the Security Policy directorate.

3) My third goal was to develop a network of personal contacts and relationships that would be useful when I try to apply for a position in the future.

While my social skills are certainly not my most valued quality I made a couple of acquaintances that I think will be helpful in the future. As far as all the other staff I have worked alongside with, I can only hope that my work has left a good impression on them. I do not consider this goal to be achieved and unfortunately some of the reasons that lead me to that conclusion cannot be mentioned in this report.

4) My fourth goal was to further my knowledge of the region (the Balkans and the larger Black Sea region) and the security threats towards Bulgaria as a member of the NATO Alliance.

I am very happy with the progress I made on this point. Perhaps if the focus was more on NATO and not the OSCE I would have been even more pleased, but that is asking for too much given the classified nature of most of the materials. The knowledge and understanding I gained is extensively useful not only in relation to Bulgaria, the Balkans and the larger Black Sea region, but also to the Middle East, Central Asia and even China’s “One Belt, One road” project.
5) Reflections on my expectations post-placement

Most of my expectations were in line with the reality “on the ground”. I thought that I would be getting more work than I did. The reason for that is not completely clear to me and I can only speculate whether I was at fault or there was simply not that much that could be assigned to me. The issue I was expecting to have with classified materials was present in the NATO department, but was hardly noticeable in the OSCE department. I believe I did well, but I also know for a fact that I could have done better in some areas like socializing more with colleagues and perhaps taking more initiative in seeking work. Maybe instead of asking for more work I should have worked on projects and documents that were assigned to other people in order to create more trust towards me from my supervisor. Lastly, I worked mostly in an office with a single colleague doing most of my work on a computer. My expectation that I would be involved in the taking of notes and/or making reports on meetings and conferences did not come into fruition. I was involved on a couple of occasions, but it was very far from what I wanted or expected, I did not, however, feel I could have asked for more given the security nature on a lot of those meetings.
Practical Implications of Living in Bulgaria

It is quite difficult to find accommodation in the capital of Bulgaria, Sofia. Working with agencies makes it more expensive and they usually want you to sign a long-term contract. As with many other things, personal contacts and networking are of huge importance in overcoming difficulties in Bulgaria, so I decided to join a few Facebook groups that offer informal arrangements for accommodation. After contact around 10 individuals I only got two replies, one for 150 Euro p/m and one for 175 Euro. The slightly less expensive one was quite far away and required a 30-40 min. public transport travel time to work. The other one in contrast was 10-15 min walking distance and 5 minute bus/tram travel time and had better living conditions, the only unfortunate element being that it was a transition room. I already had some friends in the city so I did not experience difficulties in socializing outside of work and the fact that I am a native made it easy to communicate and get along with the locals. I was surprised that the city was a lot more international than when I left Bulgaria almost 8 years ago, I came across a lot of foreign exchange students, professionals and tourists. I did not receive any financial help so I had to rely on my saving and my family helping me out with the rent, this made trips and social occasions more apart than I would have liked, but in normal circumstances that would not be an issue given the cheap prices in Bulgaria. The one thing that I thought to be more expensive than expected was the price of food, which cost me roughly the same it did in the Netherlands and Scotland (around 150 euros per month), given the lower working wage of
Bulgarians (minimum wage being around 220 Euros) I find this worrying for myself and my fellow countrymen.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, I can say without any doubt that I am overall pleased with how my placement went, my stay in Sofia and the acquaintances and personal connection that I made. Working in a Foreign Ministry certainly improved my work attitude, discipline and confidence in my work. The colleague I worked in an office with and my supervisor were to a large extend responsible for the pleasant and educational experience I had during work hours. I always looked forward to having work done and time usually flew by. While I stated that I am not completely pleased with my social interaction skills in a working environment I definitely got better at it, and hopefully I will continue to do so in the future. This was another time when I realized the importance of networking and the impact it can have on my future career. The fact that I did almost all of my work in Bulgarian was my biggest challenge, but it is also the area in which I improved the most. Given that I had not written a piece of academic/professional writing in Bulgarian since I was 18 left a lot of room for growth and I am now very pleased that I choose to do my placement in Bulgaria. Looking back, I must say that while not all of my expectations were met I am happy with my supervision. As mentioned earlier the security clearance issue definitely complicated the situation and some of the work simply could not be delegated to me. The placement showed me that this is, in fact, the type of work that I would enjoy during for the rest of my life, whether or not that will happen in Bulgaria or somewhere else is difficult to say. While I would consider it an honor to be a part of the institution and team responsible for the formation of the security and foreign policy of Bulgaria my financial situation perhaps will lead me toward another path. I can only be thankful for the opportunity I got and the knowledge, skills and personal growth I gained during my time at the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.