

OUT AND ABOUT

From Albania to Bulgaria

Six questions to Milena Selimi

Where did you stay and for how long?

In July 2019, I was offered the translation residency at [Sofia Literature and Translation House](#) in Sofia, Bulgaria. This residency was supported by [TRADUKI](#) and lasted for a month. During this time, I had the great pleasure of working and living in the former residence of the Bulgarian artist, Nenko Balkanski. Living in an artistic space like this was the perfect environment to develop my artistic expression and to produce my best possible work.

What project did you work on?

During the residency, I had the opportunity to translate *Physics of Sorrow*, a book by the famous author Georgi Gospodinov, from Bulgarian into Albanian. Its publication in Albanian was made possible by a grant from Creative Europe. *Fizika e Trishtimit* was published in Albania in November 2019, by the publisher ALBAS.

In what way did your stay at the translators' house contribute to your translation project?

Literature is a connecting bridge. It is the only space where people from different

cultures and nationalities are connected through storytelling and through the essences of being human. Literature is a breath of freedom within each and every one of us, no matter where we are from. While staying at the translators' house, I felt right at home. As a translator, I felt like I was contributing to the continuation of this legacy.

What was the biggest challenge of your translation project?

The biggest challenge was definitely trying to preserve the original structure of the sentences used by the author. Albanian (*Shqip*) is an Indo-European language and is not closely related to any other language. The order of words in Albanian is quite free, but the most used order is subject-verb-object. In contrast, the style used by the author Georgi Gospodinov doesn't really follow Bulgarian grammar rules.

Did you have contact with any other authors/artists during your stay?

Yes, and without doubt, these meetings were the highlight of my entire residency. My most valuable encounter was definitely with the author



Translators' House in Sofia
Photo: Milena Selimi

Gospodinov himself. We talked about and discussed the different phrases used in the book, the front cover, concept etc. As a translator, I deeply value these kinds of meetings with authors, and I was very lucky to be able to do so in Sofia. Another important meeting took place at the Kliment Ohridski University where I had the chance to meet Professor Dr. Rusana Beileri in person in the Albanian language section of the department of Balkan Studies. During this meeting we had an informal discussion with several Bulgarian students interested in Albanian language and culture. The meeting I had with the playwright, Elin Rahnev, was particularly special, as I was the translator of the play, 'Bean', which will be premiered in Albania at the end of this year, hopefully with the

author himself being present. While in Sofia I had the opportunity to catch up with my old colleagues Rusanka Lyapova and Zhela Georgieva, two well-known translators of Balkan languages.

How is the position of literary translators in Albania different from that of your colleagues in Bulgaria?

Being a translator in Albania, and the same in Bulgaria, means that you are continuously struggling to survive. Neither country has invested enough in translation or translators, and even less with regard to smaller Balkan languages. Public interest in literary authors from the Balkans is low as English, French and German authors dominate the literary market. The only way Balkan languages can stay alive is



Milena Selimi has had a long career as a journalist, writer and editor and has worked with national and international organizations as coordinator and moderator. A graduate of the University of Tirana with a degree in Albanian Language and Literature, and also fluent in Bulgarian, Italian, Macedonian and Serbian, she has translated novels by writers such as: Nikola Madzirov, Alek Popov, Georgi Gospodinov, Milen Ruskov and many more. Currently she is the Director of the Centre for Openness and Dialogue at the Prime Minister's Office in Tirana, Albania.

Milena Selimi
Photo: Katya Barulova

through European platforms such as **Creative Europe**, different networks like TRADUKI, and translation grants for Balkan languages given by the different Ministries of Culture in the region. As a translator for TRADUKI since 2009, I can't express enough how this network has been, and will forever be, the main door to the European Union. It's the perfect integration model where EU member states, particularly those in charge of different policies such as Germany, can find that common ground and perfect balance for collaboration with potential EU candidates such as Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Serbia. Culture builds bridges that politics can never aspire to. Both people living in Western Europe and those living in the western Balkans know this well. I wonder if the different governments know this too. Now is the time of culture. As Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union purportedly said: "If I were to do it again, I would start with culture".

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