

PLANTING PEACE, BUILDING FUTURE IN SWEDEN – LUKA GUDEK
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When I talk about my first youth exchange to Sweden, people usually think of Stockholm. However, when my friends invited me to participate in a youth Erasmus+ programme, its location was a small village named Sparsnas in forests in the west of Sweden. After landing in Gothenburg, I was half expecting to see an ABBA cover band at the airport but it I was left disappointed. But, as it turns out, Swedish woodland was the perfect place to learn about peace building and sustainable living with fellow European youth.

At first, sharing tents with a group of youth from Czechia, Finland, Georgia and Croatia for six days, deep in a Swedish forest seemed a bit daunting. In the end it was quite a nice way to make friends since we ended up playing cards, exchanging songs and chatting without much restraint from day one.

What suprised me, was the mixed learning methodology at the exchange. On the one hand, we had lectures by Jorgen Johansen and Majken Jul Sørensen, academics and activists. Jorgen was telling us about the anti-nuclear movement in Sweden, and Majken shared her work on using humor in politics. On the other hand, the learning process didn't stop at the lectures, there was also a very hands-on approach implemented. We were making wooden boxes for planting vegetables, painting a wooden house, baking bread, composting and making wooden tools.

Even though there was obviously plenty to do in the village, not all our time was spent there. We went hiking in a national park which extended over the border to Norway. Since there were many lakes nearby, kayaking was an opportunity we couldn't miss. A trainer gave us instructions on basics of not flipping the boats and we were off. Later, the bravest of us even went swimming in the freezing lake.

In the evenings, we'd light a small camp fire and exchange experiences of non-violence and peace building in our countries. It was maybe my favourite part of every day. Not only did we learn more about each other's social and political contexts, but also we got a sense of being a family. In the end, getting a Youthpass certificate was a gratifying reminder of this experience, but also a way of rewarding me and other young people being willing to learn and share their skills with others. Maybe then Youthpass wasn't that well known or recognized but it meant a lot because it was a testament of a group of people growing closer together while learning from each other.

