Positive Solidarity Project

March – December 2021



Story of Kir

Sweden

How is it to live in one of the happiest countries in the World

Life of people living with HIV in Sweden

POSITHIVA GRUPPEN

EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS



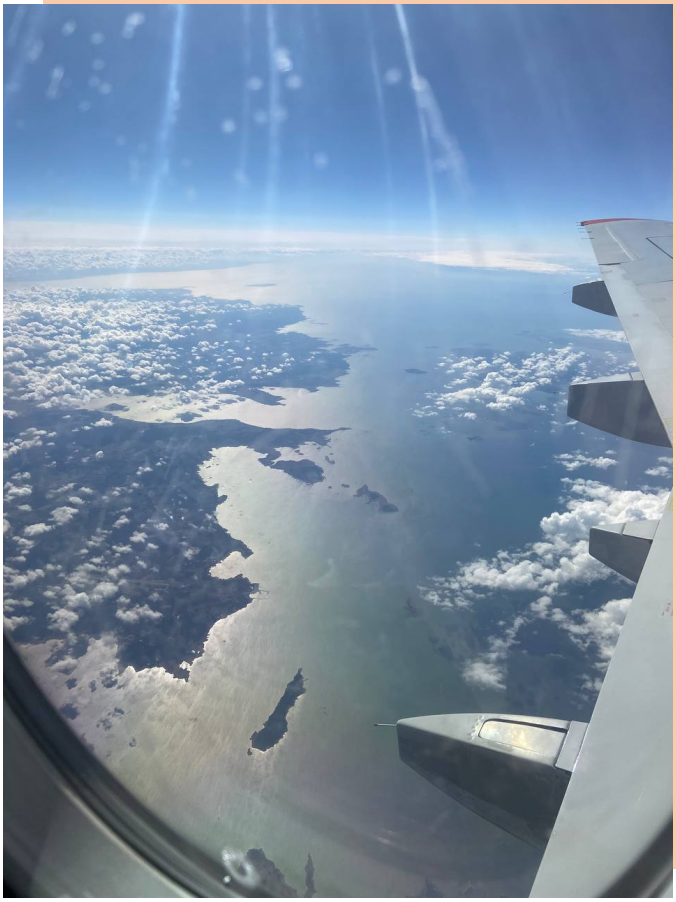
Intro

Hej! My name is Kir Belous, I'm 24 years old and I'm from Russia! In early 2021 I applied to an European Solidarity Corps (ESC) project called "Positive Solidarity Project", which would take place in Sweden at Positiva Gruppen (PG) – a Swedish patient organisation working with supporting people living with HIV and raising society's knowledge on HIV. After applying, I passed the selection process, got a visa, packed my stuff and spent the next 8 months in a country that was already precious to me and that I had always wanted to experience further. Sweden.

Throughout my experience I was writing a journal in order to track my volunteering experience and reflect on things happening to me. Whenever I felt that I wanted to write something down, I did. It ended up being divided by months, but in this version I tried to summarize it and to emphasize the most important parts of my experience.

It all started at the end of 2020, when I was finishing my short-term contract at my previous job in Russia. I had graduated recently as a railway engineer and was not sure what I wanted to do next. That's because a career in this field in Russia would mean working in a conservative and pretty much "post-Soviet" environment.

I tested positive for HIV at the end of December 2020 and a few days later I discovered the opportunity to volunteer at an HIV-organisation in Stockholm, Sweden. It felt like it was meant to be. I had been volunteering with AIESEC a lot before and I always wanted to do it abroad as well. Sweden was one of the few countries in Europe I had been to and without overexaggerating, I would say that I had fallen in love with it.





PG was looking for a young person living with HIV, so you might say that it was a perfect match.

Because of some limitations due to the corona pandemic, I got my visa later than expected, so the first month of the project was held online. I eventually arrived in Sweden on April 22nd 2021. However, I was incredibly happy to be able to travel at all, so everything else was just minor obstacles. Moreover, the staff at PG had proven themselves to be very professional and coordinated since the beginning, so I did not question my choice to move to Sweden one bit.





I got to feel the biggest impact of the pandemic in life in Sweden from the very beginning. That was the recommendation to work from home and to keep distance. It is important to state that for Swedes, recommendations (let alone laws), are something that they follow without questioning, which was something I was both positively amazed and annoyed at the same time. For a person with a Russian background, that sounds like if you'd say to a child: "Here's a very tasty ice-cream, I recommend you to not eat it." At first all our events were online (hence not very interactive in my opinion), but from the beginning of summer restrictions were lifted up a bit and we started to hold our most regular offline events – the Wednesday and Friday dinners, which are social forums at PG where people living with HIV can meet and share experiences with each other.

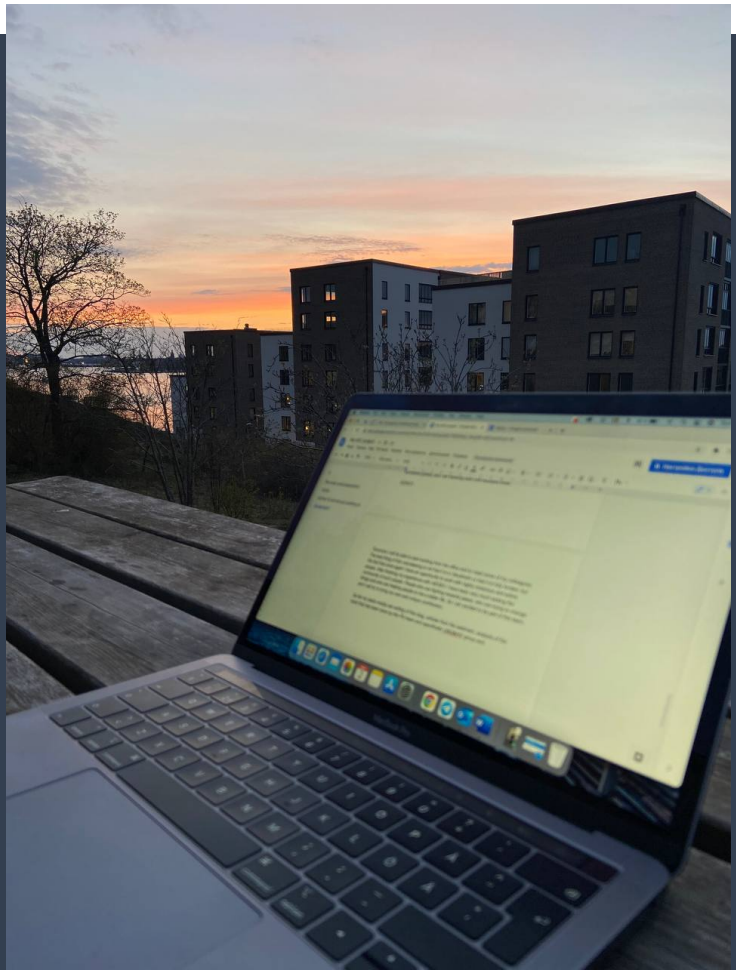
Those events would become one of my biggest contribution in the work of PG and would consume most of time, in a good way. Although sometimes it could get a bit hectic, the fact that these dinners were always attended by a lot of people made them very enjoyable.





Positiva Gruppen provided me with an accomodation in Stockholm – they were renting a room in the apartment of Swedish man, Nils. Living there turned out just wonderful. Nils is an extremely nice and hospital person. We were having breakfast together pretty often, while speaking about anything - from politics to religion. On the evenings we would talk about how our day had been. Sometimes it was like growing up in a Swedish household, and I just loved it.

In the middle of April, when the spring flowers had started to bloom, I got the chance to meet my neighbours – we were tidying up the garden beneath our house and had some barbeque afterwards.



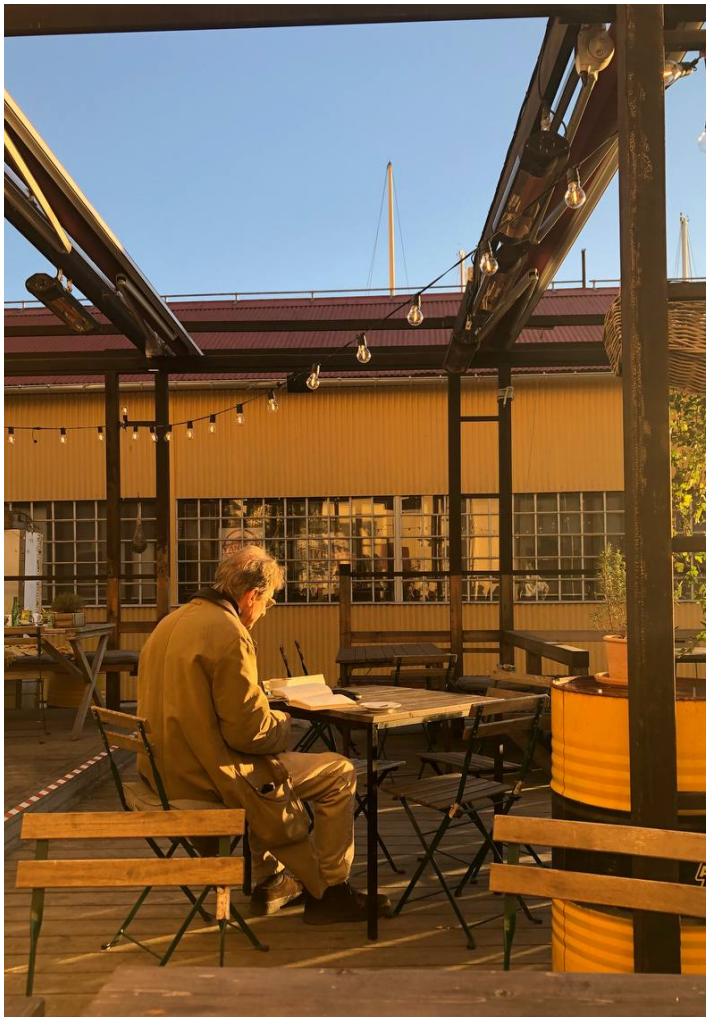
At first my tasks were mostly writing a blog on my experience, written reports from webinars, analysis of the work that has been done by the PG team and specifically Ung & Hiv (PG's youth activity for young people 18-30 years old living with HIV) and working on ideas regarding eventual online activities.

Looking back I'd say that it was hard back then, since we were not able to hold IRL-meetings. During times like these, supporting activities are even more relevant, so we had to adapt to the new reality and held our weekly dinners and other activities online instead.

At the end of May I got the chance to meet more colleagues of mine, got my own keys to the office, coordinated an event from the HIV-school (an activity for children up to 18 years old that offers a social forum for them to meet, share experiences and raise their knowledge on HIV) that was held at PG's premises, got some tasks done and was delighted with the news that in June we would open our weekly dinners and some other activities! My attitude to everything had improved dramatically by then. Something I realized was that the more diverse my tasks were, the more confident and energetic I felt.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I believed that meetings online were to become our future. What's the point with going somewhere when everything can be held digitally? Now I don't think so anymore. People will always want to have real life communication. We love to be seen, heard and touched, and that's great!



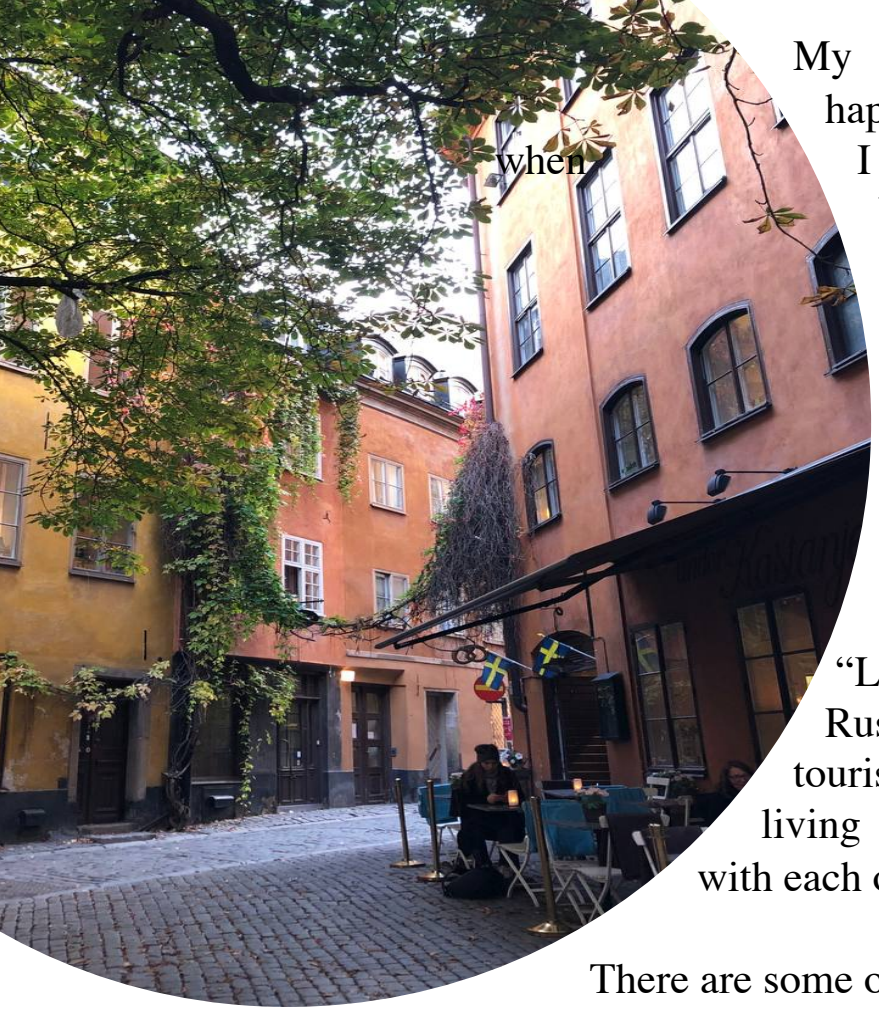


Two months after my arrival I started to feel almost like a local. I had found my favourite grocery store, beach and route for my morning runs. I had gotten to know my neighbours and started using maps less and less when going somewhere. I got used to the work activities and got along with the colleagues I was working with.

The only thing that was quite a challenge was to be integrated into the society. I think that no matter to which country you are moving to, it will always be the hardest and the longest process. The best way to navigate it is to make as many connections with locals as possible. Because of the pandemic-vibes and some characteristics of Swedish people (like not being so open for new connections and tend to spend time with people they already know).

Usually, efforts to blend in demand a huge amount of energy and resources, but the outcome is not always as good as you have been expecting it to be. I can't say that I haven't made any friends, but after a while I decided to concentrate on being comfortable with the company of myself, which for me was quite unusual. Like going alone to the cinema or to the beach. It does not demand a lot of energy, but instead a lot of inner harmony and balance. Nevertheless, the result will eventually be tremendous. You'll become more confident for the rest of your life. So, that became the new goal I tried to achieve during this project.





My introduction to Sweden happened in winter of 2019. when I visited Sweden with my boyfriend, who also used to live here (yes, just a coincedence). I instantly fell in love with this country and its people and started following an Instagram page about Sweden and also have read a very popular book called “Lagom” when I was in Russia. However, being a tourist in Sweden and actually living here shouldn’t be confused with each other.

There are some observations that I have made after a few months of living in Stockholm.

It’s not a secret that Swedish society is very organised and structured. There are also a lot of informal rules which you have to follow. Everything is very logical and systematic. Your life is simply pre-organised. That provides a huge quality of life and lacks any unnecessary confusion. However, one of the outcomes of this is that for me, a person raised in Russia, sometimes it can get quite boring. I am used to some sort of chaos and a crazy life and from time to time I missed that craziness.

On the other hand, the feeling of stability and safety in Sweden is extremely strong and I value it very much. While living here I finally felt that my human rights were respected and that I didn’t need to struggle to live a full life. To laugh, love, have a family and to be a citizen of the country I’m living at.



Apart from our dinners, during summer we also organized several IRL-activities specifically for young people living with HIV. We had a barbeque, went to the beach for sun-bathing and swimming, and the biggest activity of all was our annual conference. There we eventually managed to create a space where everyone felt comfortable to share their experience of living with HIV and I got the chance to once more facilitate a workshop on leadership.

Moreover, in August I got the opportunity to be a part of Posithiv Porträtt, where I was interviewed by PG for our organisation's magazine, – Posithiva Nyheter. Our communicator interviewed me, and I thought it was a safe space to share personal things and to deeply reflect on myself and find something that yet was undiscovered. In October, the magazine was printed and I together with other colleagues helped with packing it into envelopes and post it out all around Sweden.



Another interesting task I was busy with for some time was attending and reporting the biggest annual conference on HIV science – The IAS conference on HIV Science 2021. I covered several lectures on different topics and overall that was a great boost of information on latest achievements and inspiration. Some of these reports were also used for our magazine's articles and I hope they will be used by my colleagues in the future.

When my first summer in Sweden was over, I found myself unconsciously reflecting on the past few months. Something I don't like about summer is that every year you always wait for something extraordinary to take place, because it's considered as the most active and frivolous time of the year. However, funny enough, I now think that I enjoy autumn much more. Everybody is back in town, and Stockholm started to look more like a real city. I actually used to hate autumn before, as for me it was always associated with the start of school or university. It was always hard to go back to work after three months of careless activities. But at the same time that always meant the start of something new: new people, new subjects, new information. And somehow this feeling of "something new" is still with me until now.

In addition to that, the change in the weather is just wonderful. It is still very warm, but also very fresh. The leaves are turning yellow and red, you value each sunny day much more and strive to get as much sun as possible before the start of the long winter.

The greatest thing now is that by that time I had more tasks than before and I found some of them to be very useful, interesting and rewarding, so I felt dedicated to them. It was also nice to sometimes have deadlines in front of me and therefore work in a high tempo. It was similar to how it was at university during exams and I must say that I really enjoy this kind of rhythm of work. It's my guilty pleasure.





At the start of October, life in Sweden had changed dramatically. First of all, almost all of the restrictions were removed. On one side that was amazing - finally life would return to normal. On the other side - once again you had to adapt to a new reality and change your daily routine. I was already used to working from home and I enjoyed it. As usual you are forcing yourself to enjoy current circumstances, otherwise it would be impossible to enjoy life. Anyhow, work from the office became a thing again, and at first it was kind of unusual and awkward. Being around people again, working together with them in the same room, having lunches together, dressing up every day and using public transport. Fortunately that was just the first reaction of the adaptation and after some time I honestly loved it. I got to know my colleagues, I started to feel like part of the team and it became much easier and interesting to work, to feel like I was part of the movement and to dedicate myself to work.

Secondly, I was able to observe how pandemic has affected life of Swedes and their behaviour. When it was announced that now there are no more restrictions, it felt like people were told: “You can be social and happy again!” Before that it seemed like time in Sweden had stopped. So, there is a possibility that the conclusion that I have made about Swedes, that they do not like to socialize, is not accurate at all.

Thirdly, when all of us were working from the office, there was more to do at the organisation, which made me feel very happy because it meant that I was practising my skills and gaining new experience.



One of the last weekly dinners was conducted as the dinner of Russian cuisine and culture. We prepared some traditional Russian dishes (borscht and blini) and I held a presentation about my nation. I did not see the point to tell how Russia is the biggest country in the world and so on, but I tried to reflect on the "Russian soul" and to explain our mentality and culture and I hope that I succeded with that.

One important thing I was working on during Autumn was the preparation of the webinar with Russian NGOs that work with people living with HIV in Russia. The topic of the webinar was "Living with HIV in Russia" and three different organisations (Vykhod, Positivnaya Oblast and Shagi) from different regions joined to hold a lecture on their work. The webinar was open for people living with HIV, NGO's and health-care Professionals in Sweden and I hope that they discovered something new and maybe got a bit of inspiration from it. It was awesome to create something from scratch and to do something unusual.





I also organized a Swedish fika for the family of my host, Nils. We gathered all together for the first time after the pandemic and had a very cozy evening.



During my last weekend in Stockholm people were celebrating Saint Lucia day and I visited the concert of the choir, where Nils was singing, which means that I got to experience something very authentically Swedish family-like.

To sum it up, the best thing about this volunteering project wasn't that it was it was in Stockholm or that it was completely funded, it was the fact that once again I had the opportunity to work with highly conscious and active people. After finishing my experience with AIESEC I was very much lacking such community. The community of people who are fighting towards peace, trying to change things and helping others to live a better life. I was very grateful to be a part of this team, and I have tried to bring in my contribution.

During my time in Sweden I have attended at least 20 different events, including a conference regarding human rights, the international IAS conference on HIV science, Stockholm Pride, two conferences for young people living with HIV and a lot more.

However, what's most important is that I've met an infinite amount of amazing people. Each and everyone of them is unique, has influenced me and will never be forgotten. For that I am forever grateful.





Contact information

cyrill.belous@gmail.com