Foreigners in Sofia & Friends

Foreigners in Sofia & Friends *is the biggest online community for foreigners in Bulgaria (24k members). Its founder, the Italian Giuseppe Di Benedetto started it at the end of 2014 with the idea to provide foreigners and locals with the space to exchange information and tips about life in Sofia. More about him and his mission follow in the interview below.*

Identity

What is the mission of Foreigners in Sofia & Friends?

The community *Foreigners in Sofia & Friends* was created to provide support and share information with people who moved to live in Sofia, Bulgaria. It is meant to be a self-help community where people can support each other, find new connections and friends to solve their daily issues. It is always better to have someone to talk to in good or bad moments.

Our goal is to connect foreigners with the local people. In this way, we all can have access to life in the country and the city. We feel more connected in a real way. It is also easier to receive help from people who know already the city, the culture, and the places.

How did it all start?

I moved to live in Sofia in November 2014. At the time I only knew one Italian and a few colleagues. I was looking for information on what to do in the city, I was also searching for a flat and a flat mate.

My solution was to look for a group on Facebook where I can find other people who were in the same situation as me.

I found a community but I did not like the way it was organized. Then I told myself that I have very valuable skills and knowledge from my time working for an international company and managing online communities. And I can use the same guidelines to create a really efficient and helpful community.

I set down and started writing all the principles and the rules of my future Facebook group. Since day one they are published in the group information section. The first thing that the community needed was a guide what it is allowed and what is not, and to have examples of how we suggest people interact with each other to keep it pleasant and helpful for everyone.

Do you recognize a kind of a common identity in your community?

I studied sociology of communication. This gave me a lot of tools to understand what is a norm of a community. I am not sure about a common identity, but we deal a lot with cultural differences of people coming from all walks of life. The differences between people are one of the main elements of a community. Like in our case, it is a community which works for people from many different countries. Sometimes we have a clash of cultures, especially, around problematic topics.

This is why we had to set some limits and our members are asked to avoid discussions on politics, for example. We don't want to divide people according to their political views, sexual orientations and other beliefs. The goal is the opposite – connecting people and maintaining a safe space where everyone can ask for support and help.

Structure

Why those guidelines are so important for the community life?

This is our way to avoid chaos, advertising pollution and propaganda spam which are common problems for all online communities. It is very easy to lose control of the purpose of the community itself. So, we have to keep an eye on it.

The moderation of a community is very important. We try to facilitate the group without giving it a sense of being controlled. It is about feeling safe and accepted in a co-shared virtual space.

Do you have the same moderators from the very beginning?

In the beginning, I was the only moderator. Today one of our oldest members, for example, became such a few months ago. We thought that he has always been a helpful and supportive member, and he will have the motivation and dedication to become a moderator.

There is a difference, of course, between being an active member of a community and being its moderator. Once you accept this role it means you have to take responsibility also for what the others do, not only for yourself.

Sometimes it takes time and effort because you have to engage with people when they report an offence and complain, or when you see someone is interacting in a wrong manner according to our rules. Then you have to explain what are the principles of this community and that they are created to support us. Sometimes you have to be the teacher in the kindergarten. Someone just has to do it.

It is very easy for a big group to become unpleasant. Then the positive part of the community might be leaving to look for a safer place.

How many moderators do you have the moment?

We have 5 moderators at the moment. There is no strict structure, we mainly discuss cases when it is necessary on common chats on Facebook. Even though we have a clear idea of what we want the community to be and we have guidelines to follow, very often we have to judge the single cases. We have to adapt the complexity of real-life to fit into our model. Sometimes it is very difficult, it needs a lot of balance.

How did you develop this common idea?

In the beginning, I set up the guidelines and I have been adapting them to the changes that the community has been going through with the time.

When the group grew up significantly, and I found more moderators to help me, we also started to meet up and discuss a lot. We also became friends. When you have a group of 500 people is very different from a group of 20 000. So, you have to constantly adapt yourself, your model and forecast. Just be responsive and flexible to the way the community is changing.

How do new members join the group?

They have to request membership and answer a couple of questions – a basic introduction of themselves and their motivation for joining. Sometimes we disapprove requests, for example, when we see there is only a commercial interest for promotion of services or products. Since the beginning we wanted the community to be advert free because we do not want a group where people take advantage of each other. A common sale does not bring value to the community. If anyone needs a product or a service, people ask for it.

Sometimes we are forced to block people from the community when dealing with absolutely unexcitable behaviour that continues after trying to explain the meaning of the community. There is a level of tolerance that you need to have but there is also a limit that is valid for the virtual community as for the real community.

Experience

Did you imagine the group to grow to more than 24k members?

Frankly, no. At that time the biggest community of foreigners in Sofia was not that big at all. When we reached 1,000 people, I thought that was very close to the limit. But then it just did not stop growing. Sofia also changed in the last couple of years. More and more foreigners are moving to live

here. The real community of the city is growing, and so do the online communities. I did not expect it to become like a full-time job for me.

What are your observations on the economic background of the group?

When we speak about the online community it is simple to declare that a minimum requirement is to have access to digital devise and Internet. There is this middle-class range. We have Erasmus students, EVS volunteers, skilled people coming from abroad to work here in international companies, diplomats, freelancers, entrepreneurs, etc. I could say that refugees are probably not a big part of this community.

On another hand, Bulgarians are people who speak different languages and who are interested to socialize with different cultures. Some of them have lived, studied or worked abroad, and when they came back to Sofia, they miss the open-minded exchange between people from different countries.

What do people share in the group?

People share everything you can imagine, mostly any kind of information. In the online part of the community we give recommendations, people look for accommodations and flatmates, for jobs, social activities and entertainment, car pulling, etc. There are also open calls for joining in exhibitions, cooking classes and forming musical bands. Everyone is looking to connect with people with the same interests and skills. Also learning together like language exchanges is very popular. People also look for fellows to go to festivals, to watch the last episode of Game of Thrones or the final of the football championship.

That's why we also started organizing offline activities. The human experience of a foreigner in a new country does not end online. You get information and suggestions on the Internet but you also need someone to sit in front of you and have coffee, for example.

One of the basic needs of every person is to have friends and we started meeting up in bars. Then we started organizing parties and every time we had new ideas according to what was happening in the group. By observing the group, you can get a very clear idea of what people need when they moved abroad.

For example, we realized that the language exchanges are quite popular and we started organizing them, later the idea of food events and international food exchanges came. We have also organized some excursions, the first one was to Surva festival in Pernik and we went to Plovdiv, too.

Now in a community of 24,000 people, it is more difficult to answer everyone's interest. However, people started organizing themselves and gathering in smaller groups to do things together.

Who comes to the physical meetings?

Every time we have a mix of new and old members – new people in town and members also bring friends. Some people come to our events and start a new friendship which forms their own circle and they stop coming to our events. So many different people and different motivations.

How is the community financed?

Most of our activities are done by volunteers. Before we have collected some shared budgets for our events, or we have organized charities to support specific causes in partnership with NGOs. Sometimes we have received donations from the people who run the venues where we have organized our events. It is small amounts of money or free drinks. We also try to find some sponsorships like discounts for foods on the menu, free entries, welcome drinks and other things for our members. We haven't received any grants or other bigger donations.

Tell me about the Open Sofia foundation.

The foundation was found almost 4 years ago. It was born from the experience of the group and the need of a legal entity to organize events, to sign up for partnership, to host students on university work placements, etc.

Now we are going through a phase of restructuring the foundation. We want to move it from private to public benefit. In this way, we aim to open the doors of the foundation and involve more people. I think there is a big potential for cooperation.

Is the foundation well recognized by the members of the online community?

We still haven't promoted it properly but we want to improve that in the future. We aim people to feel that they have an organization. This is the direction we are going to.

I know that you've been thinking of opening a small consultancy. Can you please tell me more?

I hope we will be able to announce it soon. We want to provide some consultancy services on a more professional level. It will be a for-profit organization. We are now developing a very specific company policy about how to reinvest part of the profit in the community itself. Our goal is to build an economically sustainable organization that can generate profit and give back the value to its people. We are developing a business model that is both profitable, sustainable and has a social benefit for the community.

Communications and Cooperation

How do the community tell their stories?

We are working on a website and a blog where we can share our stories. It will also involve other organizations.

Does the community cooperate with other actors?

We have had partnerships with NGOs. For example, we are in contact with the social centre Zone 21 and we have organized together some charity events for migrants and their kids. Then we started working with Multi Kulti Collective. We share a common vision and mission.

We are also in contact with the Italian Cultural Institute as well as with Institute Cervantes.

Networking is our field and we try to connect with as many different people, organizations and companies as possible. Simona, the manager of the online community Sofia Foodies, is one of our oldest members. One of our moderators is the organizer of the couch-surfing community in Sofia.

Do you have any challenges when it comes to cooperation?

You have to find the right balance between different interests and priorities especially when trying to work with companies. Most of the times we find common ground with our partners. It is a pleasure to work with people when we have things in common.

In our case, we share inner motivation and gratification about the achievement of bringing value to the people. We can't measure the happiness we like to deliver to others. For us, a real quality of life is when we do something meaningful for others.

Personally, have you had a difficult moment when you thought you want to quit?

I have faced that moment a couple of times. The first one was at the time when our community started growing too fast and it changed a lot. Many new people that we didn't know joined the group. In the beginning, we were a big family. But later it became bigger, more complicated to manage, and it required more time and commitment.

We had our adolescent ages when we were growing up, and changes had to be applied. Like removing the sales of personal stuff from the group because they were just too much over the rest of the information.

All things are fine, however. There are other places to share product or to speak about politics. This is one of the things we suggest to people. Here we need the leadership to save the community the way we like it around the goal we set at the beginning. We also suggest to people that instead of trying to change our rules, put that energy into creating their own online community with their own rules and ideas. We always offer to help.