

# An international perspective of a “Laboratory City”

## Introduction

By Marcin Senderski

**EUSTORY Alumni** were offered a unique opportunity to experience the peculiarity of Ceuta during an intensive daytrip on 25th September 2013. The collection of articles and notes below will give the readers a glimpse of the impressions, observations and thoughts on the diversity and specificity of this place. The texts feature various perspectives and standpoints on what Ceuta is and what message it may convey to the world outside.

## My thoughts on . . .

By Irena Cavdek

Ceuta is Spanish town in Africa, opposite of Gibraltar. It is an example of how different religions live together. When being described life in Ceuta one will always hear about coexistence and convivencia, Spanish word without English translation. But some other languages have word for convivencia: Slovenian, Italian, Finnish and Dutch. (At this I wonder why some languages can translate this word, while others do not.) Slovenian words are sobivanje in sožitje. First one, meaning coexistence, means to be together in one place, second one, meaning convivencia, means to live together. That is the difference between words: one means just to be together at same place, while other involves also personal involvement while living together. Difference can be described as sharing food. In middle of table there is plate with salad. When eating with people we do not know or not feel comfortable with, everyone will take salad to their own plate with fork and spoon

provided. But when eating with family or friends, everyone will just eat salad from one plate. Not only we eat with them, but we also share food.

And that is convivencia.

I am not sure if I really felt difference during my visit to Ceuta, but that is probably because it was too short. For experiencing the difference

between words one should stay there longer or visit during one of religious holidays, when everyone celebrates, even if it is not their holiday. Because just allowing and tolerating religious holidays of other religions is just coexistence, but celebrating and enjoying holidays with them, that is convivencia.

# Faces of diversity

By Marcin Senderski

"This could be heaven for everyone" - Sting might have been tempted to sing if he had visited Ceuta. Indeed, the idyllic stories of cosmopolitanism and successful co-existence of four religions in this small Spanish enclave in Africa can inspire human imagination. Colorful Arabic outfits and pushy salesmen, combined with snobbish boutiques and of the most picturesque McDonald's - this is Ceuta's landscape boiled down to one sentence. Isn't it an earthy paradise if the access to it is guarded by a double 3-metre high fence, decorated with barbed wire and surveillance cameras? There has to be a reason for which illegal immigrants, mainly from Morocco, put their lives in jeopardy while struggling to put their feet on Ceutan soil. 1

million tourists that visit it annually seems to complement

this portrait and confirm the image of the sun-bathing paradise with low taxes, duty-free stores and cheap gasoline.

In the contest of most diversity per square kilometer Ceuta would rank high. Sadly, it is on top in less glorious rankings, too.

According to recent data published by Eurostat in May, the unemployment in Ceuta is the highest amongst 270 EU regions, reaching 38.5 per cent, 15 times more than in Salzburg and Tirol, the most healthy districts. To make things more depressing, Ceuta opens the list of female unemployment table with an embarrassing 49.4 per cent and is among the inglorious leaders of youth unemployment with a rate of 70.6 per cent. These are official figures, but the spokesman of Centro Cultural al-Idrissi, a local Muslim cultural center, I have interviewed yesterday, sees the reality even less optimistic, arguing that 80 per cent of youth remains unemployed, 70 per cent of

which are Muslim. This is a considerable imbalance, as Muslim population makes up for less than 40 per cent in this territory inhabited by 83.000 people and counting (it was only 71.000 in 2001).

Despite rather peaceful co-living, the insufficient economic empowerment of Muslims does not bode well for the future. The enclave might showcase a European success story of uniting cultures within liberal and democratic framework, but it simply fails to live up to this expectation. The Muslim perspective is that they are indirectly discriminated by the state, being the main employer in Ceuta, while filling vacancies in public administration. On another note, the majority of Muslim youth drop school prematurely, and - having pittance savings and no education - only rarely goes into entrepreneurship.

So why is the Ceutan headcount on growth and people trafficking so hard to be ceased? No one thinks of taking a step back to Morocco, which offers even less in terms of living conditions. Apparently, trade and tourism, along with a relatively favorable economic status of the enclave

(although significantly less outstanding than before EU accession), suffice for subsistence. Ceuta is equally far from paradise as it is from hell, although it has got a lot to move up the ladder. Whether this potential will be seized or not is a question for a crystal ball to answer. What now makes both Christian and Muslim districts closest are the planked shop-windows of every second point of sale. Difficult to decipher if it is just siesta or still the crisis.



# Feeling at home

By Mileslava Bogdanova

A lot of clouds and no sun at eight o'clock in the morning. Someone said we were lucky it was not raining. It seemed like the best weather Ceuta could offer us. We were wrong. Or at least I was as far as my vision of this town was concerned. Ceuta turned out to be the one of the warmest places I have ever been to with its boiling hot sun, hospitality of the people and the variety of personalities who walk on the streets.

I thought I was going to Africa leaving Europe behind the waters but then I arrived home even though I was thousands of kilometers away from Bulgaria.

Once I got there I was welcomed by the renovated fort of the town which generously let me see the inside part of Ceuta where history meets modern life and the four different religious groups (Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus) give the intercultural aspects of the town. You can't find that in Europe where things are well arranged and people from different nations and religions live in separate blocks so you can easily find or avoid different minorities. Such cities have the variety of cultures, call them multicultural but the feeling of division is still hanging in air.

Life in Ceuta does not go in that European manner. The way people live together in the spirit of not just being at the same place but

mixing and sharing with each other human and civil rights and everyday problems reminded me of home.

They live like in Bulgaria. Days go by in shared moments of religious celebrations and children who go to school and sit next to their friends from another religion. In Ceuta they are proud that such lifestyle turns them into a laboratory of human relations. But for me, for us on the Balkans, it is just the only way life can possibly go. It has never been about to coexistence there, the meeting point has always been sharing with those who you live with. It has always been the point that you care for others.

Ceuta sincerely tries to make you feel at home. People there want to help you even when you do not know you need help. I did not think I was lost until I had that man pulling off his car asking me if I need directions because he

saw me lonely looking at the map. That did not feel like Europe or Africa. Ceuta felt like home where no one cares about your clothes, religion or favorite music band but only wants you to be safe and enjoy your life.

# C-EU-ta: Moroccan Europe at its best

By Andreas Dheys

*Eight hours of travelling back and forth to actually stay there for ten. It was short, it was intensive, and it was what this week is all about. The chaos, jungle and wildlife I initially expected when I set my first step ever on African soil were surprisingly replaced by your typical touristic hotspot in Southern Europe. However, Ceuta not being known for its tourism, I figured there must be more to this historic city than my eye could see at that first moment. And what came out of that assumption is worth the mentioning: Filipinos (allow me to explain that one), convivencia and pigeons, pigeons everywhere!*

## Filipinos

As I left the Mediterranean beach we had lunch at, separating myself from a lovely group of Eustorians, I adventurized Ceuta like it was going out of style. Earlier that day, I had received a map of Ceuta's city center, on which all must-see places were indicated. Nevertheless, I'm not the kind of Dutch speaking tourist to be actually hanging out at those places. So I obliged myself to get local! And what better way to do so -or at least that's what I thought- than to go grocery shopping at the local supermarket. About twenty minutes it took me to find one and guess what I discovered? They had Filipinos! Allow me to clarify that just a little more: Filipinos are a brand of white chocolate covered cookies and without a doubt the best cookies to have ever been sold in your local supermarket. I knew they existed in Portugal -that is where I initially discovered them- and Spain, but now I can add a third place in the world to my secret cookies list!

## Convivencia

After safely packing all groceries in my backpack, I continued my stroll through the city. I met Tamara, one of the Slovenian participants, somewhere on the edges of the city center. She asked me if I had seen the synagogue yet, for which I had to plea not guilty. Eventually I spotted the building, wondering how I couldn't have seen it before. Having said that, it was remarkable to spot this particular syna-

gogue as a group of Muslims, both men and women, were passing by and to top off the tank, I had just passed a Catholic school myself one minute earlier. This kind of strategic planning is something we in Belgium can only dream of. These three communities would have to be separated in our country to prevent them from setting each other on fire, but Ceuta has its own definition about and vision on this matter: "convivencia"! It signifies the co-existing of different communities out here (Catholic, Muslim, Jewish and apparently even Hindu) with a specific element of cohabitation, interacting cultures and mixed street scenery that is really hard to get if you have not been walking around it yourself. I would recommend our Flemish Minister of Integration and Federal Secretary of Asylum and Migration, the poor Benidorm Bastards, to plan their next holidays somewhere towards this direction instead of the sunny Costa Brava.

And finally, I ended up somewhere beyond the coverage of the map I was given. I noticed this beautiful mid-evil fortress, which occurs to still have a military purpose of some sort -I did see some military people walking around town. I passed by a playground; I halted, ate some of those lovely Filipinos and watched some kids play a game I used to play in my childhood. Pigeons also seem to be part of the local scenery, as they basically hang around everywhere, Main Square to harbor. It's Europe and it's Africa, it's a gateway and a boundary, it's coexistencia and conviventia, it's breathing history and exhaling present, it's Europe's Moroccan Melting Pot and Morocco's European Salad Bowl, it's sharing and caring, but most of all: it's worth the travel, the stay and the re-visit!

# Excerpts from a travel diary

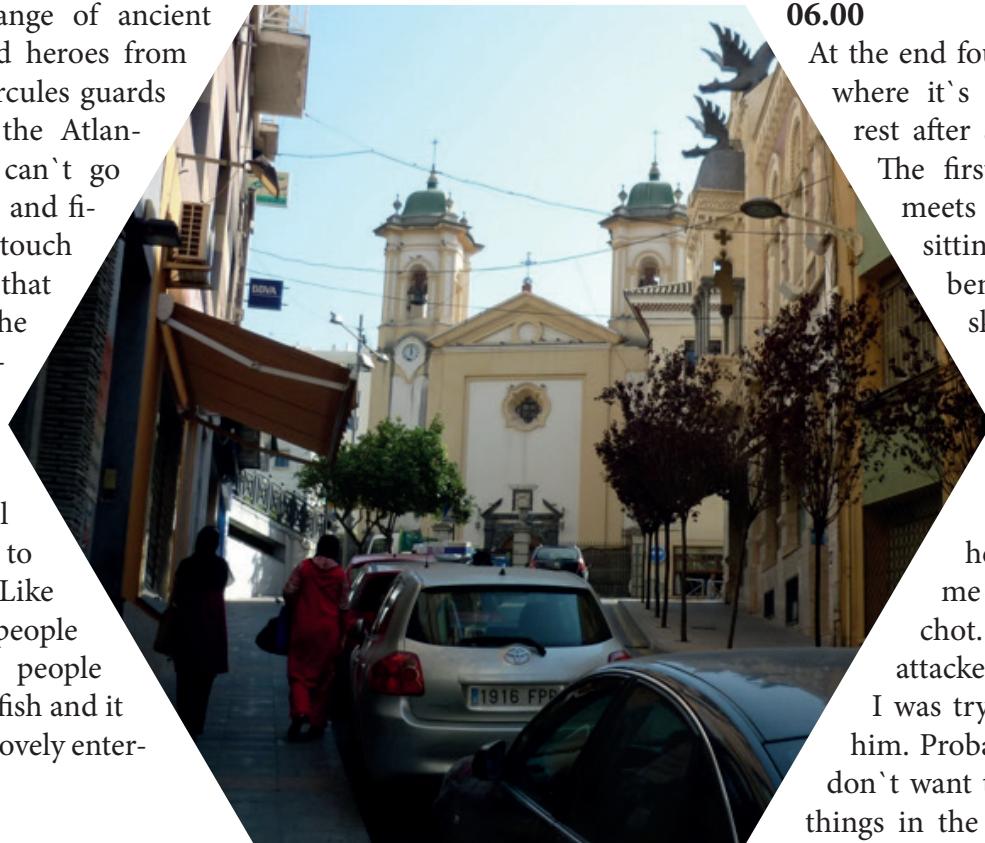
By Ekaterina Vasilyeva

## 04.00

Oh, no... I'm going to walk through the city where almost half of the population are Arabs. Is it safe for a white girl to walk alone there? In Russia you do not meet so many women in burquas on streets. But here it seems pretty normal, and my European friends also don't pay much attention to them. I assume, in European cities citizens got used to it – but not in Russia.

## 04.30

The whole range of ancient characters and heroes from Homer to Hercules guards the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. I can't go through them and finally feel the touch of the waves that carried away the ships of Columbus. It's a some kind of restricted area, and all you can do is to feed the fish. Like in our cities people feed pigeons, people in Ceuta feed fish and it seems to be a lovely entertainment.



## 05.05

Looking at the "Casa de los dragones", taking pictures just like any other ordinary tourists. On one of them two dragons are screeching at two Muslim girls. Is it a sign? The fantastical animals do not agree with the presence of Islam in the city or... Anyway, for the real fighting these dragons are too small and there are too many Muslims around them.

## 05.15

The map shows that the next monument is devoted to "convivencia". On the way to it I surprisingly stumbled over the statue of a man in a kind of KKK clothes. It's a pity he's not really racist, it's just a costume for some Catholic masquerade, otherwise there will be another example of contradiction in this unusual city. But for people who don't know it, it is a contradiction – that's the origin of creating stereotypes because of ignorance.

## 06.00

At the end found a place where it's possible to rest after sightseeing. The first one who meets me when sitting on the bench was a skinny Spanish cat with wild eyes and dirty fur. Somehow he reminded me of Don Ki-chot. He bravely attacked me while I was trying to feed him. Probably, people don't want to see good things in the others and misunderstand their actual intentions just like this cat? However, in Russia all the cats behave like this so this strange hostility unites everything.

# An Italian in Ceuta

By Silvia Martelossi

Let's imagine the place that Ulisses reached in his last adventure; imagine a place in another Continent; imagine a community member of the EU. And imagine Muslims: imagine Christians and Jewish and Hindu. Imagine something completely different from what you have ever seen in Italy. Apart from the port: in a foggy day, before the sun rises, you could think you are landing in Trieste, with blue shapes of boats, harbor buildings, cranes.

But then the sun sets high and you just stop with imagination and start perceiving.

Under houses shadow, safe from noon sunlight, a man is taking a nap, lining his back against the wall. A woman is sitting in front of her carpets shop, waiting for a friend to chat, rather than for a customer.

White curtains at the windows.

On the arid soil, between small and rectangular houses, stairs are shaped. A boy with a t-shirt of the Spanish National football team is hurrying home: on the top of the stairway his mother is calling for lunch.

From a corner a girl appears. She has a refined make-up. The colors of her chador and the movements of her light clothes remind you the waves.

You can see the sea on the right. The Ocean on the left.

You can hear the weak echo of a radio, somewhere, broadcasting old-fashioned songs.

You can smell the fragrance of home-made cookies.

But there is also the smell of stinky garbage, of vegetables sold on the streets, food lined up on the ground.

Sit on a bench in a park a girl is brushing her mother's hair. As her daughter has done, she wears the veil again, and the two of them go on with their walk. There is a palace, partially hidden by palms and oleandros, it has the color of a peach and you can swear you saw Sherazade enjoying the sun on the balcony. On the bridge nearby there is an old man, skin darkened by the burning sun, white beard and no hair, he is holding a transparent wire. Cars pass by, hardly avoiding him, but he doesn't care: today he is fishing.

Ceuta is a city that recalls the peace after a war, the rest after a struggle; it is a city of sunny and dusty streets; of desert playgrounds; of a wall with the graffiti "Nazareth por siempre".

But Ceuta is also the city of streets fulfilled with children coming back from school; of crowded and clean squares, new chain-stores, banks. It is the representative European gate to the Mediterranean sea.

It is the place of a child chasing a ball. She asks me something. I do not understand. She smiles and gives me the ball.

# A walk through the Laboratory

By Ida Ydo

*Ceuta. Seven. The seven brothers, seven hills or seven mountains. I am in the city of passersbys, a city always known for trading, moving through and lately also a big diversity of people.*

The ground of the main walking street is made of stone, and is cleaner than the floor of my own apartment. The laboratory city, experimenting with cocktails of different religions and traditions holds its streets as clean as a scientist's lab.

A man wearing about fifty kilos too many around his belly has chosen to put on a grey t-shirt with capital letters saying "It's not fun to sleep alone" is passed by a police wagon.

I don't know if it is because I have a cold or because there is no smells, but the only thing I feel in my nose is the dust of a city where there is twenty-three degrees but feels forty.

While I walk up the hilly street, passing stores closed down for the siesta I am wishing to have, I pass several groups and lone women with colorful scarves covering their hair. One is wearing a blinding green, shiny hijab, and a dress to match. Her friend is in beige headwear and bordeaux dress that reaches the ground.

The second police car of the day drives past me and stops because one of the officers knows a man and small talk for a while in Spanish. I only understand

the word "mujer" and "pescado".

A blouse reads "Enchanté" in a store window, French, Moroccan, I don't know, but the window is as clean as the stones I am walking on.

There are a lot of different people here, and as the stores are closed I go people shopping instead of window-shopping. A third police car separates my line of sight from a bald man with blue eyes walking his rat-sized dog and daughter in a taekwondo outfit.

Two posters are advertising for Goya right beside each other. The loud sound of several hammers tells me that there is rebuilding being done in the near area.

I pass a young girl, maybe thirteen, in jeans shorts that are so short I can see the bottom of her buttocks, and a faded, pink crop top showing me her belly button.

A woman with dark eyes and olive skin is wearing a white shade over her black hijab. She is quickly outrun by a fashionista in ten-inch heels, accessorized by a scarf around her hips, a phone by the ear and a kid by the hand.

A soldier is hiding around the corner of a building. Her smile reaches her eyes as she laughs into a mobile phone. She is the only soldier I see on my tour under the city lime trees that are framing the entire walking street.

Ceuta. Seven. Seven brothers. Maybe not meaning brothers as much as a big family. One big family of different cultures, beliefs, religions, traditions, looks, foods and friendships.

