



**The European Portal
for Cities and Citizens**

Interview



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EU Commissioner Mariya Gabriel: The future of Europe is everyone's future

- Mrs. Gabriel, first of all, congratulations on your new appointment and best of luck at your new job. Your portfolio as Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth has undergone several changes and has increased significantly since initially proposed. What are your expectations for your new position and how do you plan to combine so many different sectors?

- Taking on this great and important line is a real privilege and an honor for me. It provides tremendous opportunities for our SMEs, start-ups and start-ups to develop and create innovation. It is also an opportunity for our young people to acquire the necessary skills for an increasingly digital labor market.

Education, research and innovation are inextricably linked. We often talk about the knowledge triangle, but our big goal is to make it a square of knowledge, incorporating the benefits to society. Achieving this goal requires an ambitious political agreement on the next multiannual financial framework, especially with regard to programs that reflect our priorities for the future: Horizon Europe,

Erasmus + Creative Europe, European Solidarity Corps. The coming months will be crucial.

Over the next five years, we need to address several major challenges. We need to strengthen support for women, especially in the field of science. We must overcome the division between East and West in terms of excellence. We must use the full potential of education, research and culture to promote international cooperation, especially with our neighbours in the Western Balkans. We need to preserve our cultural heritage as a pillar in an increasingly unpredictable world. Sport is also very important as a means of promoting inclusion.

- After a long struggle led by the European Parliament, Culture was included in the name of your portfolio - and of course, what is Europe without its cultural heritage? What are the main obstacles that you expect to face and what is your vision for European cultural development?

- I am very pleased that Culture is now explicitly mentioned in the name of my portfolio, along with research and education, which have also been added to the name. Of course, wheth-

Read our interview with EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth Mariya Gabriel on the challenges of the future

er explicitly stated or not, culture is part of it.

Culture and cultural heritage are the cornerstones of European integration and are an essential resources for Europe. 2018 was the European Year of Cultural Heritage, and we know from research that most Europeans are proud of our common cultural heritage. They state that it is important for them to feel like they belong to Europe.

What would happen to our cities and communities without their museums, local traditions and holidays? What would Europe be like without cross-border mobility and the exchange of information on culture and arts?

That is why we must preserve our cultural heritage as a pillar in a world full of challenges. In this sense, the cultural dimension is crucial to addressing the challenges of education, innovation, social cohesion and climate change, as well as regional and urban growth, sustainable development. We need to work hard for the EU's political agenda for inclusion, sustainability and innovation, without forgetting the international context and the unique global partnerships that culture and cultural heritage help to forge.

We must also acknowledge the problems in culture itself. In the Commission's proposal for the next long-term budget, the Creative Europe program will have nearly 1.9 billion euros of funding. However, support for culture and cultural heritage must remain broader. In this context, the

Horizon Europe program and the EU Structural Funds will play a particularly important role.

- As Commissioner responsible for Education and Youth, one of the most important programs under your jurisdiction is Erasmus +. What are your plans for its development in the next 5 years?

- Erasmus is a European success story that has proven its added value for more than three decades. The program is an effective way of addressing many of the societal challenges facing Europe. In the future, we need a bigger, stronger, better Erasmus + program. We are currently negotiating with the European Parliament and the Member States. I expect the next seven-year budget for the period 2021-2027 to double and why not triple.

We need more funding to enable a wider range of people and organizations to participate in the program. More people with fewer opportunities, including disadvantaged or disabled persons, should be able to take advantage of the prospects offered. We want funding to be more accessible to smaller local organizations, such as youth groups and sports clubs.

A stronger Erasmus + program is also at the root of our efforts to make the European Education Area a reality by 2025. We want to remove all obstacles for high-quality education and facilitate the movement of students between EU education systems.

- Innovation and technological progress are essential for Europe. During your term, you will work

with other Commissioners on a range of science-related issues and how they impact citizens' everyday lives. What results do you expect from your cooperation with your fellow commissioners?

- Research and innovation are key to how we live, how we work and how we protect the climate. That is why we are developing our research and innovation policies in close cooperation with other European Commission directorates, and not only. We have started strategic planning for the new Horizon Europe research and innovation program, with the participation of other institutions, EU countries, businesses, research organizations, universities and citizens. We have created the programme in such a way that it ensures we address the issues that are most important to society and has the greatest impact.

In terms of results, research and innovation will definitely play a central role in delivering results on the European Green Deal. More than 35% of the proposed € 100 billion of funding under the new Horizon Europe program, as well as the new € 1 billion of funding under the current Horizon 2020 program, will contribute to the climate and European Green Pact objectives.

Another important issue for me is a greater representation of women in all areas. Addressing gender inequalities in science is one of my priorities for the development of the European Research Area. I look forward to working with my fellow Commissioners to bring about this positive change. The first date to mark the calendar is February 11 - International Women's Day in Science. On this day, we will be launching this year's edition of the Women's Innovator Award, which honours women entrepreneurs who have presented remarkable innovations on the market. I will be glad to have many successful female candidates from Bulgaria as well.

- You're building on top of your rich experience as Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society. What are you bringing from your previous portfolio to your current job?

- One of the main priorities of the current European Commission is to prepare Europe for the digital age. This means that we must be at the forefront of technological breakthroughs, encourage our innovators to bring their ideas to

the market and ensure that society as a whole benefits from them. These goals are closely related to my previous work as Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society.

A good example is blockchain. In 2018, I launched the Observatory and the EU Blockchain Forum. We have also proposed a Digital Europe program with a budget of EUR 9.2 billion, in which the development of blockchain applications will play an important role. On the other hand, the European Innovation Council (ESI) will be the main tool in helping to fund innovative ideas and bring them to the market.

But, of course, digitalisation is also heavily present in the education, culture and youth dimensions of my portfolio. I will continue to work to ensure that more Europeans have access to digital skills training, mainly through the Digital Education Action Plan. I was very committed to adopting it in January 2018 and am now responsible for updating it to promote digital skills for all.

This is very important for our societies to be better prepared for the future - 43% of Europeans currently lack basic digital skills.

We need to make better use of technology to make our education systems more innovative, relevant and prepared for the digital age. For example, we need citizens to understand how artificial intelligence and algorithms affect our daily lives, as well as the many ethical and social implications of these technologies. We need to retain our talents in Europe so that we can fully embrace these new technologies and our small and medium-sized enterprises benefit from the digital and environmental transformation of our economy.

- Europe's digitalization and digitization are already an established fact - they are part of the lives of not only citizens, but of entire municipalities and cities, even countries. What are your priorities for the EU's digital development during your new term?

- My leading priority is to enable the best European researchers, innovators and businesses to drive the transition to digital in a way that is revolutionary, competitive and to the benefit of society. This includes extending the development and added value of digital solutions to all EU countries. I would like to set an example with Bulgaria.

Through this Horizon 2020 research and innovation program, the Bulgarian international freight company Discordia received a loan of € 2.4 million for digitization, development of an innovative business model and creation of 160 new jobs in just a single year.

With Horizon Europe, for the period 2021-2027, we are even more ambitious. The European Innovation Council pilot project is already supporting the funding of innovative start-ups and SMEs that have failed in the past to find funding for their revolutionary and innovative ideas. The Transmetrix-based company in Sofia is one of the first 75 start-ups and SMEs to receive funding through the new ESI Accelerator tool.

What are your goals for the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe? As Commissioner responsible for Europe's youth, do you intend to work on involving young people in the discussions?

Of course. The Conference on the Future of Europe plays an important role in our priority of giving new impetus to European democracy. Citizens, especially young people, are aware of the challenges we face and wish to participate more and more actively. With this in mind, we launched the conference on the future of Europe as a forum for citizens, policy-makers and other stakeholders to hold an open, inclusive and transparent debate about our future.

Through the Erasmus + programs, the European Solidarity Corps and DiscoverEU, we can mobilize young people. It is very important that we're also

able to reach disadvantaged people or those who live in remote areas. I am convinced that young Europeans will contribute. This is their future.

In terms of research and innovation, we want to discuss how we can best deal with people's fundamental concerns. That is why we have added a whole new element to the future Horizon Europe program - the so-called. missions. Through them, we want to respond to climate change, be more effective in fighting cancer, take care of soil and food, and the condition of the oceans. My idea is to hold discussions in the Member States and hear people's opinions. I would also like to see Bulgarian citizens active, exchanging views and contributing to the pan-European debate. The future of Europe is actually everyone's future.



Culture and cultural heritage are the cornerstones of European integration and are essential resources for Europe.

EU Mayors about TheMayor.EU

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Dimitrios Marinakis,
Mayor of Lemnos, Greece

“I really believe that the interconnection between municipalities is crucial. We can all have very important benefits in many areas. For a remote and rather small place like Lemnos, it is very important to be able to follow the European developments, in order to get new ideas and apply innovative and most of all efficient policies.

Your website is a very useful ‘tool’ for municipalities and citizens. We definitely need more information about Europe and European Union as we all now live under the same European sky.”

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“It is a very positive and much needed initiative that furthers the possibilities of creating broader networks and a deeper knowledge and understanding of local developments across Europe”

Philip Sandberg,
Mayor of Lund in Sweden



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“One of the problems facing the European Union in this historical phase is also the misinformation about the activities and good practices of our continent. I believe that a tool like a unified platform can contribute to building a sense and a common look at contemporaneity.”

Giorgio Gori,
Mayor of Bergamo in Italy

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“Our process of policy making is based on co-creation. We believe in sharing knowledge, experiences and inspiration with our inhabitants and our partners. That’s the main reason why we also believe that sharing on a European level is very important. We actively participate in the European arena. In European cooperation projects, European networks, European Awards and European events. Europe is our home and future.”

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Paul Depla,
Mayor of Breda,
Netherlands



Qrendi



Brief history

MAYOR

David M. Schembri

Life within the Qrendi confines has been recorded as far back as the early or later Pleistocene times (circa 2.588 million to 11.700 years ago) as testified by fossilised bones of dwarf elephants, hippopotami, bears, stags, foxes and giant dormouse, excavated from the "bones caves" in 1858, from the nearby hard coralline limestone quarries.

Neolithic ruins at Hagar Qim, Mnajdra and Misrah is-Sinjura complement Malta's largest free-standing temples. Phoenician and Palo Christian rock tombs and catacombs are also located in Qrendi.

Neolithic Temples at Hagar Qim and the Mnajdra, the Blue Grotto sea caves and grottos, the Wied iz-Zurrieq coastal harbour, the Octagonal Tower, the Grandmaster De Redin and Lascaris Coastal Towers, The Qrendi Parish Church, The Madonna tal-Hniena Sanctuary, wayside chapels, palaces attributed to the Knights of Malta, and the Gnien tal-Kmand gardens are all worthy attractions located in Qrendi.

The confirmation of Qrendi as an independent Parish on 19 February 1618, is celebrated on the first Sunday following the 19th.

The celebration of the village feasts of Santa Maria is on 15 August, Our Lady of Lourdes - on the first Sunday in July. Also celebrated is the the Potato and Agrarian Festival on the last Sunday in May.

The religious feasts of the ascension into heaven of the Blessed Virgin known locally as Santa Marija, and the feasts celebrating the visitation of our Lady of Lourdes are definitely not to be missed.

More about the history of Qrendi can be discovered through the Tourism section.

Administrative Data

Located in the South Eastern Region of Malta, the village of Qrendi has a population of 2773 people.

Economy

Qrendi is adorned with a country side rich in flora and fauna diversity, with an abundance of Carob trees, potato and onion fields, and the legendary Maqluba doline, where Malta's national tree, the Sandarac Gum Tree (Gharghar) grows to its heart's content.

Growing in popularity at Qrendi is the San Matthew tal-Maqluba attraction, as the rich surroundings at San Matthew tal-Maqluba offer a tranquil and relaxing environment, where heritage, beauty, legend, culture and religion intersect. This location is proving of becoming a most popular venue for wedding celebrations.

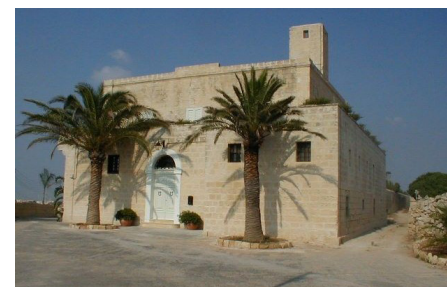
Several Fish restaurants are open daily

at Wied iz-Zurrieq, the restaurant at the Neolithic temples complex specialises in traditional Maltese dishes. A restaurant within the Qrendi village Core also offers Maltese food dishes as well as traditional Rabbit dishes.

No shopping venues are available locally except for some "family run" food supermarkets, and shops. The village of Żurrieq (ten minute walk away) however offers an open market.

Thanks to its large cultural heritage, the village was awarded with the EU "European Destination of Excellence" title, which further stimulates its tourism sector.

Tourism



GUARENA PALACE

The Guarena Palace, a square-shaped fortress-residence, consists of two storeys with the lower story being much larger than the one above. The entrance is typical of the Maltese houses of the time with its size being relatively small when compared to the palaces or residences of the Order of St John.

The Palace's entrance ceiling is barrel-shaped in which one can find a monumental stone stairway, typical of the palaces of the same era found in Valletta. The stone handrail rests on stone banisters. The upper storey consists of lesser rooms, however their doorways are much larger than those found on the first storey.

It seems that the idea of the defense of the building was wavered in lieu of comfort as such doorways allowed its rooms to be much cooler in the

hot summer months. The upper storey leads into the back gardens where one can admire numerous citrus trees. On top of the second storey one can find a small but significant observation turret, erected with the aim to trace movements from invaders or corsairs.

SAN MATTHEW TAL-MAQLUBA

Located on top of the "Maqluba" geological feature (the name meaning "overturned" referring to the area), the chapel is a typical wayside chapel, and visiting this attraction, one can truly realise the spiritual attributes of the locality.

In reality there are two chapels: the smaller and older chapel (on the left) lies on the edge of the sinkhole, and is probably one of the oldest chapels still standing in Malta as records show that it was already standing in 1574/5.

The other and much bigger chapel in size, much used nowadays, was built between 1674 and 1682.





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Brief history

MAYOR
Ricardo Rio



Braga is considered to be one of the youngest cities in Europe and combines perfectly its two-thousand-year old history with invigorating youth and vitality. With an unusual history, it is still known up to today as the city of the Archbishops or as the Portuguese Rome.

Also, the commitment to promote development based on the transfer of knowledge, technology and eco sustainability has been advertising the city of Braga as a “cluster” of technological industries and an increasingly attractive pole for Investment. It is a city that also has a rich touristic offer.

Braga has always taken a strategic and central regional role, from Bracara Augusta to the present day, thanks to the privileged geographical location and its dynamism. It plays a leading role in the economy, culture, knowledge and technology of the region and this centrality and relevance provides its inhabitants with an excellent quality of life in various sectors.



Economy

Braga is a technological hotbed, where many internationally successful startups have emerged and is home to a renowned University – University of Minho – and to the International Iberian Nanotechnology Laboratory (INL) – a leading international research centre. Bosch Car Multimedia Portugal, Aptiv, Torrestir, Alumínios Navarra, Primavera BSS, WeDo Technologies are

some of the most representative companies, among others. The municipality considers that Economic Promotion, Investment Attraction and Internationalization are the key vectors of the strategic measures adopted in order to foster Dynamism, Innovation, Knowledge and Creativity in the Business Sector, towards a new local and regional economic cycle.

Administrative Data

Braga, capital of the Minho region, is the third-largest city in Portugal, after Lisbon and Porto, and has high standards of quality of life based on location and infrastructures. It has a population of 181,954 inhabitants, which represents about 64,000 families, in an area of 183.40 km². Braga has 46% of young population (85,000 young people) and is the youngest district capital in Portugal and one of the youngest in Europe.



Tourism

With over 2000 years of a very rich history, Braga is a city of huge beauty and heritage richness, which combines tradition with innovation, memory with youth and creativity with conservatism. The city history is deeply connected with Roman Catholic Religion, being known as the Portuguese Rome or the City of Archbishops. The Cathedral of Braga, due to its long history and artistic significance, is one of the most important buildings in the country.

Braga presents places that by their intrinsic devotion and beauty, impose themselves as mandatory benchmarks to visit. A prime example of the European Baroque and the evolution of Braga art, the Bom Jesus do Monte Sanctuary is considered one of the greatest religious tourism highlight of the town and the entire Braga region.

Other types of events also attract tourists, ones that either mix the religious with the profane (like the celebration of the feasts of S. João) or are simply popular (as the reenactment of “Braga Romana”, recalling the period when the city lived under Roman rule).

The city is also the stage of Europe’s biggest White Night. During 48 hours you can listen to great concerts, explore artistic installations and see innovative performances.

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Brief history

MAYOR

Yordanka Fandakova



After the north-eastern parts of Bulgaria where the capital of Preslav was located, were conquered by Byzantium in 972, Sredets became a temporary capital of the First Bulgarian Empire. The Bulgarian Church, headed by Patriarch Damyan, moved here from Drastar City (present-day Silistra). There was a time of continuous economic and cultural growth for Sredets during the Second Bulgarian Empire (1194-1382). The city grew and got its final appearance of a typical medieval city. The streets became narrower, buildings with a typical brick and stone construction appeared, new small churches were erected, and in its vicinity, mostly on the slopes of Vitosha and the Balkan Mountains, many monasteries were constructed. In the last decades of the 14th century, the city took on its present name - Sofia, after the basilica that arose nearby. In 1382, after a three-month siege, Sofia was captured by Ottoman conquerors. Following the liberation of the city from Ottoman rule (04.01.1878), a year later - on 03.04.1879, the First Constituent National Assembly unanimously chose Sofia as the capital of the restored Bulgarian State. In 1879, the first urban development plan of Sofia was drawn up. It transformed the outlook of the city and shaped to a large extent the appearance of today's city centre. Some of the most prominent architects and builders of the time were attracted from Europe for the construction of the new capital.



Economy

Sofia is the main administrative, industrial, transport, cultural and university centre of the country, and 1/6 of the industrial production of Bulgaria is concentrated here. Sofia is the largest industrial centre of Bulgaria. There are around 800 big enterprises on the territory of the city. 75% of the steel industry, 50% of the printing industry, 15% of the electrical and electronics industry, 14% of the fur and footwear industry in the country are concentrated in Sofia. Chemical, textile and food products are also manufactured. The construction, trade and transport sectors connecting the material and social infrastructure of the big city are highly developed. The private sector on the territory of Stolicna Municipality is concentrated mainly in the spheres of trade and services.

Administrative Data

Stolicna Municipality is an administrative and territorial unit which has the status of a region. Stolicna Municipality comprises 38 populated areas, 4 of them the following cities and towns: Sofia, Bankya, Buhovo and Novi Iskar, as well as 34 villages. Sofia is divided into 24 regions. The regional mayors solve the problems

arising from the everyday needs of the population according to their place of residence, the administrative servicing of the citizens, the city/town development, sanitation, etc. The city is situated in the Sofia Field at an altitude of about 550 m above sea level. The region is rich in mineral water.



Tourists can see the exhibited remains of the Eastern Gate of Serdika - Sredets, dating from the 2nd-14th century. The remains are situated in the subway between the Presidency and the Council of Ministers. One of the oldest churches in the capital is the Saint Sofia Basilica, built in the time of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527-565). It was the main temple of the medieval city, during Ottoman rule it was turned into a mosque. St. Aleksander Nevski Memorial Temple is one of the symbols of the capital. The temple was built in 1912 under the project of the Russian architect Aleksander Pomerantsev. Its bell tower rises to a height of 53 meters; it has 12 bells, the heaviest of them weighing 10 tons. The oldest temple in Sofia is the St. George Rotunda. It is believed that it was built in the 4th century, during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great. Just near the Rotunda is the Saint Petka Samardzhyska Temple, built in

the 11th century. Another Christian landmark in the area is the Saint Joseph Catholic Cathedral. The National Archaeological Museum is located in the area with religious landmarks and just opposite the Presidency. It houses some of the most valuable treasures found in Bulgaria. Nearby is the National Museum of Natural History that houses stuffed, extremely valuable, even extinct plant and animal species. Right next to the Museum is located the St. Nicholas Russian Church that is impressive with its architecture. The popular Vitosha Boulevard is among the favourite places of the guests and residents of the capital. Here, one can find shops of world brands and its status of a pedestrian zone makes it a pleasant place for a walk and recreation. The shopping opportunities in the city are many and varied - some of the biggest shopping centres on the Balkan Peninsula can be found here.

ABOUT US

OUR MISSION

TheMayor.EU - the European Portal for Cities and Citizens aims to enhance the understanding and cohesion between the citizens of the European Union, the local authorities and EU institutions.

The goal of the initiative is to keep the taxpayers informed about the good practices on a local, regional and European Union level, by honouring the work of local authorities. This will ultimately lead to improved cooperation and exchange of information between the municipalities in the European Union and will contribute to the socio-economic development of the regions and cities.

The portal is dynamic and open to every EU municipality willing to join it, no matter how big or small. The local administrations will gain access to a direct channel through which they can inform citizens of recent achievements and promote interesting projects in line with the shared European values.

Go to themayor.eu/en/add-a-city to participate.

WHO ARE WE?

EuroAdvance Association, which stands behind the initiative is a non-profit organization. We rely largely on advertisement and sponsored content. This enables us to provide EU municipalities and visitors with a free experience.

Our organisation has broad experience in the realisation of the project Kmeta.bg – The portal of the Bulgarian municipalities. It has proven its sustainability throughout the years and has managed to attract the interest of local administrations and citizens. EuroAdvance has been a partner in the organization of “The Mayor of the Year” competition in Bulgaria for 7 consecutive years.



WHAT DO WE DO?



Every day our team carefully selects the news that matter and presents them in an interesting way in several languages. Over the years, TheMayor.EU has proven itself a valuable tool for all digital users by:

- ✓ being a reliable information channel;
- ✓ becoming a place of inspiration to local governments, the business and NGO sectors.
- ✓ presenting the latest local news, important events and innovations;
- ✓ offering a platform for promotion of EU cohesion policies;

Boyan Tomov – Chairman of EuroAdvance Association and founder of the project TheMayor.EU, Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Daniel Panov – Chairman of the National Association of Bulgarian Municipalities and Mayor of Veliko Tarnovo, Markku Markkula – First Vice-president of the European Committee of the Regions and Iskra Mihaylova – Former Chair of the Committee on Regional Development launched the unique platform dedicated entirely to the municipalities in the European Union – TheMayor.EU.

