

Name of the MSC Fellow: Dr. Viktor Senderov

Nationality: Bulgarian; U.S.A.

Host organization: Pensoft Publishers

Country of the Host: Bulgaria

Project Acronym: BIG4

Project start and end date: 1 January 2015 – 31 December 2018

Type of MSC action, H2020: ITN



Your story:

After I received a M.Sci. in Biostatistics from the University of Munich I became a guest scientist in bioinformatics at the prestigious Max-Planck-Institute for Biochemistry in Munich. Soon thereafter I was offered a Ph.D. position with a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship at Pensoft. The thought of coming back to Bulgaria and to work on a prestigious international project was irresistible. In Pensoft I not only acquired many new skills but also, in my opinion, contributed to the advancement of science and technology in Bulgaria. In parallel, I obtained my Ph.D. in Computer Science from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. I am one of the few Ph.D. students in Bulgaria having obtained their Ph.D. for work done in the private sector.

A proof for the exceptional quality of my Ph.D. experience is that today I am working on cutting-edge phylogenomics modelling at the Ronquist lab in the Museum of Natural History, Stockholm.

Project objectives and research field:

To create a semantic data model for publishing biodiversity knowledge. Create a knowledge-management system and a database utilizing the model and incorporating data published in the journals of Pensoft.

Tell us why your topic is important and/ or how it brings to advancement in your research field:

Taxonomists investigate the Planet's biodiversity and publish their findings as research papers or monographs in peer-reviewed scientific literature. Access to these findings is difficult as a lot of papers have been published in the 18th and 19th centuries and have not been digitized. Biodiversity informaticians' top priority in the last twenty years has been to create a unified system to access biodiversity data. Such a system will diminish the time they spend in manual archival work and will enable them to concentrate on ecological, conservation, and evolution questions.

What are the benefits of participating in a MSC action?

The benefits of being part of an ITN can be divided into two groups: scientific and economic. From a scientific point of view, through the ITN, fellows and hosts participate in the international exchange of ideas and get to extend their professional networks. The extended professional network that I built helped me to secure a prestigious postdoc position in Ronquist lab. The economic benefits are also not to be underestimated. The generous scholarship allowed me to come back to Bulgaria and to simultaneously do science at an international level.

Did you encounter any challenges during application/ implementation and did you get any help?

Every endeavor comes with its own set of difficulties but they were all overcome with the help of my academic adviser Prof. Lyubomir Penev, as well as people from the network. Most of the difficulties were due to the unusual for Bulgaria industry-based character of my dissertation. An accredited partner organization had to be found (in my case the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) to grant the degree and to offer an academic curriculum. I also needed to extend my contacts in the academic sector which I did through the help of the partner organization and at conferences.

Why did you choose a widening country as a Host? What was the reason that convinced you? What is making you professionally happy here?

The choice was guided by the fact that the host, Pensoft, is based in Bulgaria and offered me an opportunity to return home and by the prestige of both Pensoft and a Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITN. The strongest quality of Pensoft is that it is not only a publisher but also a software company like Amazon is.

Would you recommend others to apply? What useful advice/ tips can you give them?

Yes, I would recommend an ITN to everybody. The advice that I would give is to get well-acquainted in advance with the scientific and administrative aspects of their future project so that you have the right expectations. Additionally, it is important to have in mind that doing science in Bulgaria is harder than in Western Europe but can be highly rewarding. In Bulgaria there is more room for growth and the environment is a fertile soil for people with high independence.