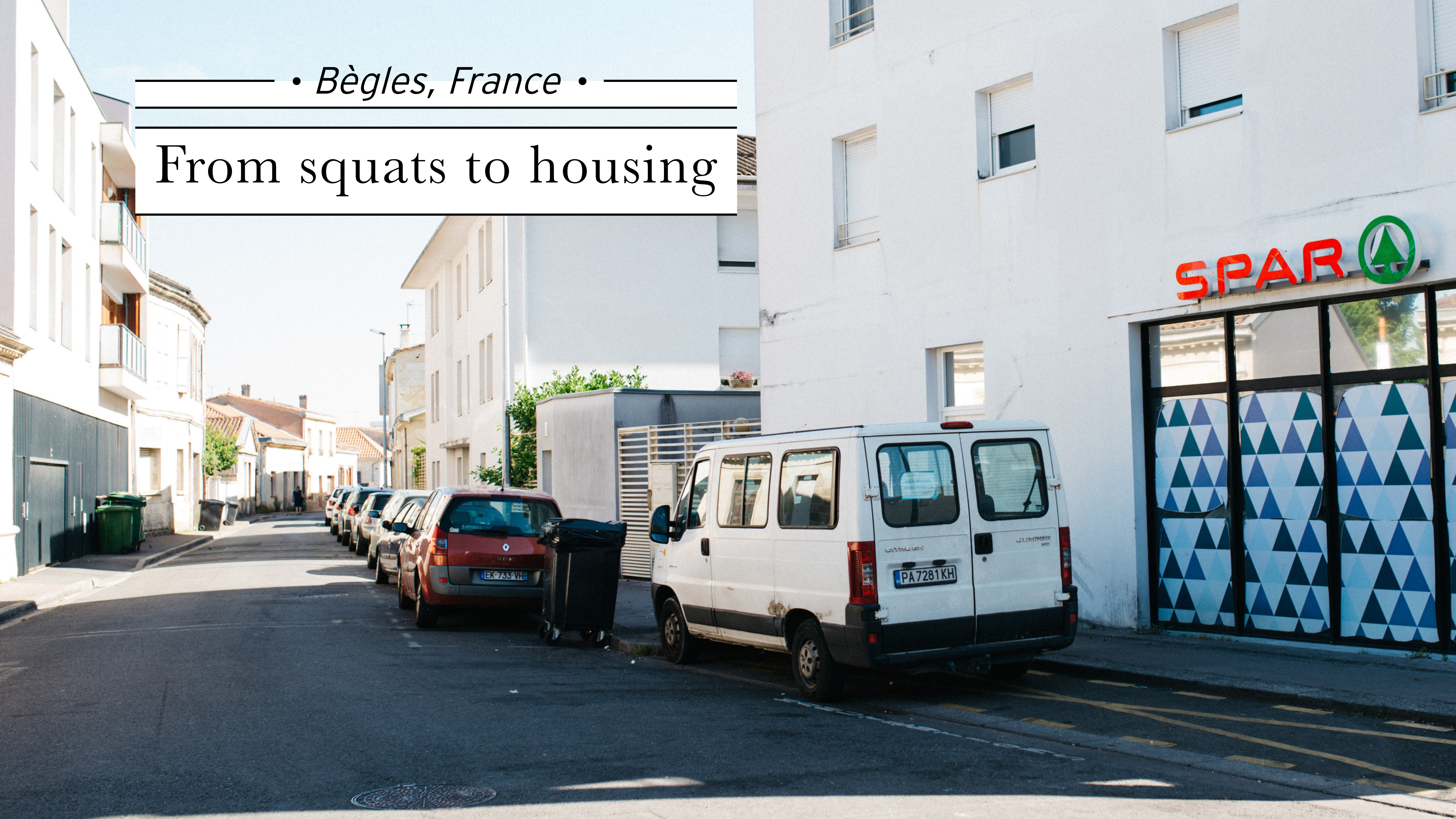


• *Bègles, France* •

# From squats to housing





A documentary photo-story

with

Bojislav, Anetta, Ana, Antonio and Angelica





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From the very beginning of the conversation, Bojislav talked to me about work. Work is why he came from Bulgaria, like many others. Construction, grape picking, farming, cleaning, security guards: everyone he knows works. He lived in a squat in Bègles, where he regularly comes to see friends.



We won't go to the squat: "If I go with you and a photographer, they'll think that the police will come for eviction. Every day, they wonder if it's going to happen." During this first meeting, I used the word Roma in my questions, but he says Bulgarian in his answers.



A photograph of a man with a short haircut, seen from the side and back, driving a truck. He is wearing a light blue shirt and dark suspenders. The truck's interior, including the steering wheel and dashboard, is visible. Two white speech bubbles with black text are overlaid on the image. The background outside the truck window is blurred.

In Bulgaria I earned 250 euros a month but bread, electricity and water cost the same as here.

Back home, everyone is stressed out because of money.





I love Bulgaria. I miss it. If we could earn 700 euros a month there, I'd go back, and so would the others.



Bojislav is a discreet man, who speaks softly. He delivers newspapers and leaflets with his truck. His wife Anetta works in farming with her mother Ana. They harvest leeks and carrots in the large fields 30 minutes from Bordeaux. They have two children: Antonio, 13, and Angelica, 5.



He was a lorry driver all over Europe for a long time. He also drove cars from Germany to Bulgaria and worked in Greece for four years. He hopes to drive large trucks again. His parents worked in Yugoslavia, Russia and Germany. He grew up with his grandparents. The family has always travelled for work: “that’s life”.





The problem in France is housing. When we come, we all know that we are going to start off by a squat.



It's hard to live  
in a squat  
with a lot  
of people  
and  
children.

Sometimes  
there is  
electricity  
and water,  
sometimes  
there isn't.

Here, it's the squat, an address, the job centre,  
work, the social worker...  
You have to continue every day, until you get  
housing.





This accommodation is good for us. There's a shower and toilet. Everything is new. The children have their own room. There is no stress.







Water comes from the tap,  
not from containers.







There were only seven families in their squat. Bojislav talks about the need for discipline to live there with dignity. He says that everything goes well, with trust, when people “look each other straight in the eye”. After four years of waiting, supported by the social action centre in Bègles, the family was given low-cost housing in a new development near Bordeaux.



It was easier in Greece: they worked, they met a private landlord and they rented, without social assistance. Appointments, paperwork, appointments, letters, more appointments: it took them a while to understand the French system.



There is nothing from Bulgaria, except what  
we bought in Bordeaux, in Saint-Michel!  
Everything here is from France. Bulgaria is on  
the phone.





David Dumeau, a social worker in the urban area of Bordeaux, who knows Bulgaria and speaks Romani, explains that all the families are in permanent contact with the country through social media online. However, because all the administrative procedures online in France are in French, they are stuck.







For David Dumeau, there is not “one Roma”, but a mosaic and individuals: “The word brings to mind discrimination, negative images or, on the contrary, romantic perceptions. Roma would rather be acknowledged as individuals, based on their choices. For others, being Roma is the basis of their identity.”



When I was a child, we had a vegetable garden, chickens, pigs and goats.



My granny made cheese.



It was easy, we didn't need to buy much in the shops.





But when Bulgaria joined Europe, tomatoes and carrots arriving were three times cheaper than at home.

The farmers no longer had money to pay the workers.

With the crisis, everything changed. The mentality is no longer the same. There is theft and corruption everywhere.





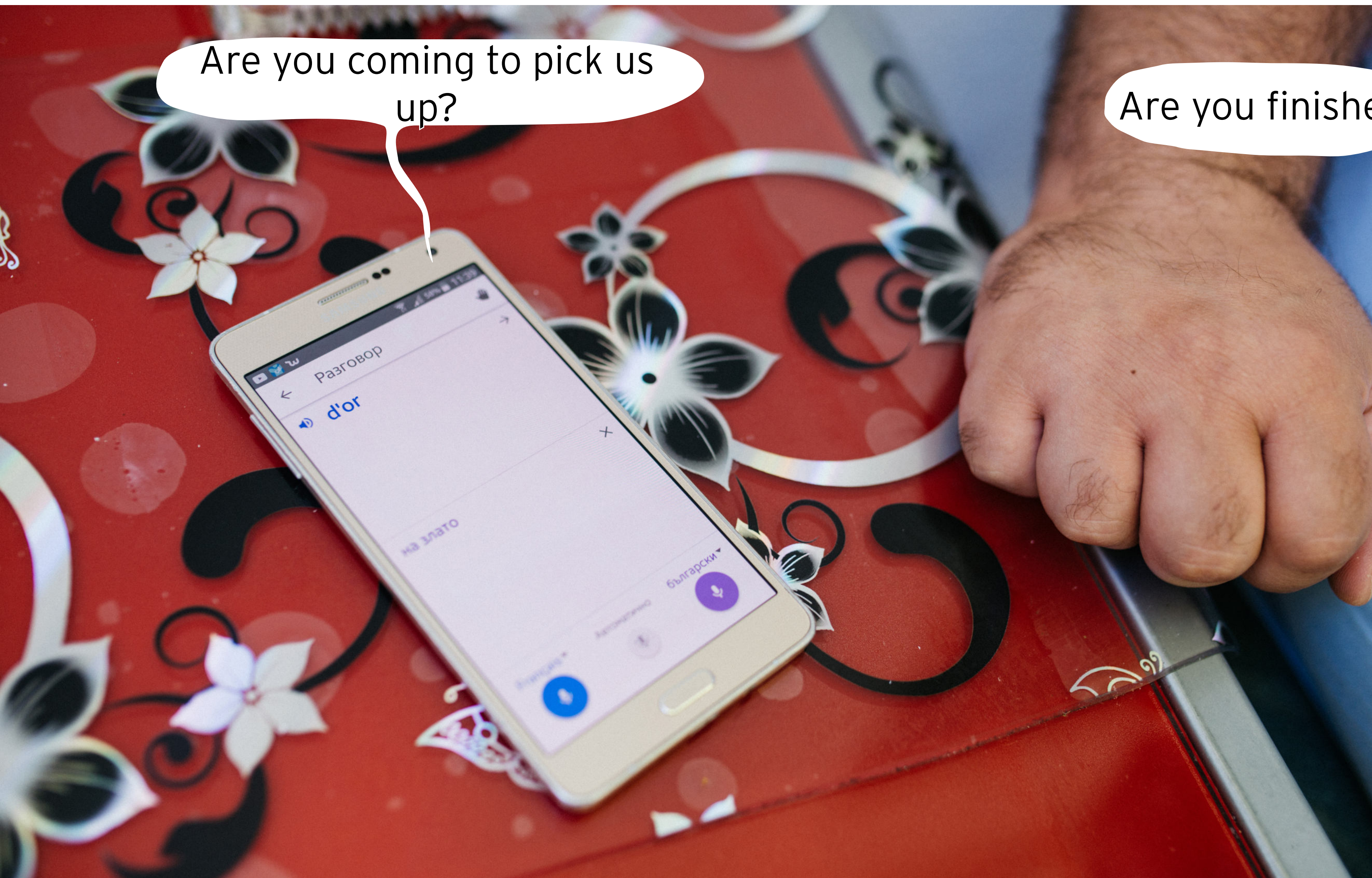
It's not easy to leave the country  
you love but everyone wants to  
leave.



This is Anetta.

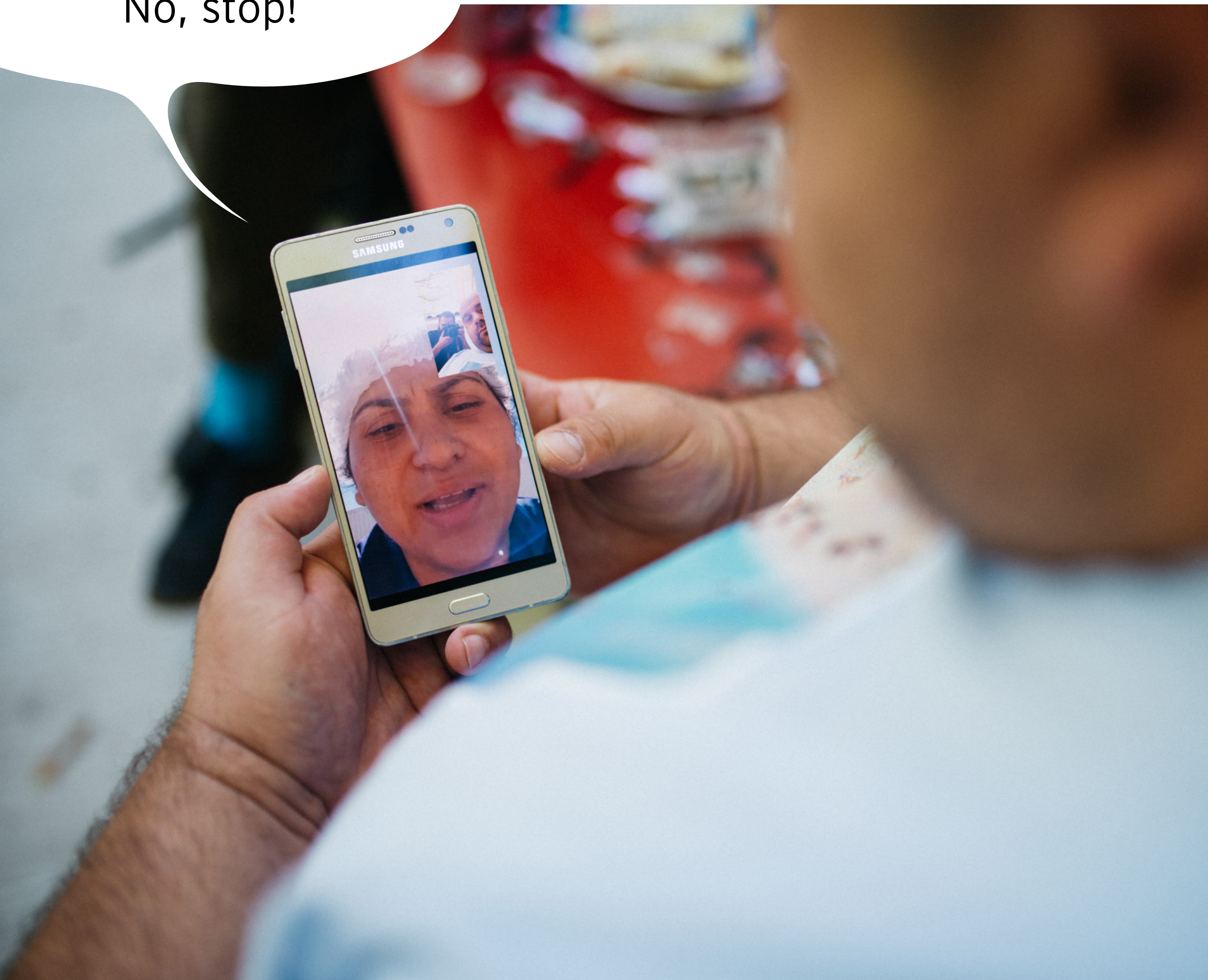








No, stop!



I don't want them to see me with my thing on my head!





When we entered their house, Bojislav relaxed. He spread his arms and smiled to show the house. He still has the squat in mind. He took out orange juice and cookies, put a pizza in the oven and invited us to sit in the garden in the shade of a big oak tree.



He remembers his first year alone in France. He and Anetta had decided to leave. They thought they had no chance in Bulgaria. When Anetta joined him at the squat with their seven-year-old son and younger daughter, Antonio started to cry. He wanted to go back to Bulgaria.



They stayed in one room for three or four years. Bojislav doesn't want to say more about it.

He shows us pictures of Bulgaria on his phone: fields of roses, snow in front of their family home.

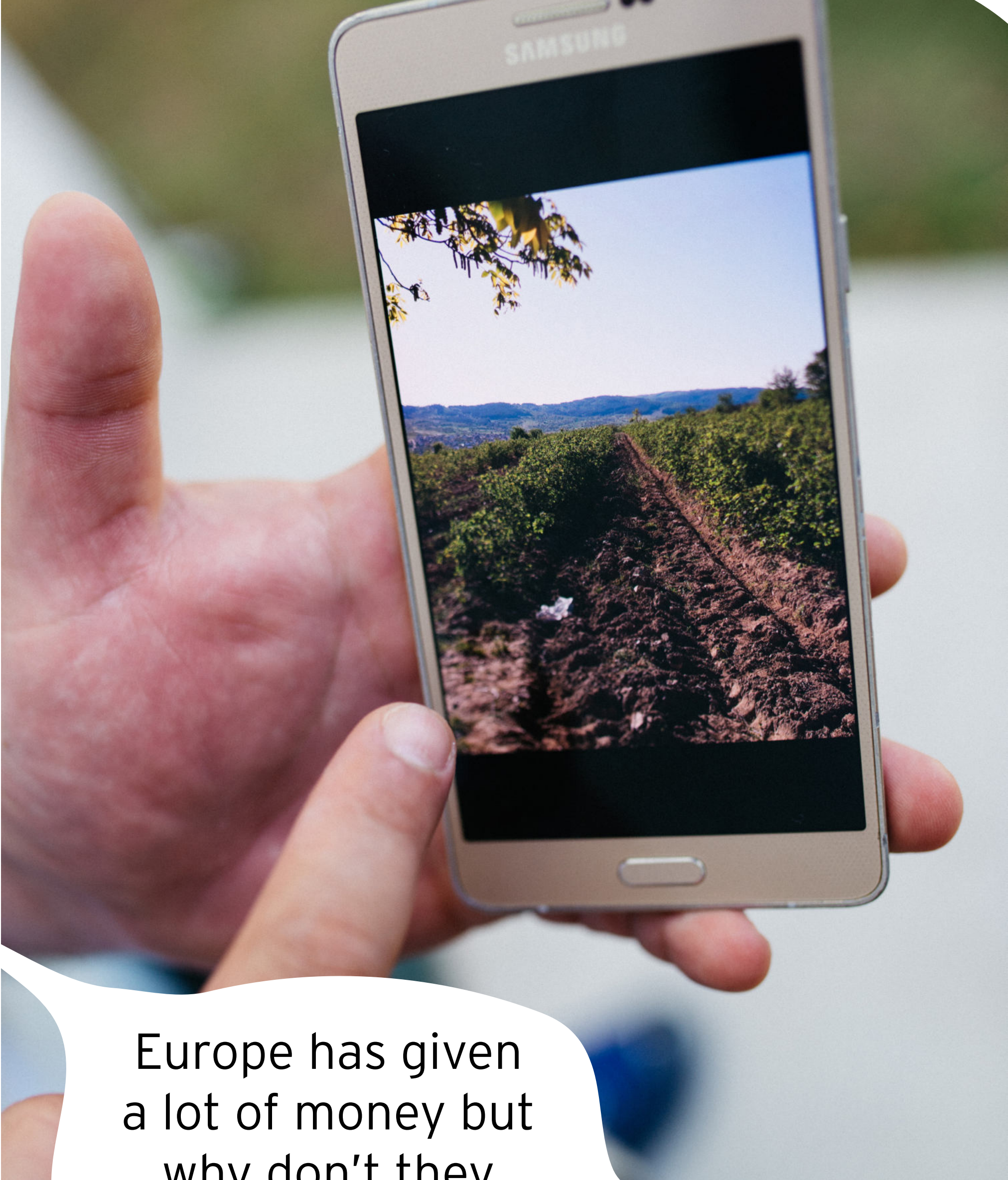


I sold roses to make perfume and soap. I still have the land but the flowers have been pulled up.

Three large owners now run everything. It's like a mafia that controls the prices.





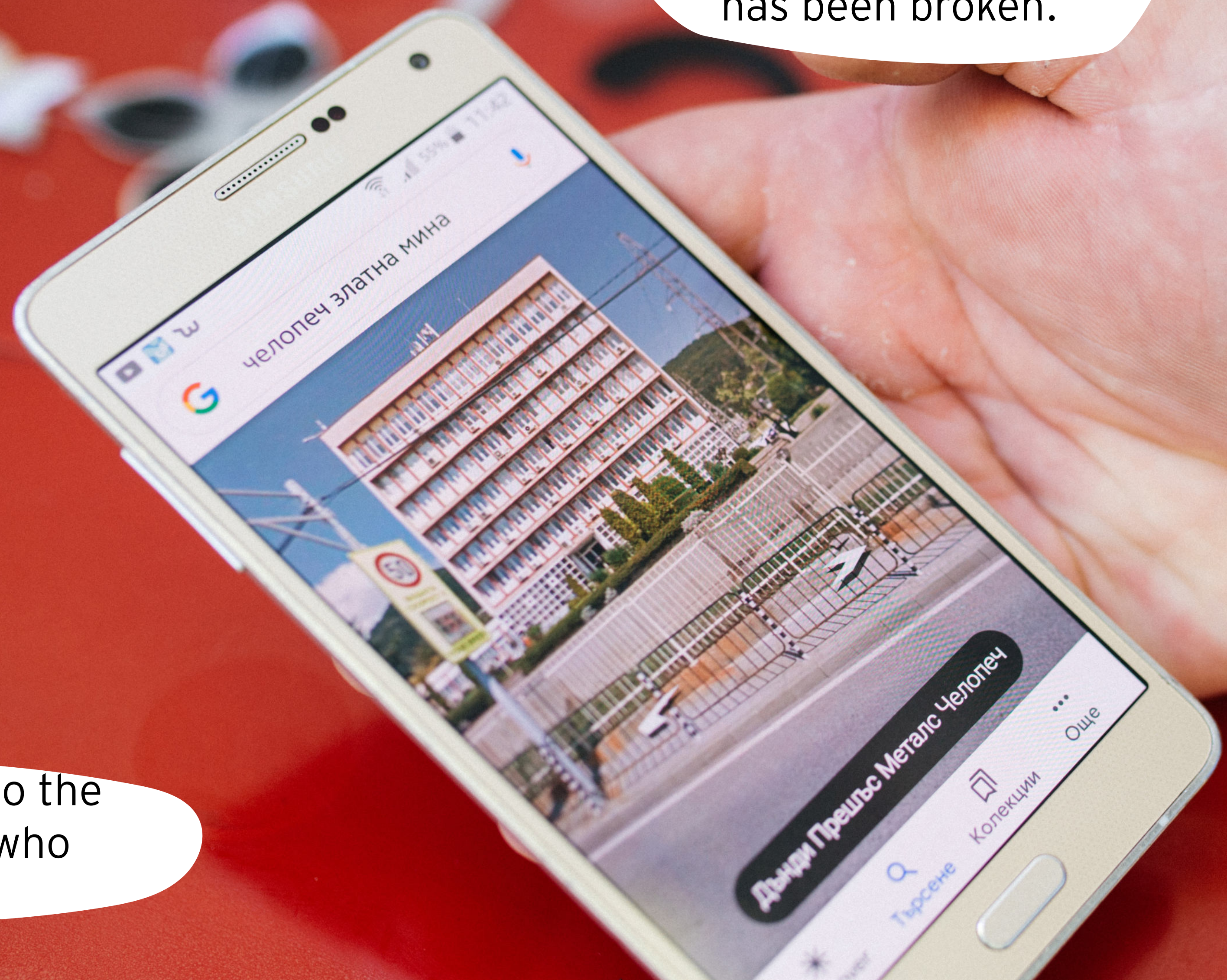


Europe has given a lot of money but why don't they check on it?

Everything goes into the pockets of those who govern.

Many foreigners have bought companies in Bulgaria.

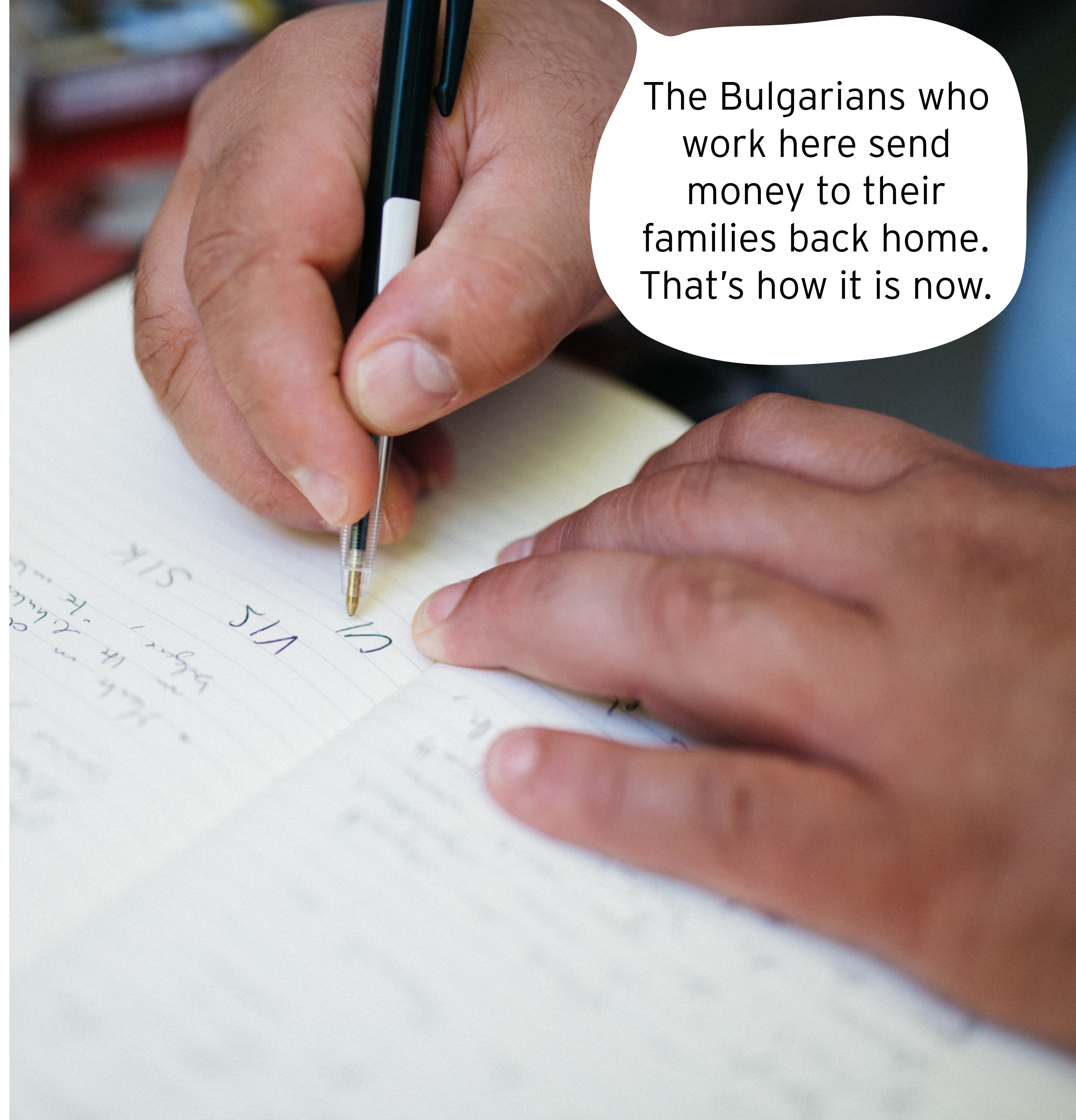
The money goes out of the country, we have nothing left. Everything has been broken.







You have to watch  
a documentary  
about the mafia.  
I'll write down the  
name for you.



The Bulgarians who  
work here send  
money to their  
families back home.  
That's how it is now.



This part of the conversation may have been agreed upon, to please the person who is asking questions and who is thought to be linked in some way to social services: Bojislav would like to thank the associations and people who helped them at the squat, the staff at the social action centre, the ones he calls by their first names.



He insists on the benefits office (CAF): “It takes time to settle in but now we are working, we don’t need it anymore. If I earn money and the CAF helps me, that’s not good. We work for France, for those who need it.” He tells me several times that he and his family are fine, that they respect the rules.



Then he talks about racism in Bulgaria and freedom in France where “people are nicer”. This time he uses the Roma word: “There is discrimination back there with the Roma like here before with Black people. It’s like that for us, it always has been and it still is.”



France is our city and our country now,  
like Bulgaria.





I explain it to the children, so that they'll study hard at school and learn a profession. They are going to live here, 100 %.

I had learnt some French at school. Here I watched TV and my son helped me too.

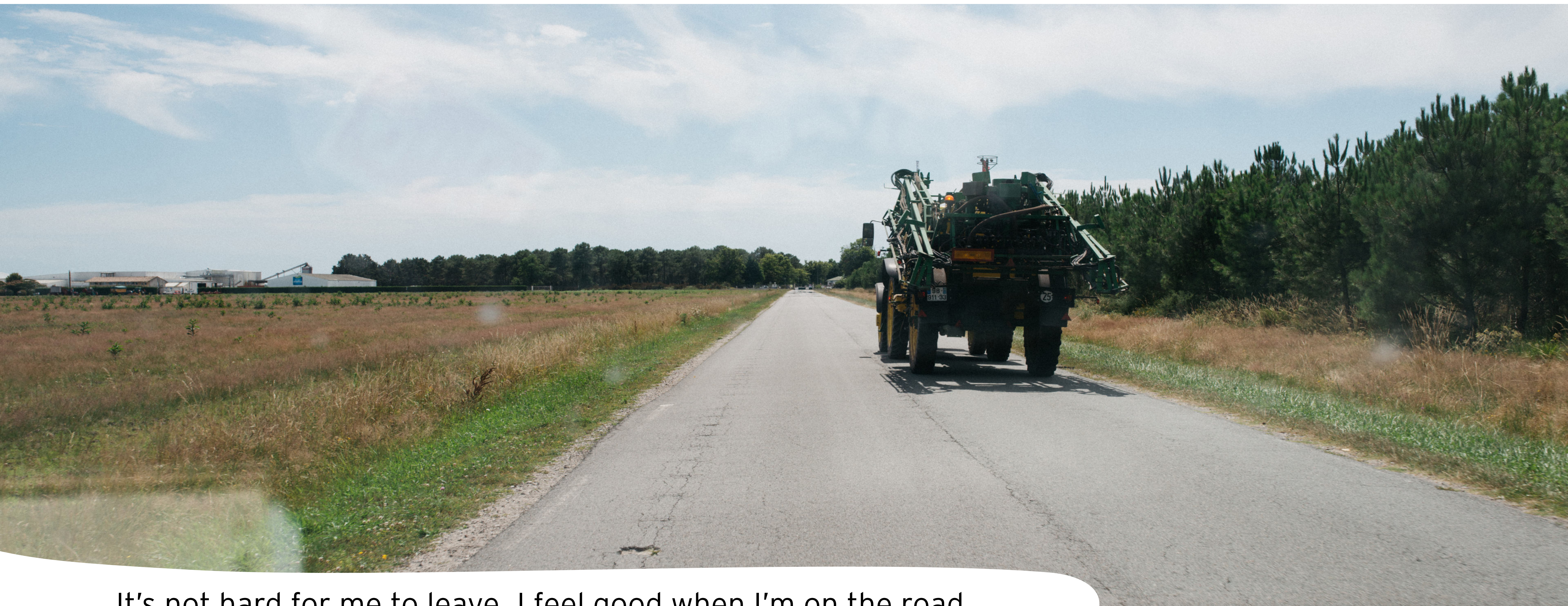




I love seeing the road. I can drive 30 hours and 3000 kilometres without sleeping!







It's not hard for me to leave. I feel good when I'm on the road.







Anetta and Ana did not want to be photographed in their work clothes, their faces marked by the fatigue of a day in the fields. Anetta's mother, Ana, has been here for 8 months, she did a day of French learning and then she started working. She will learn the language later.



Ana still lives in the squat. She comes from a village near Plovdiv. When we talk about Stolipinovo, the big Roma neighbourhood, she pouts and says she doesn't like it. Bojislav comes from a village near Pazardjik. As for Anetta, she started working in the vineyards and then the Job Center offered her a 9-month contract.



Anetta also wants to thank all those who came to the squat during the Coronavirus to help the families. That was the first thing she saw in France, kindness that she puts in opposition to what she experienced in Bulgaria.



When I arrived at the squat, I thought it was ugly!  
Now it's OK.



This house is nice, we have everything.



But for friends and living together with the children,  
it was better at the squat. I see my friends on Facebook,  
I miss them.





The children play with the neighbours here,  
and they come to our house.



In the squat,  
people help each other,  
it's like a big family.



What will they do if the squat  
is destroyed?



I want Antonio to study  
hard, to learn. Having a  
diploma is an opportunity.















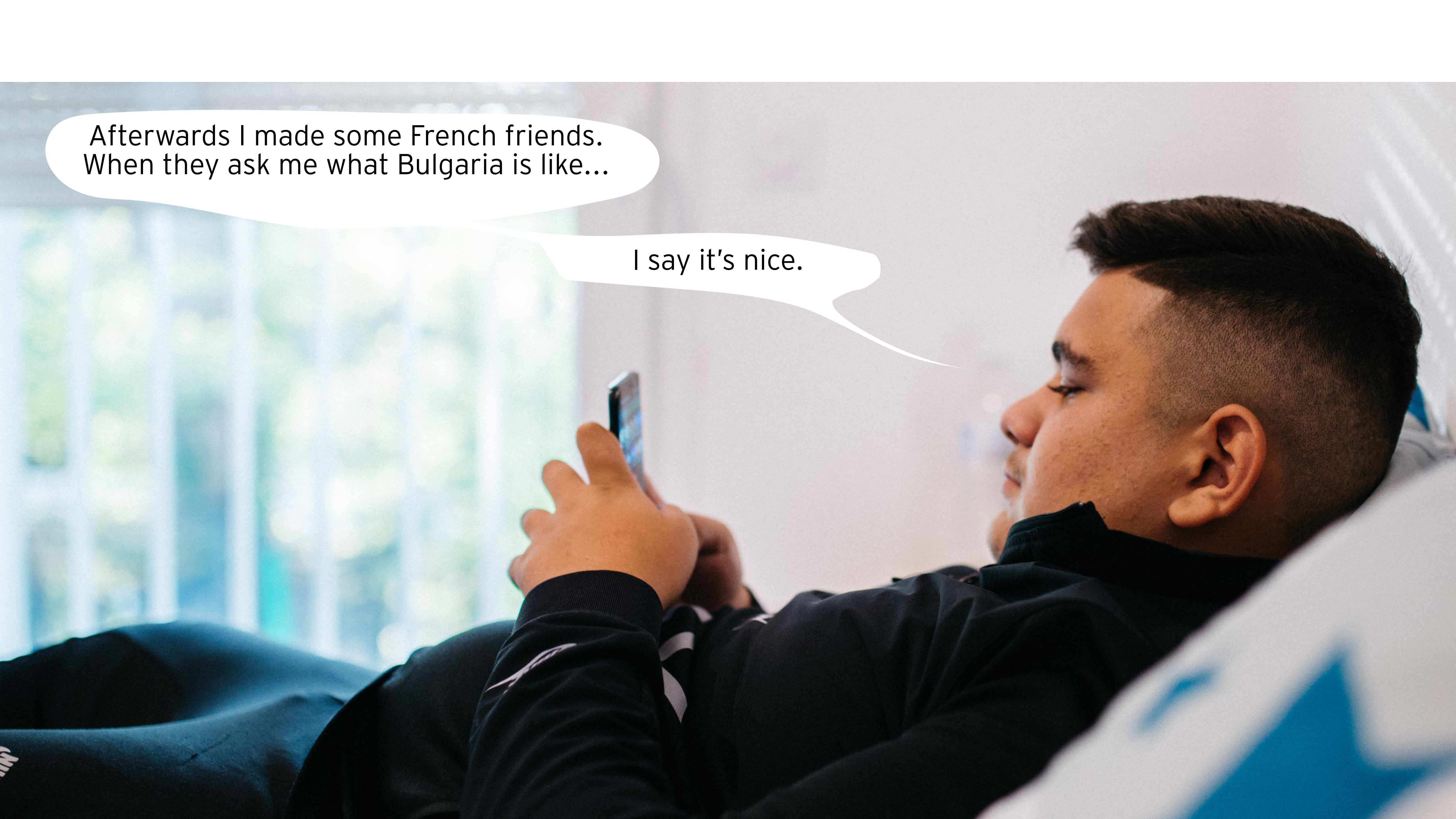
At first, at school, I was afraid, I couldn't speak French. There were some Bulgarian friends, so I went with them.

I managed as best I could. It was a bit hard with the teachers.

I began to understand after three months.





A man with short dark hair is lying down, looking at his smartphone. He is wearing a dark jacket. In the background, there is a window with vertical blinds showing green foliage outside. Two white speech bubbles are overlaid on the image. The first bubble contains the text 'Afterwards I made some French friends. When they ask me what Bulgaria is like...'. The second bubble, which is smaller and positioned below the first, contains the text 'I say it's nice.'.

Afterwards I made some French friends.  
When they ask me what Bulgaria is like...

I say it's nice.



I like Spanish and maths. I also do kick-boxing. I like it.



It doesn't matter if I bleed.





Ana and Anetta do not hesitate to use the word Roma to explain the situation. Anetta points out that she has not personally suffered discrimination because she speaks Bulgarian well: “People do not necessarily know that you are Roma”. This is very easy to see among those who have not been to school much.



Let me get ready...



Like a model...



Here no one bothers us, we have work. Back there, they're always insulting Roma people.





There are Bulgarian Roma  
and Bulgarians at the school  
but if someone comes  
there to recruit, they take  
Bulgarians.

There are Roma doctors and  
other professions but people are  
mean to them.

That's why we came here.





Antonio, even with a diploma, would have nothing in Bulgaria.



I get the impression that everyone is looking at us...





The photo session in the street is very joyful. Ana even jokes about the squat and its living conditions. She compares it to a flat, with rooms, television and radiators... Anetta can't believe that in her company, in the fields or in the offices, people say to her several times a day: "Hello Madam".















Bojislav and Anetta work a lot. They have experienced the hardship and sadness of living in a squat. They will do everything they can not to go back there. Together with her family, they did what they were asked to do, in order to get housing and a proper situation. They have entered into a certain normality, they have, as the expression goes, “ticked all the boxes of integration”.







Bulgaria has lost a fourth of its population in 15 years. The same proportion of Bulgarians and Roma Bulgarians have emigrated to find work elsewhere. In Roma neighbourhoods, Bojislav says that only grandmothers and children are left, that classes at school have fewer than ten children. When he talks about his country, it is the image of a fall that comes to mind.



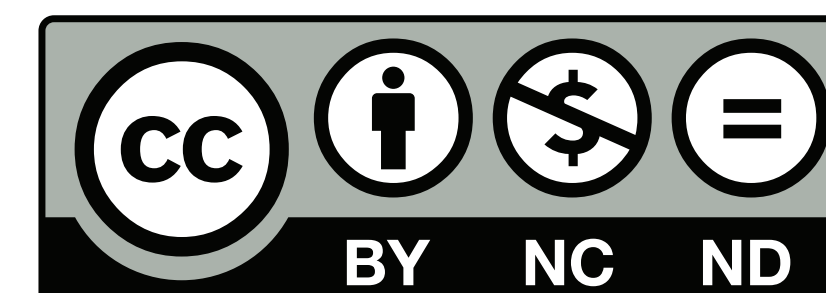




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