

Dear friends, dear COLOURS family,

When I thought about what I might say today, I always had this song in my head:

“I see your true colours shining through...”

And over these last years, it seems I really have seen many, if not all of these colours. The bright colours of deep collaboration, the shades of doubt and frustration, the unexpected explosions of wit and ideas, and yes... the glittery, nebulous and even the fuzzy colours which make our alliance so alive and so real in this complex, crazy world.

Looking back to our shared journey – from proposal preparation with my wonderful city2science team to this moment here in Kristianstad – it feels like we are painting the world with a box of crayons that somehow kept getting bigger and more colourful with each new pigment we added and each canvas we decided to fill together.

Let me remember a few magic moments: At first there were screens filled with colourful Mural Boards, in which we literally painted and puzzled our proposal together in the midst of a pandemic. Then I remember the sounds and smells of the colourful, vibrant market square at our kick-off meeting in Paderborn, when our hymn first came to life and we all enjoyed an abundance of food and even more wine from our nine different regions (including a few strange insect cookies from Sweden).

I remember the confetti colours on the cake of the swirling houseboat party in Osijek – when we danced together along the colours of our European songs. I remember the young students’ beautiful paintings, poems and songs of Bitola’s *Roots and Wings* exhibition, reminding us where we come from and where we’re heading when we call all of Europe our home. The colourful traditional musicians in Osijek and the magical white Lucia choir in the old courtyard in Kristianstad are part of my memories, as is the hospitality and warmth of our colleagues in all those COLOURful CoLabs and workshops across Europe. And of course, I remember joyfully the neon-bright creativity of the first student-led Hackathon, where 45 students co-created the future of an urban neighbourhood, answering Smart City challenges with human centered design.

But a full COLOURS spectrum can never be just bright: On my journey I also encountered bureaucratic beige — the colour nobody associates with transformation. We wrestled with Grant-Agreement-Grayscale, especially in reporting seasons such as this one. And occasionally, we landed in stormy violet, when things got really complicated, when mail threads went wild, the CSO should be fired and 9 partners had 19 opinions.

And yet, what makes COLOURS magical to me is this: Even when the palette got messy, we kept painting together! We may use different brush strikes, pencil sizes or shapes of paper, but we share the idea of making this world more COLOURful via collaboration and co-creation.

As I now switch sides back again to my independent role at city2science I do so with a full heart. While I still believe in the power of this alliance, I came to realise that I know where my own true colours shine the brightest — in an independent, entrepreneurial space, working not within but across institutions and sectors, with the freedom I need to bring energy and support into transformation processes.

This is not a goodbye to COLOURS — not at all. To me you will remain an extraordinary, vibrant ecosystem. And I'll continue cheering for you, supporting you, and celebrating every new colour you create.

Because, as I said at our Kick Off Meeting in Paderborn 2 years ago: COLOURS can only shine when there is light. And *you* — all of you — bring that light, every single day. As Amanda Gorman says in her poem "The Hill We Climb": "For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it.

Thank you for letting me be part of this beautifully chaotic, inspiring, colourful family. As I step now into a new chapter, I leave you with one wish:

Don't be afraid to let them shine! Your true colours — are beautiful like a rainbow!

Thank you! 🌈