

## A graduate of SPbPU from Gabon, Atonfak Donfak Etienne Gaetan, shared how St. Petersburg became his second home

Etienne's story is about how perseverance and respect for other cultures break stereotypes. From a student who dreamed of «just finishing his studies» to an engineer servicing one of the most complex metro systems in the world, his journey is no less inspiring than the Russian history he has come to love so much.



— **Etienne, tell us where you studied at Polytech? At which institute?**

— I studied at St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, at the Institute of Machinery, Materials and Transport (IMM&T). I enrolled in the bachelor's program in 2015, and before that I studied at the preparatory faculty for a year to learn Russian.

— **What program did you study?**

— My major is «Mechanical Engineering Technology.» This is my first higher education. Before coming to Russia, I studied economics at a university in Gabon for two years, but due to constant strikes by teachers, my studies were not going well. Then I decided to try to enroll abroad.

— **Why did you choose Russia?**

— I was interested in history at school, and I was annoyed by how often Russia was criticized in the Western media. I wanted to understand for myself what it was really like. My family was shocked — all my relatives had studied in Europe or the US. But I insisted: I said I wanted to see Russia with my own eyes.

— **Was it difficult to adapt?**

— Very much so! When I arrived, I hardly saw any foreigners. I was surprised that students here are not allowed to work part-time — in Gabon, this is the norm. For the first few months, I even wanted to go home. I decided not to give up.

— **What are your impressions of Polytechnic University?**

— The university is strong but demanding. If you fail your exams, you can be expelled, even if you pay for your studies. The teachers were understanding: if something was unclear because of the language, they stayed after class and explained it in English. My most vivid memories are of defending my thesis. There were only three of us in the department, but the commission evaluated our work.

— **Was Russian difficult?**



— Very much so! In the preparatory faculty, I memorized poems to pass the

exams. But now I speak fluently, albeit with an accent.

**— Where else have you been in Russia?**

— Only in St. Petersburg. This is my comfort zone: my son was born here, I have friends and work here. I consider the city my second home. My relatives still can't believe that I'm staying in Russia. But I love this country: everything is honest here. If you work hard, you are respected.

**— What advice would you give to future foreign students?**

— Be prepared to study hard. Polytech is not an «easy» option. But if you persevere, doors will open. And don't be afraid to dream: I, a guy from Gabon, became an engineer in the metro. So anything is possible!

Etienne continues to work in the metro and plans to stay in Russia. He says that his story is proof that Russia values those who are willing to work hard and fit into its culture.

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