

# **EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI): A journey**

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**Abreviation**

LO1	Learning Outcome 1: Reflective
LO2	Learning Outcome 2: Intercultural
LO3	Learning Outcome 3: Intersectoral
LO4	Learning Outcome 4: Challenge-based

I remember when I first heard about EUTOPIA. The project sounded perfect for me as since I was in High School, I was convinced in the benefits of international learning and diversity. The more places you see, the more cultures you get to know, the more you challenge yourself when learning; the more you actually get in the long run as you get to see a variety of perspectives, methods and ideas to overcome the obstacles. Therefore, the idea of an educational program that fosters mobility, cooperation between universities and involves students into designing a new educational methodology in order to tackle 21st century issues, appealed greatly to me. To understand further how I got to believe that EUTOPIA was what I needed to be doing, I will tell you a little bit about my life and then proceed to explain how activities within the project have enriched me and additionally internationalised my experience.

## I was born in a non-European city

I was born in 1990 in Sofia, Bulgaria. I grew up in quite an interesting period for the country, a period of change in social values, perspectives, and way of living. My parents grew up in communist, well-ordered, centrally planned out country with great appreciation for Russian movies, literature and music. I, on the other hand, grew up in a chaotic, crisis prone, corrupted, ever changing country, looking towards the West. My mom got the Green Card and moved to the US, in the beginning to New York where my ant and cousin also lived. My brother and I started visiting for the summer vacations. The contrast between the US and Bulgaria was striking to me. Reflecting back on it now, there were a lot of cultural differences in the style of communication. Just as an example, in Bulgaria students would always address their teachers with Miss/Sir and their last name. If we wanted to go to the restroom we would always ask for permission. When I visited my cousin's school in New York, I was shocked to see what I took as frivolity and disrespect at first, namely kids were interrupting the teacher to ask questions and calling her by her first name and if someone needed to go to the bathroom they just got up, declared they were going to the bathroom and left. No questions asked. When back in Bulgaria I made the mistake of trying to go to the restroom without asking for permission first, it was absolutely frowned upon and my request was denied mercilessly, so I had to wait for the end of the class to go about my business. 9-year-old me was very perplexed about this turn of events. Now thinking back on this silly event I recognise how it revealed to me how behaviour I had assumed as normal can be actually abnormal in another part of the world [LO2], a lesson I was reminded of again and again later when I moved to Paris and then to Barcelona.

# Bulgaria becomes part of Europe



*Some friends from the European Club and I at the European Parliament*

I was curious for everything international that was happening, so I was thrilled when my school entered in programs organised by the European Union that aimed at integrating European values into the activities of the Bulgarian students. I found the European Club was ago be a marvellous place. We would meet students from other schools and talk about what is to be European. There was this idea that Bulgaria was somehow behind and had to catch up in order to be part of the Western world. It took me years and to live outside of Bulgaria to realise that the country added its own flavour to European culture and had a lot to offer itself.

As we entered the European Union in 2007, the country quickly started opening and absorbing ideas from the outside. The European Club I was part of was invited to participate in an open doors day in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, with kids from all the country members. We were all very excited, especially our teacher who insisted that we wear uniforms to the event — black skirt and blazer, white shirt and blue scarf for the girls and black suits for the boys. To our utter shock and embarrassment, the other kids were all casually dressed, but we just held our heads high and besides the dress code mismatch did our best to act normal. Reflecting back on it, we must have seemed a bit serious and intimidating to the rest when all we were truly trying to do was to fit in. We were divided into smaller international groups that had to brainstorm ideas on various issues. I was voted representative of my group and got to share the woking ideas to the rest of the participants in the parliament chamber. Although my voice trembled in excitement and I might have forgotten half the things I wanted to share, I remember my teacher was really proud and this is all that mattered to me at the end of the day. We were under pressure to represent the country and show that we are not so backward or different from the rest. The fact that in Bulgaria we shake our heads when we say no and we nod to indicate yes, to the contrary of the whole world, did not make matters easier but we understood each other at the end of the day. We returned to Bulgaria feeling Europeans, because we had

participated on an equal footing with other kids to brainstorm solutions to problems that we all share. Suddenly, the world seemed a bit smaller [LO2].

## Filipa is European



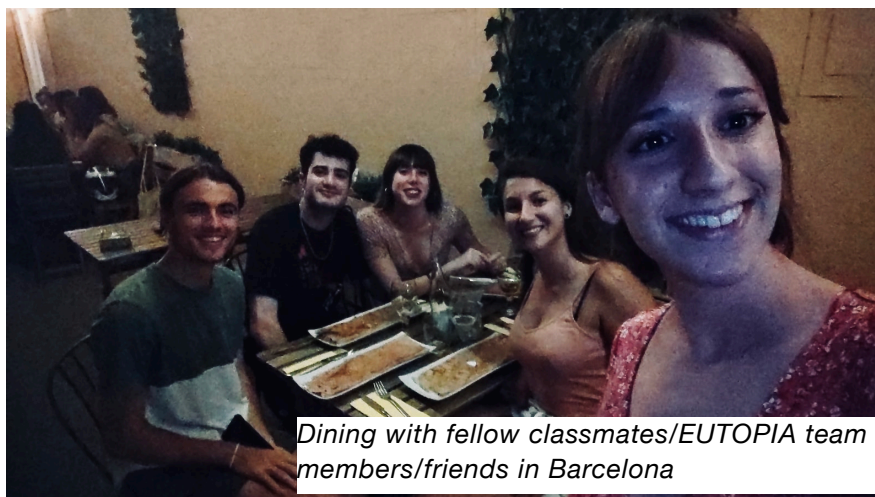
When I was 20 years old, I followed what I thought was the love of my life to the *City of Lights*, where I lived for 5 years — studying French and tour guiding, explaining to tourists from all over the world the history, culture, art, cuisine and strange habits of Parisians. The ever changing, diverse and multicultural expat scene

in the city, for the first time made me feel like I belong. Hanging out with Parisians I felt out of place, but in my group of emigrants we were all different and that made me feel home. However, I felt like I was on vacation from real life and had to sooner or later return to it. I could go back to Bulgaria, study in Paris or do so in the US. But a part of me was calling for a new adventure. I had already started from scratch once, how hard can it be to do it again. So I thought, if there is a good reason to move to a country I had never been to, learn another language and culture, studying is definitely it.

I moved to Barcelona, Spain and after a year and a half of adapting to the climate, behaviour, learning some basic Spanish and tour guiding again I applied to the University of Pompeu Fabra, which seemed to me the most international of universities in the city. The first two years were a challenge. Not only that classes were not in English, as I was secretly hoping, but most of them were not in Spanish either. I had to adapt to studying and communicating in English, Spanish and Catalan, which on its own was a struggle. I was not there to make friends, but quickly the benefits of having ones in this jungle started manifesting themselves. Without friends it would have taken me probably double the effort to understand what is going on. They guided me through the material, and the behaviour of others — students and teachers alike. Our differences were not just based on language and culture, something that I was already used to, but generational as well. In a lot of situation I had to think about how *younger Filipa* would have probably reacted to certain situations to understand the behaviour of my class mates. I was at times frustrated knowing that I would have probably gotten much better grades with

much less effort if I had returned back to Bulgaria. I started joking that I am doing a 4 year Erasmus program, and I came to the conclusion that I would not have wanted it any other way. I put a great effort into understanding, learning and adapting and this experience has helped me realise that it is never too late and that when there is willingness anything can be learned and that change is nothing to be afraid of. Taking myself out of my comfort zone was a preparation for working outside of my comfort zone itself [LO3].

Studying political science and administration in Barcelona, gave me a whole other perspective and focus on issues that I would have never gotten anywhere else. I, furthermore, appreciated the fact that I got to see local issues, such as the struggle for Catalan independence, without the local bias but through a whole different set of values [LO3]. I learned things about the city, that I could have never learned if I was not studying here with local people. I almost cried when my friends told me that in the beginning I was like a tourist but by the end they see me as a local, despite the still appalling level of my Catalan.



## Filipa and EUTOPIA

I heard about EUTOPIA in my 3rd year. Between classes and work, I had no time to lose so I would do things only if they are interesting and/or practical. One could argue that there is a practical side to every activity, but if the activity is not interesting I find I don't really reflect on it after and hence I don't really get a learning outcome. That was a key when I decided to involve myself with EUTOPIA: the project sounded interesting, challenging and practical. Furthermore, EUTOPIA recognised that issues in the 21st century are transboundary and as such an international cooperation and glocal (global+local) approach should be applied to solving them.

I took part in the Open Innovation Challenge [LO2,3,4]. As part of it, I had to sign up for a transversal class in project management where in teams we needed to come up with a project in the scope of one of the SDGs. Our team was very diverse as we had representatives from political science, law, philosophy and business which I believe added to the diverse character of our project. With the Covid-19 pandemic the project was mostly carried out online, however we met every week via zoom to work and although it was very time consuming and we didn't win at the end, I believe it was one of the most enriching experiences in my academic trajectory (see the project in the folder: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cDgNdPNnYt8TdMrMh1hzt\\_oPXu8UYibo?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cDgNdPNnYt8TdMrMh1hzt_oPXu8UYibo?usp=sharing)).

We were searching for ways to enhance cooperation between various stakeholders to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable under the guidance of university staff and Rosa Suriñach, a coordinator for the Urban Resilience Hub - UN Habitat. I learned a lot about what programs are already in place and got inspired to brainstorm further ways of organising team work, as well as international intercultural cooperation [LO2,3,4].

One of the things that made the most impression on me was the glocal approach according to which an international issue should not be just approached top down but also bottom up. By reflecting on the local characteristics as well as international implications of an issue, this issue can be in fact solved much better. Because each region present its own unique challenges, specific characteristics have to be considered when designing solutions. One glove does not fit all. In the meantime, similarities should be also paid attention to. By sharing best practices we can actually also find solutions that can be employed in more than one location (with modifications where necessary). I firmly believe that only local or only global approach would mostly fall short of truly fixing the issues. But by adapting solution in an interdisciplinary way through the glocal approach we might have a better chance. This is why intercultural exchange, and creating opportunities for deeper understanding of local as well as international characteristics can benefit us all immensely, especially in international transboundary issues and work on the UN SDGs!

I also took another class on the topic of Governance and Public Policy: Challenges and Opportunities within the EU, where once again I got to apply the glocal approach and the project based learning methodology in researching SDG 3.5 – Prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol (See the report in the folder: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cDgNdPNnYt8TdMrMh1hzt\\_oPXu8UYibo?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cDgNdPNnYt8TdMrMh1hzt_oPXu8UYibo?usp=sharing)). In this case we had to assess how the UPF is dealing with the issue of abuse of substances. We decided to compare on one hand UPF with other local universities and also on a global level with other universities in

cities similar to Barcelona. All in all, besides assessing the performance of the university we also managed to research mitigation initiatives used elsewhere and ended up proposing them to the university staff. This approach and methodology can be easily used for any of the SDGs as well as other issues [LO3,4].

In conclusion, looking back on all of these experiences I realise that I have always searched for the international angle but now I also understand how important is that the local is not lost but it is reflected upon in a way that it can actually enrich and further reinforce the international. More than ever I appreciate that diversity is power, and that our different experiences, values and ideas are what makes our world not just more colourful but also richer and more adaptable. All of these experiences have brought us to this very point where we can better communicate and understand each other, so we can actually cooperate to meet the goals we have set in front of us.