

EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation

(EUIC): *A Reflective Portfolio*

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There is no denying that the 21st century is characterized by one of the highest degrees of global exchange and interconnectedness that has ever existed. Our globalized world is now marked by more than the mere exchange of commodities across maritime hotspots. We have entered a period where socio-cultural interconnectedness has taken the upper hand, and humans, notwithstanding their origins, are increasingly exposed to a diverse range of cultures, ideas, and practices, leading to the transformation of traditional society as a whole, a society that is transnational and multicultural. Having lived a greater part of my life in Catalonia is one of the crucial reasons that enabled me to have this realization. It is not only the fact that I had been brought up in a bilingual environment, balancing both the Catalan and Spanish languages, but also, the immense cross-cultural nature of my setting, where Catalan culture both intersected and diverged with Spanish folklore, that made me aware of the beauty and importance of cultural engagement and exchange.

Reflecting critically on my upbringing, I have always been encouraged to venture beyond my comfort zone. My parents had always believed that learning languages was a crucial door into breaking away cultural stigmatization and developing my cognitive capabilities, especially in public speaking. As a result, from a very early age, I learned both English and French which have proven crucial in both my scholastic life and interpersonal relations. In addition, exposing myself to interculturalism was not something that was merely provided by my parents, or that I was able to experience in my usual environment, but also, it was something I was incredibly drawn to. During high school, I participated in two exchange programs, the first in Bordeaux, France, and the other in Düsseldorf, Germany. For me, these were the very first experiences that enabled me to encounter different multicultural identities, as well as experience firsthand, how, despite the existence of cultural barriers, I was able to enhance meaningful interpersonal connections as well as, discover the importance of tolerance and respect when embarking on such a cultural adventure. Despite these insightful experiences, my biggest cultural challenge as a teenager came when I was sixteen years old. At that time, I had been awarded a regional one-month scholarship to attend a high school in the French department of Haute-Savoie. During this time, I lived with a French family who not only opened their home making me feel part of their family, but also taught me the beauty of the French culture and language. From an academic perspective, I was able to truthfully discover the French language, while undertaking a wide range of subjects, notably, political science, governance, and French history. Soon, I managed to conquer my initial fear of public speaking, in case I was unable to be understood or make any major errors and, with some

confidence and external empathy, I mastered both academic and informal settings. Furthermore, I made long-term friendships with people who taught me that language barriers can be broken, especially once you overcome cultural stereotyping and embrace genuine tolerance, you may find truly remarkable human beings from whom you learn, discover, and truly understand the significance of cultural exchange and social integration.

Internationalization did not gain sufficient meaning for me, at least I did not understand the material importance of the concept until I had the opportunity to experience the weight it carries in our current global setting, through participating in a volunteering project of the European Solidarity Corps in 2023. I would not say that it was fate that brought me to partake in this experience, however I will surely admit, that it was thanks to my interest in what I could find beyond my home country and what I could give in return, especially considering this duality of culture that I carried, that pushed me to face my fears and insecurities, and after three whole months, embrace the significance of global cultural intersection.

My volunteering experience started in January 2023, as I changed the warm and sunny weather of Barcelona, to a much colder and snowy Polish setting in the city of Leszno, in the *Wielkopolska* region. There I would be working with a group of twenty bright and young minds who came from different places across Europe, even from areas that, at that time, I could not locate on a map with precision like Kosovo or Lofoten Islands. I reckon it was this profound intellectual and linguistic mix of motivated people that enabled us to make a real difference in our day-to-day activities. But also, it was this diversity that made me know myself better as a person, strengthening my communication and collaboration skills, as well as discovering a part of myself that was wide open, even intrigued, into learning the past experiences, traditions, and values of every single one of our group participants. It was notably the fact that volunteers had to co-live together in a single household that encouraged me to have a new mindset, one that encompassed the acknowledgment of different ways of doing the same thing or even of understanding reality that went beyond mere differences in eating schedules, or food choices. An example of this understanding that struck me the most, was the wide range of opinions on topics like migration or climate change. It was the first time in my life that I felt exposed to this new wave of thinking, one that, after some reflection, can be partly understood as a consequence of our different geographical and socio-cultural upbringings.

On another note, beyond the interpersonal exposure to different ideas, values and practices from other volunteers in the project, during my time Poland I had the pleasure of immersing myself, not only in the Polish culture, discovering hidden-gems, like the coastal town of Gdnánsk or the historical salt mines of Krakow, eating their traditional foods and even, learning a bit of the language and culture, but most importantly, I had the opportunity of participating in the promotion of EU values and sociocultural awareness for a diversity of age groups through the local non-governmental organization, *Fundacja Centrum Aktywności Twórczej*.

In general terms, my main responsibility in this project was to enhance the organization of a wide range of workshops on creativity, DIY projects, and handicrafts for different social entities and institutions of the region, including schools, social centers, and non-governmental organizations. In addition, volunteers engaged in the so-called youth camps, which encompassed language games, cultural exchanges, and workshops on culture, tradition, social awareness, arts, and sports. For instance, one of the major activities I had the pleasure of directing was the winter camps. This activity is focused on the organization of a two-week program during the winter holidays, for children and young adults between the ages of five and eighteen, that supports volunteers to prepare activities that would bring participants closer to a diversity of cultures, values, and ideas. As an example, I organized different workshops around the Catalan and Spanish folklore, including an arts and craft session for six-year-old children to build their personalized Spanish fan, a storytelling session on the legend of Saint George and its importance within the Catalan values, a sports activity on discovering some folkloric Catalan and Spanish dances such as *les sardanes*, *flamenco* and *sevillanas*, and a Q&A interactive session where we discussed with teenagers the similarities and differences between the Spanish and Polish traditions. All of these activities, did not only served me to discover unknown leadership and management skills that would latter on prove key in my academic and extracurricular life, but also, it made me realize that despite believing I had been brought up in a multicultural and globalized environment, there was much more to share, learn and understand from people of different sociocultural backgrounds.

My role in Leszno did not end with the winter camps, but extended beyond the socio-cultural animation realm within the span of three months. With the pivotal help of *Fundacja Centrum Aktywności Twórczej*, as our medium of connection between volunteers and the Polish civil society, I managed to lead several distinctive projects that opened my eyes to new truths about the challenges of our current globalized world. First and foremost, as part of the volunteering team, we were assigned to direct a social fundraising campaign to encourage the population of Leszno to donate money to build a new sanitary center for those segments of the population that were not able to access public health properly. This initiative struck me the most, as I was not used to being exposed to such large amounts of civil mobilization and communal responsibility. Volunteers and participants built different sets of activities for all ages during one whole weekend, for instance, a live concert, dancing lessons, and a cultural cooking workshop where we taught children to bake French, Spanish, German, and even Turkish pastries. Moreover, as part of the volunteering team, we were fortunate to organize Leszno's second edition of Women's Day. This project was special for me, as it was the first time I felt a major cultural difference between the Polish and Spanish values. While in Spain, I celebrated Women's Day as part of a vindication for an amelioration of women's rights and living conditions, thus, a vindication of gender equality, in Poland, Women's Day was materialized as an appreciative festivity, for all women. Instead of organizing demonstrations, volunteers directed parades to commemorate important women in Polish history or even to celebrate the role of women as a whole in Polish society. Besides these two intensive projects, I reckon my biggest challenge as well as contribution during my time in Poland, was participating in the organization of activities focused on social integration, aimed at ameliorating the existing cultural and social upheavals between the Polish civil society and the incoming Ukrainian refugee population staying in the region. During this task, we were assigned to enhance a multiplicity of activities, including workshops in primary schools, so children understood the importance of respect and social inclusivity, as well as, open group discussions on the role of community, refugees, and multiculturalism.

All in all, my volunteer experience in Poland showed me the importance of humankind and cultural multilateralism. Before, I may not have entirely grasped the role it played in my day-to-day life, but after three wonderful months in Leszno, I gained the confidence to reflect upon my upbringing, my values and traditions, and how they had

conditioned my role in society. Nevertheless, as this volunteering experience proved, my background was my strength, all my past accomplishments were pivotal for the project, and it was thanks to these skills that I was able to understand and embrace Polish culture. There, I realized that our world is made up of cultural intersections, and it is only we, humans, who are the agents of social change and building of an empathetic and respectful international community.



Poland also was a moment of self-realization, through interpersonal work with people all over Europe, exposure to different ways of understanding our current reality, and being able to see and work first-hand on the socio-cultural struggles of our contemporary society, I realized what my next step needed to be. Now, it has been two years since I started partaking in a BA in Global Studies. This transdisciplinary degree has helped me theorize our global dynamics and understand from an academic perspective, the accomplishments and difficulties of an increasingly globalized world that every day struggles to be more interconnected and internationalized as stigmatization, racism, and xenophobia surge as global trends. I am most certain that my international path does not end here, in fact, it has just started. As I embark on my next adventure, as an Erasmus student at the University of Maastricht, I cannot stop reflecting on my prior experiences abroad, how they have transformed my perspective, and hopefully, will guide me through new chapters filled with different perspectives, ways of thinking, and doing.

Overall, I am most thankful for the EUIC initiative, as it has provided me with the guidance and encouragement to critically evaluate and share my connection with intercultural internationalization and how this has served me to become who I am today. Beyond this, the EUIC has helped me realize how I can help make the world a more inclusive and accepting place, one in which culture, language and interpersonal relations are core skills to further an international society.