

## EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalization (EUCI)

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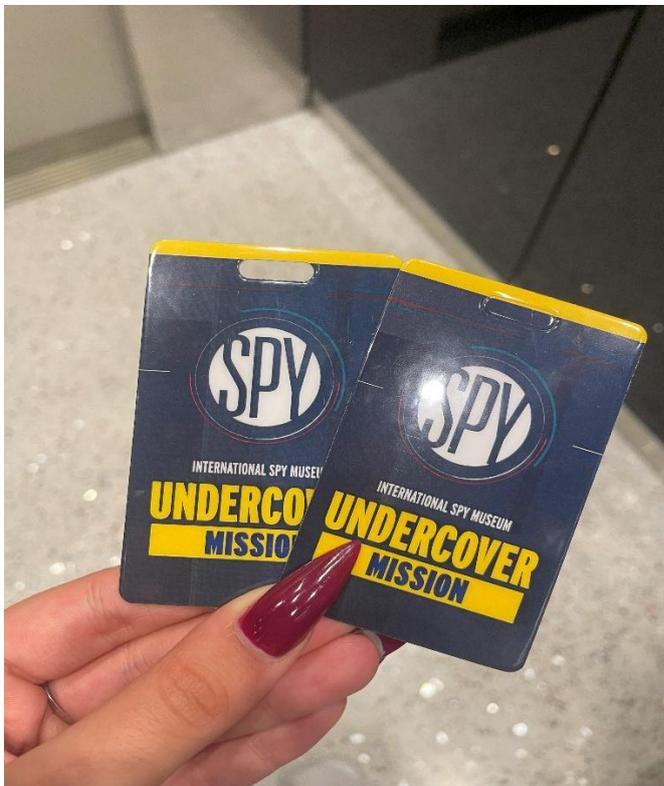
### How the American dream brought me closer to Europe

My journey in the EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalization (EUCI) program has provided a unique platform to deepen my understanding of intercultural exchange and global engagement, encouraging me to reflect on the diverse experiences that have shaped my international path. Among these, my participation in the Study of the U.S. Institutes (SUSI) for Student Leaders stands out as a formative chapter, offering insights into democracy, media literacy, and cross-cultural dialogue that continue to inform my academic and personal growth. Hence, I find this to be the perfect example to showcase multiculturalism and reflect on the intercultural aspects for this essay.

In the summer of 2024, I participated in the Study of the U.S. Institutes (SUSI) for Student Leaders from Europe, a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). The program consisted of a 4-week academic residency at Arizona State University and a study trip, totaling 5 weeks. Essentially, the program aims to develop leadership skills and offer a better understanding of the U.S. values and culture. The topic for my cohort was the challenges that democracy faces in the 21st century, which I explored at the Walter Cronkite Institute for Journalism and Mass Communication. This experience was valuable both academically and personally, as it allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of journalism and the methods it employs to reach and engage target audiences. I had the opportunity to learn from inspiring professors whose professionalism and expertise not only expanded my knowledge but also opened new horizons in terms of leadership and critical thinking. Beyond the classroom, the program created a space for intercultural dialogue, where I exchanged perspectives with peers from across Europe and the United States, further shaping my worldview and strengthening my commitment to building inclusive communities.

The program began with a three-day visit to Washington, D.C., where we were introduced to the work of the institute we would later attend, took part in the official opening ceremony, and received a general overview of our upcoming activities in the United States. Washington, D.C., which was, for me, the true introduction to what the "American dream" meant beyond books and media. Among all the participants, my colleague and I, who travelled together from Romania, were the first to arrive at Dulles International Airport. That moment, stepping into a space so distant from home, yet filled with anticipation, marked the beginning of an unforgettable journey. On the very first day, I met my fellow participants in person, and together we explored the city, sharing our excitement over the adventure that awaited us. I still remember the first dinner we had in Washington, when I encountered what would become my earliest cultural shocks: the tipping culture in restaurants, the impressive but sometimes overwhelming distances that could only be crossed by car, and the grand, imposing architecture that seemed to embody both history and power. These initial experiences were not only fascinating but also thought-provoking, as they pushed me to reflect on the cultural differences between Europe and the United States and on how these differences shape people's daily lives and perspectives. My colleagues were all over Europe, as Washington brought together all the SUSI institutes attending that year. Therefore, there were 60 students to chat and exchange ideas

with, which, after those 3 days, would go to their assigned institute, myself included. So no time to waste when you need to discover so many cultures, hear so many languages and befriend so many people. In Washington, I lived some truly unforgettable experiences, especially while visiting museums with one of the close friends I made during the program. Together, we went to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, an experience that left a deep mark on me. Walking through its exhibits was profoundly moving, and I found myself in tears as I read about the struggles, resilience, and history of a community that had been marginalized and ostracized for centuries. It was a powerful reminder of the importance of justice, equality, and recognition. In contrast, the International Spy Museum sparked a different kind of fascination in me. Its interactive exhibits, filled with stories of secret missions, espionage techniques, and innovative tools used throughout history, awakened my curiosity and made me reflect on the hidden dimensions of global politics and security. Both visits enriched my perspective in unique ways, combining emotional depth with intellectual curiosity and making my first days in the United States all the more memorable.



Washington was the beginning of an everlasting melancholy, as it was the first time we had to say goodbye to our friends after spending so little time together. We had to embark on our next journey, each of us to our institutes, and so I left Washington and flew to Phoenix, Arizona, where my academic journey started and where I consolidated the friendships started in Washington, as part of my friends were joining me.

Having spent the most time of my American journey in Phoenix, I have the most memories from there. I feel emotionally attached to that place and the friendships it fostered. It feels like I lived in a dream I did not want to wake up from. I experienced what it means to study in one of the most prestigious schools in the United States of America, I lived the fantasy of being a student at an American university and experienced a reality I have only seen in movies and the teen shows from Disney Channel we grew up with. It was an academically

challenging yet enriching experience. It was an honour to attend classes taught by American professors and observe different approaches and practices from those in European universities. I had the chance to explore media labs, access professional equipment to document our own journalism projects, and step inside news studios such as the one at the Walter Cronkite Institute, where the university's news broadcasts were produced, as well as larger, professional studios like 12 News in Phoenix.



My friend group was very diverse. Although I had things in common with all my colleagues, I naturally orbited toward some people and organically formed a group of our own. My roommate, whom I greatly love and still keep in contact with, is from Kosovo and my other close friends are from Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro. I am happy to have had such a diverse and culturally rich friend group, which taught me a lot of things, from culture and language to history. Now, I feel like I have gathered a mosaic of knowledge and whenever I hear their language or understand a word they taught me, I think dearly of them. I feel incredibly fortunate to have met such welcoming friends, who also share so many similarities with my own culture and language, being all from the Balkans. One core memory from the program would be a night that we all spent as a group at a pool in Phoenix. It happened during our first week in Phoenix and we made a pool reservation for almost all of us. We swam and played a lot in the water, we even did a diving contest. We also played our countries' songs and summer music hits from Europe. We all danced and had a great time. We laughed and got to know each other better, we took tons of pictures that night. Later, we stopped at a gas station to try the Polar Pop cups, a very American thing, and returned to the hotel. We stayed out in front of the hotel for a couple of hours to talk, laugh and listen to music. It was an amazing night for which I am so grateful. This memory is dear to me because that night I felt like I found a family, my Balkanic family. I felt close to each one of my colleagues and I am happy I got to chat with everyone. I felt at peace, I felt understood and most importantly, I felt I belonged there with them. This experience, along with many other beautiful moments we shared, gave me hope that I will see them again. Our last days of the project made me think of the song "We'll meet

again" by Vera Lynn, which made me very emotional. I sang this song with one of my dearest friends from the project while saying goodbye at the airport.

One of the most remarkable experiences during the program was our visit to the Grand Canyon. Traveling there with my classmates and engaging in group activities like guided hikes and scenic viewpoints made the experience even more special. Standing on the edge of the canyon, witnessing its vastness and the layers of history carved into the rock over millions of years, was breathtaking and unlike anything I had ever seen in Romania. It was a humbling reminder of the natural wonders our planet holds and the importance of preserving them.



Another unforgettable experience was volunteering at a local food bank in Phoenix, something I had never done in Romania despite many years of volunteering. Homelessness is a significant issue in the city, and these centers rely on volunteers to prepare and pack food parcels for those in need. Working alongside my peers, sorting donations, and assembling meals gave me a profound sense of purpose and connection to the local community. It was eye-opening to see the scale of need and the dedication of people committed to helping others, and it made me reflect on the different forms volunteering can take across cultures.



These are just a few of the memories that connect me to Phoenix and the friends I made there. Together, we explored many parts of the city, went to karaoke, and immersed ourselves in American culture through food, music, and traditions. One of the most unforgettable experiences was celebrating the Fourth of July for the first time, watching fireworks, and joining Americans in marking this special day. I got a glimpse into what everyday life in the U.S. is like and saw firsthand so many things I had only ever seen portrayed in movies.

Yet, as time passed, it was soon time for the final leg of the program, a study trip to Philadelphia. Saying goodbye to Phoenix, the university, and the American students I had grown close to was incredibly difficult. Philadelphia, however, welcomed us with many sleepless nights spent sharing stories, exploring the city's rich historical sites, and absorbing its cultural energy. We visited the Declaration of Independence, the Liberty Bell, the Rocky statue, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The city proved to be both dynamic and refreshing, a welcome change from Arizona's desert climate. Of course, no trip to Philly would have been complete without trying an authentic Philly cheesesteak, a culinary experience that added another layer to understanding local culture.

After three immersive days in this historic metropolis, it was finally time to say farewell to the U.S. and return home, a deeply emotional moment that is hard to put into words. The multicultural environment I experienced throughout the program, from Washington, to Phoenix, to Philadelphia, was transformative. I discovered so many perspectives, learned to navigate new social and cultural contexts, and developed friendships that continue to inspire me even a year later. These connections have motivated me to travel more across Europe, seeking opportunities to visit my friends and deepen the bonds we formed during SUSI.

Looking back, the experience was more than just an academic journey. It was a personal adventure that shaped my worldview, broadened my understanding of democracy, culture, and community, and left me with lasting memories and relationships. The friendships I made, the

cultural traditions I witnessed, and the cities I explored all combined to create an experience that continues to influence my personal and academic growth. In many ways, SUSI not only allowed me to see the United States but also opened my eyes to the richness of human connection and the endless possibilities of cross-cultural exchange. Who would have thought that pursuing the American Dream would also bring me closer to my Balkan roots?