

# **EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation 2025**

## **Reflective Portfolio by GrațIELA Pințoiu**

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### **Cover letter**

Hi! My name is GrațIELA Pințoiu, I am 23 years old and I have two degrees, a Bachelor in International Relations and European Studies, from which I graduated in 2023, and a Master in Media Communication, from which I graduated in 2025, both attained at the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and both conducted in the English language.

When I think about internationalisation, I perceive it as an inner process one deals with when merging with different cultures from one's own. To me, it feels like some kind of metamorphosis, changing us and changing how we perceive and react to the world around us. This metamorphosis also helps us understand and more easily accept people who are different from what we consider "normal". I believe that internationalisation is a component that should not be missing from our lives, even though sometimes we have to make real efforts in order to obtain it, such as travel abroad or seek opportunities that will prove to be useful for this process. But no good thing comes to you without some effort or fighting for it.

Personally, I feel that I have always been an international person, without leaving my country or experiencing events abroad, thanks to my affinity for the English language. Being part of the digital indigenous generation, technology and the internet were part of my childhood growing up, and these two were rarely in my mother tongue. From playing online video games and interacting with other players in English, to watching films, TV shows and cartoons in English, my brain somehow understood there is a whole world outside my little hometown, people to meet, cultures to experience and places to see. It understood that English is a universal language when dealing with outside of your country contexts, and languages in itself plays a crucial role in culture exchange and understanding. I think the desire to experience other cultures remained dormant inside of me until I had the chance to actually put it into practice, to be old and courageous enough to take the dive.

My first internationalisation experience, and the one that kick-started it all, was in June 2022, when I participated in my first Erasmus experience, a youth exchange that took place in Latvia. I was extremely anxious about applying for it, since I have never been to another country or travelled by plane, and mostly, thinking about the idea of spending ten days with complete strangers from different countries, and having to communicate only in a foreign language, made me think a thousand times about it. However, in the end, curiosity got the best of me and I applied, and truth to be told, it was an amazing experience that I will never forget. From then on, I have participated in one more youth exchange in Spain, in 2024, and then spent the spring semester of 2025 in Kaunas, Lithuania, as an Erasmus student, this last experience being the one I wish to discuss in this essay. These major three activities also shaped my European identity, since they are part of European Union projects for the youth and students, and have the purpose of constructing and strengthening the idea of a European culture. Looking back on these events, I can certainly admit that now, when I am introducing myself, I also like to call myself European and international as well. My idea of the other countries, of travelling and of borders changed and continues to change thanks to these experiences, and the future ones that are yet to come. It also changed after countless interaction with other people that consider themselves international, no matter where are they coming from, such as the interactions I had with other EUCI participants during the seminars. I consider meeting as many people as possible from different backgrounds a goal in my life, which I wish to pursue constantly, since each discussion opens a new horizon for me. Cultural exchange, building on the European identity, travelling, are very crucial components in my life, especially since I am a young person and I want to experience many international contexts.

### **Reflective essay**

As I mentioned earlier, what I wish to talk and reflect upon in this essay is my Erasmus study mobility, since I feel like this one was the most pertinent in my internationalisation journey. As a background, I applied and were accepted at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania, for the spring semester of 2025, therefore I moved there at the end of January, and came back in Romania at the end of June, with a total of five months spent there. My first thoughts about this mobility program is that I wanted to experience the education system and the study curricula of a foreign country, and also living as an exchange student. Although it is usually not a very popular

option, I choose Lithuania because I find the Baltic countries extremely underrated, impression which I got after my first abroad experience in Latvia, where I also met Lithuanians. I was aware about all the challenges which might arise in this mobility, such as cold weather, not-so-friendly locals, and also trying to find the time to write my master thesis, since it was my last semester, but this did not stop me. Before I left, I was also wondering what more could I learn from this experience, how will I change or develop my skills, since I was already pretty confident in my soft skills or survival, adaptation, flexibility. But it turned out there is always something more to learn, either from your own experiences, or from others, and the conversations you would have. For me, from the point of view of personal development, I am more direct now (since the language barrier pushes you here to be so), I am not afraid to ask for help or small favours, and now it is easier for me to talk to people or integrate in a group. And there are definitely more things that are not so obvious or cannot be put into words. What is more, living in a dormitory that was only for international students also shaped my experience in an internationalisation one. I was lovely to meet people almost every evening in the lobby, doing fun stuff such as board games or Lego, and talking about our lives back home but also about our lives here. It is interesting to see how living abroad changes your habits, hobbies and routines, no matter if you spend a semester or three whole years. What I learned from living in this international dorm is that people are friendlier than they seem and being the one to first say “hi” will actually surprise you, in the good way. This dorm was my home for the semester, my place of rest, or where I could meet with my “neighbours” to talk and drink our coffee in the morning.

When it comes to the intercultural part of my Erasmus, this comes from meeting and befriending an array of people, not just students, from all over the world. I am quite a social person and sometimes an extrovert, so making friends was not that hard. I feel that interculturalism in itself is made up out of the practice of exchanging ideas and opinions about one’s culture, the good and the bad as well. I enjoy my culture, even though after some time I came to the conclusion that a lot of parts of it is shared with other cultures as well, such as Latin or Turkish, which further one makes you realize people are not that different based where they are from. There was always something I could relate to, comparing my culture and other’s. Talking of the good part of culture, during my Erasmus mobility I took part in a “cultural night”, a type of event organised by the Erasmus Student Network, where all the Erasmus people were invited to present their culture, share fun fact or stories about their countries or tell stories. That night, I saw around 20 PowerPoint presentations about

different countries and their culture, danced their dance, and ate and drank their food. For me, it was indeed an intercultural and multicultural experience, telling people that “oh, we also have this type of pancakes in my country” or that “we also celebrate Ester like this”. Although I was one thousand kilometres away from home, I also felt like home there. It is a strange feeling, having an away-from-home home, but as I said in the beginning, I always felt myself as an international person; I enjoy discovering new places, people, cultures. I am sure that no matter where life takes me, I can make myself feel like home, since this experience also made me more adaptable and flexible in international contexts.

However, cultural exchange is not always about fun or pleasant experience, and because I want this essay to be as inclusive as possible, I also wish to discuss about the not-so-good side of it. For example, when talking about politics with a person from Slovakia, they told me how currently there are protests happening there because the government raise the prices of everything, or about a case in which a journalist was killed because he dared talk about something he shouldn't have. I am aware that every country has its bad side as well, but what gave me a feeling of distress was the fact that I did not know about these, although they were quite known cases. Personally I am a very political aware person, I like to inform myself about the affairs of other countries or the European Union and the world, such as the Novi Sad protests that were happening, but I realised that the media controls what they talk about or what they show on news outlets. As a person with studies about journalism, I am aware to always check multiple sources and not to believe everything I see, but I this conversation made me even more aware about how what we see shapes our perception of the world. I believe that cultural exchange is important not only when it comes to basic stuff such as food or traditions, but also when it is about more important matters, such as politics or internal affairs. This also happened during both of my youth exchanges, in Latvia and Spain, where there was always an activity where we talked about stereotypes and impressions about the countries and people that were present in the projects. I feel like these experiences, talking about the ugly sides of our countries and cultures, makes us feel closer to each other, show empathy, and it also thought me to be more accepting and aware of facts that I did not know or maybe I did not care about. I feel like caring, showing that you care, is very important in an intercultural context, and I wish to inspire this feeling to as many people, even if they did not experience such contexts.

On another instance, I felt this experience as an intersectional and interdisciplinary one thanks to the university I attended. I got very lucky that Vytautas Magnus University had the perfect master program to match all my courses from back home. But even so, they were not what I was expecting, but in a good way. Back in Romania, my studies were mostly focused on media studies, but in Lithuania, I experienced more of a journalistic manner of teaching and coming out of the courses. The professors were not only from Lithuania, but from other countries as well, such as USA or Sri Lanka, which made the educational experience a very inclusive, comprehensive, and international one. Seeing the points of view of these teachers about the course they were teaching, especially since they actually worked in the domain, was so enjoyable, since they could give first hand examples coming from their experiences. It made me feel like I was having a conversation with a friend, not that I was at school. Moreover, almost all of my classmates were also from other countries, such as Italy, Uzbekistan or Ukraine. We would usually share experiences from our countries, and this made me so much more interested in the subject. I would always ask my classmates follow up questions because I am a big fan of knowing facts from other cultures, and I wanted to use this whole Erasmus experience as a means to find out more and be more intercultural. The courses were also diverse and tackled subjects of interest for today's age, such as how to use AI for in the journalism sector. As a reflection upon the educational part of this Erasmus experience, I could wholeheartedly say that it broke any expectations I had, made me want to attend the courses willingly and sparked my love for learning. I believe that this direct type of education was also important for me in the internationalisation process, since not only all the courses were in English, and language plays a big role here, but also because I got to experience how the school curricula and education works abroad and out of the comfort of my own country.

However, the challenges that I went through during my mobility was actually seeing and experiencing the cultural differences and disparities. I became very good friends with a girl from the Czech Republic, and there were moments when we would talk about our lives growing up, and I was thinking to myself "so this how it feels like to come from a country closer to Western Europe". Coming from a country that does not really rise itself to European standards, there were times when I felt jealous on my friends from Germany for example, or even Lithuania. Since Romania and Lithuania are quite similar with the socio-political and economic background, I do not understand how can we be so different in terms of living standards, such as trains that are never delayed or better media literacy policies, the latter example actually becoming the main subject of

research for my master thesis. I am aware that Romania still has a long way before we actually compare it to a Western European country, but after experiencing living in a Baltic country for five months, I do wish to become part of the change, to try and help make the living condition a little bit better, such as being part of activist NGOs or exercise my right to vote. I do not resent my country, nor do I hate the fact that I was born here, I only want to see it change for the better, maybe to follow the example of Lithuania when it comes to certain areas of interest for the public. What helped me ease this feeling of jealousy was hanging out with people from fellow Balkan countries, such as Montenegro, Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Like this, we always had stories and culture from our countries that we could relate to. In the end, I am grateful for all the people I have met and all the friends I made, no matter where they were from.

In conclusion, I think that this Erasmus mobility was a very introspective and personal experience that shaped me in more ways than I had originally thought, in addition to being a step forward in my internationalisation journey. In retrospect, what I had assumed would be just another academic semester overseas ended up being a life-changing event that was full of opportunities for both intellectual and emotional development, intercultural conversations, and challenges that tried my ability to adapt. My five months of living and studying in Lithuania allowed me to see the world from a variety of perspectives, compare, relate, reflect, and comprehend not only other people but also myself. From impromptu lobby conversations in the dorm to insightful class discussions, I discovered that internationalisation is about opening up: to people, to ideas, to change. I came to see that unless we are open to hearing other people's truths, even the uncomfortable or strange ones, we cannot really understand the world. I learnt from my experiences how to deal with difference, stay interested and involved, and question my own preconceptions in cross-cultural situations. Deeper down, this mobility forced me to consider my expectations, aspirations, and sense of national identity. It inspired a desire to bring about constructive change back home in addition to learning from other cultures. The entire process (academic, cultural, and emotional) felt like a mirror reflecting my own growth, highlighting both my progress and the vast amount of undiscovered territory.

## **Conclusion**

When I first hear of the EUCI, I thought it would be a good opportunity to get my international experiences acknowledged in some way, therefore I signed up for it. Then, after I participated in the seminars, interacted with other people that were also part of the program, I realised how many of us are alike, how many of us refer to ourselves as international, travellers. Moreover, I realized I never reserved time just to reflect on my international experiences, to take everything in and think about what did I learn from them, how did they make me feel, in what way did the experiences change me and my view of the world and the future. I believe that the reflection part is as important as the experiencing one, and in this journey of internationalisation, it has a critical role in making the experience a fully rounded one. Therefore, this essay is the pure representation of my internationalisation experiences and my reflections on them. I am glad I was presented with this opportunity and being able to further on draw conclusions from my experiences.