

Strong Enough to Stand, Soft Enough to Listen *Reflections on the ESA 2024*

In April 2024, I participated in the European Student Assembly (ESA) in Strasbourg, alongside students from across Europe. We gathered to discuss and propose solutions to major societal challenges like sustainability, digital transformation, and democratic backsliding. I had expected an enriching academic experience, and while that expectation was met, what surprised me was how deeply personal and intercultural the experience became.

Before we get into the depths of my experience at the ESA I would like to give you a little bit of a background story of who I am, but most importantly, how I came to appreciate the many wonders of internationalization. I have a background of political work and I am the youngest elected official in the city council of my home town. When I was 16 years old I joined the youth organization whose parent party I represent today. At 18 years old I became an elected official and at 19 years old I was picked as the leader of my party group in the city council. Today, in 2025 I am still politically active but I am rather focused on my academic journey than politics.

As of September 2025 I am writing my thesis for my bachelor's in European Studies at the University of Gothenburg. During my second year I applied to represent the University of Gothenburg in the European Student Assembly, and was thankfully elected coordinator for one of the eleven panels. Being elected coordinator for a panel felt like both an opportunity and a challenge. I knew from my political work that I was comfortable speaking, leading discussions, and helping groups reach decisions. But this was different. At the ESA, the diversity of backgrounds, languages, and perspectives made every conversation more complex. It was not enough to know the subject or to argue well. You also had to be patient, open, and willing to rethink your own assumptions. Which, as you may know, is not common practice in politics.

When I first arrived in Strasbourg, I thought most of my learning would come from the formal debates and the policy writing. I quickly realised that the Assembly was about much more than that. It was about how you connected with others, how you managed misunderstandings, and how you built trust in a group where no one shared the same point of reference. One moment that has left me reminiscing came not in a conference room, but in a train station. On the second day, we were running late for a session at the European Parliament. A group of about ten of us, from Germany, Romania, Greece, and elsewhere, had

to quickly figure out how to get there by tram. What should have been a simple task turned unexpectedly chaotic. Everyone had their own idea of what to do, shaped by the public transport systems in their own countries. Some insisted on buying paper tickets from the machines, others said we could use mobile apps or contactless cards. One delegate was convinced that we could just hop on and validate later, while another warned us that this would result in a fine. The conversation became a whirlwind of contradictory advice, assumptions, and rising stress. We were all speaking English, but beneath the surface, our national habits and norms were clashing.

That moment taught me something I didn't expect to learn in a setting focused on tram tickets: how even everyday decisions are filtered through our individual cultural framework. It wasn't just about finding the right tram or the technicalities regarding buying a ticket, it was about learning to navigate disagreement, uncertainty, and urgency in a multilingual, multicultural group. As a Swede, I found myself stepping back, asking questions rather than offering solutions, and trying to understand the logic behind each suggestion. Eventually, we pooled our ideas, made a decision to buy paper tickets, and just barely caught the tram in time for the meeting.

Reflecting on the tram experience, I realised that leading in international contexts is less about strong opinions and more about listening, adapting, and knowing when to facilitate. The week confirmed this: real cooperation depends on empathy, patience, and cultural awareness. At the same time, I saw where I still want to grow. Stronger French or German would help me connect more deeply. I also recognised that my understanding of European political institutions is still limited. My studies and local political work have given me a foundation, but the ESA showed me how much more I need to learn to contribute meaningfully in European debates.

Another instance which affected my view of internationalisation happened even before the event officially began. I had just missed my transport bus from the airport and was facing a five-hour wait for the next one when I randomly struck up a conversation with another stranded traveler, a Greek student named Maria. We quickly discovered that we were both heading to Strasbourg for the same reason: the European Student Assembly. What began as a chance encounter turned into a long and engaging conversation about our backgrounds, studies, and motivations for joining the ESA. We shared not only stories, but also a sense of curiosity and excitement about what was ahead. Looking back, that moment captured the

very spirit of international exchange: connection through coincidence, and openness to the unexpected. Meeting Maria reminded me that intercultural learning doesn't start when the event begins, it starts the moment you're willing to engage, listen, and be surprised. It later turned out Maria was one of the participants of my panel, and she did a great job.

Beyond these encounters, the ESA was both stimulating and challenging. I coordinated a panel on European Heritage, where debates on democracy, identity, and participation were often intense. At times I felt overwhelmed, shifting between optimism and scepticism, but I came to see the process itself of debating and revising across cultures as a democratic practice. The week was also an emotional journey, from the exhilaration of entering the Parliament chamber to the self-doubt of questioning my contributions and the quiet affirmation of being thanked or seeing consensus reached. By the final plenary, when our proposals were presented, I felt proud not only of the ideas but of the collaboration that made them possible.

My participation in the European Student Assembly was not only an academic endeavour but a transformative experience. It strengthened my skills in inquiry and intercultural communication, deepened my understanding of cross-border cooperation, and reinforced my belief in internationalization as a responsibility to foster understanding and shared progress. Above all, my most important lesson is this; *stay soft in hard times*. To hold on to patience, empathy, and openness even when under pressure.

This is not only a lesson for conferences. It is a lesson for Europe today. Our continent is facing political threats, where democratic values are questioned and freedom is tested. At the same time, we are living through an environmental crisis that demands urgent and collective action. These are hard times, and in such times it can feel safer to harden ourselves, to close in, and to defend only what is our own. Yet if Europe is to endure, we must also remain soft enough to listen, to cooperate, and to keep our faith in dialogue.

The European project is not perfect, but it is built on the democratic belief that people with different languages, histories, and cultures can sit around the same table and eat from the same plate. I feel this belief not as an abstract ideal but as something real and alive in the conversations I shared with my fellow students. It made me proud to stand with them, proud to defend democracy, and proud to be part of a Europe that is fragile but also resilient: strong enough to stand its ground, yet soft enough to keep learning and growing.