



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Experience Abroad Reflection

**Lessons at the Crossroads of Europe: My Summer I International
Experience in Warsaw**

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I spent all six weeks of my Summer I Laidlaw experience in the vibrant Polish capital, Warsaw. It was not my first time in Warsaw, but it was my debut traveling there not as a tourist, but rather as a “warszawianka” or, in other words, a Varsovian, a citizen of Warsaw. One of my favorite phrases after years of traveling to various countries is “do not misinterpret traveling with immigration,” and my summer experience in Poland proved that.

Before this summer, as many other Ukrainians, I associated Poland only as my layover destination between Ukraine and the world due to an inability to fly directly from Ukraine after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. As I unexpectedly discovered, Poland is so much more than that.

Many people might assume that Poland is just a typical European country, which is not even worth visiting as it does not have any world wonders or Pinterest cities like Rome or Paris, however, it is a very common and unfortunate misconception. Due to its unique location on the blurred border between Western Europe and the Eastern European bloc, Poland became an epicenter of a mix of both of these worlds in terms of culture, experiences, traditions, and cuisine.

Having lived in Poland for almost two months, I can assure you that Poland is a country filled with Western European values and ideas, yet sprinkled with Eastern European historical resilience and traditions.

Personally, I believe that language is the soul of every nation, and for one to have an opportunity to interact with citizens of a country from different racial, religious, and generational backgrounds without leaving anyone behind, they need to make an effort and learn the basics of the native language of these people that unite them all. After going one day to a local grocery market in Warsaw, I discovered one issue: I could not communicate with the elder Polish population, not due to a generational gap, but because we had a language barrier. Simply put, while the younger generation learns English in schools and can hold a proper conversation in that language, elderly people know only Polish, so for me to interact with them without relying on a good old sign language, I needed to learn Polish to the level where at least we would understand each other. That was the driving force behind my decision to start learning Polish, which ended up with me learning how to read, write, and speak Polish (sometimes broken Polish, but this is part of the learning process). Being immersed in the Polish-speaking environment helped me practice my language skills daily, but being a part of this environment also helped me to adjust better, and feel truly welcomed and accepted.

The fast-paced, growing economy of Poland has allowed Warsaw to become one of the major current start-up hubs in Central Europe. Its location gives Poland the privilege of being an active member and participant in the EU markets. In addition, Poland is a well-known oasis for political refugees from Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan, which creates a base of skilled

professionals from various spheres and disciplines. The Polish business ecosystem has been favored by many young Ukrainian entrepreneurs who fled from their homeland, as they consider Poland a great investment opportunity and an open market for niche products and services that might not yet exist at the local level.

Staying in Warsaw during my Laidlaw research experience provided me personally with the unique opportunity to observe how Ukrainian innovation and Polish economic momentum not only are able to co-exist, but also create a so-called “fertile ground” for cross-border collaboration, which holds long-term opportunities. Moreover, it depicts how migration, supported by policy, can contribute to economic diversification and growth.

The insights I received, I believe, are invaluable for understanding how entrepreneurs can adapt to new cultures as well as business environments and make their business flourish. It is potentially helpful in envisioning how post-war Ukraine can harvest its own entrepreneurial efforts internationally for sustainable recovery.

One more lesson Ukraine can take from Poland is how Poland approached the restoration of Warsaw after the end of WWII. Over 85% of Warsaw had been destroyed by the end of the war. Poland made a conscious decision to restore the area to its pre-war historical appearance rather than replacing it with modern architecture. While walking through the Warsaw Old Town, you feel like you have been teleported to the 13th century, when this part of the city was initially built. In my opinion, this decision of the Polish government portrayed how heritage can be used not as an artifact of the past but rather as a cultural tool to heal collective trauma. Many urban restoration practices I saw in Warsaw could be adapted in Ukraine’s post-war rebuilding, preserving historical identity while creating cities of the future.

By interacting with Polish youth, particularly students from the main universities in Warsaw, I had a chance to analyze the difference between being a student in Canada versus in Poland firsthand. The key distinction I noticed lies in the underlying issues of youth movements in both countries. In Poland, for instance, youth movements are closely tied to civic engagement and the political resilience of the nation, often with the main emphasis on national identity and participation in governance at the local level. I met many university students in Warsaw who were involved in volunteer initiatives, advocating for social justice, including but not limited to anti-corruption and anti-immigration campaigns, both in their institutions and nationally. Canadian students, however, focus often more on specific social issues, including equity and inclusion, mental health, and LGBTQ+ rights, promoting their initiatives primarily on social media.

Observing the contrast between the two helped me understand how cultural, historical, and political contexts shape youth engagement across the globe. Additionally, I highlighted the

importance of adaptability and cultural sensitivity when working with youngsters on the international scale.

My Summer I experience in Warsaw taught me lessons far beyond Poland's borders. The importance of open-mindedness, cross-cultural dialogue, cooperation, and innovation would probably be the main lessons I will remember when approaching global issues with cultural sensitivity and respect, as well as with a global citizen mindset.