



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Experience Abroad Reflection

**A Tale of Two Countries or How I spent my Summer II (LiA) in Tbilisi,
Georgia**

Laidlaw Scholar: Alisa Chichvarina

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Finding the Right Fit

I already completed my international component of the Laidlaw Programme during my first summer in Poland. Hence, for the longest time, I considered staying in Canada, where my university is located, and searching for NGOs there for my LiA. Although I was not sure about the exact organization I wanted to work for, I knew exactly what kind of work I wanted to do: working with kids from underprivileged backgrounds. I cold-emailed 25 different refugee centers and non-profit organizations across Canada, and only three got back to me. After talking with their representatives online for multiple months, it became clear that either our goals did not align, or the proposed project itself did not target their participants.

The deadline to lock in the organization was approaching, and I still had nothing. That was the moment when I realized that by thinking of staying in Canada, I was majorly limiting myself to the different opportunities and organizations abroad that potentially might be the best fit.

Because my family used to travel a lot, I wanted to challenge myself and pick a country I had never been to before for multiple reasons: immersing myself in a new culture and environment without knowing the national language, exploring its food and traditions, while meeting new people and making connections in a country where I knew no one and no one knew me. This is exactly how Georgia landed on my list.

After having an interview with a director of DRONI, I understood that this was exactly the NGO I had been looking for. At the end of the day, the perfect match did exist, it was just across the ocean. So, the first takeaway from my LiA happened while I was still physically present in

Toronto: never try to limit yourself to one option, and do not give up. There is definitely something waiting for you, you just need to give it time.

Cultural Nuances

Georgia was one of the 15 republics of the Soviet Union and is currently partially occupied by Russia. The vast majority of the Georgian population is Orthodox. Consequently, Georgians and Ukrainians share many cultural similarities and traditions that have been passed down from our grandparents. As someone born and raised in Ukraine, I felt seen and supported by so many Georgian people, who share a similar experience of living in a country affected by occupation.

After becoming friends with the Georgian volunteers, we had multiple sleepless nights filled with discussions about the similarities between our upbringings and family traditions. Whenever we found differences in these traditions, we would jokingly debate which way was the “better one”: Ukrainian or Georgian.

One lesson I will carry with me forever that I learned in Georgia is how nuanced cultural experiences can be in countries that have experienced occupation. At first glance, being fluent in Russian might have been an advantage, because many Georgians from different generations understand and can speak it as well. However, I quickly realized that I had to be very careful when to use or not to use that language. The older generation does not always speak English, so the only shared language of communication with them was sometimes Russian. However, the younger generation is much more sensitive towards the use of Russian, so English was the first language I would use with them.

This experience made me realize that language can carry much more meaning than simply being a tool for communication. I had to become more aware of the historical and cultural context behind the language I was using and adapt my communication accordingly.

One more thing that really stood out to me about Georgian culture was how proud people are of their identity and heritage. Georgians could spend hours talking about their unique alphabet. Fun fact: Georgia actually has three different writing systems that are still culturally significant today. They take great pride in their traditional dances and music, and I had many conversations with people explaining the different types of dances, songs, and traditions that are unique to different regions of the country. I was also told about the many different varieties of grapes and numerous ways of making wine. Sakartvelo is known as a birthplace of wine.

Another aspect of Georgian culture that I will remember is the hospitality of its people. I have travelled to many countries before, but I have never felt more “at home” so far away from home. From being invited to family dinners to strangers going out of their way to help me, I constantly felt welcomed and included.

Multiculturalism and Friendships Across the Globe

As a cherry on the top, I would like to reflect on my journey as a global citizen during my LiA. Before landing in Tbilisi, I had a whole lot of an existential crisis on the plane about whether I would be a representative of UofT (my home institution) and, consequently, Canada, or an international student studying abroad who was born and raised in Ukraine. Being Ukrainian plays a big role in my cultural identity, so I was unsure how to approach these thoughts at first.

When I opened the door to the office the next day and 15 other volunteers just stared me down without properly greeting me, it was an extremely intimidating experience. I found out that all of

the people there were Erasmus volunteers who were working on the project together for two months as part of their contracts.

Later, I was asked to quickly introduce myself, and here was the moment of slowed-down breathing and trembling legs. Should I say I am a Ukrainian volunteer, or mention immediately that I came here for my LiA as a part of the Laidlaw Scholarship experience? But wait, then I would have to spend hours explaining what Laidlaw is, as well as the fact that I currently study in North America, so my Ukrainian identity is pretty much blended with some Western values. And what about the language? If I know that a person is fluent in Russian or Ukrainian, should I use one of these languages, or go with the safer option - English? All of these questions were just whirling in my head at the same time, making me even more nervous than I already was.

Spoiler alert: a few days later, I befriended all of the aforementioned volunteers as we worked on many projects together. I found out that some of them thought I was a Ukrainian who was currently living in Ukraine, while others said that I did not have a typical “Slavic accent” (whatever that was supposed to mean) when I spoke English, so they were sure I was born in Canada. Either way, neither of the two countries that were assumed to be part of my identity was a member of the European Union, while the other volunteers, apart from the Georgians, were coming from France, Italy, Greece, Poland, Romania, etc.

Being the youngest person in the room and also coming from a completely different background than my colleagues, I did not know if we would co-work, co-exist, or “co-friend” each other. Yet, we became extremely close. So, how did that happen?

What I have realized throughout my LiA is that you always have to be open when meeting new people. Open-mindedness has existed as a concept for centuries, yet individuals do not always understand what it truly entails. Being open to help, being open to understand, being open to accept and treat each other equally; being open to trying each other's traditional food, being open to dancing traditional dances and listening to music from your countries, but most importantly, being open to other people and their stories.

I will forever remember eating badrijani nigvzit, Georgian eggplant rolls with walnut filling, at 3am in the kitchen with other volunteers while watching *The Hunger Games* together, dancing sirtaki in the office, playing Durak (a card game), or learning new Italian words to sing a song together. All these experiences did not form my LiA. They were memories created together with other people from different countries, cultures, religions, sexualities, and identities by making an effort to wake up every day "open" to the world and to other people. And is not that exactly what multiculturalism or global citizenship means?