



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Leadership-in-Action Project Report

Expect the Unexpected: My LiA in Sakartvelo

Laidlaw Scholar: Alisa Chichvarina

Hosting Organization: DRONI

Date: 01/09/2026

1 Introduction

For all six weeks of my LiA experience, I flew to the vibrant capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. Just to clarify any possible misunderstanding for the readers of this report, I should mention that I went to the country of Georgia, located in the Caucasus region, and not the state of Georgia, which is the birthplace of Coca-Cola (a fun fact for those who did not know that).

I worked for the Youth Association DRONI, based in the bustling district of Saburtalo in Tbilisi. DRONI is primarily led by young people and made for young people. It was originally established to help Georgian youth become accustomed to European and international educational, work, and exchange opportunities, as well as to serve as a promotional platform for civic-rights education and peacebuilding.

I knew I wanted to work with underprivileged youth from 2022, when the full-scale war started in my home country and I worked as a translator in a refugee centre in Poland. I saw how unfair life can be for someone without money or power, especially for children and teenagers who do not have equal access to high-quality education, unlike some people around the world. Therefore, when it was time to choose an organisation for my LiA, I immediately began doing in-depth research on NGOs around the world that support disadvantaged youth, and that is how DRONI in Georgia caught my eye.

Georgia is another country whose territories are currently occupied by Russia, and I knew that many families had been forced to move from the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to seek refuge elsewhere in Georgia or abroad, including, but not limited to, Tbilisi. DRONI's mission of

providing equal opportunities and quality education to disadvantaged youth deeply resonated with me and only reinforced my desire and eagerness to work with young people during my LiA.

DRONI works closely with youth centres around Georgia, but particularly in certain areas of Tbilisi, where young people do not have equal access to education for various reasons. Initially, it was agreed that I would implement my LiA project in the form of an English-speaking club as well as university application workshops in one of these centres, which had been underfunded for many years. Therefore, they were not able to host such lessons. Additionally, it was also discussed that I might assist in developing fundraising strategies for the head office of the largest youth centre in Tbilisi, considering my background in finance.

However, upon my arrival, the decision was made that, in addition, I would join the group of Erasmus+ volunteers, on top of my pre-assigned duties, to assist with the daily and special activities of the NGO, such as creating escape rooms and working on a website for one of the centres.

With this report, I aim not only to list the activities and impact of my LiA project, but rather to tell the story of the people who worked on the project and those for whom it was created, showing how just six weeks can lead to significant long-term change in someone's life.

2 Implementation of the LiA Project

2.1 Escape Rooms & Europe Day

The day after I arrived in Tbilisi, I already had mandatory training on the special considerations of working with youth. The whole next week was filled with 9-5 workshops on how to create engaging static and dynamic educational escape rooms.

This whole first week was a challenge in itself. I was in a new country, which I had never visited before, where people spoke a language I did not understand. It was also in a completely different time zone, so, for the rest of the week, I was jet-lagged. I was working with new people whom I knew nothing about, while being the youngest member of the team. Navigating Tbilisi traffic seemed more like a horror story than an LiA challenge. On top of everything, I had never worked on creating escape rooms from scratch before.

It was the project I was assigned to help the Erasmus+ volunteers with, and it turned out to be one of the most enjoyable experiences of my LiA. I always asked questions if I did not know or understand something. Although I was the youngest volunteer at DRONI, I never felt like I did not belong or experienced any kind of imposter syndrome. My ideas and opinions were always heard, and the excitement to work with youth was shared by every single person in the group. Additionally, we did many team-building activities, which helped all volunteers bond for the next two months. I was surrounded by people from different countries and educational backgrounds, yet we were united by our goal: to exchange our experiences with each other and share knowledge with Georgian youth.

In a group of five volunteers, we created an educational dynamic escape room with four different stages and a concluding puzzle at the end. We worked a lot as a team during the process of creating the puzzles, but we also had to show uniqueness and creativity in order to create each stage individually and then present it to young people during Europe Day. This escape room focused on Erasmus+, Erasmus Mundus, and Youth Exchanges. It was prepared and conducted in both English and Georgian. We also created two levels: an easier one for participants aged 12 and above and a more difficult one for an 18+ audience, in order to make it more age-appropriate.

Throughout my whole LiA, I had to work with absolutely different people, with polar personalities, opinions, ideologies, and thoughts. However trivial it may sound, “communication is key” indeed. Working as an international volunteer meant listening first and then talking. As a result, I significantly developed my collaboration and team-working skills. It is always nice to have “effective team player” on your CV until you actually have to voice your opinion in a room full of professionals from different industries, back it up factually, and be ready and open to change some of your ideas to serve the community better. Getting the local context from Georgian volunteers, combined with the creativity and innovativeness of the young Erasmus+ volunteers, helped us all understand the broader picture of our work and the impact we were having on Georgian youth.

We conducted this escape room during Europe Day on 9 May. My colleagues and I conducted seven outdoor escape rooms with more than 40 participants. I delegated tasks efficiently within my team, and we were all eager to help each other whenever needed.

The escape-room creation project continued until the very last day of my stay in Georgia. Together with the group of volunteers, we discussed what went well and what did not go so well during

Europe Day, in order to improve our activities in the future. We spent hours brainstorming intellectual but also fun topics for a static escape room that we could run in one of the youth centres in Tbilisi. Being aware that we are currently surrounded by AI in every sphere of our daily lives, one of the topics which became our final idea was the negative side effects of AI use that teenagers might not be familiar with in this age of technology, as well as how they can navigate this issue and protect themselves online nowadays.

After five weeks of hard work, it finally paid off. We conducted our static escape room about the negative side effects of AI at one of the biggest youth centres in Tbilisi and presented it to more than 50 students over multiple days. Working on this project weekly with the other volunteers was one of the highlights of my experience. Coincidentally, I played the main character in the escape room, so recording a video prompt at 4am, in which I had to use every bit of my acting talent, was incredibly fun.

We later received feedback from the director of the youth centre, who said that the students genuinely loved the experience. She also mentioned that they wanted to take part in more activities like this whenever they had the chance. This feedback showed that the escape room achieved the impact we had hoped for: it encouraged participants to engage with a currently important topic in an interactive way.

2.2 Speaking Club & University Application Workshop

The main activities of my individual LiA project were founding and hosting a weekly speaking club and conducting multiple university application workshops in Tbilisi youth centres. The primary goal of these activities was to bridge a practical gap between the blend of a post-Soviet educational system and rising Western-oriented values for Georgian youth, increasing their chances of employability locally and internationally, while also doing that in an interactive way and relaxed atmosphere through non-formal youth-centred learning. As initially planned, both of these activities provided assistance to Georgian youth from various financial backgrounds in building public speaking and intercultural communication skills, emphasising practical ideas rather than theory. In my classroom, I tried to create a non-judgemental learning space, where everyone's ideas were welcomed and heard.

Having experienced both Eastern European and Western education, I believe it is incredibly important to find balance, taking the best qualities of both systems, and also realising their drawbacks. But most importantly, I aimed to provide a high-quality educational standard in a non-profit environment, aligning with one of the UN SDGs of equal education.

A personal challenge I experienced during these activities was to build rapport with my students as a young and innovative mentor rather than a teacher, while also being respected by my students. Sometimes the age gap I had with my students was just 2-3 years, and I feared that the participants of my workshops might consider me underqualified to mentor them due to my age. First of all, I approached this challenge by not stating my age to the participants of the workshops, as I found it quite inappropriate. For the longest time, even my colleagues were unaware of my actual age,

thinking I was much older. I learned that people perceive you in the way you present yourself to them. Always being professional, on time, considerate, and an effective communicator comes not with age, but rather with your own personal values, and the sooner young people learn this, the faster they will be seen as young professionals ready to work, collaborate, and be truly accepted as part of the team.

I succeeded in having a mentorship relationship with my students and also being admired and respected by them at the same time. I had all the requirements and background knowledge for this LiA project, so I learned not to underestimate myself and to strive for continuous learning opportunities and professional improvement.

2.3 Europe Workshop

During one of the last weeks of my stay in Tbilisi, some of the other volunteers and I brainstormed another workshop for youth, which was inspired by Monopoly as a gamification element and was about Europe and the European Union.

My main personal takeaway from this activity was not to be scared of taking responsibility and being proactive. If no one else in the room wants to take part in some activities, why not just say yes to all of these activities myself and see what happens. By having this mindset during all six weeks of the LiA, I did so many new things that I could have never imagined having knowledge for or the courage to conduct. I was constantly going out of my comfort zone, challenging myself by talking to a bunch of people during events and workshops, performing public speaking every week or even every day, and taking part in projects that were “bigger” than my scope of practice,

such as building a website or brainstorming creative ideas for fundraising opportunities, but never scared or embarrassed to ask questions, learn something new daily, and develop leadership skills individually and in a team setting. Saying “yes” to one small opportunity might open doors for you that you never knew existed.

3 Ethical Considerations

Having volunteered, lived, and worked in many different countries, I had a baseline understanding of what I should and should not do while working in a completely different country with people from various backgrounds. Therefore, I can highlight cultural sensitivity as a primary ethical consideration in such an experience.

In my case, the aforementioned cultural sensitivity took the form of a language question. Since childhood, I have been considered a native speaker of both Ukrainian and Russian. Georgia, as well as Ukraine, used to be part of the Soviet Union, therefore, many people from the older Georgian generation are fluent in Russian, but may not be as confident in expressing themselves in English. However, the historical and socio-political context should also be taken into consideration. I had a few Georgian friends who told me to be very mindful of which language I used with whom, as, after the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the younger generation of Georgians became more protective of their heritage.

For example, Gen Z is much more sensitive towards the use of Russian, so English was always the first language I used to communicate with them. To avoid making assumptions, I would always ask people which language they felt most comfortable using in order to create a safe and

welcoming environment. I also learned a few Georgian words and phrases to speak with the older generation.

Another ethical consideration I would like to mention is avoiding saviourism. LiA, or any volunteering experience, should never be approached from the perspective of “saving” or “fixing” a community. Volunteering is always about giving, but also taking in culture, norms, traditions, language, etc. When working with young people, especially internationally, it is vital to make an effort to get to know their culture as much as possible, as this helps to build connections and, consequently, develop rapport and respect in the future.

Volunteering can therefore also be called a cultural exchange. Working for an NGO made me understand that our perspectives are not universal or the only “correct” ones. I had an amazing opportunity to work with a group of other international volunteers, where everyone had their own ideas. Yet, we were still able to communicate and compromise when needed, creating something unique for children at the youth centres.

4 Collaboration and Team Dynamics

Doing a commerce degree means having multiple group projects every semester. Hence, I have never been scared of working in a team where people might have different opinions from time to time. A conflict of thoughts is not really important, but the way you resolve it and find a compromised solution to the issue is what is crucial.

Both long-term and short-term volunteers at DRONI were older than me. However, I did not feel a sense of not belonging even once. My opinions and ideas were more than welcomed and encouraged to be shared and discussed.

I was lucky that, with a one-day difference, I arrived with the Erasmus+ volunteers, who were staying in Tbilisi for two months of their ESC. Seeing them daily at the office, working on the same projects of creating escape rooms, and later going out to explore Tbilisi together, which turned into late-night sessions of playing the Soviet card game Durak, bonded us. All of us had completely different work ethics, and even different hours of the day when we were productive or not. We brainstormed many things together while working at the office, but we understood pretty quickly that it would be more efficient to just set one strict deadline per week, when we discussed everything that each of us had done during that week. We all agreed that this worked best for the team and for our overall results and productivity.

Additionally, by observing my colleagues, I learned that it is better to bring up the things you do not like to the other person sooner rather than later, before the feeling of frustration builds up and consequently bursts later on with worse consequences. Speaking up when you do not like something is not a sign of a nosy personality, but rather a first step towards healthy dialogue and communication in the future.

5 Conclusion

Throughout my LiA in Tbilisi, I was grateful to work on various initiatives, some of which I had multiple years of expertise in, and some of which made me feel like a lost puppy. These activities ranged from different static and dynamic escape rooms to a weekly English-speaking club and website programming. In all of these projects, I managed to combine non-formal education practices with useful practical skills and engaging activities for Georgian youth. My LiA project proved to be feasible within the given six-week timeframe, considering the outcomes of the lessons and workshops, as well as feedback from my colleagues and mentors, and, most importantly, positive feedback from the young participants of the aforementioned activities. Over 40 young people were engaged during the Europe Day activities, 50+ kids participated in our static escape rooms, and the lessons and workshops that I hosted ran regularly in youth centres, becoming the first lessons of such kind there. These statistics showcase that the LiA activities were more than achievable and also meaningful to the local community.

The key takeaway from my LiA is very surprising: “It is OK to not know what you would like to do with your life or future.” For the longest time, I had everything pre-prepared and planned 1,000 steps in advance, but that approach does not necessarily bring success. Slow-paced Georgia reminded me of my old self, who was curious and brave: the little girl who always wanted to know more by asking questions or exploring on her own. I did many things during my LiA, but I never caught myself feeling tired or slacking off from work. Why? Some might say responsibility or discipline, which might not be far from the truth, but I would highlight that I was doing things I truly enjoy: teaching, helping out youth, learning a new language, travelling, trying new food, and spending quality time with extremely interesting people from around the world. We shared laughs,

our traditions, and some tears when I was leaving. It sounds cliché, but I finally felt human and alive again.

Apart from that, I have also learned that working with youth requires a lot of energy and creativity, as well as flexibility and cultural humility. I also understood the importance of being proactive and saying “yes” to new challenges.

Moreover, leadership is really not about having all the correct answers and being always right, but about listening to others and guiding them when they feel stuck. I do not really like the word “leader”. It seems to me that “mentor” is a better word to describe a “great leader”. I now understand that being a leader means being open to feedback and dialogue, and continuously improving both individually and as part of a team.