



JOINT FACULTIES
OF HUMANITIES
AND THEOLOGY

Centre for Languages and Literature
Master of Arts in European Studies

EUHR18

Supervisor: Elsa Hedling

Navigating identity and intergroup relations across borders: How studying abroad shapes Polish students' sense of self and perceptions of “others”

Izabela Drogoś

Abstract

This thesis examines how transnational mobility shapes the relationship between the sense of national belonging, European affiliation, and openness towards “others” among Polish students who have studied abroad. Based on 308 survey responses, it explores how living and studying away from one’s home country influences self-perception and impacts intergroup attitudes, applying Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorisation Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and the notion of “othering” as its theoretical and conceptual framework.

The analysis considers how the quality of interpersonal interactions, situational group memberships, and the balance between national and supranational identification relate to the openness towards “others”. By comparing patterns across varying durations of stay, shifts in attachment to Poland, sense of European belonging, and attitudes towards foreigners, the research highlights how international experiences can encourage Polish youth to reflect on their own and others’ place in the world. The findings offer insights into the complex, non-linear interactions between identity and intergroup perception, challenging zero-sum assumptions that weaker national attachment, stronger European identification, and greater openness to “otherness” inevitably coincide.

Keywords: Polish identity, European identity, “otherness”, intergroup contact, international mobility

Table of contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Relevance of the research	1
1.2. Study aim and the research questions	3
1.3. Disposition	3
2. Conceptual and theoretical framework	4
2.1. Identity	4
2.1.1. National identity	4
2.1.2. European identity	4
2.2. Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory	5
2.3. Intergroup Contact Theory	6
2.4. “Othering”	7
3. Literature review	8
3.1. Identity formation in the transnational context	8
3.2. National and European identity of Poles	11
3.2.1. Polish national identity formation: background	11
3.2.2. Polishness and Europeanness	13
3.3. “Othering”, intergroup contact, and their impact on identity	16
4. Methodology	20
4.1. Choice of the method	20
4.2. Rationale	23
4.3. Research sample	25
5. Results and discussion	27
5.1. Identity reflections	27
5.1.1. Discussion	31
5.1.1.1. Reginal and national affiliations	34
5.1.1.2. Appreciation for Poland’s history, culture, and quality of life	34
5.1.1.3. Critical remarks and areas for improvement	36
5.1.1.4. Strengthened national identity and openness to diversity	38
5.1.1.5. Identity salience	39
5.1.1.6. Final remarks	40

5.2. Intergroup relations reflections	43
5.2.1. Discussion	45
5.2.1.1. From recognition to navigation of differences	48
5.2.1.2. Challenging experiences	48
5.2.1.3. Regional familiarity	49
5.2.1.4. Similarity in diversity	50
5.2.1.5. Disparity of perspectives	51
5.2.1.6. Rediscovery of Poland's assets	52
5.2.1.7. Increase in the intergroup understanding through diversity	53
5.2.1.8. Re-categorisation into the "international students" in-group	57
5.2.1.9. Final remarks	58
6. Conclusions	59
Bibliography	62

1. Introduction

1.1. Relevance of the research

Neither can a person live in isolation from other people, nor can a country function disregarding the modern international order. Individuals create a sense of “self” in relation to “others”. Nation-states define their identity against other countries.

The two concepts, “self” and “other”, are in a constant interplay with each other, leaving a mark on both human-to-human and country-to-country relations. While the role of national identity becomes more evident when confronted with “otherness”, interacting across borders not only alters self-concept but also impacts intergroup perception¹. This is why these two phenomena – identity and “othering” – are intrinsically connected².

In an increasingly divided Europe, marked by a visible rise in intergroup tensions across national and ethnic lines, understanding whether a strengthened sense of national belonging can coexist with increased openness to “others” is essential. Young people’s experiences are particularly intriguing in this discourse, as it is their futures that are shaped by current political and cultural developments. Their input is also crucial to creating a roadmap to reduce “othering” narratives and rebuild cooperation between “us” and “others”.

While aversion to “others” is closely correlated with traditional Polish identity³, Poles share an unequivocal feeling of belonging to Europe⁴: the same Europe that is home to forty-four *other* countries⁵. This apparent contradiction within one of the largest EU Member States highlights the relevance of the Polish example in exploring the interplay between the sentiment of national belonging, attachment to Europe, and intergroup understanding. What is more, taking into account Poland’s historically complex relations with its neighbours, as well as current political dynamics positioning the country between pro-European orientation and nationalist narratives promoted by political parties across the right-wing spectrum, Polish transnational students serve as a particularly relevant research sample.

The motivation behind this study stems from three key factors. First, young people are more mobile, open-minded, and receptive to other cultures⁶. Second, Poland's reinforced position

¹ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration*, p. 146.

² Łastawski, K. (2007) ‘Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej’, p. 279.

³ Puchała, D. et al. (2023) ‘Skąd bierze się niechęć do obcych? O grupowych identyfikacjach Polaków’, p. 2.

⁴ Galbraith, M. (2023) ‘Being European in Poland and Polish in Europe’, pp. 209, 215-217, 220.

⁵ Przegląd państw na mapie politycznej Europy (Accessed: 8 August 2025).

⁶ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration*, p. 92.

on the contemporary international scene makes the nation's identity and attitudes towards “others” a valid case study. Third, studying abroad constitutes a unique opportunity for students to critically reflect on the idea of Polishness and its relationship to Europe, as well as to compare attitudes towards other nations developed in the national environment with first-hand experience abroad.

Among the various opportunities for international mobility, the EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, play a particularly influential role in shaping students' worldview. Within the framework of this thesis, Erasmus+, together with CEEPUS, NAWA, and bi-lateral agreements between universities worldwide, are seen not only as a tool for promoting European identity and encouraging cultural exchange but also enabling individuals to broaden their outlook, expanding beyond the narratives promoted within national echo chambers.

Considering that the international sojourns of students from Central and Eastern Europe are significantly understudied regarding the impact they have on the students' national identity and perception of “others”, this thesis constitutes the first step in closing a fundamental research gap in the field of European studies. By analysing the experience of students from the biggest country in the region, it aspires to provide inspiration for researchers to conduct similar studies in other Central and Eastern European countries. Moreover, while there exist a number of studies that examine intergroup relations in the context of immigration⁷, nations with a long history of conflict⁸, mind perception⁹, right-wing authoritarianism¹⁰ or affective polarisation¹¹, as well as extensive research that investigates European identity of students from Western and Northern Europe who study abroad¹², researchers have not yet brought the concepts of national identity, its interaction with European identity, and the impact of intergroup contact on reducing “othering” attitudes together.

⁷ Caricati, L. (2018) ‘(...) A Cross-National Test of Intergroup Threat Theory’, pp. 41–51.

⁸ Shamir, M. et al. (2006) ‘Conflict, identity, and tolerance’, pp. 569–595.

⁹ “(...) mind perception is a dynamic process in which relevant contextual information such as social identity and out-group threat change the interpretation of physical features that signal the presence of another mind.”, p. 15 in Hackel, L.M. et al. (2014) ‘Group membership alters the threshold for mind perception (...)’, pp. 15–23.

¹⁰ Altemeyer, B. (1981) *Right wing authoritarianism*.

¹¹ Wagner, M. (2024) ‘Affective polarization in Europe’, pp. 378–392.

¹² Mitchell, K. (2015) ‘Rethinking the “Erasmus Effect” on European Identity’, pp. 330–348; Elofsson, N. (2020) *Erasmus and its effects on participants' European identity*.

1.2. Study aim and the research questions

This thesis aims to examine how studying abroad impacts students' notion of self, especially in the context of their Polish identity, while also taking into account how this identity is shaped alongside, or in contrast to, a broader sense of European belonging. It also seeks to investigate how the identity fluctuations relate to students' perceptions of "others".

By analysing the experiences of Polish students who have studied abroad between 2021 and 2025, it explores how contemporary international mobility shapes the relationship between national identity and intergroup attitudes. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Polish students who have studied abroad navigate their national belonging and how it relates to a broader European identity?
2. How does studying abroad influence students' perception of "others"?

1.3. Disposition

This dissertation begins with an argument and motivation for the choice of the topic, connecting the concept of Polish national identity and intergroup perception explored within the context of international studies. Subsequently, the following Chapter presents the conceptual and theoretical framework. It starts by explaining how identity is approached in this research, focusing on both national and European layers. Then, it introduces Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorisation Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and the concept of "othering", which have been chosen to drive the analysis. Chapter Three discusses prior research on identity formation in transnational settings, with a focus on Polish national and European identity. Furthermore, it also explores how intergroup contact and mechanisms of "othering" have been shown to influence identity considerations. Chapter Four outlines the methodology by establishing the rationale for using a mixed-method survey and detailing the survey design, sampling strategy, and data collection process. This Chapter also discusses the strengths and limitations of the chosen method. Chapter Five presents the results and discussion together. It is organised around two main themes that emerged from the data analysis: identity reflections and intergroup relations. Finally, Chapter Six concludes the thesis by revisiting the research questions, summarising the key findings – especially the correlation between the students' Polish identity and how they perceive "others" – and reflecting on their significance.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

2.1. Identity

In this thesis, identity is understood in line with the definition proposed by Giddens, who describes it as “the distinctive characteristics of a person’s character or the character of a group which relate to who they are and what is meaningful to them”¹³. In his definition, Giddens addresses both the individual and collective dimensions of identity, indicating that, in an increasingly globalised world, the significance of group membership and distinctiveness from other groups gains in relevance. Within the framework of this dissertation, group membership is examined in the context of belonging to a nation, feeling European, and holding international student status.

2.1.1. National identity

For the purpose of this research, national identity is defined as “a consciousness of belonging to a broader political entity (...) which is, on one hand, collective (...) and on the other hand, individual”¹⁴. Belonging, therefore, is perceived as rooted in the self-recognition of being part of a national in-group. This definition by Pinterič builds upon Smith’s conceptualisation of national identity, which, he argues, is established on five essential features: 1) a historical territory, or homeland; 2) common myths and historical memories; 3) a common, mass public culture; 4) common legal rights and duties for all members; and 5) a common economy with territorial mobility for members¹⁵. These components are widely recognised in the academic literature as vital to national identity formation, and their relevance is especially evident in the Polish context, where national narratives are strongly embedded in education, public discourse¹⁶, and collective memory.

2.1.2. European identity

In this dissertation, the concept of European identity refers to a sense of unity with other Europeans arising from emotional attachment and the recognition of belonging to a shared European group that has its roots on the European continent¹⁷. While often linked to the European Union, European identity does not have to be exclusively tied to the EU

¹³ Giddens, A. et al. (2014) *Sociology*, p. 1047.

¹⁴ Pinterič, U. (2005) ‘National and supranational identity in context of the European integration and globalization’, p. 414.

¹⁵ Smith, A. D. (1991) ‘National Identity’, p. 14.

¹⁶ Łastawski, K. (2007) ‘Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej’, p. 283.

¹⁷ Cojocaru, C. (2019) ‘Erasmus mobilities and European identity: an exploratory incursion’, p. 68.

institutions¹⁸. Instead, it can emerge from a broader awareness of shared values and cultural heritage, as well as geographic position.

2.2. Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), first introduced by Tajfel in 1978, serves as a foundation for understanding intergroup relations and self-categorisation¹⁹. It postulates that individuals classify themselves as members of various social groups, a process that influences their behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions of “others”. However, one of SIT’s limitations is the lack of differentiation between various kinds of groups²⁰. The dynamics between rival sports fans, individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, and members of different national groups, for instance, stem from distinct social and historical contexts and evoke different emotions²¹. In the framework of this thesis, SIT will be applied to examine the connection between interactions with individuals of other nationalities and the way Polish students perceive their national and European group memberships.

SIT is based on seven psychological principles that shape identity formation and intergroup behaviour²²:

1. Self-categorisation – Individuals conscientiously internalise their group membership, accentuating in-group similarities.
2. Identity salience – In certain situational contexts, different identities may be triggered. Only if group membership is salient does it affect behaviour²³.
3. Social comparison – People assess the groups they identify with (in-groups) in relation to those they do not (out-groups).
4. Positive distinctiveness – A result of social comparison depicted as in-group favouritism and out-group derogation.
5. Continued evaluation – Individuals continuously reassess the social categories they put themselves into.

¹⁸ Galbraith, M. (2023) ‘Being European in Poland and Polish in Europe’, pp. 210, 217.

¹⁹ Gaffney, A.M. et al. (2023) ‘Social identity theory’, p. 1.

²⁰ Brown, R. (2000) ‘Social identity theory: Past achievements, current problems and future challenges’, p. 761.

²¹ Examples inspired by Brown, R. (2000) ‘Social identity theory: Past achievements, current problems and future challenges’, p. 761.

²² Tajfel, H. et al. (1986) ‘The social identity theory of intergroup behavior’, pp. 283-284.

²³ Trepte, S. et al. (2017) ‘Social identity theory and self-categorization theory’, p. 3.

6. Self-esteem – It can be increased if the group comparison results in positive distinctiveness, or it may be one of the reasons to engage in social comparison in the first place²⁴.
7. Individual mobility to another group, social creativity, and social competition – If the result of social comparison is not favourable for the in-group, an individual might introduce other categories for comparison or decide to switch group membership.

Building on SIT, principally on the “Self-categorisation” principle, Turner proposed a distinction between social and personal identity. His Self-Categorisation Theory highlights that personal identity can be independent of group memberships, with the degree to which social or personal identity takes precedence varying based on the context and its significance to the individual²⁵. Turner’s theory supports the idea that people can maintain multiple identities simultaneously, navigating affiliations with various groups²⁶. In the case of Polish students studying abroad, the interaction between national and European sentiments, as well as a sense of belonging to the group of international students, becomes especially noteworthy.

Social Identity Theory, together with Self-Categorisation Theory, as well as the concept of national and European identity, will serve as a critical basis for the analysis of identity reflections shared by students in the survey designed for the purpose of this dissertation.

2.3. Intergroup Contact Theory

Allport’s Intergroup Contact Hypothesis suggests that meaningful interactions between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations only in situations where four key conditions are met: 1) equal group status within the situation; 2) common goals; 3) intergroup cooperation; and 4) the support of authorities, law, or custom²⁷.

Building on Allport’s framework, Pettigrew further outlines four key mechanisms through which intergroup contact shapes attitudes towards “others”: learning about the out-group, forming emotional connections, changing behaviour, and reassessing one’s in-group. Together, these processes contribute to reducing intergroup biases and encourage openness

²⁴ Trepte, S. et al. (2017) ‘Social identity theory and self-categorization theory’, pp. 4-5.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 1, 6.

²⁷ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*. p. 47 after Allport, G. W. (1954) *The nature of prejudice*.

to cooperation across groups²⁸. They will be further described in the “*Othering*”, *intergroup contact, and their impact on identity* section of the *Literature review* Chapter.

2.4. “Othering”

The notion of “othering” was first used by Spivak and Said, who stated that in colonial times, “othering” practices were used to create a dichotomy between Europe and the “Orient”. They were meant to sustain dominant narratives and power structures by legitimising the marginalisation of those deemed as “outsiders”²⁹.

Such practices, until this day, reinforce social, cultural, and political hierarchies, contributing to constructing a division between “us” and “them”, often leading to the marginalisation of the out-group. Therefore, while the concept of the “other” refers to any individual or group perceived as different from one’s in-group, the practice of “othering” goes beyond a mere recognition of difference. It is “a process whereby individuals and groups are treated and marked as different and inferior from the dominant social group”³⁰.

A feeling of threat stemming from “othering” can manifest in various forms: rigid national categorisation, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, or even Eurosceptic attitudes³¹. For the purpose of this thesis, “othering” is understood as the practice of distancing oneself from people of nationalities different than Polish, which can include both subtle and overt acts of exclusion, from assumptions about cultural superiority to social avoidance.

Both the concept of “othering” and Intergroup Contact Theory will serve as guiding frameworks for the examination of developments in the way Polish students shape and perceive their relationships with “others”. Identified patterns will then be brought together with the results of identity reflections analysis in Chapter Six to draw conclusions about the interplay of these two phenomena. However, in order to situate this thesis in a broader academic context, the following Chapter will first outline the state of previous research.

²⁸ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) ‘Intergroup contact theory’, pp. 70-71.

²⁹ Ambesange, P.V. (2016) *Postcolonialism: Edward Said & Gayatri Spivak*. p. 48.

³⁰ Griffin, G. (2017) ‘Othering’, *Oxford Dictionary of Gender Studies*. (Accessed: 8 March 2025).

³¹ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, p. 49.

3. Literature review

3.1. Identity formation in the transnational context

As Adler highlights, “transitional experiences can be the source of higher levels of personality development”³². The author argues that in moments of psychological, social, or cultural tension, individuals are compelled to adjust and reinterpret aspects of their identity. This idea was further developed by Kuhn, who added that cross-border interactions “lead individuals to lower their out-group boundaries”³³.

According to the researchers, studying abroad not only poses a challenge in terms of adaptation to a new cultural environment, but also, as a profound transnational experience, prompts students to renegotiate their sense of self and perception of “others”. The extent to which this transformation occurs, however, depends on multiple factors: the salience of national identity, activation of the mechanisms of intergroup differentiation, and motion through the stages of transnational adaptation.

The very transnational adaptation was conceptualised by Adler as a five-stage process³⁴:

- 1) Initial contact with the second culture, or the out-group, during which individuals search for similarities with their own in-group.
- 2) Disintegration, where cultural differences become apparent often leading to confusion.
- 3) Reintegration, characterised by a rejection of the second culture and a renewed attachment to one’s in-group.
- 4) Autonomy, during which individuals gain sensitivity and understanding of the out-group, as well as become more comfortable with their status as insider-outsiders in the two cultures.
- 5) Independence, where they reconcile cultural differences and similarities, seeing themselves and “others” as unique products shaped by culture and upbringing.

While these stages provide a useful framework, they suggest a linear progression that may not fully capture the complexity of identity formation. Some individuals may fluctuate between stages, experience them in a different order, or never reach the later stages of autonomy and independence. Instead, they may close themselves off to the newly discovered diversity, reinforcing identification with the national community.

³² Adler, P.S. (1975) ‘The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock’, p. 14.

³³ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, p. 2.

³⁴ Adler, P.S. (1975) ‘The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock’, p. 17.

Although the interplay between in-group identification and out-group perception remains the cornerstone of this thesis, personal identity, distinct from collective identity associated with group membership, also plays a crucial role in how individuals navigate the transnational adaptation and negotiate between identity layers. McKay et al. suggest that it is not merely a passive construct dependent on external circumstances, but that personal identity reflections are indispensable in personal growth and development during the exchange³⁵. The author highlights that, ultimately, the sense of “self” is profoundly based on a sensation much deeper than mere group association.

While students’ personal identity reflections will also be demonstrated in further analysis, they will be treated as complementary to the national and European identity considerations, which constitute one of the two pillars of this dissertation. Nevertheless, they will allow for the illustration of an in-depth picture of respondents’ introspections.

While some studies suggest that mobility strengthens the European identity³⁶, others argue that it has little impact³⁷ as those who choose to study abroad already identify as European³⁸. The inconsistent nature of these findings indicates that the impact of international experiences on identity is highly individual and determined by prior attitudes, social networks, and the specific cultural context of the host country. Due to these conflicting results, instead of relying on the previously gathered material, I examined European sentiments among students by including questions related to the feeling of European belonging in the survey, which allowed for the collection of the most recent and accurate data.

While exploring European identity during transnational sojourns, some research has also shed light on national identities and intergroup perceptions within specific national contexts. Elofsson, in a study on Swedish Erasmus+ students, found that many participants initially relied on national preconceived notions to categorise people from different backgrounds. However, direct interactions with international students allowed them to gain a more intricate understanding of cultural diversity³⁹.

³⁵ McKay, S. et al. (2020) ‘Identity development during student exchange (...)’, p. 2.

³⁶ King, R. et al. (2003) ‘International Student Migration and the European ‘Year Abroad’ (...)’, pp. 229-252; Mitchell, K. (2015) ‘Rethinking the ‘Erasmus Effect’ on European Identity’, pp. 330-348.

³⁷ Sigalas, E. (2010) ‘Cross-border mobility and European identity (...)’, pp. 241-265;

Wilson, I. (2011) ‘What should we expect of Erasmus generations?’, pp. 1113-1140;

Kuhn, T. (2012) ‘Why educational exchange programmes miss their mark (...)’ pp. 994-1010.

³⁸ Oborune, K. (2015) ‘Becoming more European or European after Erasmus?’, p. 80.

³⁹ Elofsson, N. (2020) Erasmus and its effects on participants’ European identity (...), pp. 16, 20, 24.

Several respondents noted that while abroad, they felt a closer attachment to their Swedish identity, yet upon returning home, they identified more strongly as European. Others underlined how their experiences challenged stereotypes, allowing them to see cultural similarities that were previously overlooked, and develop a closer connection with “others”⁴⁰. With regard to national identities, McKay et al. observed similar patterns in their research, with one French interviewee stating: “I [now] have two ways of thinking and two ways of living, which are very different, and I can, depending on the situation, choose one or the other”⁴¹. Their statements clearly depict that international mobility can, indeed, lead to identity flexibility, where navigating between various senses of belonging becomes an everyday exercise. On the other hand, it can also lead to a strengthened sense of national belonging, as reported by some students, who remark that distance from their home country allowed them to reflect on and reaffirm their connection to their national culture⁴².

The extent to which studying abroad affects national identity is influenced by several factors. Oakes suggests that for any group association to become salient, it must be accessible, emotionally relevant, or of central value to an individual⁴³. Therefore, in the context of national belonging, an individual needs to feel an emotional connection with their nation for that aspect of their identity to stand out while studying abroad. When this occurs, members may overly emphasise similarities with their in-group, reshaping their personality to fit in better with the majority⁴⁴. Furthermore, the strength of national identification while abroad may depend on geographical proximity to the country of origin. Within Europe – particularly within the EU, where open borders facilitate movement and basic knowledge of other European countries is expected – students tend to introduce themselves by nationality (e.g. “Polish,” “German,” or “Greek”), with little need to explain their country’s context, as widely recognised stereotypes often serve as an implicit reference point. However, outside of Europe, where knowledge of European inter-country dynamics is often more limited, students may find themselves defining their identity in relation to Europe as a whole (i.e., “I’m from Europe”). This shift underlines that self-identification is influenced not only by personal attachment but also by the perceptions and knowledge of those around. While this phenomenon will not be further investigated as a part of this thesis due to the imbalance between intra-European and outer-European study destinations

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*; McKay, S. et al. (2020) ‘Identity development during student exchange (...)’, p. 8.

⁴¹ McKay, S. et al. (2020) ‘Identity development during student exchange’, p. 7.

⁴² Elofsson, N. (2020) Erasmus and its effects on participants’ European identity (...), p. 17.

⁴³ Trepte, S. et al. (2017) ‘Social identity theory and self-categorization theory’, p. 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*

of respondents participating in the survey, it constitutes a compelling starting point for future research.

Nonetheless, considering the cultural richness of countries based both within and outside of the European continent, cross-cultural comparison was identified as a key factor in identity negotiations regardless of mobility location. Intergroup differentiation is especially significant in this process, as an individual must not only internalise their group membership but must also be recognised to belong to that national group by others to be able to make comparisons⁴⁵. In line with Social Identity Theory, while engaging in evaluations, humans tend to favour their in-group over out-groups⁴⁶. This is often manifested through positive distinctiveness⁴⁷, where they selectively compare aspects of their home and host countries in ways that favour their own nation. For instance, a Polish student might highlight national traditions such as *Thusty Czwartek* as a point of pride, while distancing themselves from controversial aspects of their country, such as government policies, by assuring that they do not personally support them. This act of social creativity allows individuals to preserve a positive self-concept while managing potentially uncomfortable associations with their national identity.

To better understand how the described processes unfold for Polish students, the following section explores the historical background and characteristics of Polish national identity and examines how it has been studied, while taking into account its relation to the broader feeling of European belonging.

3.2. National and European identity of Poles

3.2.1. Polish national identity formation: background

Poland's long history of struggle against threats posed by external powers has nurtured a strong sense of independence and a tendency toward protectionism against foreign influences⁴⁸. The experience of losing sovereignty for over a century, regaining it in 1918, and then facing the upheaval of the Second World War reinforced Poland's cautious stance towards other countries. However, Polish history also includes periods of great tolerance, particularly following the sixteenth century's Union of Lublin, which united Poland

⁴⁵ Tajfel, H. et al. (1986) 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior', p. 284.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

⁴⁷ Gaffney, A.M. et al. (2023) 'Social identity theory', p. 2.

⁴⁸ Łastawski, K. (2007) 'Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej', p. 294, 300-302.

and Lithuania into a single political entity. Even during the time of the Union, however, instances of hostility toward outsiders persisted⁴⁹.

Reconciling these conflicting historical experiences remains a challenge that Poles continue to navigate today. While historical lessons encourage caution in interactions with “others”, a significant part of Polish society strives to cultivate the traditions of openness and hospitality. The commitment to upholding these values has become especially evident since 2022, as Poland has provided support and protection to over one million Ukrainian citizens in the past three years⁵⁰. However, the kindness and welcome demonstrated by Poles throughout that time may be seen as limited to “others” who share a similar cultural background, and are victims of attacks by countries Poland already perceives with distrust. This perspective was further reinforced in February 2025, when the lower chamber of the Polish Parliament adopted a law suspending the right to asylum in response to the increasing number of immigrants, primarily from the African and Middle-Eastern countries, arriving at the Polish-Belarusian border⁵¹. This clearly selective approach makes Poland a particularly relevant subject of study of intergroup perceptions, especially in the contemporary context of continued struggle with migration, rising right-wing nationalism across Europe, and growing isolationist tendencies that threaten international cooperation.

With regard to Poland’s place in Europe, owing to the country’s charged history of conquest and defense taking place on the European continent, Polish national identity has not developed in isolation from the broader European context. It has evolved alongside a sense of European consciousness, with Poland’s cultural and geographical belonging to Europe deeply rooted in its history; It has become an important part of national awareness⁵².

It is precisely the historical perspectives that hold a considerable weight in educational curriculum, which, according to Łastawski, plays a great role in shaping and highlighting national identity. The national myths and stories, perpetuated by teachers and in family settings, influence young people’s approaches towards their country. It is at home and in school, where they acquire fundamental knowledge about their ancestors, surroundings,

⁴⁹ Łastawski, K. (2007) ‘Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej’, pp. 297-299.

⁵⁰ Obywatele Ukrainy w Polsce – raport (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

⁵¹ Sejm przyjmuje ustawę o zawieszeniu prawa do azylu (...) (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

⁵² Łastawski, K. (2007) ‘Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej’, pp. 283, 292-293; McManus-Czubinska, C. et al. (2003) ‘Understanding dual identities in Poland’, p. 127.

and country⁵³. In the modern world, I consider it essential for social media to be added to this list, as it influences not only the national identity of the young but also the way they perceive “others”. Furthermore, other relevant factors – rural or urban environment of upbringing, the political affiliations of family and peers, personal agreement or disagreement with prevailing ideologies, exposure to international travel, and direct interactions with foreigners – shape Poles’ view on their and “others” place in the world⁵⁴. These same factors also affect one’s sense of national belonging, which is strengthened through the same language, common cultural heritage, and experiences of growing up with similar values, symbols, and ingrained preconceived notions.

Polish youth, from an early age, have been exposed to the narratives of national historical struggle both through public discourse and the education system⁵⁵. This experience, combined with the newly acquired international perspective of studying abroad, allows each new generation of Poles to contribute fresh perspectives and reshape national thinking while upholding⁵⁶ or challenging its perennial values.

3.2.2. Polishness and Europeanness

According to Rodak, Polishness should be understood not as an idea but as a practice⁵⁷, meaning that it is shaped by lived experiences rather than abstract concepts. As the “self” is the “primary actor of the identity formation process”⁵⁸, experiences that lead individuals to the encounter with the “self”, particularly the transnational ones, consequently shape how humans perceive themselves. However, I argue, the ways in which foreign exposure influences identity vary across nationalities, depending on the background of a nation-state.

While Polish traditional identity has been shaped by historical narratives of suffering and heroism, research suggests that younger generations strive to reinterpret the foundations of their sense of belonging. In their study, Brzezińska et al. confirmed that while traditional identity is often associated with historical martyrdom, Polish youth tend to distance

⁵³ Łastawski, K. (2007) ‘Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej’, p. 283.

⁵⁴ Woolston, C. (2023) ‘The psychological challenges of rural living’ (Accessed: 9 May 2025).

Willoughby, E.A. et al. (2021) ‘Parent contributions to the development of political attitudes in adoptive and biological families’, p. 2027;

Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, pp. 31-36;

Hu, J. et al. (2024) ‘Social identity and social integration: A meta-analysis exploring the relationship between social identity and social integration’, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Brzezińska, O. et al. (2011) ‘Re-constructing Polish Identity. Searching for a New Language’, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁶ Łastawski, K. (2007) ‘Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej’, p. 307.

⁵⁷ Rodak, P. (2023) ‘Polishness: A time of deconstruction, a time of reconstruction’, p. 356.

⁵⁸ Cinoğlu, H. et al. (2012) ‘Self, identity and identity formation (...)’, p. 1115.

themselves from these themes, not out of rejection of their national identity but because such narratives no longer resonate with them. Instead, they construct their Polishness through positive personal associations rather than historic pathos and perceive their European identity as a given, embracing it naturally⁵⁹.

Similarly, Galbraith observed that Poles identified no conflict between being European and Polish, emphasising that “Poland has always been in Europe”, both in geographic and cultural terms⁶⁰. Poles’ European identity, therefore, does not appear to be dependent on the EU membership, nor do Polish people see their national and European identities as mutually exclusive, but rather embedded within each other. However, McManus-Czubinska et al. note that while this dual identity makes Polish people, especially the young, more open to global diversity, it is inconsistent with Polish historical opposition to non-Christian influences⁶¹. While the role of Christianity – Catholicism in particular – in Polish national identity remains significant, as younger generations increasingly detach from religious narratives, similarly as they do from the notion of national martyrology, this aspect is gradually becoming less central to their sense of national belonging.

With regard to the broader academic debate about European identity, in his 2008 paper, Fligstein suggested that interpersonal connections among Europeans would gradually lead them to see each other less as belonging to separate national categories and more as a part of a shared European community⁶². The Erasmus+ programme, the European Commission’s flagship exchange initiative in Europe, explicitly aims to promote European identity among students by providing them with opportunities for personal international interactions. The Commission’s impact study on Erasmus+ provides significant evidence that the programme fulfills its aim⁶³. Nonetheless, while a strengthened European identity is a key aspect of intra-European student mobility, it is equally important to recognise that the EU consists of twenty-seven sovereign states, each with distinct national identities, which, as argued in Chapter 3.1, are being especially accentuated in the European context.

In 2013, Van Mol conducted one of the few studies that included Polish students in its sample, concluding that foreign exchange did not bring about an identity change for them⁶⁴.

⁵⁹ Brzezińska, O. et al. (2011) *Re-constructing Polish Identity. Searching for a New Language*, pp. 2, 5- 6, 8.

⁶⁰ Galbraith, M. (2023) ‘Being European in Poland and Polish in Europe (...)’, pp. 209, 215-217, 220.

⁶¹ McManus-Czubinska, C. et al. (2003) ‘Understanding dual identities in Poland’, pp. 128, 132.

⁶² Fligstein, N. (2008) ‘Euro-Clash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe’, p. 139.

⁶³ European Commission (2019) *Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study: Final Report*, p. 134.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, K. (2015) ‘Rethinking the ‘Erasmus Effect’ on European Identity’, p. 333.

However, given that the study was carried out over a decade ago, as well as considering the increasing number of Polish students engaging in international mobility⁶⁵, this conclusion is due for re-examination.

In the 2019 study, Van Mol explored different meanings of Europe among mobile students, again including Polish participants, although without focusing on the national dimension of their identity⁶⁶. While some researchers have investigated how Polish students perceive European identity during and after their exchanges⁶⁷, none have focused on the impact of transnationalism on their national identity.

Despite Brzezińska's affirmation that "a substantialist notion of Polish national identity no longer seems viable and has been gradually withering under the influence of a strong orientation towards Europe"⁶⁸, I argue that national identity remains a highly relevant concept. Given that this perspective was formulated in 2011, attitudes towards European integration and exclusive European identification may, and, most likely, have shifted in response to political developments. As nation-states continue to maintain their strong position within the European framework, Poles studying abroad inevitably compare their national identity to those of other nations. Therefore, in order to get a comprehensive overview of the influence studying abroad has on students' identity, its impact should not be examined solely through the lens of European identity but combined with national belonging.

New approaches to studying Polish national identity, particularly with regard to the role of young people in shaping it, underline the necessity of a multidisciplinary perspective⁶⁹. McManus-Czubińska et al. claim that "Polish national identity (...) does not define Poles, it differentiates them", suggesting the existence of interdependence between national identification and separation from the "other"⁷⁰. This connection between identity and "otherness" leads to a deeper exploration of how intergroup contact and processes such as "othering" influence the sense of belonging.

⁶⁵ Appendix One: Information given to the participants for the survey and data collected from Polish universities

⁶⁶ Van Mol, C. (2019) 'Intra-European student mobility and the different meanings of "Europe"', pp. 24–40.

⁶⁷ Duczkowska-Piasecka, M. et al. (2012) 'The significance of developing European identity (...)', pp. 15–21; Wiśniewski, R. et al. (2013) 'Educational exchange and new opportunities (...)', pp. 113–124.

⁶⁸ Brzezińska, O. et al. (2011) 'Re-constructing Polish Identity. Searching for a New Language', p. 9.

⁶⁹ Łastawski, K. (2007) 'Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej', p. 307.

⁷⁰ McManus-Czubinska, C. et al. (2003) 'Understanding dual identities in Poland', p. 132.

3.3. “Othering”, intergroup contact, and their impact on identity

As stipulated in Social Identity Theory (SIT), identity is not formed in isolation, but rather shaped through comparison and interaction with “others”. Researches conducted by Schachter in 1959 and Hogg in 2021 indicate, however, that especially during periods of uncertainty – such as adapting to life in a new country – people tend to seek familiarity⁷¹ to gain a sense of security. They are naturally inclined to seek connections based on similarities, such as a shared nationality or common experiences, rather than immersing themselves in the host culture from the beginning of their stay. Nevertheless, Brewer notes that individuals tend to balance the need for assimilation with the need for distinctiveness⁷². Therefore, the negotiation between the extent of engagement with one’s in-group, out-groups, as well as social integration – the process of becoming part of a new social environment⁷³ – play essential roles in shaping identity during transnational experiences.

Mitchell argues that maintaining frequent contact with co-nationals while studying abroad can actually hinder the development of a broader European identity, as it reinforces national belonging rather than encouraging identification with a wider community⁷⁴. This idea aligns with Pettigrew’s Intergroup Contact Theory, which emphasises that it is meaningful interactions with members of *different* groups that can challenge pre-existing biases and support new group identifications⁷⁵. While complete detachment from the in-group has been recognised as a challenge, I argue that it is not necessary in its utter form. Positive intergroup contact can occur as long as students maintain an open approach and curiosity towards “others”. Which factors should, therefore, be present to facilitate the contact between groups?

Wagner and Machleit stress that voluntary interaction, a common language, and financial stability contribute to positive intergroup interactions⁷⁶. Hence, if English-speaking students of different nations participating in a funded Erasmus+ exchange have the willingness to get to know each other, theoretically, they should face few to no intergroup barriers. Yet, practically, the effectiveness of such contact depends on various other conditions, including

⁷¹ Gaffney, A.M. et al. (2023) ‘Social identity theory’, p. 9.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁷³ Hu, J. et al. (2024) ‘Social identity and social integration (...)’, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Mitchell, K. (2015) ‘Rethinking the ‘Erasmus Effect’ on European Identity’, p. 346.

⁷⁵ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) ‘Intergroup contact theory’, pp. 70, 75.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 69 after Wagner, U., Machleit, U. (1986) “*Gestarbeiter*” in the Federal Republic of Germany: contact between Germans and migrant populations, pp. 59–78.

historical and sociocultural antecedents of a given group⁷⁷ and external influences. Deutsch and Collins demonstrate that direct contact with the out-group and, therefore, prevalence or lack of “othering” rhetorics in individuals’ communities significantly impact how they perceive “others”⁷⁸. Caricati further expands this idea, emphasising that media consumption also shapes intergroup attitudes by reinforcing or challenging existing narratives about social groups⁷⁹.

All these hurdles may impede intercultural understanding, countering Adler’s optimistic prediction that global mobility would weaken ethnocentric and nationalistic tendencies⁸⁰. In 2025, contemporary societies remain deeply divided, with nationalist sentiments on the rise. For this reason, investigating the connection between international mobility, the intensity of attachment to one’s country, and the way they perceive “others” gains in relevance.

The relationship between intergroup contact and identity formation has been, and remains, complex. Kuhn, in her 2015 publication, argues that forming friendships with Europeans strengthens European identity more than engaging in close interactions with non-Europeans⁸¹. Brown, however, presented an alternative perspective already in 1984, suggesting that groups aware of their similarities may feel particularly driven to emphasise their differences⁸². Díez-Medrano put Brown’s findings in the European context in 2008: the researcher found that “when Europeans interact with each other, they often do so as members of their respective national communities rather than as fellow Europeans”⁸³. Elofsson’s 2020 research reinforces Díez-Medrano’s argument, underlining that it is encounters with non-Europeans that may actually increase students’ sense of European belonging⁸⁴. These findings raise an important question, which builds on the issue of geographical proximity of study destination discussed in Chapter 3.1: Do interactions between European nations highlight national distinctiveness, whereas engagement with

⁷⁷ Stephan, W.G. et al. (2009) ‘Intergroup threat theory’, p. 9 after Allport, G. W. (1954) *The nature of prejudice*.

⁷⁸ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) ‘Intergroup contact theory’, p. 67 after Deutsch, M., Collins, M. (1951) ‘Interracial Housing: A Psychological Evaluation of a Social Experiment’,

⁷⁹ Caricati, L. (2018) ‘Perceived threat mediates the relationship between national identification and support for immigrant exclusion (...)’, pp. 41–51.

⁸⁰ Adler, P.S. (1975) ‘The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock’, p. 22.

⁸¹ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, p. 124.

⁸² Brown, R.J. et al. (1986) ‘The effects of intergroup similarity and goal interdependence on intergroup attitudes and task performance’, p. 81.

⁸³ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, p. 54.

⁸⁴ Elofsson, N. (2020) *Erasmus and its effects on participants’ European identity (...)*, pp. 24-25.

individuals from outside the continent prompts the salience of European commonalities? In these cases, who is perceived as the “other” heavily depends on the context.

Nevertheless, neither Brown’s nor Díez-Medrano’s studies contradict the general idea that intergroup contact can reduce bias. In another one of his studies, Brown argues that “groups perceiving themselves to hold similar norms of attitudes or to enjoy equivalent status (...) show more intergroup attraction and less bias than dissimilar groups”⁸⁵. International students, regardless of their nationality, find themselves in a foreign environment in the context of university studies. Therefore, all of them also share the student status that allows them to reframe their group membership: while they come from different national backgrounds, they simultaneously belong to the collective group of international students. The depicted fluidity of association emphasises the layered nature of identity, where its different aspects become more salient depending on the context, yet one must not necessarily exclude the other. Furthermore, interactions between international students fulfill the four key conditions for positive intergroup contact indicated in the Intergroup Contact Theory: students share the same status, work towards similar goals, collaborate in academic settings, and receive support from host institutions⁸⁶.

This re-categorisation, according to Perdue et al., “highlights similarities among the interactants and obscures the ‘we’ and ‘they’ boundary”⁸⁷, a statement which was reaffirmed by Brown who claims that “because in-group and (former) out-group members now share a common in-group identity, they should be drawn closer together and intergroup discrimination should be reduced”⁸⁸. Building on Perdue’s claim, Pettigrew suggests that gathering new information about an out-group, interacting in repetitive manner but in varied settings, and approaching the “other” with empathy can improve attitudes towards the out-group and expand the in-group’s perspective⁸⁹, proving that the norms and customs employed by the in-group are not the only possible ways to operate in the world. Similarly, cultural learning has been recognised by McKay as one of the drivers of identity change⁹⁰, which, I argue, can also shift attitudes towards the “other”.

⁸⁵ Brown, R. (2000) ‘Social identity theory: Past achievements, current problems and future challenges’, pp. 757–758.

⁸⁶ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, p. 47 after Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*.

⁸⁷ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) ‘Intergroup contact theory’, p. 75 after Perdue CW. et al. (1990) *Us and them: social categorization and the process of intergroup bias*.

⁸⁸ Brown, R. (2000) ‘Social identity theory: Past achievements, current problems (...)’, p. 752.

⁸⁹ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) ‘Intergroup contact theory’, pp. 71-72.

⁹⁰ McKay, S. et al. (2020) ‘Identity development during student exchange (...)’, p. 3.

Social Identity Theory asserts that group membership not only impacts self-categorisation but also influences the behaviour of a group member⁹¹. Yet, what drives people to identify with a particular group in the first place? Individuals do not conform to the in-group norms merely due to normative pressure or a need for accuracy. Rather, group membership provides clear guidance for understanding how to think, feel, and behave within a social context. The in-group prototype, along with those who closely embody it, serves as a powerful source of social influence, shaping behaviour standards⁹².

The challenge that all international students face abroad is negotiating between multiple group identities – national, European, student – which makes it especially puzzling for them to decide not only which prototype to conform to but also who the “other” is, as the point of reference is constantly shifting. To determine the value of multiple in-groups, students continuously engage in re-evaluation and re-categorisation, negotiating which identity gains salience at any given time. These processes indicate that the definition of an in-group, similar to identity, is fluid and dynamic, changing over time and across contexts. Polish national identity is no exception⁹³.

⁹¹ Hu, J. et al. (2024) ‘Social identity and social integration (...)’, p. 2.

⁹² Gaffney, A.M. et al. (2023) ‘Social identity theory’, p. 5.

⁹³ Rodak, P. (2023) ‘Polishness: A time of deconstruction, a time of reconstruction’, p. 349.

4. Methodology

4.1. Choice of the method

To address the research questions guiding this thesis, I adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, through a survey to explore how studying abroad impacts students' identities and their perceptions of "others". The methodological choice was inspired by previous studies investigating identity and intergroup contact, although these topics are often explored separately rather than in relation to one another⁹⁴. Understanding the importance of the fact that the questions should "mean the same to all socio-cultural (...) groups represented in a survey", the questionnaire was directed to the students of Polish roots⁹⁵.

For the purpose of data collection, I contacted fifty-three out of sixty-five public universities listed on the official Polish government's website via email⁹⁶. For those I did not contact, relevant contact information for their international cooperation departments could not be found. In my initial email, I expressed a request to share the number of students who had participated in study exchanges between 2021 and 2025, as well as to circulate my survey among them in order to gather data about the general population and reach a broad research sample.

As noted by McKay et al., one of the main limitations of exploratory qualitative studies, such as one conducted for this dissertation, is the issue of generalisability: the findings tend to apply only to the specific population studied⁹⁷. The author suggests that a possible way to overcome this issue is to replicate the study across multiple populations to determine whether similar patterns emerge. To mitigate this limitation, I strived for the geographical diversity of my sample by gathering responses not only from universities in major academic cities but also by inviting non-usual suspects, i.e., students of smaller universities, to participate in the survey. This strategy was intended to increase the representativeness of the data.

⁹⁴ Mitchell, K. (2015) 'Rethinking the 'Erasmus Effect' on European Identity', pp. 330–348.

McKay, S. et al. (2020) 'Identity development during student exchange: A qualitative study of students' perspectives on the processes of change';

Elofsson, N. (2020) *Erasmus and its effects on participants' European identity (...)*.

⁹⁵ Wolf, C. et al. (2016) 'Cognitive Models of Answering Processes', p. 212.

⁹⁶ Wykaz uczelni publicznych nadzorowanych przez ministra właściwego ds. szkolnictwa wyższego i nauki - publiczne uczelnie akademickie (Accessed: 2 April 2025).

⁹⁷ McKay, S. et al. (2020) 'Identity development during student exchange: A qualitative study of students' perspectives on the processes of change', p. 3.

The chosen time frame, 2021-2025, was selected for three reasons:

- 1) For the period 2021-2027, the European Commission nearly doubled the funding of the Erasmus+ programme – compared to the years 2014-2020 – by designating a budget of €24.574 billion to strengthen transnational European mobility⁹⁸. Considering that Erasmus+ is one of the most widely used exchange programmes among Polish students, this period provided an ideal backdrop for studying the impact of student mobility⁹⁹. Data provided by the Polish universities listed in Appendix One show an increase in the number of students participating in Erasmus+ exchanges, further underlining the relevance of focusing on this up-to-date timeframe.
- 2) The year 2021 marked a return to in-person classes and activities, as pandemic-related restrictions began to ease. This allowed international students to fully immerse themselves in the studying-abroad experience.
- 3) Since this study investigates subjective reflections related to identity and intergroup contact change, where data is gathered *post-factum*, I considered it important to collect responses from participants whose exchange experience was relatively recent, so that they could more easily recall and reflect on their pre-exchange attitudes. This strategy allowed for minimisation of the rosy retrospection effect: “a tendency for people to (...) recollect events they experience more fondly (...) than they evaluated them to be at the time of their occurrence”¹⁰⁰.

I received responses to my email request from twenty-one universities, twelve of which shared solicited data and agreed to distribute the survey among those enrolled. These universities, located in Wrocław, Rzeszów, Szczecin, Opole, Bydgoszcz, Kraków, Poznań, Gdańsk, Lublin, and Warszawa, reported sending 5.502 students abroad within the EU, Europe, and beyond the continent during the specified time frame. Given that undergraduate studies typically last three years, and some students may not have decided to continue their education in that particular university, I acknowledge a limitation of data collection: those who went abroad earlier in this period, especially in 2021, may not have received the survey. Additionally, I recognise that for the students participating in the exchange during spring

⁹⁸ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, (2021) *Erasmus+ 2021-2027: enriching lives, opening minds through the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport*.

⁹⁹ Podsumowanie programu Erasmus na 20-lecie Polski w UE (Accessed: 02.04.2025).

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell, T.R. et al. (1994) *A theory of temporal adjustments of the evaluation of events: Rosy prospection and rosy retrospection*, p. 87.

2025, the survey might be premature. Nevertheless, respondents who indicated starting their international exchange in spring 2025 had already studied outside of their home country in the previous years, with the exception of one participant studying in China. Therefore, in the majority of such cases, students could reflect on their identity and intergroup perceptions through the auxiliary lens of the earlier sojourns.

In total, the survey disseminated among current students of the abovementioned universities, which was open between the 1st of February and the 19th of March 2025, received 308 responses. While this does not account for the entire population, the variety of universities involved ensured a geographically diverse and nationally representative sample.

The survey was designed to include a combination of both closed and open-ended questions. While the primary aim was qualitative, with the focus on uncovering identity and intergroup relations reflections, the survey also incorporated quantifiable elements, such as demographic background, programme type, and intergroup contact frequency, in order to reveal general trends and tendencies that allow for reaching overarching conclusions, while nonetheless providing space for in-depth reflections. This design was inspired by J. Billiet, who underlined that survey questions can serve as empirical indicators in “a translation process in which theoretical constructs (...) are translated into observable variables”¹⁰¹. Even in the closed sections, respondents had the possibility to elaborate their answers in an “other” field, if they considered that the provided options did not exhaust their experiences. The size of the boxes for the “other” field, as well as for the open-ended questions, were suited to accommodate the length of the answer¹⁰².

The trade-offs between the scope and depth of the survey were thoroughly considered throughout the design process. While a fully quantitative approach would have allowed for greater generalisability, it would carry the risk of oversimplifying the complex and deeply personal nature of identity negotiations and interpersonal relations. Since the examined themes are linked to abstract and subjective concepts, offering an open-text space encouraged respondents to articulate thoughts that would likely have been lost in a strictly quantitative method. Implementing this flexible strategy allowed for the collection of essential demographic and quantifiable data, as well as deeper qualitative insights.

¹⁰¹ Wolf, C. et al. (2016) ‘What Does Measurement Mean in a Survey Context?’, p. 196.

¹⁰² Wolf, C. et al. (2016) ‘Designing Questions and Questionnaires’, p. 228.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by Justesen and Mik-Meyer¹⁰³. All survey participants were clearly informed about the study's purpose and were assured that their anonymity would be maintained for privacy reasons. The information given to the participants, together with the data shared by the universities, can be found in Appendix One. Given the personal nature of identity and social relationships as subjects, upholding these ethical principles was crucial throughout the entire research process.

4.2. Rationale

To ensure a comprehensive exploration of the topic that would allow for reaching informed conclusions, the survey was divided into four sections.

The first section gathered background information on students, such as age, gender, country of upbringing, and nationality of parents. Drawing on Kuhn's findings, which suggest that transnational factors (e.g. dual citizenship, being born outside one's country of residence, previous travels abroad, and social interactions with foreigners) affect not only the feeling of attachment to Europe but also perceptions of "others"¹⁰⁴, in this section I included questions on students' personal backgrounds, travel histories and international social interactions prior to their studies abroad. Moreover, following Hu and Cheung's hypothesis that strong national ties and interactions with individuals solely from one's national social circle can make the process of social integration more difficult¹⁰⁵, I asked students about their initial sense of attachment to Poland before their studies as well as about the groups they socialised with most during their stay abroad.

The second section focused on the studying-abroad experience itself. It included questions about the destination, length, programme type, and timing of the studies. Inspired by Pettigrew's argument that "optimal intergroup contact requires time"¹⁰⁶, I sought to compare responses between students who studied abroad for shorter periods (i.e., one semester or less) and those who stayed longer (i.e., more than one semester). Mitchell's study, which looked at students' social groups abroad¹⁰⁷, motivated me to examine how often Poles

¹⁰³ Elofsson, N. (2020) *Erasmus and its effects on participants' European identity (...)*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰⁴ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, pp. 31-36.

¹⁰⁵ Hu, J. et al. (2024) 'Social identity and social integration: (...)', pp. 2-4.

¹⁰⁶ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) 'Intergroup contact theory', p. 66 after Allport, G. W. (1954) *The nature of prejudice*, p. 76.

¹⁰⁷ Mitchell, K. (2015) 'Rethinking the 'Erasmus Effect' on European Identity', p. 337.

interacted with foreigners, whether they talked about Poland during their stay, and whether they encountered nation-related stereotypes.

The third section addressed post-study-abroad reflections. In this part, I asked students to evaluate if their feelings of national and European belonging had shifted throughout the time of the experience. While capturing reflections related to feelings in a survey poses a challenge due to social desirability bias, as well as the importance of using accurate wording and order of questions¹⁰⁸, I strived to mitigate this difficulty by implementing two strategies. Firstly, I assured the participants that their answers were anonymous, providing a safe space where they could express their true sentiments rather than conforming to the pressure of adhering to socially acceptable statements. Secondly, being aware that retrieval of the pre-exchange feelings could be challenging due to the passage of time, I included open-ended questions that encouraged respondents to reflect on situations that occurred during their studies abroad and feelings that accompanied them after they came back¹⁰⁹. By implementing these strategies, once more, I aimed to reduce the rosy retrospection effect.

While multiple researchers have focused their studies on the development of European identity¹¹⁰, I aimed to go a step further by juxtaposing questions about national and European belonging directly, encouraging participants to reflect on these dimensions side by side, potentially prompting them to subconsciously compare one feeling to the other. Additionally, in this section, I explored whether students' attitudes towards Polish people and foreigners evolved throughout the course of their time abroad and whether the shifts in these attitudes were connected to changes in their national and European identities.

The fourth section included a set of non-obligatory, open-ended questions related to perceptions of Poland, Polish identity, European belonging, as well as intercultural interactions with foreigners. Through these inquiries, I wanted to gain a more in-depth understanding of the specific experiences that influenced students' views of themselves and "others". Despite being optional, each open-ended question received over 120 responses, offering sufficient qualitative material for the purpose and scope of this dissertation to make

¹⁰⁸ Wolf, C. et al. (2016) *The SAGE Handbook of Survey Methodology*, pp. 218, 222, 257.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 222

¹¹⁰ Cojocaru, C. (2019) 'Erasmus mobilities and European identity: an exploratory incursion', pp. 66-78; Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*; Mitchell, K. (2015) 'Rethinking the 'Erasmus Effect' on European Identity', pp. 330-348.

individual interviews, originally planned as supplementary to the survey, unnecessary¹¹¹. Almost 58 per cent of respondents described their identity reflections in the section of open questions, while over 42 per cent shared their insights about the role studying abroad plays in changing the perception of “others”.

All survey responses were individually examined and colour-coded in an Excel sheet in order to identify thematic trends. They were then analysed in clusters according to the replies to the two guiding questions of the survey that allowed for a thorough investigation of how studying abroad impacts the way Polish students navigate their perception of self and “others”: “Did your perception of being Polish change because of studying abroad?” and “Did your view on foreigners (non-Polish) change after living abroad?”.

4.3. Research sample

A total of 308 Polish students participated in the survey. Almost 70 per cent of them were born between 2000 and 2003, though the full age range extended from 1991 to 2005. The vast majority of respondents (99 per cent) grew up in Poland and have parents of solely Polish nationality. The sample was predominantly female (76,9 per cent); however, the survey also gathered points of view of male participants (21,8 per cent), as well as non-binary (1 per cent) and genderfluid students (0,3 per cent).

The overrepresentation of female respondents aligns with broader statistical trends across mobility programmes. According to data from the Polish Central Statistical Office, approximately 70 per cent of students taking advantage of studying abroad are female, despite the fact that women comprise around 58 per cent of the country’s overall student population¹¹². Cordua and Netz, in their study investigating “gender differences in study abroad intent among first-semester students in Germany”¹¹³, aimed to provide an insight into this phenomenon. Their findings suggest that female students are, indeed, more inclined to study abroad, not only because they choose fields that offer international opportunities, but also because they are more likely to value the benefits of exploring other cultures and personal development that come with international mobility. These conclusions correspond with the findings of the survey conducted for this dissertation: of the twenty-one respondents

¹¹¹ Nevertheless, recognising the timeliness and relevance of the topic, as well as the potential for further exploration, I asked those interested if they consented to have their data retained for the possibility of future academic work on this subject.

¹¹² Główny Urząd Statystyczny (17.06.2024 r.) *Szkolnictwo wyższe w roku akademickim 2023/2024*, p. 1; *Cała Prawda o Erasmusie* (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

¹¹³ Cordua, F. et al. (2021) ‘Why do women more often intend to study abroad than men?’, p. 1.

who mentioned personal growth as their motivation to embark on the international journey, 85 per cent were female. While the referenced study focuses on German students, its conclusions support a more generalised observation that women tend to demonstrate more openness towards intercultural experiences than men¹¹⁴.

The vast majority of students (93,8 per cent) studied abroad through an EU-funded programme, with 88,1 per cent doing so within the EU. This high degree of participation reflects the growing popularity of mobility opportunities under Erasmus+, which offer relatively accessible paths to study abroad due to the availability of financial support and lack of visa requirements¹¹⁵. Additionally, 5,5 per cent of respondents included in the aforementioned sample extended their international journey by moving for studies outside of the EU after finishing their initial exchange, either to another European country or outside of the continent. The remaining 11,9 per cent of respondents studied outside the EU, in destinations such as Norway, Türkiye, Israel, South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA. Nearly half (43,7 per cent) of the overall sample spent more than one semester abroad (longer than four to six months, depending on the host country).

Importantly, 93,8 per cent of respondents had travelled abroad prior to their international studies, 45 per cent of whom did it regularly at least twice a year. 92,2 per cent of these students have previously visited another EU member state.

Taking into account that the chosen methodology aimed to overcome the limitation of generalisability identified by McKay et al.¹¹⁶, as well as considering the wide variety of backgrounds reflected in the collected responses, I argue that the sample offers a diverse and representative snapshot of Polish students who have studied abroad. The data captures significant variation of the mobility experience, particularly in terms of destinations, the balance between short- and long-term stays, the frequency and diversity of contact with foreigners, and initial perceptions of both Polish and European identity. It also reflects diverse attitudes towards people of other nationalities. Together, these factors serve as a strong foundation for analysing how studying abroad shapes young Poles' perceptions of self and "others".

¹¹⁴ Cordua, F. et al. (2021) 'Why do women more often intend to study abroad than men?', p. 16.

¹¹⁵ Marking 37 years of Erasmus+: Key numbers and achievements (Accessed: 2 May 2025).

¹¹⁶ McKay, S. et al. (2020) 'Identity development during student exchange: A qualitative study of students' perspectives on the processes of change', p. 3.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Identity reflections

As outlined in the literature review section, Polish national identity, like any form of identity, is shaped rather through lived experiences than abstract theoretical reflections¹¹⁷. As I proceed to demonstrate in this Chapter, data gathered through the survey affirm the validity of this statement.

The core questions that enabled the analysis of Polish identity development presented in the next pages of this thesis were “Before moving abroad, did you feel a strong connection to Poland?” and “Did your perception of being Polish change because of studying abroad?”. The distributions of answers to the abovementioned questions are summarised in the form of two pie charts. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of responses related to the strength of attachment prior to moving abroad, while Figure 2 demonstrates the answers connected to the change of perception of Polish identity.

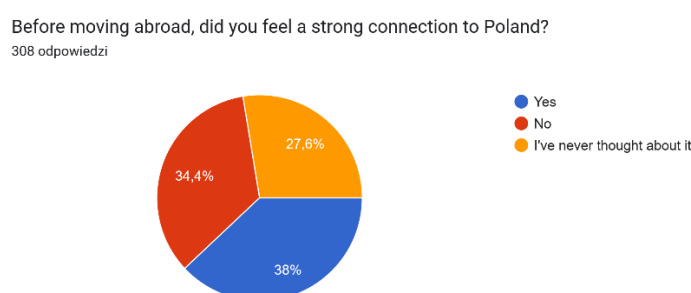


Figure 1: Connection to Poland prior to studies abroad

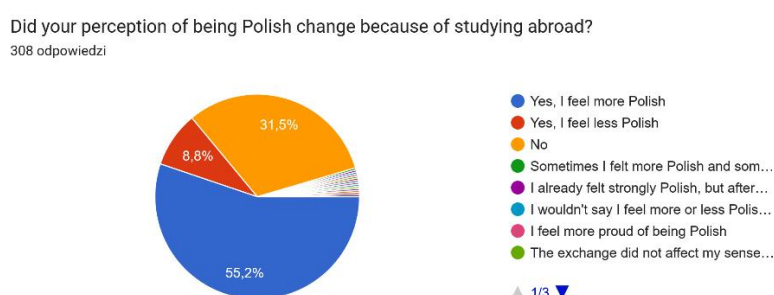


Figure 2: Change of perception of national belonging

¹¹⁷ Rodak, P. (2023) 'Polishness: A time of deconstruction, a time of reconstruction', p. 356.

As depicted in the first pie chart, fewer than 40 per cent of all respondents reported feeling a close bond with Poland before studying abroad, which makes the subsequent shift in national sentiment especially interesting. As Figure 2 illustrates, over 55 per cent of students claimed to feel more Polish after experiencing living abroad, countering Brzezińska's view that the notion of national identity will be gradually diminishing¹¹⁸.

In total, approximately 67 per cent of 308 students reported that studying abroad had an impact on their perception of national identity. Moreover, among those who indicated no change, 43 per cent already felt strongly connected to their country of origin before departing for the international studies. A more detailed quantitative exploration of these patterns, as well as their correlation with the students' travel experience, length and location of studies, social interactions, view on Poles and foreigners, and engagement in conversations about Poland, can be found in Appendix Two.

While the principal purpose of this thesis is to examine how Polish students who have studied abroad navigate their national identity, in order to explore the field in a comprehensive manner, I consider it necessary to look beyond national belonging. Taking into account a broader European context, particularly given that, as Galbraith's study indicated, Poles often view their country as naturally tied to Europe¹¹⁹, is essential. This perspective was also reflected in the survey responses.

When asked whether he felt more European after his exchange, one participant replied: "It is a strange question. As Poland has always been on the continent of Europe, it will always be a European country, and therefore the Poles are European". Due to this phenomenon, I found it important to investigate first-hand the role that European identity plays in the broader self-perception of students, especially since most of them pursued their studies within the EU. In order to do so, I invited them to recall their feelings of European belonging prior to moving abroad and reflect on whether the international experience caused them to shift. The overview of results is demonstrated below in the form of pie charts.

Figure 3 presents the answers related to the European sentiment of respondents prior to studying abroad, while Figure 4 illustrates whether their international experience influenced their sense of attachment to Europe.

¹¹⁸ Brzezińska, O. et al. (2011) *Re-constructing Polish Identity. Searching for a New Language*, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ Galbraith, M. (2023) 'Being European in Poland and Polish in Europe (...)', pp. 209, 215-217, 220.

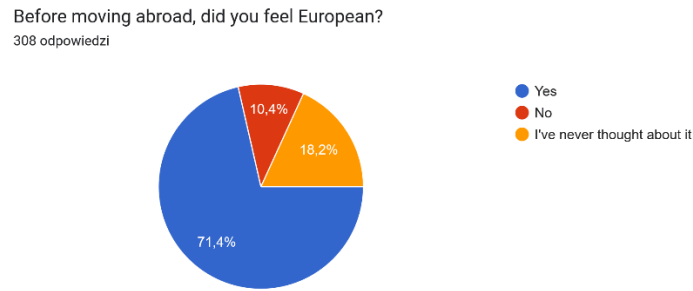


Figure 3: Feeling European before studying abroad

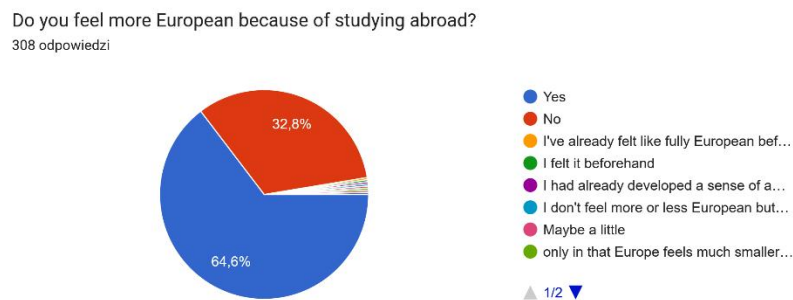


Figure 4: Change of perception of European belonging

As depicted in Figure 3, the number of students who identified with Europe before their exchange, a total of 220 respondents, was nearly double that of those who reported an initial strong connection to Poland. This finding supports the argument that it is principally students who already feel a sense of European affiliation who are more eager to pursue international mobility programmes¹²⁰. At the same time, this feeling of belonging is not fixed: in fact, 68 per cent of students who felt European prior to moving outside of Poland reported a strengthening of that identity during their stay abroad. While this is not a change in European identity in the strictest sense, I argue that reinforcing a pre-existing feeling of connection still prompts meaningful reflections. Facilitating international mobility for those already “converted”, as Kuhn describes students who hold a European identity before going abroad¹²¹, is beneficial, as it gives them an opportunity to assess this sense of attachment in an international context.

¹²⁰ Kuhn, T. (2012) ‘Why Educational Exchange Programmes Miss Their Mark: Cross-Border Mobility, Education and European Identity’, p. 995.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*

Additionally, more than 50 per cent of the students who had not initially felt European developed a sense of connection to Europe as a result of their exchange experience, indicating that cross-border mobility has the potential to expand European identity even among those less predisposed.

While the study of European identity offers a valuable lens to assess identity implications of studying abroad, the analytical foundation for this section stems from the survey question: “Did your perception of being Polish change because of studying abroad?”. Based on the responses to this query, four distinct categories were developed.

Category one includes students who indicated a stronger sense of Polishness after their time abroad. Category two demonstrates the responses of students whose sense of national identity remained stable, with a particular focus on their pre-existing connections to Poland. Category three depicts the insights of respondents who noted a weakening sense of Polish identity as a result of their experiences abroad. Category four focuses on the analysis of responses of those who reported a shift in perception but found it difficult to label this evolution within the “more or less Polish” duality.

This framework allows for a detailed exploration of how the Polish identity of students evolved in relation to their previous identity considerations, as well as personal and social experiences abroad. While Appendix Two includes a detailed quantitative overview of the responses, Table 1 offers a comparative visual outline of the gathered data allowing for a clearer demonstration of trends across categories.

Category	Total Students	Previous Travel Experience	Length of Stay Abroad	Previous Connection to Poland	European Identity Before/After	Social Interactions (Foreigners vs Poles)	View of Foreigners	View of Poles	Conversations About Poland
1: I feel more Polish	173	95% had travelled; 54% >2x/year	Nearly equal split: short/long term;	32% strong tie; 29% no reflection; 39% no prior tie	75% felt European; ~70% stronger	96% interacted on a daily/weekly basis; ~63% mostly with foreigners and no Poles; 5% only with Poles	47% improved; 43% unchanged (31% open; 12% neutral) 10% worse	42% more positive; 10.5% more critical	100% discussed; 96.5% enjoyed
2: No change in Polish identity	100	97% had travelled; 38% >2x/year	70% short-term; 30% long-term	44% strong tie; 30% no reflection; 26% no prior tie	73.5% felt European; ~50% stronger	>90% interacted on a daily/weekly basis; 50% mostly with foreigners and no Poles; 17% only Poles	40% improved; 59% unchanged (79% open; 21% neutral); 1% worse	13% more positive; 15% more critical	91% discussed and enjoyed
3: I feel less Polish	27	88% had travelled; ~50% >2x/year	Nearly equal split: short/long term	19% strong tie; 30% no reflection; 48% no prior tie;	85% felt European; 82% stronger	100% interacted on a daily/weekly basis; >50% mostly with foreigners and no Poles; 4% only with Poles	82% improved; 18% unchanged open	12% more positive; 60% more critical	79% discussed and enjoyed
4: Other reflections	8	100% had travelled; ~63% <2x/year	63% stayed longer than 1 semester	50% strong tie; 25% no reflection; 25% no prior tie	63% felt European; ~38% stronger	100% interacted daily; 50% mostly with foreigners and no Poles	Varied views	Varied views	100% discussed; ~88% enjoyed

Table 1: Correlations between the national identity categories and travel experience, length and location of studies, social interactions, view on Poles and foreigners, and engagement in conversations about Poland

5.1.1. Discussion

Based on 308 survey responses, the study revealed curious patterns concerning not only the Polish national identity of the students but also an evolving perspective on their home country itself. The results confirmed that neither national identity nor the perception of Poland is a fixed quality carried passively across borders; rather, it is situational, reflexive, and continually shaped through interpersonal contact and social comparison.

Before proceeding with the qualitative assessment, nonetheless, I trust it is beneficial to demonstrate several key trends that emerged from the quantitative analysis in the first place.

One such trend, concerning the length of mobility, depicted that a significant majority of those who indicated no change in their sense of Polish identity stayed abroad for a single semester (70 per cent). However, this does not necessarily imply that this period is insufficient for reflection to occur: approximately half of the students who did report a shift in their Polish identity have also spent only one semester abroad. The real difference, then, may lie not in the duration of mobility but in individual predisposition for reflection.

Moreover, among students in category two – those whose Polish identity remained unchanged – the fewest reported a shift in European identity (50 per cent) and the most

maintained stable views on foreigners (59 per cent), compared to respondents from categories one and three. Despite the fact that over 90 per cent of them engaged in daily or weekly interactions with international peers, that group also showed the highest preference for closely befriending solely fellow Poles, indicating that they were eager to maintain a familiar environment in foreign settings. These patterns suggest that the stability of perspectives during international mobility may be less dependent on the time spent abroad, and more reflective of the general tendency to seek comfort in familiarity and avoid deeper intercultural immersion.

Furthermore, among those whose Polish identity weakened, the greatest number of respondents had not felt a strong connection to their country prior to the exchange, compared to the other categories. This group also had the highest share of students who already felt European before their studies abroad, and whose European identity continued to strengthen during mobility. Rather than adopting a new identity due to international exposure alone, it appears that many in this category found confirmation abroad for the affiliation they already held. International studies simply offered a setting in which the pre-existing identification could surface and solidify.

Further patterns related specifically to the perception of foreigners will be examined in Chapter 5.2. For now, the focus turns back to deeper identity reflections.

Not all of the students' answers fell neatly into binaries of feeling “more” or “less” Polish. Rather, their narratives often depicted layered, sometimes ambivalent relationships with national identity. At the same time, alike quantitative data, qualitative responses revealed a number of recurring themes across participants' reflections.

One of the most prominent trends was a growing appreciation for Poland's comfort, safety, and quality of life¹²². Many students came to realise that Poland is not “as bad” as they had perceived it before going abroad, or even that it is “as good” as the Western European countries in certain aspects¹²³. Alongside this appreciation, various respondents also took

¹²² This sense of gratitude was expressed both by students who studied outside of Europe, who reflected that “this experience makes you realize how comfortable you are in your own country/community, and more empathetic to foreigners who need to adjust to a new place”, and in Southern Europe, who reported: “Before[,] I did not notice how developed of a country we are (for example[,] online payments, post deliveries, even opening times of the stores and their availability)”; “I started to value Poland more (the safety, public transport, costs of living, *savoir-vivre* in public spaces, less crowds, Polish nature).”

¹²³ A respondent who studied in several EU Member States, both in Southern and Western Europe, realised that “(...) Poland is ‘not that bad’. I appreciate my culture and country more[,] but at the same time, I am much more aware of its flaws – bad and good emotion[s] get equally vivid.” At the same time, a participant who spent a year in Italy, as well as a student who lived in Italy and the Netherlands, reported a similar shift

pride in sharing Polish culture, whether by engaging in conversations about traditions or preparing traditional meals¹²⁴. Concurrently, many actively sought to challenge stereotypes about Poland and Polish people. For some, the experience of living abroad deepened the sense of pride in their national belonging and brought a renewed awareness of the personal meaning that Poland holds for them¹²⁵.

To interpret these findings, this discussion draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT), Self-Categorisation Theory, and related literature. By doing so, it highlights identity as a dynamic process, which is negotiated and reimagined through both internal reflections and external validation.

As illustrated in Chapter Two, SIT defines how individuals develop parts of their self-concept through identification with and membership in social groups. Yet, whether a given identity becomes salient depends on emotional relevance and contextual accessibility¹²⁶. This is where Self-Categorisation Theory complements SIT: by suggesting that identity is not just “held” but “activated” when it becomes psychologically meaningful. For many of the students participating in this research, the experience of studying abroad served as a catalyst that brought their national identity to the front. Even those who had not been previously concerned with contemplating the meaning of national belonging found themselves fervently explaining Poland’s history and culture. These situations, frequently triggered by conversations in which respondents engaged in comparisons between their home environment and the customs they encountered abroad, compelled students to re-evaluate both personal attachment to Poland and collective perception of “Polishness”. Hence, participants’ reflections revealed to be consistent with SIT’s notion of social comparison, which suggests that to validate their in-group membership, individuals seek an out-group they can define themselves against¹²⁷. However, it must be noted that students’ experiences and interactions with foreigners helped them realise not only cultural differences

in perspectives: “I don't perceive [Poland] as ‘developing’ country anymore, but as equal and quite successful com[p]aring to others.”; “I don't think that it's ‘so behind’ the [W]est anymore (...).”

¹²⁴ One such student, who experienced studying in Hungary and Australia, reflected: “I consider myself being a patriot, thus during my stay abroad I tried to encourage my peers to share my admiration for my country. I shared stories, showed them pictures, encouraged them to listen to Polish music[,] and cooked delicious meals.”

¹²⁵ Strong emotions related to the sense of national pride were expressed by multiple respondents. Renewed national attachment was especially visible in the following statements shared by students who lived in Malta, Ireland, Italy, and Türkiye: “Never felt so proud of being Polish and though far away, for the first time in my life I felt really connected to our country.”; “When I was abroad[,] I became more patriotic and proud of my culture and identity.”

¹²⁶ Trepte, S. et al. (2017) ‘Social identity theory and self-categorization theory’, p. 7.

¹²⁷ Tajfel, H. et al. (1986) ‘The social identity theory of intergroup behavior’, p. 283.

but also similarities between nations. That was the case of almost 70 per cent of respondents: recognising similarities encouraged a greater sense of unity with other Europeans, proving that social comparison does not necessarily need to entail negative differentiation.

5.1.1.1. Regional and national affiliations

By engaging in intercultural comparison, some students gained clarity about their regional identity while reinforcing their connection or maintaining ambivalence towards their nation. One respondent, after experiencing an exchange in Germany, reaffirmed Poland's belonging to the group of Eastern European countries¹²⁸. Others, reflecting on their exchange in Spain and Türkiye, recognised the country's deeper cultural ties to other Slavic nations¹²⁹. Some, nonetheless, built their sense of Polish identity purely through contrast: a student in Berlin mentioned she "felt [a] deeper connection to Poland, especially because of the differences between [her] and other foreigners and the similarities between [her] and other Polish people". Her reflection not only illustrates the SIT's notion of social comparison but also exemplifies self-categorisation, as recognising qualities she shared with fellow Poles led her to reaffirm her Polish identity. These insights mirror the findings of Elofsson, who examined identity reflections of Swedish Erasmus+ students¹³⁰.

5.1.1.2. Appreciation for Poland's history, culture, and quality of life

Intriguingly, regardless of shifts in Polish identity, many students found that social comparison prompted greater appreciation of Poland's historical and cultural richness. They also began to appreciate the daily conveniences they once overlooked. Indicating a recurring sentiment, the word "appreciate" appeared in nearly 15 per cent of responses, showing a noticeable trend towards taking pride in the positive aspects of the country that the participants have previously disregarded.

A respondent who lived in Mexico and Peru highlighted the realisation that "our [Polish] culture is extraordinary (...). We have been through a lot as a nation in the past". Others studying across various countries (Belgium, USA, Jordan, Portugal, and Türkiye, Croatia,

¹²⁸ After spending a semester in Germany, he noted: "Now I feel even more Polish, because I saw differences in perception of Westerners and Easterners. I consider Poland as an [E]astern country."

¹²⁹ One such student described an observation "(...) that [E]uropeans were friends with [E]uropeans; but I mostly [became] friends with other Slavic people (I was the only [P]olish person, so not Poles)." Another, replying to a question regarding a specific experience that significantly changed her perspective on relations with foreigners or that highlighted cultural differences, mentioned that "exchanging words with other [S]lavic people" was what impacted her the most.

¹³⁰ Elofsson, N. (2020) *Erasmus and its effects on participants' European identity* (...), p. 17.

Germany, Spain, and Italy) started to value Poland's public safety, cleanliness, free healthcare, advanced banking solutions (especially BLIK), and efficient postal systems such as InPost¹³¹. Even students whose national identity was weakened recognised these practical solutions. One such respondent, who lived in Spain and Romania, shared that she no longer has a "Polishness complex": the internal belief of inferiority to other nations¹³². Her increase in self-esteem exemplifies the mechanism of positive distinctiveness described in SIT, based on the idea that people strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from the "others"¹³³.

Many participants sought to present Poland in a favourable light as well, particularly when confronted with negative stereotypes. One respondent who had lived in Estonia mentioned: "I have a stronger will to depict Poland as a nice, interesting country with rich history and which develops very fast (...)". Her testimony shows that while young Poles may not blindly endorse the historic pathos, as indicated by Brzezińska¹³⁴, they do recognise and appreciate the value of Poland's history.

Another student in Germany made an active effort to counteract negative preconceptions by "always trying to say nice things [about her home country] because [she has] met people that had bad opinions about Poland (e.g.,] that Polish people steal)". She noted that sharing positive aspects of Poland led to noticeable changes in how others viewed her home country. This example, once more, reflects positive distinctiveness, yet from another angle: individuals engage in counteracting stereotypes by focusing on more favourable traits of Poland in contrast to common stereotypes. A participant in Spain with reinforced national identity went a step further: she promoted the country by deliberately encouraging others to visit Poland. An exchange student in Türkiye did the same despite no change in identity, though her connection to the country had already been strong.

What is more, the following statement illustrates that participating in international exchanges not only gives one an opportunity to see and present their country in a different light. It can also help to understand the significance of their place of origin and encourage a deeper exploration of the country's unique characteristics. A student who experienced living

¹³¹ One respondent who studied in Italy highlighted all these specific solutions: "I've gained some appreciation for some [P]olish everyday solutions (public transport, [BLIK] payment, bureaucracy, city cleanliness)."

¹³² She reported: "I definitely feel more connected to European countries, I no longer have a Polishness complex. I also see that[,] as Poles[,] we are in no way worse than Western Europe."

¹³³ Tajfel, H. et al. (1986) 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior', p. 283.

¹³⁴ Brzezińska, O. et al. (2011) 'Re-constructing Polish Identity. Searching for a New Language', p. 2.

in Germany admitted: “Explaining Polish history and culture made me realise how many things I'm not sure about and how biased I am. It made me double-check and strengthen my historical and political knowledge”. Similarly, a participant in Norway shared that she “gained more knowledge about [her] own country and sense of identity through sharing [her] culture with others”. After having studied in Spain and France, another respondent reflected: “I would hope that I wasn't ever too critical of Poland, but I definitely became less so. It was fun trying to figure out a sense of national pride that wasn't linked to the usual nationalistic elements of it”.

5.1.1.3. Critical remarks and areas for improvement

While some embarked on a journey to explore ways to discover a fresh meaning of national identity, others, particularly those whose Polish identity strengthened during studies in the EU Member States, expressed newfound respect for specific qualities they associate with Polish people. They focused on highlighting positive characteristics such as honesty, helpfulness, openness, and emotional depth in relationships¹³⁵. Nonetheless, the process of social comparison has not always led to positive distinctiveness.

A number of students who indicated no change in national identity, and who had not reflected on their connection with Poland before their time abroad, developed more negative views of Polish society despite holding a better overall opinion about the country. Some students became more critical of Poland and experienced a decline in their Polish identification after having witnessed problematic behaviours reinforcing negative stereotypes among fellow Poles abroad¹³⁶. Surprisingly, even one student with a strengthened Polish identity, after having lived in Spain and Hungary, chose not to disclose his nationality as he feared being judged through the lens of stereotypes¹³⁷. The contrasts with the openness, tolerance, and optimism of students' host countries made them realise the close-mindedness and

¹³⁵ The appreciation of concrete qualities was expressed by respondents who studied across multiple countries, from Spain: “I appreciate (...) that our relationships are deeper than in e.g. Spain (we do not small talk, we really care about [somebody] if we ask ‘how are you?’)”, through the Netherlands: “I started to embrace our honesty. A lot of Western Europeans are fakely polite.”, to Czechia: “Once I got the comparison to people and cultures from across the world, I think that we are really decent people. I appreciate more the way Polish people behave”, demonstrating that there are perceivable differences even between nationals from the same region.

¹³⁶ One such student shared: “I understand more why [G]ermans strongly dislike us, because I have myself encountered many unpleasant situations including Poles in Germany.”

¹³⁷ He noted: “I don't show off where I'm from unless someone asks, I still feel a bit embarrassed saying that I'm from Poland because it implies different stereotypes in the minds of others. However, if I see that the reactions are positive and I sense interest[,] then I am happy to tell people about Poland.”

judgemental attitudes of Polish society, as well as highlighted other negative traits associated with “Polishness”: persistent complaining or selective acceptance of marginalised groups¹³⁸.

One respondent who reported feeling less Polish after having studied in Spain shared an especially insightful reflection: “I already hadn’t felt too Polish before moving, but now that I have an experience of living abroad and a real comparison[,] I feel that my feelings have a stronger basis to them and aren’t just a simple oikophobia¹³⁹”. This quote, once again, captures an important finding of this study: while international mobility can change minds and shift attitudes, it can also reinforce pre-existing feelings and identity tendencies rather than radically transform them. However, it is worth noting that not only can negative approaches be reinforced. As the survey results showed, 32 per cent of respondents who had previously felt a strong connection to Poland indicated that this attachment further strengthened during their time abroad.

This variety of approaches further underlines that, ultimately, the feeling of national belonging is highly subjective. While an individual may hold in high esteem their country’s cultural values and everyday solutions, they may simultaneously feel a lack of belonging.

Several other students, whose Polish identity became stronger or remained unchanged, also engaged in critical reflections, identifying areas for improvement in their home country. Participants studying across Europe, North America, and the Middle East shared that open-mindedness promoted by studying abroad helped them realise both the advantages and shortcomings of life in Poland and in a foreign land¹⁴⁰. A student on exchange in Germany shared: “I view Poland now as safer than I used to, (...). At the same time, I see how much

¹³⁸ A respondent in Spain, whose perception of Polish people worsened following his experience abroad, described his observation: “[P]olish people abroad are very different [from] the others. They’re not that open, wi[l]ling for adventure and risk, most of them are staying home and then complaining rather than taking some action and trying to make the situation better”. A conflicting perspective demonstrating simultaneous appreciation of the country and discontent with its politics was shared by another participant: “I love Poland a[nd] the Polish people, especially of my generation. However, I strongly dislike current Polish political affairs (the intertwining of ‘the church’ and politics, anti[-LGBT] whistle blowers).”

¹³⁹ Oikophobia denotes “aversion, disgust, and often hatred towards one’s own indigenous community (especially family, nation and civilisation)” in Poradnia językowa PWN (30.09.2023) *Ojkofofia i ksenofilia*, own translation.

¹⁴⁰ After experiencing studies in Spain and France, another respondent described his newly found appreciation of Poland. However, he also mentioned that, by no means, is the country perfect, but should strive for further improvement: “Before[,] I would often complain about Poland, about our mentality and some perspective we have. I’d often imagine Western European countries as a perfect place, which, after living there for a while, I realized is not true, every country has some issues and problems, but now I think Poland is a pretty good country to live in, even if from my perspective, there is always some things to improve.” Another student plainly stated that living abroad “has helped [him] see both the advantages and disadvantages of Poland more clearly (...).”

more work there is to be done in the Polish society when it comes to education about European security, climate policy, and intercultural policy”. Another participant added: “I understood how safe I feel in Poland, and also how beautiful it is especially during the summer, but also I’ve seen (...) more [relaxed] lifestyles, (...) positive mindsets, (...) how people interact [with] each other in different countries more openly”. Finally, a student who studied in France and Germany shared a compelling observation: despite the country’s challenges, he “saw that people from abroad have a more positive view of Poland than Polish people [themselves]”.

These students expressed admiration for qualities observed abroad that, in their view, could enrich Polish society, demonstrating that there is a learning curve that originates in social comparison. By engaging in comparisons, students continued the evaluation of social categories that they belong to, which is central to the ongoing reconstruction of group identities as described in SIT.

5.1.1.4. A strengthened national identity and openness to diversity

Several students with strengthened Polish identity shared a reflection that greater identification with Poland does not have to preclude openness to the diversity of other cultures. A participant who went on an exchange to Portugal specifically stated that her international experience helped her “feel closer to [her] nation, but also better understand (...) other nationalities”. This sentiment was shared by a student whose strengthened attachment to Poland did not, however, prevent her from developing a closer connection to her host country, Italy¹⁴¹. Her case illustrates that identities are not mutually exclusive: they can co-exist rather than compete and evolve in parallel to lead to more nuanced understandings of self.

The presented testimonies demonstrate that cross-border experiences, reflections on attachment to Poland, and how individuals portrayed their country to others influenced the shift in the way they regard it. While, in some cases, social interactions and comparisons tended to reinforce existing perspectives, in 68 per cent of cases they allowed students to break free from the well-established national standpoint and to open themselves to a new, international outlook.

¹⁴¹ She shared: “I feel a very strong connection to Italian culture after living in Italy and a definite sense of [P]olish identity at the same time”.

5.1.1.5. Navigating identity salience

Negotiations between the familiar and the unknown have not come easily. As students began to unveil different meanings of their national belonging, they also engaged in negotiating between multiple layers of their identity, navigating which aspects became more prominent depending on the social context.

The SIT's notion of identity salience, which states that, depending on social settings, certain aspects of identity may become more or less visible¹⁴², was repeatedly shown in students' experiences. National identity often became more pronounced in contexts where students were surrounded by non-Polish peers. This salience was situational: being one of the few foreign students in a classroom, cooking traditional meals, or answering questions about Polish culture all activated a stronger sense of group belonging¹⁴³. Students' intensified sense of Polishness in these particular multicultural settings demonstrates how group identities become salient when emotionally and socially activated, as Oakes suggests¹⁴⁴.

Several students developed new attachments to Polish traditions, caused by the feeling of cultural nostalgia. They reported: "In France, I made sure to make the Easter salad that I never liked before" and "I've never been a fan of Polish food, but suddenly [in Germany] I was missing it and craving *żurek* and *ogórkowa*, which I don't even really cook when I'm in Poland".

Several respondents studying in France and the Netherlands stated that their strengthened Polish identity became more salient particularly among Europeans¹⁴⁵. For these students, being away from their familiar environment and surrounded by people of different nationalities made them more aware of their national characteristics. At the same time, international experience also made them more comfortable with their nationality.

Reflections of a student living in South Korea, whose Polish identity strengthened, extended even further: she discovered a new perspective on how growing up in Poland had shaped

¹⁴² Tajfel, H. et al. (1986) 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior', p. 287.

¹⁴³ Some students described concrete situations during which their national identity was especially salient: "[With] my group of friends (from [the] Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, Ukraine, Spain, Greece, Latvia) we made every Friday a national dinner. So every weekend[,] someone cooked their national meal[,] such as pierogi, cold borsch[,] etc. [T]hat's was pretty cool."; While others noted that their sense of Polishness was activated by the sole fact of living abroad: "I felt very proud to talk about my country with the people I have met abroad. (...) I definitely found myself talking about Poland more while living in a different country".

¹⁴⁴ Trepte, S. et al. (2017) 'Social identity theory and self-categorization theory', p.7.

¹⁴⁵ One of them noted: "Among Europeans I feel distinctly Polish, (...). Among Polish[,] I feel at home".

who she is¹⁴⁶. Her observation showed that elements like education, everyday traditions, and national customs are not just abstract influences: they constitute a starting point of reflection when a person finds oneself in a completely different environment¹⁴⁷. The realisations about national qualities have proven to be triggered by contacts with other cultures, which, sometimes, prompted certain feelings leading to identity salience.

One respondent, whose Polish identity strengthened during an exchange in Germany, reflected: “I always used to think that I feel more European than Polish. Now I know that I am Polish. Then European. Poland is the priority here”. Her experience abroad allowed her to distinguish and reorder her distinct senses of belonging, highlighting again that identities can co-exist but may hold varying levels of importance for an individual at different points in their life. This reflection demonstrates Self-Categorisation Theory in practice: the prioritisation of identity categories based on the surrounding social context and emotional resonance¹⁴⁸.

In contrast, a respondent studying in the Netherlands, who had not reflected on her identity either prior to or during her exchange, expressed a different stance: she felt no need to label herself with a national identity. For her, being Polish was a fact, not a trait she could choose or refuse to identify with. Her reflection also aligns with the Self-Categorisation Theory, which points out that personal identity does not have to depend on group membership¹⁴⁹.

5.1.1.6. Final remarks

In light of Oakes’ notion of identity salience and Turner’s Self-Categorisation Theory, the findings from the survey partially confirm that the national identity of Polish students studying abroad was, indeed, reactive to interpersonal dynamics and cultural contrast. In principle, students who reported feeling more Polish after their exchange often experienced national identity as newly meaningful in foreign settings, where their Polishness became visible and emotionally resonant. Notably, appreciation of particular national qualities appeared not only amongst those who had a strong connection to Poland before their mobility but also those who lacked the sentiment of attachment or had never reflected

¹⁴⁶ She reported: “Having experienced a culture and society so different, but in some ways also similar to mine[,] gave me a new perspective on who I am, how has Poland shaped me and how our society works”.

¹⁴⁷ Łastawski, K. (2007) ‘Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej’, p. 303.

¹⁴⁸ Trepte, S. et al. (2017) ‘Social identity theory and self-categorization theory’, p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

on their identity before, demonstrating that a pre-existing emotional bond is not always necessary for national identity to become meaningful in a new context.

On the other hand, the group who reported feeling less Polish after their experience abroad included the greatest percentage of students who lacked an emotional connection to Poland beforehand (48 per cent); therefore, when placed in culturally diverse environments, they leaned towards European identity, which they had found more relevant even before the exchange. This group also revealed to be the most critical towards fellow Poles and the most open towards foreigners, with 82 per cent sharing that their perception of foreigners improved. In these cases, in the absence of initial emotional attachment to the country of origin, national identity did not become a salient category.

Taken together, these findings prove that identity is constantly shaped by the psychological relevance of group memberships in specific social contexts.

Although internal identity reflections are crucial when it comes to the redefinition of an individual's identity, personal perceptions are also closely linked to social interactions¹⁵⁰. Studying abroad naturally relies on interpersonal contact with people from various cultural backgrounds: international students build friendships and engage in conversations about customs and traditions, often comparing their realities with peers from other countries. For Polish students, this was clearly the case: over 98 per cent talked about Poland with foreigners, especially its culture, politics, or history, and 95 per cent of them reported enjoying these exchanges. Despite encountering stereotypes, as stipulated by 80 per cent of students, many reflected that they were "rather playful and not negative, not having [an] impact on social interactions", suggesting a certain degree of mutual respect. Several participants expressed surprise at how rarely stereotypes appeared in and affected their social interactions.

Both those who reported strengthened or unchanged Polish identity regularly engaged in contact with foreign peers, most often on a daily basis, just as those who indicated a decline in national identification. This constant suggests that the frequency of interactions with foreigners is also not the sole driving force behind shifts in identity. Regular international interactions appear necessary to encourage identity reflections, but are not sufficient to predict change in Polish identity. Rather, it is the subjective feature of the experience, dependent on the quality of relationships, as well as the individual

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

approach and interpretation of cultural differences and similarities, that appears as the key variable.

These phenomena will be further explored in the next chapter, where findings related to the perception of “others” by Polish students will be presented.

In conclusion, a factor that appears to be most impactful on the identity shifts is the comparative reflection that the stay abroad itself enables. Encountering different worldviews, lifestyles, and attitudes encourages a re-evaluation of national belonging but also brings about deeper identity considerations. Whether the comparison with other cultures leads to the appreciation of or detachment from national belonging depends largely, but not solely, on prior attachment to Poland, openness to diversity, and the social dynamics students experience during their time abroad. Therefore, the negotiation of Polish identity in transnational contexts is shaped more by internal reflection and the personal meaning assigned to intercultural encounters than by measurable variables such as study duration or frequency of contact with foreigners alone.

5.2. Intergroup relations reflections

As demonstrated in the identity reflections section, it is often not the time spent abroad itself, but the quality of the international experience that plays a key role in shaping how students perceive themselves. Central to building the very quality of the experience are the relationships participants develop during their mobility.

This section proceeds to focus on the evolution of respondents' line of thinking about foreigners during their time abroad. Following the scheme employed in the analysis of identity reflections, it begins with an overview of principal quantitative data that will pave the path to explore the trends that appeared across students' responses.

The distributions of answers to the two central questions forming the foundation of this part of the research – “What were your views on foreigners before moving abroad?” and “Did your views on foreigners change after living abroad?” – are illustrated in the two pie charts presented below. Figure 5 outlines the distribution of students' attitudes towards foreigners prior to studying abroad, whereas Figure 6 depicts whether, and how, those views shifted following the experience.

What were your views on foreigners before moving abroad?

308 odpowiedzi

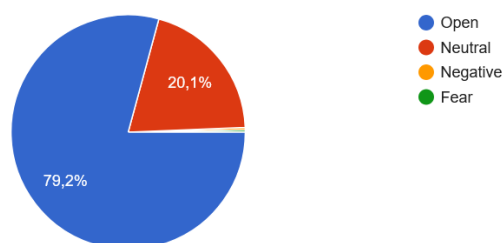


Figure 5: Approach towards “others” before studying abroad

Did your view on foreigners (non-Polish) change after living abroad?

308 odpowiedzi

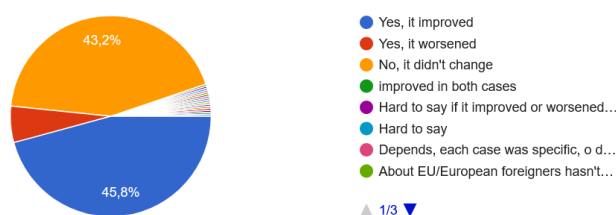


Figure 6: Shift in perceptions of foreigners after studying abroad

As demonstrated in Figure 5, a significant majority of participants approached “others” with open curiosity even before moving abroad. In fact, there were only two respondents who admitted to holding negative or fearful perceptions. Interestingly, both of them later reported an improved attitude towards foreigners, while indicating a weakened sense of their national identity and a more critical view of Polish people.

Overall, an increased openness towards “others” was experienced by nearly 46 per cent of respondents. The second-largest group (approximately 43 per cent) revealed no shift in perception, although further analysis revealed that 83 per cent had already held open attitudes beforehand. Considering that the remaining 17 per cent described their previous stance as neutral, these results underline the presence of a strong baseline of tolerance among Polish students who choose to study abroad.

Only a small minority – in particular, nineteen students representing less than 6 per cent of the sample – reported a worsening of their views. However, these shifts did not originate from existing prejudice: 62 per cent of this group had previously described their approach towards foreigners as open, and 38 per cent reported neutrality. Therefore, a turn towards more negative perceptions appeared likely to be a result of a concrete interpersonal situation abroad, such as cultural misunderstanding, hateful behaviour, or unresolved conflict.

Notwithstanding, 251 students, over 81 per cent of the total sample, returned from their international studies with either maintained or increased openness towards “others”. This figure points to a notable trend, similar to one observed in relation to European identity: international mobility has the potential to reinforce inclusive attitudes even among those who have already held an openly curious approach.

A more detailed quantitative description of correlations between the perception of “others” and the students’ travel experience, length and location of studies, family members’ as well as friends’ views on foreigners, social interactions during and prior to studies abroad, together with relation to Polish and European identity, has been detailed in Appendix Two. In the Appendix, the connections between the students’ attitudes and the abovementioned indicators are organised according to four distinct categories that serve as the foundation for the subsequent qualitative analysis.

Students in category one reported a shift in perceptions of foreigners in a positive direction following their time abroad. The responses of participants whose perspective on “others” has not changed are showcased in category two. Respondents who stated that moving away from

their home country led them to develop more negative attitudes towards foreigners are represented in category three. Category four consists of students who acknowledged a change in perspective but found it difficult to articulate their considerations within the predefined options. Their reflections, therefore, are analysed in a more descriptive manner.

All categories are visually demonstrated in Table 2, which provides a comparative summary of the collected data facilitating the overview of trends that appeared across categories.

Category	Number of Students	Previous Travel Experience	Length of Stay	Location of Study	Family Views on Foreigners	Friends' Views on Foreigners	View on Foreigners Before Exchange	Social Interactions Before Exchange	Social Interactions During Exchange	Relation to Polish Identity	Relation to European Identity
1: Improved View	142	93% had traveled before (48% $\geq 2x/year$)	57% stayed 1 semester 43% stayed longer	EU & non-EU	Open: 56% Neutral: 59% Negative: ~15%	Open: 80% Neutral: 36% Negative: <5%	Open: 78% Neutral: 20.5% Negative/Fear: 1.5%	63% socialised with foreigners	95% daily/weekly contact 52.5% mostly with foreigners	Strengthened: 58% Unchanged: 26% Weakened: 13%	Strengthened: 75% Unchanged: 23%
2: Unchanged View	133	95% had traveled before (41% $\geq 2x/year$)	58% stayed 1 semester 42% stayed longer	EU & non-EU	Open: 57% Neutral: 56% Negative: ~7%	Open: 86% Neutral: 30% Negative: 3%	Open: 83% Neutral: 17%	71% socialised with foreigners	80% daily/weekly contact 65% mostly with foreigners	Strengthened: 49% Unchanged: 42% Weakened: 6%	Strengthened: 57% Unchanged: 40%
3: Worsened View	18	100% had traveled before (60% $\geq 2x/year$)	40% stayed 1 semester 60% stayed longer	EU & non-EU	Open: 42% Neutral: 89% Negative: ~16%	Open: 68% Neutral: 58% Negative: 10%	Open: 62% Neutral: 38%	63% socialised with foreigners	95% daily contact 63% mostly with foreigners	Strengthened: 90% Unchanged: 5.5% (1 student)	Strengthened: 44% Unchanged: 56%
4: Other Reflections	15	All had traveled before	60% stayed 1 semester 40% stayed longer	Mostly EU (67%)	Mostly open or neutral	Mostly open (73%)	Varies	73% socialised with foreigners	100% daily/weekly contact	Strengthened: 67% Unchanged: 33%	Strengthened: 53% Unchanged: 13%

Table 2: Correlations between the perception of “others” and the students’ travel experience, length and location of studies, family members’ and friends’ views on foreigners, social interactions during and prior to studies abroad, and relation to Polish and European identity

The following discussion section investigates how students’ perceptions of “others” were influenced by particular interactions and challenges they faced in the foreign environments.

5.2.1. Discussion

As previously highlighted, insights gathered from 308 respondents unveiled a notable pattern: the vast majority of participants either maintained an open approach towards foreigners or developed greater openness throughout their sojourn. However, among the small group who reported a shift towards a more negative view, an interesting contrast stood out: compared to the other categories, a greater share of these students stayed abroad for more than one semester. Upon initial observation, this correlation could imply that longer

stays away from one's home country contribute to a deterioration in perception of "others". Yet, before drawing such a conclusion, it warrants a closer examination.

This group was not only the smallest in size, it also distinguished itself in other aspects. Most notably, it included the highest proportion of respondents who had described their attitude towards foreigners as neutral prior to moving abroad. In contrast, the smallest share of these students had embarked on the international adventure with a distinctly open mindset, compared to their peers in categories one and two. What is more, a similar pattern was visible in the reported views of their families and close friends, which were described as neutral in almost 90 per cent of cases. The survey results, therefore, point to it being likely in neutrality, rather than in the explicit bias towards "others" where "othering" attitudes may originate, implying a possible new research direction. The length of mobility appears to be a less relevant factor.

What kinds of experiences during their time abroad, however, inspired students to revise their attitudes – whether towards greater openness, a consolidation of neutrality, or growing scepticism?

To explore this further, the analysis now focuses on the patterns that appeared across students' qualitative reflections, examining how concrete interpersonal experiences impacted the evolution of their views of foreigners. Drawing on Intergroup Contact Theory – specifically Allport's Intergroup Contact Hypothesis and Pettigrew's four key mechanisms shaping intergroup contact – the notion of "othering", and related literature, it situates students' reflections within a broader theoretical and conceptual framework. Their considerations are not merely anecdotal but serve as valuable illustrations of how theory unfolds in practice.

According to Pettigrew, learning about the out-group – also referred to interchangeably as "foreigners" or "others" – is an essential factor allowing for an improvement in intergroup attitudes¹⁵¹. This learning process, however, must transcend superficial interactions: it should encompass meaningful insights into the new culture as well as genuine openness to the perspectives of the other group. Many students who participated in this study described precisely such moments of deeper understanding.

¹⁵¹ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) 'Intergroup contact theory', p. 70.

Moreover, many recognised that living abroad provided them with space to re-evaluate their assumptions about other people. Importantly, these reflections were not idealised. Students acknowledged both cultural differences and similarities, as well as their positive and negative aspects¹⁵². While many respondents described situations in which cultural differences became salient, they often emphasised how they were accompanied by a discovery of an unexpected common ground. These two dimensions, difference and similarity, often appeared side by side, suggesting that students were engaging in an active process of social comparison, reassessing their own national in-group against the foreign out-group. Such reassessment corresponds with the provisions of Social Identity Theory (SIT)¹⁵³, which not only indicates that comparison influences identity shifts, but, I argue, it encourages a re-evaluation of one's social convictions.

The opportunity to learn about people and practices first-hand, rather than solely through the outlook of stereotypes, was perceived as a powerful driver in promoting open-mindedness¹⁵⁴, which strongly aligns with Allport and Pettigrew's claim that direct intergroup contact, under favourable conditions, can be a catalyst for changing attitudes¹⁵⁵. As students built new international social bonds, many began to interpret intercultural encounters through a more empathetic lens. These emotional connections additionally demonstrate that, indeed, Pettigrew's condition of forming "affective ties" is crucial for positive intergroup contact¹⁵⁶.

¹⁵² One of the respondents who studied in Portugal reflected on how differences in approaches to making friends impacted her own behaviour: "The most noticeable difference was in making friends, where Poles were more closed, it took time to open up to people, while Portuguese, Spanish[,] or Italians immediately treated you as their friend. But our habits began to intertwine, so I became more open and extroverted". She did not judge which approach was better, but rather described a positive change she noticed in herself, which was prompted by the interactions with peers of different nationalities. A different kind of experience was shared by a student in Spain, who was surprised by the lack of general knowledge of her peers from Western countries, and recognised a disparity in education levels: "People asked questions such as whether we have electricity in Poland, whether we hunt polar bears, etc. Most of these questions came from people in the United States or England, and this put me off a little in terms of their lack of general and fairly basic knowledge about the world. I realised that the level of education in the West is declining, and the closer you get to the East, the higher the standards are".

¹⁵³ Tajfel, H. et al. (1986) 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior', pp. 283-284.

¹⁵⁴ The role of everyday interactions was especially highlighted by many as a factor that influenced their shift in perception of "others". A student who spent a semester in Spain, when asked about a specific experience that changed her perspective on relations with foreigners, captured her reflections in the following manner: "[I]t was about all the small things we have in common and also the little differences that highlight our diversity. These differences show the areas where we can learn from each other, try new things, and grow together as a result".

¹⁵⁵ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) 'Intergroup contact theory', pp. 66, 74.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

5.2.1.1. From recognition to navigation of differences

Experiencing new layers of intercultural differences by forming deeper emotional connections during their time abroad allowed students to grow more appreciative of diversity. This appreciation was frequently accompanied by the recognition of cultural overlap, suggesting that respondents were learning to value similarities and differences equally. By doing so, they moved beyond binary thinking in which the traits distinguishing individuals draw them apart, and qualities connecting them bring them closer together. Hereby, they began to dismantle the processes of “othering”, as they no longer perceived cultural difference as synonymous with deficiency.

As one respondent in Spain observed: “It’s these differences that help people become more accepting of things beyond their control. Just like culture, people have their own behaviours, patterns, and even appearances that they should embrace and appreciate, even if they are ‘different’ from those in other countries”. Such reflections point to a progression into the “Independence” stage of Adler’s transnational adaptation, at which individuals who have already developed sensitivity and understanding of the second culture, advance to integrate and appreciate both the known and the unfamiliar¹⁵⁷.

5.2.1.2. Challenging experiences

Even when students encountered challenging or distressing situations during their sojourn, they rarely allowed isolated negative events to deteriorate their perception of “others”. One respondent, for instance, noted a significant decrease in his sense of safety while living abroad. Despite being personally affected, he reported no change in his previously open attitude towards foreigners. Instead, he contextualised unsettling events as a part of a broader social reality:

In Barcelona[,] I got robbed, and [so did] one of my closest friend[s] (...); in France[,] I was often scared to walk alone [at] night. I don’t think it has changed my perspective on relations with foreigners, I think it’s (...) shaped my views on the fact that that’s a different reality, which, if I want to spend some time in these parts of Europe, I have to accept and adapt myself to.

Concerns about safety, particularly in Western European cities, appeared repeatedly in students’ reflections. A participant who spent a semester in Belgium described her surprise

¹⁵⁷ Adler, P.S. (1975) ‘The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock’, p. 17.

at the everyday security concerns: “Cultural differences in this situation apply more so to [W]estern/[E]astern perspective (...) – throwing the trash out on the streets, casual shootings that no media talks about on a daily basis, closing entire metro lines because of bomb threats on a random Wednesday. This has never happened in Warsaw”.

In her case, the reduced feeling of physical safety did not result in evoking “othering” practices. While her statement reflects a degree of cultural shock, the respondent’s overall perception of foreigners improved. Additionally, much like others discussed in the previous Chapter, she reassessed her national sense of belonging by positioning herself within a broader Eastern European in-group.

Taken together, these insights confirm that a deterioration in attitudes towards “others” is more likely to occur when a series of negative encounters accumulates, rather than being dependent on an isolated incident. While a single distressing event might lead to momentary frustration, it is the repeated exposure to unfavourable interactions that appears more probable to drive a negative perception of foreigners.

One respondent distinctly highlighted this phenomenon. During her short-term exchange in France, she confirmed certain negative stereotypes about the French. Nevertheless, these personal judgements did not translate into broader distrust of foreigners. To the contrary. Despite her unfavourable perception of that particular national group, she expressed a strong sense of shared European identity: “EU citizens don’t feel like foreigners for me. (...) – I really believe in the EU’s motto “United in diversity” after my studies[,] but also... there is much more we all have in common than there are differences, in my opinion”.

5.2.1.3. Regional familiarity

This inclusive understanding of Europeanness, however, was not equally reflected in all responses. As previously noted, studies abroad helped some recognise the contrasts between Western and Eastern European realities. For others, international settings resulted in a redefinition of belonging through regional affiliation. One participant living in Spain described a newly-discovered sense of connection to fellow Slavic students:

I can say that historical background has a lot to do with connections. Even though many students were from [the] EU[,] not everyone felt close. The more countries share[,] the easier [it] is to make friends and connections. I was really shocked [by] how many similar words we share with other Slavic countries.

Given his emphasis on similarities, it appears that common linguistic and cultural reference points, possibly more than a common historical background, played a significant role in shaping his sense of closeness. Such, perhaps subconscious, inclination to search for familiarity demonstrates that, in unfamiliar environments, individuals tend to seek proximity to those perceived as similar.

His observation was shared by another student whose initially open attitude towards foreigners remained unchanged. She described how her “straightforward approach was often read as a rude or too open by people of different nationality than Polish” but indicated having “no trouble with that when interacting with Polish/Serbian/Russian/etc. students tho[ugh]”.

These statements not only demonstrate how cultural familiarity can lower the threshold for intercultural communication, but also – as suggested by Brown – that groups perceived to have a common background have higher intergroup attraction and lower bias compared to dissimilar groups¹⁵⁸.

5.2.1.4. Similarity in diversity

Personal redefinition of in-group boundaries, exemplified by students’ reflections, illustrates a key mechanism supporting intergroup cooperation identified by Pettigrew: the reassessment of one’s social categories¹⁵⁹. Following Kuhn’s perspective¹⁶⁰, I argue that this process can further contribute to lowering overall intergroup boundaries. More broadly, the findings suggest that transnational experiences promote openness towards “otherness” by encouraging individuals to identify shared ground across national lines, gradually carrying them away from the default preference to remain in the familiar circle.

This openness to novelty was particularly visible in responses from students who studied in Spain¹⁶¹. Many reported realising the extent to which they shared similar life experiences with peers from other countries. One student remarked: “By talking with other Erasmus students[,] we found many similar experiences that happened to us in completely different parts of the world”. While not all elaborated on the nature of these commonalities, another participant summarised a widely shared feeling: “We finally see that ‘we’re all on this

¹⁵⁸ Brown, R. (2000) ‘Social identity theory: Past achievements, current problems and future challenges’, pp. 757–758.

¹⁵⁹ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) ‘Intergroup contact theory’, p. 75.

¹⁶⁰ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, p. 32.

¹⁶¹ While respondents who studied in other countries also reported increased openness to foreigners, students who participated in an international mobility to Spain revealed themselves to be especially eager to share concrete examples of how their view of “others” evolved as responses to the open-ended questions.

together’, it’s a very unifying experience! We stop perceiving our differences and we focus on what we have in common with other foreigners. We tend to stick together. A beautiful realisation!”

Such a sense of unity, although echoed by a respondent who studied in Italy, did not inspire him to move past national differences, but rather to reframe them. Witnessing how diverse nations respond to similar situations in their own, unique ways, prompted him to rethink the role of upbringing, perennial values, as well as personal traits in shaping everyday behaviour¹⁶².

5.2.1.5. Disparity of perspectives

Notwithstanding the many responses filled with enthusiasm, not all students’ experiences fit within the optimistic narrative. Among the 82,4 per cent of students who interacted daily with peers of other nationalities, conflicting perceptions of particular national groups inevitably appeared.

As individuals with varying preconceptions, temperaments, and cultural frames of reference interact, perspectives on entire countries may be challenged or reinforced, depending on personal encounters. One such instance concerned students’ impressions of peers from Northern Europe.

While Intergroup Contact Theory asserts that social contact under four key conditions – equal status within the situation (international student status), common goal (strike up friendships), support of authorities (study programme), and cooperation – has potential to lower intergroup barriers¹⁶³, the following case demonstrates how the absence of one of these prerequisites can hinder that process.

A student who spent a semester in Belgium recalled feeling actively excluded from social activities by his Spanish roommates. However, he later developed close friendships with Danish and Norwegian peers, highlighting moments of mutual support, shared travel adventures, and even a warm farewell organised before his return to Poland. In contrast, another respondent, who, after having lived in Spain and Hungary, reported a worsened view

¹⁶² Following his exchange semester, he reported: “Foreigners seem closer and more similar after studying abroad[,] but also they seem different. I know that sounds off[,] but it’s true. We (...) are [all] people who face [the] frustrations of everyday life[;] we often have similar history[ies] and views on life[,] but the way we were brought up influenced our values and personalities. Though we deal with [the] same things because life is mostly [the] same for us[,] we react differently”.

¹⁶³ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) ‘Intergroup contact theory’, p. 70.

of foreigners, described feeling ridiculed for being Polish by students from wealthier European countries, especially Denmark and Norway. He recalled that they “notoriously resorted to stereotypes, ridiculed, mocked (...) poorer nations (mainly Poles (...))”.

These examples illustrate how context can play a decisive role in shaping students’ views. Highly subjective experiences, especially when emotionally charged, can lead to creating distorted generalisations about concrete nations. While a tendency to limit future interactions with such is understandable, it is essential to acknowledge the role of coincidence in the occurrence of international encounters. Although one student shared having “witnessed people growing more prejudiced [towards other nations] during Erasmus than they were before”, another participant offered a more grounded perspective: “It is not about the nationality but the personality”. This reminder underlines the importance of resisting overgeneralisation. While studying abroad creates numerous opportunities to dismantle¹⁶⁴, challenge, or confirm stereotypes, one must recognise that one individual is rarely representative of an entire nation.

5.2.1.6. Rediscovery of Poland’s assets

As demonstrated in the Chapter 5.1, encounters with “others” frequently became moments of self-reflection. A respondent who maintained her open approach towards foreigners during her exchange in Spain noted:

It seems to me that, as Poles, we (unfortunately!) often have a sense of inferiority towards other nationalities that we perceive as better or more interesting. However, getting to know and interacting with people from abroad has shown me that Poles are actually very well received internationally and have absolutely no reason to feel inferior in any way.

Her perspective was shared by several other participants who also began to question a deeply-rooted sense of Polish inferiority, realising it often lacked solid factual grounds.

In addition to such shifts in self-perception, multiple students, particularly those who engaged in conversations with peers from outside of Europe, reported an increasing awareness of their relative privilege. Interactions with students from African and Latin American countries, in particular, were often those that most clearly exposed global inequalities. Such realisations encouraged several participants to express deeper appreciation

¹⁶⁴ McKay, S. et al. (2020) ‘Identity development during student exchange (...)’, p. 8.

for having been born in Poland, “a country with a strong passport and in [the] European Union”.

An especially vivid example of a disparity was described by a student in Spain whose view of foreigners improved during her stay abroad. She recalled having a stroll through the Valencian city centre, when her Chilean friend remarked how unusual it felt not to have to hold her bag tightly at all times¹⁶⁵. While this reflection was not explicitly linked to changes in European identity, other participants did connect intercontinental interactions with an increased sense of European belonging.

A student who participated in an exchange in Australia succinctly summarised their considerations on intercultural diversity: “Leaving Europe made me realise the differences”. Such statements imply the existence of potential grounds for further research, particularly to investigate whether, contrary to Kuhn’s thesis¹⁶⁶, engagement in close interactions with non-Europeans strengthens European identity more than relationships formed with fellow Europeans.

5.2.1.7. Increase in intergroup understanding through diversity

Although a considerable number of students described cultural differences in detail, most reported either improved, sustained, or newly formed open views of foreigners. This outcome highlights that the development of intergroup understanding does not necessarily require an emphasis on similarities. Instead, what proves to be more valuable is cultivating a multifaceted appreciation of cultural diversity. In many cases, it was precisely the deeper, experiential understanding shaped through everyday contact that enabled students to reach the “Independence” stage of Adler’s transnational adaptation process¹⁶⁷. Rather than eliminating differences, it is the ability to accept and navigate them that appears to be the true outcome of a successful intercultural exchange.

The cultural distinctions that stood out to students most often revolved around everyday habits and behaviours: punctuality norms in Southern Europe, approaches to sharing and consuming food in China or India, expectations in romantic and platonic relationships,

¹⁶⁵ Her exact words shared in the survey were as follows: “We were having a stroll in the city center in Valencia[,] and my friend from Chile told me that she feels weird to be able to just walk around and not keep her bag really tightly close to her”.

¹⁶⁶ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*, p. 124.

¹⁶⁷ Elofsson, N. (2020) Erasmus and its effects on participants’ European identity (...), pp. 16, 20; Adler, P.S. (1975) ‘The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock’, p. 17.

or flexible degrees of respect for personal space. These “small things” were ones that impacted and, eventually, irritated students most: “putting (...) shoes on other seats [in public transport,] making [them] unavailable for others to sit, (...) not (...) making space for you if you wanted to leave the bus (...)” occurred to be common complaints. Nevertheless, despite these frustrations, the respondent who shared them maintained an open view on foreigners, once again demonstrating that momentary discomfort does not automatically lead to negative generalisations.

Other commonly mentioned differences were found within the university settings. They extended beyond variations in educational systems, where different countries employed distinct ideological approaches¹⁶⁸, to include group work dynamics and ways in which students interacted with professors.

Two respondents who studied in the Netherlands, both of whom reported improved views on foreigners, reflected on their time in Dutch academia. One observed that “working on the same project with people from different countries definitely shows the cultural differences[. F]or example[, Asian students being more shy and not necessarily sharing the[ir] opinions[, rather] agreeing with the rest of the group”. Another noted a more informal classroom culture, describing how Dutch students spoke to professors in ways which, from a Polish perspective, would be considered disrespectful: “Students might say an unfunny joke/insult the lecturer to his or her face (...), which the lecturer will (...) turn it into a joke and carry on with the lecture”. Classrooms indeed served as a learning space, both academically and culturally.

In addition to distinct behaviours, participants also observed differences in personality traits across nationalities. One respondent, whose views on “others” remained neutral, remarked

¹⁶⁸ In the question “Can you describe a specific experience that significantly changed your perspective on relations with foreigners or that highlighted cultural differences?”, a student on exchange in Italy whose previously neutral view on foreigners worsened remarked: “The inability to understand that there are different political views than fascist and socialist that all the Bolognese are representing, the indoctrination with leftist ideology at the university[, and the shocked and disgusted looks when I spoke about the Polish system of schooling regarding religion[, while the teacher herself completely disregarded the importance of religion in (...) society.” Another participant, whose overall view on foreigners worsened, but improved on Germans, described: “I really appreciated the enormous amount of work that the German society has been putting in, when it comes to historical education about national socialism. I see Germans as more friendly, welcoming, open, tolerant[, and responsible than I used to [be]”. Nonetheless, another student who has lived in Germany, and whose overall perception of others improved, reported: “My German friends seem to idealise socialism. I tried to explain that the reality can be worse and that my own family had [a] bad experience[, but I don't think they understood”. Such a variety of perspectives regarding a single country once again underlines the notion that impressions are shaped primarily by the specific individuals one encounters rather than by nationality alone.

that studying among introverted Finns, he felt more confident, whereas in Italy, the social extroversion of Southerners left him feeling overwhelmed¹⁶⁹. Another student, whose initially open view of foreigners deteriorated, recalled how the loudness and self-confidence of a Middle Eastern flatmate clashed with her own sense of self-consciousness and concern about others' opinions¹⁷⁰.

Although not all respondents explicitly connected such experiences to a reassessment of their own in-group belonging, others, who underlined positive qualities of foreigners, were often more direct in expressing a desire for Poles to learn from other nations. They also tended to display greater curiosity towards the out-groups, form lasting international friendships, and critically reflect on their own cultural norms, conforming to all four mechanisms of Intergroup Contact Theory¹⁷¹. Among the most frequently praised qualities were the openness of Southern Europeans as well as the kindness and generosity shown by residents of North Africa and the Middle East.

Her personal observations encouraged one female respondent to share: "I think (...) Europe should open up to people who are not from [here]. And realise that not everyone is [a] terrorist". Her words strongly resonate with Tropp and Pettigrew's findings that direct, meaningful contact with members of an out-group significantly reduces perceptions of threat¹⁷². A similar sentiment was shared by another student who had studied across multiple EU Member States: "Living in Paris (and Austria to [a] less[er] degree) showed me how a multicultural society looks like (in a good sense) and how ridiculous (...) [the] political populist 'debate' about immigrants coming to Poland and EU [is]". In these cases, willingness to learn about "others" enabled participants to critically examine political rhetoric surrounding migration and diversity. Although challenging, their reflections

¹⁶⁹ He shared: "Finnish people are way more introverted than Polish people, which made me feel pretty confident in Finland. Italians[,] on the contrary – way more extraverted, which exhausted me. Other places [in] the world = different cultures and approach[es] to the world. Sometimes for the bad, sometimes for the good".

¹⁷⁰ She described her experience in detail: "I lived with [an] Arab girl from Israel[,] and everything about her was loud[,] and she was totally unbothered by it. She'd also talk to her family on the phone all day. I didn't really mind[,] but I couldn't believe she fe[lt] comfortable with it. Polish p[eo]pl[e] are much more self-conscious and worried [about] what others think of them or if p[eo]pl[e] around them are comfortable with what they're doing. There's a bigger emphasis on *savoir-vivre* in Poland".

¹⁷¹ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) 'Intergroup contact theory', p. 70.

¹⁷² Stephan, W. G. et al. (2009) 'Intergroup threat theory', p. 16 after Tropp, L. R. et al. (2000) 'Intergroup contact and the central role of affect in intergroup prejudice', pp. 246-269; Pettigrew, T.F. et al. (2006) 'A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory', pp. 755, 766.

ultimately resulted in an improved intergroup perception, fulfilling the provisions of Intergroup Contact Theory.

The expansion of one's horizons emerged as a recurrent theme throughout students' responses. Many reported gaining not only an understanding of new cultural norms and values, but also exposure to alternative ways of seeing the world. One respondent, who maintained a consistent openness towards "others", shared a personal example: "I learned from a person living in Japan that they show them a world map with Japan in the center[.], so it's completely different in a way". Although seemingly anecdotal, this insight captures the essence of what many participants described as an outcome of intercultural interactions: moving away from the West-centred "bubble".

Diversity became an integral element of the learning process during students' time abroad¹⁷³. In some cases, the experience reshaped participants' outlook on life altogether: it increased trust, made them more accepting, and provided inspiration to live with greater openness, curiosity, and empathy¹⁷⁴. These acquired qualities also helped them navigate the very fact of being the "other" in a foreign environment oneself.

One student, whose view on foreigners improved after studying in multiple EU Member States, noted: "When you become a foreigner yourself, you have a chance to understand how complex societies are (...). You can gain a greater sense of community with others, no matter what culture they represent". Furthermore, a large number of respondents similarly stressed that interacting across borders helped humanise the "other" – a figure that, prior

¹⁷³ During their international mobility, students actively engaged in reflections about how the diversity of cultures, behaviours, and approaches to life impacts their own habits, and what they can learn from "others" to improve their lifestyle. Although short, her stay in Southern Italy prompted one respondent to compare her work routine to that of Italians: "To be honest, the lifestyle of [S]outhern Italians doesn't suit me at all. Their measured life, no rush, everyone is late everywhere[.] or does not come at all, sometimes drove me crazy. I am a chronic workaholic[.] and sometimes I do not manage to just relax, which would be good to learn from the Italians". Another participant described a multitude of learning opportunities she encountered during her stay in Spain, and how they impacted her: "You're with foreigners all the time[.] 24h per day. You live with them, party, study, everything. You can have so many conversations about the cultural differences[.] and also easily see [them] when you're spending a lot of time with them. I think it's beautiful, if only you want to[.] you can learn so much, even how to make (...) pasta from Italians or how to dance bachata from Spanish people. Erasmus is the best experience in my life and I recommend it [to] every open-minded person".

¹⁷⁴ When asked about the role studying abroad plays in perceiving foreigners, a student in Portugal described what she learnt during her time abroad: "[E]ven though we are from different countries, when put in similar situations we can count on each other and despite cultural differences we are able to understand and support each other". Similarly, a respondent who studied in Spain reflected on her life lesson: "It's these differences that help people become more accepting of things beyond their control. Just like culture, people have their own behaviors, patterns, and even appearances that they should embrace and appreciate, even if they are 'different' from those in other countries".

to the exchange, had often existed as a vague conglomerate of stereotypes, distant images, and second-hand narratives conveyed by media¹⁷⁵. In fact, experiencing life abroad encouraged many students to dismantle the “othering” rhetorics¹⁷⁶.

Living in a foreign country placed them in a position where they were not a part of the majority, enabling a more direct understanding of what it means to be perceived as the “other”. Rather than remaining distanced from people of different nationalities, they strived for connection, finding a common ground in navigating a similar reality. While differences remained, the former out-group was no longer unfamiliar nor carried the weight of interiority. The distinction between “us” and “them” became blurred.

5.2.1.8. Re-categorisation into the “international students” in-group

International studies offered a unique intercultural experience rich with bonding opportunities. Specifically, the experience of belonging to a joint group of international students transcended national lines, while fulfilling four conditions of improving intergroup relations specified in Intergroup Contact Hypothesis: equal status, common goal, institutional support, and cooperation¹⁷⁷. One respondent, who studied in Estonia and reported a more positive view of foreigners, precisely illustrated the relevance of shared situational identity in decreasing intergroup barriers: “Being in the same, new situation as students (...) brings us closer together, no matter (...) our origins”. Her words not only highlight the situational salience of the new social identity but also demonstrate a strong sense of belonging that arises with it. The convergence of Allport’s Hypothesis with SIT

¹⁷⁵ A respondent who studied in Spain shared that, according to him, studying abroad “(...) strips the ‘others’ from this veil of mystery and shows them for what they really are: humans”. While contemplating how international mobility influences perception of “others”, another participant confirmed that first-hand cross-cultural interactions break the barrier separating “us” from “them”: “Studying [abroad] somehow forces you to connect with people from different countries. Those places you only heard of before now have faces and feelings. You exchange info[rmation] about your cultures, joke around about stereotypes[,] but also get to know their struggles and [the] complexity of their [n]ational identity. You bond. Simply[,] once you get to know them, foreigners become real human beings instead of things you’ve heard about them in the media and from other people. And what is more important - it makes you one of them, a foreigner in your country of destination. (...) There is no more ‘us’ and ‘them’. It[’]s just ‘us’”. Her perspective was mirrored in the response of a student who lived in China during her exchange: “What was previously just a concept you’ve heard about is now embodied by living, breathing people. It also makes you realise how shallow and misguided the mainstream descriptions of other cultures and countries can be”.

¹⁷⁶ A student who spent a semester in South Korea reflected how being the “other” impacted her way of thinking about foreigners: “I think being a foreigner, even for a couple of months[,] is an eye opener. You realize what it is like to be on the other side, to be the ‘others’, especially in a country that is not really that open to foreigners. This experience makes you realize how comfortable you are in your own country/community, and more empathetic to foreigners who need to adjust to a new place.”

¹⁷⁷ Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity*. p. 47 after Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*.

suggests that the transition from a national to an “international student” identity can be more than a temporary adjustment: it supports the process of self-re-categorisation, which creates a new sense of belonging not in spite of diversity, but through it.

Concurrently, these findings align with the work of Perdue et al., who argue that re-categorisation from a national in-group into a broader situational in-group emphasises shared characteristics¹⁷⁸, while not overlooking the differences. Due to this shift, those who were previously perceived as the out-group begin to be seen as members of a common category, hence obscuring the division between “us” and “them”, developing a sense of closeness, and decreasing intergroup bias.

5.2.1.9. Final remarks

In summary, a recurring sentiment across the majority of students’ responses was one of excitement, discovery, joy, and curiosity sparked by engagement with “otherness”. Several participants who took part in multiple exchanges pointed out that they became more open to the novelty with every sojourn. Some admitted that during their first stay abroad, they primarily interacted with fellow Polish students, only to actively seek contact with foreign peers later on¹⁷⁹. Belonging to the shared in-group of “international students” eased the process of connecting with peers from other national backgrounds. Willfully placing oneself in an unfamiliar environment created a natural push to cooperate and form friendships with individuals from countries that, prior to the exchange, existed merely as names on a map¹⁸⁰.

As many of the students’ contemplations focused on similarities and differences between home and host cultures, their thoughts inevitably guided them to re-evaluate their own identity – not only the way they view “others”. Therefore, having explored participants’ reflections on national identity, the sense of European belonging, and perceptions of foreigners, the closing Chapter brings these dimensions together to examine whether, and how, they intersect.

¹⁷⁸ Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) ‘Intergroup contact theory’, p. 75.

¹⁷⁹ A respondent who studied in three different EU Member States shared: “During my first Erasmus[,] I was extremely shy[,] so [I interacted with foreigners] only at the University, during [the] second one[,] I’d say 50/50, and in Germany[,] daily, I have only friends from other countries than Poland.”

¹⁸⁰ This was precisely the experience of a student who spent a semester in Germany: “By forcing you into an unfamiliar environment, (...) it makes you stop thinking about other nationalities as [a] monolith. But the other side of that coin means that often you form opinions on the country through the prism of your interactions with specific people. There are certainly multiple countries, I used to be neutral towards, that now hold a special place in heart, be[ca]use of the friends I’ve made during my exchange.”

6. Conclusions

Adler postulates that “the transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with self”¹⁸¹. Yet, if such encounters result in deeply personal conclusions strongly dependent on individual circumstances, is it possible to find a correlation between how the students view the “self” and how they perceive “others”?

The analysis of ways in which Polish students navigate their national identity while studying abroad yielded three distinct findings. First, national identity tended to become most salient in safe and receptive environments, where students detected curiosity about their background from “others” and felt encouraged to express their cultural affiliation. Second, participants not only redefined their Polishness, but the relationship to their home country as well: they reflected on what they value, what they miss, and what aspects they feel conflicted about. Third, physical distance from Poland created the emotional space needed to articulate both appreciation and critique. This dual awareness encouraged them to navigate their national identity not as a static category but as an evolving part of themselves.

The principal mechanism that allowed for the re-evaluation of the sense of self was social comparison. By contrasting their own behaviours, habits, and values with those of “others”, students actively explored different layers of their identity, both national and European. Many did not consider these identities conflicting, but rather complementing each other.

Social comparison also played a critical role in shaping students’ perceptions of “others”. While over 81 per cent of respondents reported sustaining or developing a more open view on foreigners, their answers were often more complex. What was revealed to impact students’ open-mindedness most was the re-categorisation into the shared situational in-group of “international students”, which helped them embrace the unknown of the foreign cultures instead of approaching their time abroad solely as Polish nationals.

The process of negotiating Polishness and learning about the “otherness” while adapting to a new environment was not without difficulty. However, it was precisely this challenge that sparked the most in-depth, introspective considerations.

Among those whose Polish identity weakened, twenty-two out of twenty-seven respondents reported a more positive view of foreigners: the highest proportion across all identity categories. However, this group represented less than 9 per cent of the total research sample.

¹⁸¹ Adler, P.S. (1975) ‘The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock’, p. 18.

Their experiences, therefore, while valuable for illustrating the full spectrum of perspectives, should be interpreted alongside broader patterns. Notably, within the largest category – students whose Polish identity strengthened – nearly half (eighty-one individuals) also reported an improved perception of foreigners. Presented numbers clearly demonstrate that neither does exposure to diversity inherently weaken national identification, nor does a stronger sense of national belonging translate into an automatic rejection of “others”.

These findings challenge simplistic, zero-sum assumptions about identity: pride in one’s nationality does not have to imply nationalistic superiority. Moreover, rather than posing a threat to national identity, exposure to diversity enables re-conceptualisation within a pluralistic, internationally informed framework. In many cases, the most profound expressions of empathy and openness were shared by students whose identities were evolving. Their testimonies support the notion that fluid, rather than rigid affiliations, stimulate greater curiosity and critical introspection.

A further layer of nuance was offered by the group whose Polish identity remained unchanged. This category included the highest number of respondents with a previously strong national attachment, which was maintained despite international exposure. While they demonstrated the lowest rate of increased openness compared to other categories, over 87 per cent either sustained or developed a positive view of foreigners. What is more, this group exhibited the most consistent attitudes across multiple dimensions, including in relation to European identity. Their stability does not imply bias, but should rather be seen as an indication of pre-existing clarity and continuity in the students’ worldview.

When considering the interplay between national belonging, European identity, and perception of “others”, the results indicate a lack of linear progression. There is no straightforward trajectory that moves from feeling “less Polish” to identifying as “more European” to becoming increasingly open to “others”. The minimal statistical differences, especially between students in categories one and two, reinforce the conclusion that Polish and European identities are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary. Dual identification appeared as particularly common among students with stronger national ties, thus insinuating that those who feel Polish are more likely to simultaneously express European affiliation, than those who identify as European – without feeling attachment to their home country – to gain a sense of Polish belonging.

Concurrently, among students whose Polish identity weakened after their sojourn, European identity unfolded to function as a substitute rather than a complement. In these cases, diminished national attachment prompted them to seek affiliation with a broader, more inclusive European community. Across both paths, however, European identity served as a unifying lens.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that the greatest levels of openness and reflection tended to emerge when individuals began to move away from an exclusive sense of national belonging. In this context, perceptions of “others” were closely tied to the degree of flexibility in one’s national self-conception. The more students actively questioned or reconstructed their Polishness – not necessarily leading to deterioration in Polish identification – the greater their capacity for empathy, curiosity, and critical engagement, both towards “them” and “us” grew.

In today’s highly polarised world, cultivating such openness is necessary. It should, however, be grounded in the appreciation of differences rather than their erasure. As Tajfel pointed out, “there is no reason, in fact, to assume that intergroup differentiation is inherently conflictual”¹⁸². Diversity of background, thought, language, and experience will continue to exist, regardless of progressing globalisation. In an era where hate-driven nationalistic narratives dominate public discourse, there is value in reframing national identity as dialogic, rather than defensive; not threatened by “otherness”, but enriched because of it¹⁸³.

While the world may never – nor necessarily should – become entirely uniform, its differences do not need to be feared. They can be appreciated, questioned, and learnt from. The students’ testimonies presented in this study do not romanticise international mobility, but highlight the transformative power of contact, comparison, and realised complexity. They reveal that even reinforced national identity, when paired with purposeful interaction, can become a tool for connection, rather than exclusion. The objective of promoting transnational contact is not to dissolve difference, but to cultivate understanding and personal development. Ultimately, each individual becomes who they are through encounters with “others” – whoever those “others” may be for each person.

¹⁸² Tajfel, H. et al. (1986) ‘The social identity theory of intergroup behavior’, p. 289

¹⁸³ Rodak, P. (2023) ‘Polishness: A time of deconstruction, a time of reconstruction’, p. 356

Bibliography:

Adler, P.S. (1975) 'The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 15(4), pp. 13–23.

Altemeyer, B. (1981) *Right wing authoritarianism*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Ambesange, P.V. (2016) 'Postcolonialism: Edward Said & Gayatri Spivak', *Research Journal of Recent Sciences*, 5(8), pp. 47–50.

Brown, R.J. and Abrams, D. (1986) 'The effects of intergroup similarity and goal interdependence on intergroup attitudes and task performance', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 22, pp. 78–92.

Brown, R. (2000) 'Social identity theory: Past achievements, current problems and future challenges', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 30, pp. 745–778.

Brzezińska, O., Czajkowska, B. and Skully, D. (2011) *Re-constructing Polish identity: Searching for a new language*. RECON Online Working Paper 2011/05. Oslo: ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo.

Cała prawda o Erasmusie. Available at: <https://krd.org.pl/cala-prawda-o-erasmusie/> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

Caricati, L. (2018) 'Perceived threat mediates the relationship between national identification and support for immigrant exclusion: A cross-national test of intergroup threat theory', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 66, pp. 41–51.

Carnine, J. (2015) 'The impact on national identity of transnational relationships during international student mobility', *Journal of International Mobility*, 3(1), pp. 11–30.

Cinoğlu, H. and Arıkan, Y. (2012) 'Self, identity and identity formation: From the perspectives of three major theories', *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 9(2), pp. 1114–1131.

Cojocaru, C. (2019) 'Erasmus mobilities and European identity: An exploratory incursion', *Journal of Educational Sciences*, 20(2), pp. 66–78.

Cordua, F. and Netz, N. (2021) 'Why do women more often intend to study abroad than men?', *Higher Education*.

Duczkowska-Piasecka, M. and Mazurkiewicz, K. (2012) 'The significance of developing European identity – The analysis of Polish students', *European Integration Studies*, 6, pp. 15–21.

Elofsson, N. (2020) *Erasmus and its effects on participants' European identity: An interview study of Swedish exchange students*. Bachelor's thesis. Centre for European Studies (CES), University of Gothenburg.

European Commission (2019) *Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study: Final Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2021) *Erasmus+ 2021–2027: Enriching lives, opening minds through the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Evason, N. (2017) 'Polish culture – core concepts', Cultural Atlas. Available at: <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/polish-culture/polish-culture-core-concepts> (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Fligstein, N. (2008) *Euro-Clash: The EU, European identity, and the future of Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gaffney, A.M. and Hogg, M.A. (2023) 'Social identity theory', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*.

Galbraith, M. (2023) 'Being European in Poland and Polish in Europe: Transnational constructions of national identity', in Pasięka, A. and Rodak, P. (eds.) *Rethinking Modern Polish Identities: Transnational Encounters*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, University of Rochester Press, pp. 209–233.

Giddens, A. and Sutton, P. W. (2021) *Sociology* (9th edn). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Główny Urząd Statystyczny (17.06.2024) *Szkolnictwo wyższe w roku akademickim 2023/2024*.

Griffin, G. (2017) 'Othering', *Oxford Dictionary of Gender Studies*, Oxford University Press.

Available at:

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191834837.001.0001/acref-9780191834837-e-283> (Accessed: 8 March 2025).

Hackel, L.M., Looser, C.E. and Van Bavel, J.J. (2014) 'Group membership alters the threshold for mind perception: The role of social identity, collective identification, and intergroup threat', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 52, pp. 15–23.

Hu, J. and Cheung, C.K.J. (2024) 'Social identity and social integration: A meta-analysis exploring the relationship between social identity and social integration', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, pp. 1–13.

King, R. and Ruiz-Gelices, E. (2003) 'International student migration and the European "year abroad": Effects on European identity and subsequent migration behaviour', *International Journal of Population Geography*, 9(3), pp. 229–252.

Kuhn, T. (2012) 'Why educational exchange programmes miss their mark: Cross-border mobility, education and European identity', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 50(6), pp. 994–1010.

Kuhn, T. (2015) *Experiencing European integration: Transnational lives and European identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Łastawski, K. (2007) 'Historyczne i współczesne wartości polskiej tożsamości narodowej', *Śląskie Studia Historyczne*, 13, pp. 279–307.

Marking 37 years of Erasmus+: Key numbers and achievements. Available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/news/marking-37-years-of-erasmus-key-numbers-and-achievements> (Accessed: 2 May 2025).

McKay, S., Lannegrand, L., Skues, J. and Wise, L. (2020) 'Identity development during student exchange: A qualitative study of students' perspectives on the processes of change', *Emerging Adulthood*, 8(4), pp. 1–14.

McManus-Czubinska, C., Miller, W.L., Markowski, R. and Wasilewski, J. (2003) 'Understanding dual identities in Poland', *Political Studies*, 51(1), pp. 121–143.

Mitchell, K. (2015) 'Rethinking the "Erasmus effect" on European identity', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53(2), pp. 330–348.

Mitchell, T.R. and Thompson, L. (1994) 'A theory of temporal adjustments of the evaluation of events: Rosy propection and rosy retrospection', in Stubbart, C., Porac, J. and Meindl, J. (eds.) *Advances in Managerial Cognition and Organizational Information-Processing*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp. 85–87.

Oborune, K. (2015) 'Becoming more European or European after Erasmus?', *Politeja*, 37, pp. 75–94.

Obywatele Ukrainy w Polsce – raport.

Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/obywatele-ukrainy-w-polsce--aktualne-dane-migracyjne2> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

Pettigrew, T.F. (1998) 'Intergroup contact theory', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 49, pp. 65–85.

Pettigrew, T.F. and Tropp, L.R. (2006) 'A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), pp. 751–783.

Pinterič, U. (2005) 'National and supranational identity in context of the European integration and globalization', *Društvena istraživanja*, 14(3), pp. 401–420.

Podsumowanie programu Erasmus na 20-lecie Polski w UE. Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/nauka/podsumowanie-programu-erasmus-na-20-lecie-polski-w-ue> (Accessed: 2 April 2025).

Poradnia Językowa PWN (30.09.2023) *Ojkofofia i ksenofilia*. Own translation. Available at: <https://sjp.pwn.pl/poradnia/haslo/ojkofofia-i-ksenofilia;22891.html>

Przegląd państw na mapie politycznej Europy. Available at: <https://zpe.gov.pl/a/przegląd-państw-na-mapie-politycznej-europy/DsnfTkM0a> (Accessed: 8 August 2025).

Puchała, D. and Bilewicz, M. (2023) 'Skąd bierze się niechęć do obcych? O grupowych identyfikacjach Polaków', *Nauka*, 3, pp. 21–43.

Rodak, P. (2023) 'Polishness: A time of deconstruction, a time of reconstruction', in Pasieka, A. and Rodak, P. (eds.) *Rethinking Modern Polish Identities: Transnational Encounters*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, University of Rochester Press, pp. 349–358.

Sejm przyjmuje ustawę o zawieszeniu prawa do azylu. Available at: <https://pl.euronews.com/europa/2025/02/23/sejm-przyjmuje-ustawe-o-zawieszeniu-prawa-do-azylu-niezgodne-z-konstytucja-i-prawem-unijny> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

Sigalas, E. (2010) 'Cross-border mobility and European identity: The effectiveness of intergroup contact during the ERASMUS year abroad', *European Union Politics*, 11(2), pp. 241–265.

Shamir, M. and Sagiv-Schifter, T. (2006) 'Conflict, identity, and tolerance: Israel in the Al-Aqsa intifada', *Political Psychology*, 27, pp. 569–595.

Smith, A.D. (1991) *National identity*. London: Penguin Books.

Stephan, W.G., Ybarra, O. and Rios, K. (2009) 'Intergroup threat theory', in Nelson, T. (ed.) *Handbook of prejudice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. (1986) 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior', in Worchel, S. and Austin, W.G. (eds.) *Psychology of intergroup relations*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, pp. 7–24.

Trepte, S. and Loy, L.S. (2017) 'Social identity theory and self-categorization theory', in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*.

Van Mol, C. (2013) 'Erasmus student mobility and the discovery of new European horizons', in Feyen, B. and Krzaklewska, E. (eds.) *The Erasmus phenomenon: Symbol of a new European generation?* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, pp. 163–174.

Van Mol, C. (2019) 'Intra-European student mobility and the different meanings of "Europe"', *Acta Sociologica*, 65(1), pp. 24–40.

Wagner, M. (2024) 'Affective polarization in Europe', *European Political Science Review*, 16, pp. 378–392.

Willoughby, E.A. et al. (2021) 'Parent contributions to the development of political attitudes in adoptive and biological families', *Psychological Science*, 32(12), pp. 2023–2034.

Wilson, I. (2011) 'What should we expect of Erasmus generations?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49(5), pp. 1113–1140.

Wiśniewski, R. and Bukalska, I. (2013) 'Educational exchange and new opportunities — The perspectives of Polish Erasmus students in Portugal', *Seminare*, 34, pp. 113–124.

Wolf, C., Joye, D., Smith, T.W. and Fu, Y. (2016) *The SAGE Handbook of Survey Methodology*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Woolston, C. (2023) 'The psychological challenges of rural living', *Arts & Sciences*, Washington University in St. Louis. (Accessed: 9 May 2025).

Wykaz uczelni publicznych nadzorowanych przez ministra właściwego ds. szkolnictwa wyższego i nauki – publiczne uczelnie akademickie. Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/nauka/wykaz-uczelni-publicznych-nadzorowanych-przez-ministra-wlasciwego-ds-szkolnictwa-wyzszego-i-nauki-publiczne-uczelnie-akademickie> (Accessed: 2 April 2025).

Information given to participants of the survey in Polish and English

1. Celem poniższej anonimowej ankiety jest zbadanie, jak doświadczenie studiowania za granicą wpływa na poczucie tożsamości narodowej wśród Polek i Polaków oraz postrzeganie odmienności osób z innych krajów. Ankieta jest częścią pracy dyplomowej i jej wyniki zostaną wykorzystane wyłącznie do celów naukowych. W niektórych przypadkach odpowiedzi mogą być cytowane w pracy, jednak w sposób całkowicie anonimowy.

Wypełnienie ankiety nie powinno zająć więcej niż 10 minut. Odpowiedzi na pytania otwarte mogą być udzielane zarówno po angielsku, jak i po polsku.

2. The purpose of this anonymous survey is to examine how the experience of studying abroad affects the sense of national identity among Polish students and their perception of people from other countries. The survey is part of a Master's dissertation and its results will be used exclusively for scientific purposes. In some cases, responses may be quoted in the thesis. It will be done in a completely anonymous manner.

The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete. Answers to open-ended questions can be given in either English or Polish.

Data collected from Polish universities

University	Number of students who studied abroad in the period 2021-2025 and among whom the survey was distributed	Number of students who studied abroad in the period 2021-2025 and among whom the survey was not distributed
<u>Uniwersytet Wrocławski</u>	1438	
<u>Uniwersytet Rzeszowski</u>	151	
<u>Uniwersytet Szczeciński</u>	2021: 48 2022: 60 2023: 90 2024: 100	
<u>Uniwersytet Kazimierza Wielkiego</u>	34	
<u>Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie</u>	361	
<u>Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Poznaniu</u>	582	
<u>Politechnika Krakowska im. Tadeusza Kościuszki</u>	400	
<u>Politechnika Opolska</u>	244	
<u>Politechnika Poznańska</u>	1164	
<u>Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II</u>	550	
<u>Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego im. Bronisława Czecha w Krakowie</u>	130	
<u>Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego Józefa Piłsudskiego w Warszawie</u>	150	
<u>Uniwersytet Opolski</u>		2021: 75 2022: 91 2023: 133 2024: 146
<u>Uniwersytet Łódzki</u>		2021: 240 2022: 293 2023: 262 2024: 492
<u>Politechnika Gdańska</u>		963

<u>Politechnika Lubelska</u>		470
<u>Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego i Sportu</u> <u>im. Jędrzeja Śniadeckiego w Gdańsku</u>		80

Category	Total Students	Previous Travel Experience	Length of Stay Abroad	Previous Connection to Poland	European Identity Before/After	Social Interactions (Foreigners vs Poles)	View of Foreigners	View of Poles	Conversations About Poland
1: I feel more Polish	173	95% had travelled; 54% >2x/year	Nearly equal split: short/long term;	32% strong tie; 29% no reflection; 39% no prior tie	75% felt European; ~70% stronger	96% interacted on a daily/weekly basis; ~63% mostly with foreigners and no Poles; 5% only with Poles	47% improved; 43% unchanged (31% open; 12% neutral) 10% worse	42% more positive; 10.5% more critical	100% discussed; 96.5% enjoyed
2: No change in Polish identity	100	97% had travelled; 38% >2x/year	70% short-term; 30% long-term	44% strong tie; 30% no reflection; 26% no prior tie	73.5% felt European; ~50% stronger	>90% interacted on a daily/weekly basis; 50% mostly with foreigners and no Poles; 17% only Poles	40% improved; 59% unchanged (79% open; 21% neutral); 1% worse	13% more positive; 15% more critical	91% discussed and enjoyed
3: I feel less Polish	27	88% had travelled; ~50% >2x/year	Nearly equal split: short/long term	19% strong tie; 30% no reflection; 48% no prior tie;	85% felt European; 82% stronger	100% interacted on a daily/weekly basis; >50% mostly with foreigners and no Poles; 4% only with Poles	82% improved; 18% unchanged open	12% more positive; 60% more critical	79% discussed and enjoyed
4: Other reflections	8	100% had travelled; ~63% <2x/year	63% stayed longer than 1 semester	50% strong tie; 25% no reflection; 25% no prior tie	63% felt European; ~38% stronger	100% interacted daily; 50% mostly with foreigners and no Poles	Varied views	Varied views	100% discussed; ~88% enjoyed

Note: In some places, numbers do not amount to 100%. The reason for this is that some students commented on their reflections in the “other” field that was available for each question.

Table 1: Correlations between the national identity categories and travel experience, length and location of studies, social interactions, view on Poles and foreigners, and engagement in conversations about Poland

Category 1: “I feel more Polish”

- A total of 173 students reported feeling more Polish after their international studies, about 58% of the overall number of women, 52% of men, and 67% of non-binary students.
- Previous travel experience: Almost 95% of respondents in this category had travelled abroad before their exchange. 54% of them did so at least twice a year, visiting countries within the EU, in Europe, or outside of the continent.
- Length and location of studies: The distribution between students participating in one-semester sojourns and those who lived abroad longer was nearly equal. Their host universities were located within and outside of the EU and broader European continent, with the majority studying in the EU or in the partner universities in Norway and Türkiye due to the wide availability of the Erasmus+ programme.
- Previous connection to Poland:
 - 39% of respondents in this category indicated no prior connection to Poland.
 - 29% had not previously reflected on their feeling of attachment to the country.

- Among the remaining 32%, who already felt strongly attached to Poland, the international experience enhanced their existing national identity.
- Relation to European identity: 75% of students in this category felt European before moving abroad, and approximately 70% of them affirmed that this feeling of connection intensified during their studies.
- Social interactions: More than 96% interacted with foreigners on a daily or weekly basis, with almost 63% indicating that most of these interactions occurred with non-Polish students. Less than 5% of students mainly socialised only with fellow Poles.
- View of foreigners:
 - 47% of respondents in this category stipulated that their view of foreigners improved after the exchange.
 - 31% maintained their previously open attitude.
 - 12% kept their initial neutral point of view.
 - Only 10% reported a worsening perception of foreigners.
- View of Poles: 42% of students whose Polish identity strengthened see their fellow nationals in a more positive light. However, 10,5% developed a more critical view of the Polish people.
- Conversations about Poland: All students in this category talked about Poland during their exchange, with the great majority of them (96,5%) enjoying these conversations.

Category 2: “No change in Polish identity”

- A total of 100 students indicated no change in their Polish identity, around 31% of the overall number of women, 38% of men, and 33% of non-binary students.
- Previous travel experience: 97% of respondents in this category had travelled abroad before their international studies; however, only 38% had done so more than twice a year. Those who visited other countries opted for staying within the European continent, most often exploring other EU Member States.
- Length and location of studies: Those whose approach towards national identity remained unchanged predominantly participated in shorter exchanges: 70% studied abroad for one semester. Their destinations included universities both within and outside the EU.
- Previous connection to Poland:

- 44% felt a strong connection to Poland beforehand.
- For 30% of respondents in this category, international studies did not prompt a national identity reflection: they had not reflected on their attachment to Poland neither before nor after the exchange.
- The remaining 26% did not feel Polish, neither before nor after their experience abroad.
- Relation to European identity: 73,5% felt European prior to their exchange, with almost half of them declaring that this feeling grew stronger over time.
- Social interactions: More than 90% had daily or weekly interactions with international peers. While over 50% mostly interacted with other Polish students, only 17% limited their interactions exclusively to fellow Poles.
- View of foreigners:
 - 40% developed a better view of people of other nationalities.
 - Only one respondent reported a decline in her perception.
 - Of the remaining 59%, 79% already had an open approach prior to the exchange.
- View of Poles: 13% indicated a more positive view of Polish people, while 15% started to view them more negatively.
- Conversations about Poland: 91% engaged in and enjoyed conversations about Poland.

Category 3: “I feel less Polish”

- A total of 27 students reported feeling less Polish after their time abroad, around 9% of the overall number of women and 8% of men.
- Previous travel experience: 88% of this group had travelled abroad before their international studies; however, only around 50% of them had done so more than twice a year. Their destinations varied: they included EU Member States, as well as other countries within and outside of Europe.
- Length and location of studies: This group of students participated in both short- and long-term exchanges at universities in the EU, other European countries, and beyond the continent in nearly equal split.
- Previous connection to Poland:
 - 81% departed on their international adventure without a strong connection to Poland or a lack of reflection on their attachment to the country. This lack of

firm grounding may have contributed to a fading of their national identity once exposed to a more diverse cultural environment.

- Only 19% had felt a strong connection to Poland before studying abroad.
- Relation to European identity: 85% had already felt European before their exchange, and for 82%, living abroad intensified that sense of belonging.
- Social interactions: All students in this category interacted with foreign peers on a daily and weekly basis. Nearly 50% indicated that most of their interactions were with fellow Poles, making the subsequent negative shift in their views of Polish people a noteworthy finding.
- View of foreigners:
 - 82% highlighted an improvement in their perception of foreigners post-exchange, while the rest maintained an already open attitude.
- View of Poles: Almost 60% reported a worsening perception of Polish people after their international studies. Only 12% of respondents noted an improvement.
- Conversations about Poland: Despite a decline in Polish identity, approximately 79% discussed and enjoyed talking about their country of origin.

Category 4: Other reflections on Polish identity

As nearly 3% of respondents, a total of 8 people, found it difficult to capture their experience in the predefined categories, they took advantage of the open-ended space provided in the “other” field. Due to the diversity of their reflections, the analysis is presented in the form of a descriptive overview.

Nevertheless, one quality that connects all respondents in this group is regular daily interaction with foreigners. 50% of them also maintained most of their social interactions with Polish peers, in addition to their international friendships. Most had travelled abroad up to twice per year prior to their exchange, and about 63% studied abroad for more than a semester. Their views on foreigners, similarly to attitudes towards Polish people, varied, and in 75% of cases, their European identity either pre-existed or intensified. 38% of students in this category, especially those studying in Spain and Italy, noted that whether they felt more or less Polish depended on the situation they found themselves in.

A few illustrative examples include:

1. A student with extensive EU travel experience who participated in an academic exchange in Israel, followed by a Master's degree in Belgium, engaged in an in-depth reflection on Polish identity in comparison to national identities of other European countries. Having already felt both Polish and European before his international studies, he realised that "being Polish is actually quite a distinct identity in Western Europe". This realisation prompted him to feel an increased affiliation with other Slavic nations. His daily interactions with peers from both Poland and other EU countries resulted in fruitful discussions about Poland's place in Europe: whether it should be classified as a Central or Eastern European country. These conversations possibly contributed to stronger identification with students from Slavic nations, many of whom also struggle with this ambiguity. Although his European identity was reinforced by the international experience, he continued to feel distinctly Polish among Europeans. His attitude towards foreigners remained unchangeably open, while his view on the Polish people improved.
2. Another respondent, whose international experience spanned from a US-based high school exchange programme to Erasmus studies in Spain alongside travels within and beyond Europe, indicated that these experiences, as well as daily interactions with EU students, helped her develop a growing sense of comfort with her Polish identity abroad. At the same time, she acknowledged that she would likely never be perceived as "local" elsewhere than in her home country, clearly reaching the stage of autonomy of Adler's five-stage transnational adaptation process¹. Her previously strong connection to Poland evolved, and while her perception of foreigners changed as she recognised cross-cultural similarities with other nations, her previously not reflected-upon European identity remained unaffected.
3. A student with limited travel experience within Europe prior to her exchange in Italy described how her semester abroad led her to feel greater comfort in international environments. She continued to identify as Polish, though her connection to Poland was not strong before the exchange. Her sense of European identity, which existed beforehand, became more enhanced through her experiences abroad. However, neither her already open attitude towards foreigners nor her perception of fellow Poles shifted.

¹ Adler, P.S. (1975) 'The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock', p. 17

4. Another participant with limited EU travel experience prior to their semester in Germany, filled with intercultural interactions, reflected that the exchange did not impact their previously weak connection to Poland, but made them realise that they did not want to return to Poland. While not seeing Polish people in a worse light, they realised that their country of origin is not a place where they would like to stay permanently. Meanwhile, their European identity, already established prior to the move abroad, remained strong, and their previously open approach to foreigners stayed unchanged.
5. One student, who had rarely travelled within Europe before her studies and experienced a yearly exchange in Italy, shared that her previously not-reflected-upon Polish identity evolved as she recognised “how interesting Polish culture and history is for foreigners”. This positive view contrasted with what she described as a tendency among Poles to “complain and self-roast”. This external validation prompted her to appreciate her cultural background. While her international studies did not affect her already established sense of European identity, her perception of foreigners became more critical, while her view of Polish people improved.

Category	Number of Students	Previous Travel Experience	Length of Stay	Location of Study	Family Views on Foreigners	Friends' Views on Foreigners	View on Foreigners Before Exchange	Social Interactions Before Exchange	Social Interactions During Exchange	Relation to Polish Identity	Relation to European Identity
1: Improved View	142	93% had traveled before (48% $\geq 2x/year$)	57% stayed 1 semester 43% stayed longer	EU & non-EU	Open: 56% Neutral: 59% Negative: ~15%	Open: 80% Neutral: 36% Negative: <5%	Open: 78% Neutral: 20.5% Negative/Fear: 1.5%	63% socialised with foreigners	95% daily/weekly contact 52.5% mostly with foreigners	Strengthened: 58% Unchanged: 26% Weakened: 13%	Strengthened: 75% Unchanged: 23%
2: Unchanged View	133	95% had traveled before (41% $\geq 2x/year$)	58% stayed 1 semester 42% stayed longer	EU & non-EU	Open: 57% Neutral: 56% Negative: ~7%	Open: 86% Neutral: 30% Negative: 3%	Open: 83% Neutral: 17%	71% socialised with foreigners	80% daily/weekly contact 65% mostly with foreigners	Strengthened: 49% Unchanged: 42% Weakened: 6%	Strengthened: 57% Unchanged: 40%
3: Worsened View	18	100% had traveled before (60% $\geq 2x/year$)	40% stayed 1 semester 60% stayed longer	EU & non-EU	Open: 42% Neutral: 89% Negative: ~16%	Open: 68% Neutral: 58% Negative: 10%	Open: 62% Neutral: 38%	63% socialised with foreigners	95% daily contact 63% mostly with foreigners	Strengthened: 90% Unchanged: 5.5% (1 student)	Strengthened: 44% Unchanged: 56%
4: Other Reflections	15	All had traveled before	60% stayed 1 semester 40% stayed longer	Mostly EU (67%)	Mostly open or neutral	Mostly open (73%)	Varies	73% socialised with foreigners	100% daily/weekly contact	Strengthened: 67% Unchanged: 33%	Strengthened: 53% Unchanged: 13%

Note: In some places, numbers do not amount to 100%. The reason for that is some students commented on their reflections in the “other” field that was available for each question. In the questions about the views of friends and family, respondents could pick more than one answer considering that each person in their social circle may hold different opinions.

Table 2: Correlations between the perception of “others” and the students’ travel experience, length and location of studies, family members’ and friends’ views on foreigners, social interactions during and prior to studies abroad, and relation to Polish and European identity

Category 1: “My view on foreigners improved”

- A total of 142 students reported that their view on foreigners improved after their international studies, about 50% of the overall number of women, 33% of men, and 33% of non-binary students.
- Previous travel experience: Almost 93% of respondents in this category had travelled abroad before their exchange. Around 48% of them did so at least twice a year, visiting countries within the EU, in Europe, or outside of the continent.
- Length and location of studies: The distribution between students participating in one-semester sojourns and those who lived abroad longer was 57:43. Their host universities were located within and outside of the EU and broader European continent.
- Family members’ views on foreigners:
 - Over 56% of respondents in this category indicated that their family members are open to “others”.

- 59% marked that their family members hold a neutral view towards foreigners.
- Almost 15% claimed that their family members perceive “others” in a negative way.
- Friends’ views on foreigners:
 - 80% of respondents in this category indicated that their friends are open to “others”.
 - Almost 36% marked that their friends hold a neutral view towards foreigners.
 - Less than 5% claimed that their friends perceive “others” in a negative way.
- Respondents’ views on foreigners before moving abroad: Over 78% of students in this category felt open towards foreigners before moving abroad, and almost 20.5% held a neutral view. Only 1 respondent indicated having had a negative view, and one reported the feeling of fear.
- Social interactions prior to studies abroad: Over 63% of those whose view on foreigners improved socialised with foreigners before their studies abroad.
- Social interactions during studies abroad: More than 95% interacted with foreigners on a daily or weekly basis, with 52.5% indicating that most of these interactions occurred only with non-Polish students. Less than 4% of students mainly socialised only with fellow Poles.
- Relation to Polish identity:
 - Almost 58% of respondents in this category stipulated that their Polish identity strengthened during their studies abroad.
 - Of 26% who indicated no change in their national identity, almost 49% felt a close connection to the country before, and less than 25% had not been deeply attached to Poland.
 - Less than 13% felt less Polish after their time abroad.
- Relation to European identity:
 - Over 75% of respondents in this category stipulated that their European identity strengthened during their studies abroad.
 - For more than 23%, their European identity did not strengthen; however, almost 64% of them had already felt European before their time abroad, and slightly over 18% had not felt attachment to Europe.

Category 2: “My view on foreigners has not changed”

- A total of 133 students reported that their view on foreigners has not changed after their international studies, about 41% of the overall number of women, 60% of men, 66% of non-binary students, and 100% of gender-fluid students.
- Previous travel experience: Almost 95% of respondents in this category had travelled abroad before their exchange. Around 41% of them did so at least twice a year, visiting countries within the EU, in Europe, or outside of the continent.
- Length and location of studies: The distribution between students participating in one-semester sojourns and those who lived abroad longer was 29:21. Their host universities were located within and outside of the EU and broader European continent.
- Family members’ views on foreigners:
 - Over 57% of respondents in this category indicated that their family members are open to “others”.
 - More than 56% marked that their family members hold a neutral view towards foreigners.
 - Almost 7% claimed that their family members perceive “others” in a negative way.
- Friends’ views on foreigners:
 - Over 86% of respondents in this category indicated that their friends are open to “others”.
 - Almost 30% marked that their friends hold a neutral view towards foreigners.
 - Only 3% claimed that their friends perceive “others” in a negative way.
- Respondents’ views on foreigners before moving abroad: About 83% of respondents in this category had had open views on foreigners before their exchange, while the remaining 17% reported a neutral approach.
- Social interactions prior to studies abroad: Almost 71% of those whose view on foreigners has not changed socialised with foreigners before their studies abroad.
- Social interactions during studies abroad: More than 80% interacted with foreigners on a daily basis, with 65% indicating that most of these interactions occurred only with non-Polish students. Less than 4% of students mainly socialised only with fellow Poles.
- Relation to Polish identity:

- Almost 49% of respondents in this category stipulated that their Polish identity strengthened during their studies abroad.
- Of 42% who indicated no change in their national identity, 40% felt a close connection to the country before, and less than 28% had not been deeply attached to Poland.
- Slightly more than 6% felt less Polish after their time abroad.
- Relation to European identity:
 - Over 57% of respondents in this category stipulated that their European identity strengthened during their studies abroad.
 - For almost 40%, their European identity did not strengthen; however, almost 67% of them had already felt European before their time abroad, and more than 13% had not felt attachment to Europe.

Category 3: “My view on foreigners worsened”

- A total of 19 students reported that their view on foreigners has not changed after their international studies, about 6% of the overall number of women, and 6% of men.
- Previous travel experience: 100% of respondents in this category had travelled abroad before their exchange. Around 60% of them did so at least twice a year, visiting countries within the EU, in Europe, or outside of the continent.
- Length and location of studies: 60% of students stayed abroad for more than one semester. Their host universities were located within and outside of the EU and the broader European continent.
- Family members’ views on foreigners:
 - Over 42% of respondents in this category indicated that their family members are open to “others”.
 - More than 89% marked that their family members hold a neutral view towards foreigners.
 - Almost 16% claimed that their family members perceive “others” in a negative way.
- Friends’ views on foreigners:
 - Over 68% of respondents in this category indicated that their friends are open to “others”.
 - Almost 58% marked that their friends hold a neutral view towards foreigners.

- Only 10% claimed that their friends perceive “others” in a negative way.
- Respondents’ views on foreigners before moving abroad: About 62% of respondents in this category had had open views on foreigners before their exchange, while 38% reported a neutral approach.
- Social interactions prior to studies abroad: Over 63% of those whose view on foreigners has worsened socialised with foreigners before their studies abroad.
- Social interactions during studies abroad: Almost 95% interacted with foreigners on a daily basis, with 63% indicating that most of these interactions occurred only with non-Polish students. Less than 1% of students mainly socialised only with fellow Poles.
- Relation to Polish identity:
 - Almost 90% of respondents in this category stipulated that their Polish identity strengthened during their studies abroad.
 - One person who indicated no change in their national identity already felt a close connection to the country before.
- Relation to European identity:
 - Over 44% of respondents in this category stipulated that their European identity strengthened during their studies abroad.
 - For almost 56%, their European identity did not strengthen; however, more than 63% of them had already felt European before their time abroad.

Category 4: Other reflections on the perception of “others”

Approximately 5% of respondents, a total of 15 students, found that their experiences did not fully fit within the predefined categories. For that reason, they chose to use the open-ended “other” option to better express their personal reflections. In order to deliver a comprehensive analysis, their responses are presented in the form of a descriptive overview. Unlike the reflections on Polish national identity, where clear illustrative cases could be presented, considerations in this section will be organised according to the patterns that unfolded across the responses.

One of such patterns depicted that the attitude towards foreigners of many students depended significantly on the “others” country of provenance. This view was shared by 67% respondents in this category. 27% of students in this group found it difficult to clearly state in which direction their attitude shifted, while one participant (6%) summarised that his time abroad

helped him realise that, regardless of nationality, people around the world ultimately share many of the same experiences and values.

When considering family attitudes towards foreigners among this category, the responses varied between “open” and “neutral”, with only one case described as “negative”, two highlighted as “it depends”, and one as “cautious”. Friends’ attitudes were predominantly reported as “open” (73%).

The quality that connected all respondents in this group is their previous international travel experience. Importantly, 73% of them had already interacted with foreigners prior to their studies abroad, and all of them maintained daily or weekly contact with people of other nationalities throughout their exchange. None limited their social interactions solely to Polish peers. In fact, about 50% of participants socialised with both Polish and international students.

In terms of study duration and location, 60% of students stayed abroad for a period of one semester, and 67% of them studied exclusively in the EU countries.

With regards to identity reflections, 67% (10 students) reported a strengthened sense of Polish identity after their time abroad. Of the remaining five participants, who did not report a specific shift, three (60%) had already felt a close connection to Poland before their exchange. For 53%, their sense of European belonging intensified, while for 13% who felt a previous connection, it did not change.

Several respondents shared insightful examples that highlighted the complexity of intercultural interactions. One student, who participated in two one-semester exchanges in Portugal and Türkiye, explained that his perception of “others” varied depending on the concrete country and context. For him, negative situations in a shared flat with roommates of Indian and Arab provenance significantly impacted his point of view. Similar stories were shared by two other students: one entered into conflicts with an Italian flatmate during an exchange semester in Portugal, while the other reported feeling socially excluded by his Spanish flatmates in Belgium. Although these examples occurred across different countries, they reveal a shared theme: everyday situations, especially in shared accommodations, play a significant role in shaping interpersonal relations and broader perceptions of national groups.

Simultaneously, students in this category also described the helpfulness, openness, and kindness of many local residents in their host countries, as well as other international students. The student who studied in Portugal and Türkiye recognised the role of luck in forming friendships

abroad. He underlined that the friendships that mattered most to him were shaped more by the personalities of the people he met than by their nationalities. His closest relationships were formed with peers from Sudan, Indonesia, Bosnia, Chile, and other European countries. At the same time, his Polish identity strengthened, while his previously unexamined European identity remained unchanged. This observation indicates that the sole fact of living in multiple countries and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds does not automatically impact the sense of European belonging. Instead, a conscious willingness and personal reflection on one's identity appeared to be a fundamental factor in adopting or reinforcing European self-identification.

Several students who lived in various EU member states, and who engaged in daily contact with foreign peers, stipulated that studying abroad helped them better understand other ways of "being". One such respondent in Czechia explained that even living in a neighbouring country challenged his assumptions on what is "normal". He realised that what one nation perceives as "natural" could be considered "strange" elsewhere. Such sentiment was repeated by three other respondents who studied in Germany, Belgium, and Spain. These participants pointed out that experiencing life abroad helped them see that the division between "us" and "them" is not as profound as it may seem at first. One respondent summarised this realisation powerfully, stating that the experience allowed her to see "foreigners [as] real human beings, instead of [just] things you've heard about them in the media and from other people".

a) Identity category 1, Reflections on foreigners category 1

1. "Before[,] I did not notice how developed of a country we are (for example[,] online payments, post deliveries, even opening times of the stores and their availability)."
2. "I started to value Poland more (the safety, public transport, costs of living, savoir-vivre in public spaces, less crowds, Polish nature)."
3. "In a nutshell, it made me realize that Poland is "not that bad". I appreciate my culture and country more but[,] at the same time, I am much more aware of its flaws – bad and good emotion get equally vivid."
4. "When I was abroad[,] I became more patriotic and proud of my culture and identity."
5. "I felt [a] deeper connection to Poland, especially because of the differences between me and other foreigners and the similarities between me and other Polish people."
6. "When I was abroad[,] I became more patriotic and proud of my culture and identity. I have also noticed that [E]uropeans were friends with [E]uropeans; but I mostly made friends with other Slavic people (I was the only [P]olish person, so not Poles)."
7. "I know that our culture is extraordinary and we have been through a lot as a nation in the past."
8. "I have a stronger will to depict Poland as a nice, interesting country with [a] rich history and which develops very fast, which I also believe to be true."
9. "I'm always trying to say nice things because I have met people [who] had bad opinions about Poland ([e.g.,] that Polish people steal). After saying positive things[,] people changed their views a bit."
10. "I gained more knowledge about my own country and sense of identity through sharing our culture with others."
11. "I started to embrace our honesty. A lot of Western Europeans are fakely polite."
12. "I feel more close to my nation, bu[t] also I better understand the other nationalities."
13. "I feel a very strong connection to Italian culture after living in Italy and a definite sense of [P]olish identity at the same time."
14. "[With] my group of friends (from [the] Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, Ukraine, Spain, Greece, Latvia) we made every Friday a national dinner. So every weekend[,] someone cooked their national meal[,] such as pierogi, cold borsch[,] etc. [T]hat's was pretty cool."

15. "I felt very proud to talk about my country with the people I have met abroad. I don't think it changed the way I think about it, because I have always been quite patriotic. I definitely found myself talking about Poland more while living in a different country."
16. "I always used to think that I fe[lt] more European than Polish. Now I know that I am Polish. Then European. Poland is the priority here."
17. "I understood how safe I feel in Poland, and also how beautiful it is[,] especially during the summer, but also I've seen different[,] maybe more chill lifestyles, and more positive mindsets, also I've seen how people interact [with] each other in different countries more openly."
18. "The most noticeable difference was in making friends, where Poles were more closed, it took time to open up to people, while Portuguese, Spanish[,] or Italians immediately treated you as their friend. But our habits began to intertwine, so I became more open and extroverted."
19. "People asked questions such as whether we have electricity in Poland, whether we hunt polar bears, etc. Most of these questions came from people in the United States or England, and this put me off a little in terms of their lack of general and fairly basic knowledge about the world. I realised that the level of education in the West is declining, and the closer you get to the East, the higher the standards are."
20. "It's these differences that help people become more accepting of things beyond their control. Just like culture, people have their own behaviours, patterns, and even appearances that they should embrace and appreciate, even if they are "different" from those in other countries."
21. "When it comes to foreigners[,] I had the best time with my friends from all over the world[,] so my perspective is still very much open and welcoming, but when it comes to Belgian people[,] I didn't really meet them. Cultural differences in this situation apply more so to [the] [W]estern/[E]astern perspective (in my opinion) because I noticed it as well in other [W]estern countries - throwing the trash out on the streets, casual shootings that no media talks about on a daily basis, closing entire metro lines because of bomb threats on a random Wednesday. This has never happened in Warsaw. Not the best vibe in Brussels."
22. "EU citizens don't feel like foreigners for me. Third[-]country citizens can be met everywhere in the EU[,] and they are often [a] another story. As for cultural differences – I really believe in the EU's motto "United in diversity" after my studies[,] but also... [T]here is much more we all have in common than there are differences, in my opinion."

23. "I can say that historical background has a lot to do with connections. Even though many students were from [the] EU[,] not everyone felt close. The more countries share[,] the easier [it] is to make friends and connections. I was really shocked on how many similar words we share with other Slavic countries."
24. "Leaving Europe made me realise the differences."
25. "We were having a stroll in the city center in Valencia[,] and my friend from Chile told me that she feels weird to be able to just walk around and not keep her bag really tightly close to her."
26. "My German friends seem to idealise socialism. I tried to explain that the reality can be worse and that my own family had [a] bad experience[,] but I don't think they understood."
27. "Working on the same project with people from different countries definitely shows the cultural differences[. F]or example[,] Asian students being more shy and not necessarily sharing the[ir] opinions[, rather] agreeing with the rest of the group."
28. "In Poland, we respect lecturers, but in the Netherlands, they don't. They will tell unfunny jokes/insult the lecturer to their face and use rude words, to which the lecturer will say that they are wrong or turn it into a joke and continue with the lecture."
29. "Living in Paris (and Austria to [a] less[er] degree) showed me how a multicultural society looks like (in a good sense) and how ridiculous is a political populist "debate" about immigrants coming to Poland and [the] EU."
30. "When you become a foreigner yourself, you have a chance to understand how complex societies are, what are your values, and at the end of the day, we are all the same people. You can gain a greater sense of community with others, no matter what culture they represent."
31. "Being in the same, new situation as students going abroad to some country brings us closer together, no matter of our origins."

b) Identity category 1; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception open

1. "I don't think that it's "so behind" the [W]est anymore, I noticed some positive and negative aspect[s] [I] haven't seen before."
2. "Never felt so proud of being Polish and though far away, for the first time in my life I felt really connected to our country."
3. "I would hope that I wasn't ever too critical of Poland, but I definitely became less so. It was fun trying to figure out a sense of national pride that wasn't linked to the usual nationalistic elements of it."
4. "In France, I made sure to make the Easter salad that I never liked before."
5. "I've never been a fan of Polish food, but suddenly I was missing it and craving żurek and ogórkowa, which I don't even really cook when I'm in Poland."
6. "Having experienced a culture and society so different, but in some ways also similar to mine[,] gave me a new perspective on who I am, how has Poland shaped me[,] and how our society works."
7. "My straightforward approach was often read as a rude or too open by people of different nationalit[ies] than Polish."
8. "It seems to me that, as Poles, we (unfortunately!) often have a sense of inferiority towards other nationalities that we perceive as better or more interesting. However, getting to know and interacting with people from abroad has shown me that Poles are actually very well received internationally and have absolutely no reason to feel inferior in any way."
9. "I consider myself being a patriot, thus during my stay abroad I tried to encourage my peers to share my admiration for my country. I shared stories, showed them pictures, encouraged them to listen to Polish music[,] and cooked delicious meals".
10. "Now I feel even more Polish, because I saw differences in [the] perception of Westerners and Easterners. I consider Poland as an [E]astern country."
11. "Foreigners seem closer and more similar after studying abroad[,] but also they seem different. I know that sounds off[,] but it's true. We all are people who face [the] frustrations of everyday life, we often have similar history[ies] and views on life[,] but the way we were brought up influenced our values and personalities. Though we deal with [the] same things because life is mostly [the] same for us[,] we react differently."
12. "Every day I was taking a bus to university and I was surprised how different people were acting on a bus, I mean[,] a "bus culture". There was a different system of entering

and leaving a bus, people were putting their shoes on other seats[,] making it unavailable for others to sit. They were not moving/making space for you if you wanted to leave the bus, but you were standing a bit further from the exit. I found all these situations weird at first, but after a while[,] it started to annoy me, because in Poland it's way different from my experience.”

13. “I would say it wasn’t anything specific; it was about all the small things we have in common and also the little differences that highlight our diversity. These differences show the areas where we can learn from each other, try new things, and grow together as a result.”

c) Identity category 1; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception neutral

1. “Finnish people are way more introverted than Polish people, which made me feel pretty confident in Finland. Italians[,] on the contrary – way more extraverted, which exhausted me. Other places of the world = different cultures and approach[es] to the world. Sometimes for the bad, sometimes for the good.”
2. “I appreciate more our history and resist[ance][,] and that our relationships are deeper than in e[.].g. Spain (we do not small talk, we really care about sb if we ask “how are you?”).”
3. “Exchanging words with other [S]lavic people - we're one family!”

d) Identity category 1; Reflections on foreigners category 3

1. "I don't show off where I'm from unless someone asks, I still feel a bit embarrassed saying that I'm from Poland because it implies different stereotypes in the minds of others. However, if I see that the reactions are positive and I sense interest[,] then I am happy to tell people about Poland."
2. "I view Poland now as safer than I used to, because of the low number of radicalized Middle Eastern immigrants, which isn't the case in Germany. At the same time, I see how much more work there is to be done in the Polish society, when it comes to education about European security, climate policy, and intercultural policy."
3. "Unpleasant experiences with people from the richest European countries, such as Denmark and Norway. These people notoriously resorted to stereotypes, mocked, ridiculed[,] and treated poorer nations with contempt (mainly Poles, due to the large migration of the lower social class to these countries)."
4. "The inability to understand that there are different political views than fascist and socialist that all the Bolognese are representing, the indoctrination with leftist ideology at the university[,] and the shocked and disgusted looks when I spoke about the Polish system of schooling regarding religion[,] while the teacher herself completely disregarded the importance of religion in the society."
5. "I really appreciated the enormous amount of work that the German society has been putting in, when it comes to historical education about national socialism. I see Germans as more friendly, welcoming, open, tolerant[,] and responsible than I used to."

e) Identity category 1; Reflections on foreigners category 4

1. "It is a strange question. As Poland has always been on the continent of Europe, it will always be a European country, and therefore the Poles are European."
2. "Explaining Polish history and culture made me realise how many things I'm not sure about and how biased I am. It made me double-check and strengthen my historical and political knowledge."
3. "Once I got the comparison to people and cultures from across the world, I think that we are really decent people. I appreciate more the way Polish people behave."

f) Identity category 2, prior connection to Poland; Reflections on foreigners category 1

1. "This experience makes you realize how comfortable you are in your own country/community, and more empathetic to foreigners who need to adjust to a new place."
2. "To be honest, the lifestyle of [S]outhern Italians doesn't suit me at all. Their measured life, no rush, everyone is late everywhere[,] or does not come at all, sometimes drove me crazy. I am a chronic workaholic[,] and sometimes I do not manage to just relax, which would be good to learn from the Italians."
3. "I think being a foreigner, even for a couple of months[,] is an eye[-]opener. You realize what it is like to be on the other side, to be the "others", especially in a country that is not really that open to foreigners. This experience makes you realize how comfortable you are in your own country/community, and more empathetic to foreigners who need to adjust to a new place."

g) Identity category 2, prior connection to Poland; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception open

1. "It has helped me see both the advantages and disadvantages of Poland more clearly. I cannot[,] however[,] say that my view of Poland improved/diminished."
2. "[Stereotypes about Poland were] rather playful and not negative, not [an] having impact on social interactions."
3. "It brings you closer to people from different cultural backgrounds. What was previously just a concept you've heard about is now embodied by living, breathing people. It also makes you realise how shallow and misguided the mainstream descriptions of other cultures and countries can be."
4. "I saw that people from abroad have a more positive view of Poland than Polish people [themselves]."

h) Identity category 2, no prior reflection on connection to Poland; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception open

1. "It is not about the nationality but the personality."
2. "I learned from a person living in Japan that they show them a world map with Japan in the center[,] so it's completely different in a way."

i) Identity category 2, no prior connection to Poland; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception open

1. "Before I would often complain about Poland, about our mentality[,] and some perspective we have. I'd often imagine Western European countries as a perfect place, which, after living there for a while, I realized is not true, every country has some issues and problems, but now I think Poland is a pretty good country to live in, even if[,] from my perspective, there is always some things to improve."
2. "It's not maybe highlighting cultural differences, but I realized how safe Poland actually is. For example, in Barcelona[,] I got robbed, and one of my closest friend[s] also got robbed; in France[,] I was often scared to walk alone by night. I don't think it has changed my perspective on relations with foreigners, I think it's kinda shaped my views on the fact that that's a different reality, which, if I want to spend some time in these parts of Europe, I have to accept and adapt myself to it."

j) Identity category 2, no prior connection to Poland; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception neutral

1. "I actually witnessed people growing more prejudiced [towards other nations] during Erasmus than they were before."

k) Identity category 2, no prior connection to Poland; Reflections on foreigners category 4

1. “The [o]ne thing that sticks with me is how my friends from outside [of] Europe were careful not to get in any trouble cause they were worried that they may get deported. How much effort was required from them to get all the paperwork done so they can go for the [e]xchange semester[,] and how much they wanted to come back to [E]urope in [the] future to live here. Comparing their and my journey[,] it made me realise how privil[e]ged [I] am by being born in a country with a stron[g] passport and in [the] European Union that allows free movement between countries.”
2. “Studying [abroad] somehow forces you to connect with people from different countries. Those places you only heard of before now have faces and feelings. You exchange info about your cultures, joke around about stereotypes[,] but also get to know their struggles and [the] complexity of their [n]ational identity. You bond. Simply[,] once you get to know them, foreigners become real human beings instead of things you've heard about them in the media and from other people. And what is more important – it makes you one of them, a foreigner in your country of destination. [E]specially when you are not fluent in the language of that country. There is no more “us” and “them”. It[']s just “us”.”

l) Identity category 3; Reflections on foreigners category 1

1. “I definitely feel more connected to European countries, I no longer have a Polishness complex. I also see that as Poles we are in no way worse than Western Europe.”
2. “[P]olish people abroad are very different than the others. They’re not that open, wil[l]ing for adventure and risk, most of them are staying home and then complaining rather than taking some action and trying to make the situation better.”
3. “I love Poland as the Polish people, especially of my generation. However, I strongly dislike current Polish political affairs (the intertwining of “the church” and politics, anti[-LGBT] whistle blowers).”
4. “By talking with other Erasmus students[,] we found many similar experiences that happened to us in completely different parts of the world.”
5. “Mostly[,] my perspective change[d] when I found out [that] sometimes people do not know basic thing[s] about life. For example, I met a lot of people from Morocco, Saudi

Arabia, Turkey, and they are more nicer sometimes even than European people. I think somehow Europe should open up to people who are not from Europe. And realise that, not everyone is [a] terrorist.”

6. “You’re with foreigners all [the] time[,] 24h per day. You live with them, party, study, everything. You can have so many conversations about the cultural differences[,] and also easily see it when you’re spending a lot of time with them. I think it’s beautiful, if only you want to[,] you can learn so much, even how to make a pasta from Italians or how to dance bachata from Spanish people. Erasmus is the best experience in my life and I recommend it for every open-minded person.”
7. “During my first Erasmus[,] I was extremely shy[,] so [I interacted with foreigners] only at the University, during [the] second one[,] I'd say 50/50, and in Germany[,] daily, I have only friends from other countries than Poland.”

m) Identity category 3; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception open

1. “I already hadn’t felt too Polish before moving, but now that I have an experience of living abroad and a real comparison[,] I feel that my feelings have a stronger basis to them and aren’t just a simple oikophobia.”
2. “It strips the ‘others’ from this veil of mystery and shows them for what they really are: humans.”

n) Identity category 3; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception neutral

1. “I understand more [about] why [G]ermans strongly dislike us, because I have myself encountered many unpleasant situations including Poles in Germany.”

o) Identity category 4; Reflections on foreigners category 3

1. “I don't perceive [Poland] as [a] “developing” country anymore, but as equal and quite successful com[p]aring to others.”

p) Identity category 4; Reflections on foreigners category 2, prior perception open

1. "I've gained some appreciation for some [P]olish everyday solutions (public transport, [BLIK] payment, bureaucracy, city cleanliness)."
2. Among Europeans[,] I feel distinctly Polish, among cosmopol[is] I feel distinctly European (although it[']s rather a Europ[e]an agenda than identity that makes the difference). Among [the] Polish[,] I feel at home."
3. "By forcing you into an unfamiliar environment, in which you have to cooperate with people from all over the world, it makes you stop thinking about other nationalities as [a] monolith. But the other side of that coin means that often you form opinions on the country through the prism of your interactions with specific people. There are certainly multiple countries, I used to be neutral towards, that now hold a special place in heart, be[ca]use of the friends I've made during my exchange."

q) Identity category 4; Reflections on foreigners category 3

1. "I lived with [an] Arab girl from Israel[,] and everything about her was loud[,] and she was totally unbothered by it. She'd also talk to her family on the phone all day. I didn't really mind[,] but I couldn't believe she feel comfortable with it. Polish p[eo]pl[e] are much more self-conscious and worried [about] what others think of them or if p[eo]pl[e] around them are comfortable with what they're doing. There's a bigger emphasis on savoir-vivre in Poland."

r) Identity category 4; Reflections on foreigners category 4

1. "We finally see that "we're all on this together", it's a very unifying experience! We stop perceiving our differences and we focus on what we have in common with other foreigners. We tend to stick together. A beautiful realisation!"