

UNICA IRO Meeting 2025

Hosted by Tallinn University, 10-12 December 2025

“Strategic Internationalisation: Navigating Diplomacy, Partnerships, and Intercultural Competence in a Changing World”

Biographies of Speakers & Chairs

Elena AVGOUSTIDOU-KYRIACOU | Director of the International Relations Service, University of Cyprus and Coordinator of the UNICA IRO Group



Overall Chair

Elena Avgoustidou-Kyriacou is the Coordinator of the UNICA IRO Group, also serving as the IRO Observer for the Steering Committee. She was born in Nicosia, Cyprus, and was educated in the UK. She holds a BSc in Economics (University of Leicester) and an MBA-Finance (Imperial College London). She is the Director of the International Relations Service of the University of Cyprus (UCY), and the Director of the Confucius Institute at UCY since 2014. She is also the UCY Erasmus+ Institutional Coordinator and the Secretary of the UCY International Relations Committee. She has been working in international relations since 1993 and has an expertise in mobility, international cooperation, international development, cultural diplomacy, as well as international recruitment and promotion and publications.

Luciano SASO | UNICA Secretary General



Chair

Prof. Luciano Saso (Faculty of Pharmacy and Medicine, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy) coordinated several research projects in the field of pharmacology and has been referee for many national and international funding agencies and international scientific journals in the last 30 years. Prof. Saso has extensive experience in international relations and has been Deputy Rector at Sapienza University of Rome for 8 years (2014-2022). In the last 25 years, he participated in several projects and has been speaker and chair at many international conferences. He has been Member of the Steering Committee of UNICA for four years (2011-2015) and President for eight years (2015-2023) He took over the role of Secretary General of the UNICA Network in June 2023.

Sorin COSTREIE | President of UNICA



Welcome Words

Prof. Sorin Costreie was elected to the position of President in June 2023. He was previously Vice-Rector for Public Relations and University Networks (2019-2024) and Vice-Rector for International Relations of the University of Bucharest (2017-2019), as well as former Vice-Dean of the UB Faculty of Philosophy (2016-2017). He is a member of the University Senate since 2011. In between, in 2016, he was Adviser to the Minister and State Secretary in the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research. He was also in the period 2020-2023 State Advisor to the Prime-Minister for Education and Research.

He is Associate Professor at the Department of Theoretical Philosophy, University of Bucharest. He holds a PhD in Philosophy (University of Bucharest, 2007), with a thesis in philosophy of mathematics, and pursued further doctoral studies in philosophy of language at the University of Western Ontario, Canada between 2000 and 2008. He has published articles, books and edited volumes with Routledge, Springer, Oxford University Press, Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, Humanitas, University of Bucharest Press, etc. He was awarded several scholarships and fellowships to study for extended periods in Canada, United States, Germany, Spain, and Italy. His area of interest has lately focused on mathematical cognition and critical thinking. He is member of various professional associations, and since 2014 he is member of the Steering Committee of the European Society of Analytic Philosophy.

Anete ELKEN | Senior Specialist of International Cooperation, Strategy Office, Tallinn University



Speaker & Chair

Anete Elken is responsible for coordinating Tallinn University's strategic global partnerships across key regions, including Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and providing strategic counsel to university leadership on internationalisation policies. She is the lead for the university's Africa cooperation network, advising the academic community on regional policy and funding opportunities, and manages the Erasmus+ ICM projects. Reinforcing her expertise in global engagement, Anete previously served as a cultural attache at the Estonian Embassy in China.

Abstract (Opening Talk, Session 2): The IRO as soft diplomat: Partnering with the government and EU in Africa Collaboration

Abstract: This talk explores the IRO's crucial evolution into a diplomatic actor. Using a case study focused on EU-Africa strategic cooperation, we will demonstrate how IROs actively move beyond traditional mobility management to leverage high-level partnerships with the national government and EU organisations.

This approach showcases the university's contribution to public and cultural diplomacy, effectively bridging institutional priorities with geopolitical goals to forge stronger Euro-African ties.

Mikk KASESALK | Strategy Manager, Tallinn University



Speaker

Mikk Kasesalk, the Strategy Manager of Tallinn University is responsible for planning the university's development and overseeing its strategic management. He guides the preparation of the university's development plans, coordinates the collection and analysis of management-related data, oversees the work in the field of information and communication technology, and ensures the development of information systems and quality management. He focuses on shaping Tallinn University into an innovative, systematic, and intelligent organization, where data is an integral part of daily management across all units.

Abstract (Day 1, Opening talk on Strategic Internationalisation)

Strategic internationalisation has become a core driver of institutional quality, resilience, and societal impact in European higher education. In a context shaped by geopolitical uncertainty, demographic pressures, digital transformation, and intensifying global competition for talent, universities must move beyond mobility-focused approaches toward integrated, mission-driven international engagement. This involves aligning internationalisation with research priorities, teaching innovation, talent development, and institutional governance, while strengthening data-informed decision-making and responsible partnership management. European university networks such as UNICA play a critical role as platforms for policy learning, collaborative experimentation, and shared digital and academic infrastructures. As universities navigate new expectations for sustainability, inclusiveness, and knowledge security, strategic internationalisation becomes essential for maintaining academic autonomy, supporting student success, and contributing to Europe's broader economic and societal goals.

Åsa PETRI | Head of Unit for the International Office, Student Services, Stockholm University



Speaker

Åsa Petri is the Head Of Unit For The International Office as well as the Head Of Student Services Of Stockholm University. The International Office manages and supports international cooperation projects, student mobility, the Erasmus+ and other programmes, international student recruitment and strategic support in international affairs to the management of the university.

Before Åsa Petri joined Stockholm University, she worked for the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research for 13 years. Five of these, she was posted in Brussels as the Education Attaché of Sweden to the EU, including chairing the negotiations on education policy in the Council of Ministers during the Swedish EU presidency in 2023.

Åsa Petri has previously worked in international relations offices at the Stockholm School of Economics and the Anderson School of Business at UCLA, as well as for the Global alliance of management schools (CEMS), based in Paris.

Abstract (Day 1, Session 1): “Higher education international cooperation in the current geopolitical climate”

The presentation will focus on the challenge of balancing risks and opportunities that international cooperation in higher education poses to our work in higher education international cooperation today.

Catalin PLOAE | Senior International Relations Expert, Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE)



Speaker

Dr. Cătălin Ploae is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of International Business and Economics of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) and a seasoned expert in the internationalisation of higher education. With over 15 years of experience in the field, he previously served as Director of International Relations at ASE Bucharest (2020-2022), where he was responsible for planning, coordinating and monitoring the university's internationalisation strategy, managing institutional partnerships worldwide, attracting international funding for student mobility and skills-development programmes, and representing the university at high-level international forums and governmental meetings.

During his mandate, he successfully coordinated flagship events such as International Week in ASE (2020 & 2021) and the Internationalisation Knowledge Fair. Since 2016 he has held the position of International Relations Officer at the same university, overseeing the negotiation and management of cooperation agreements with foreign universities and organisations, coordinating Erasmus+ and other externally funded international projects, and contributing to the continuous updating of curricula based on global best practices.

Dr. Ploae has led or participated in numerous Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships and Cooperation Partnerships as project manager or key expert (including blockchain for entrepreneurs, business intelligence, export experts training – EXPOVET, institutional resilience, AI strategies for educational leaders, and digital transformation). He is currently the local project director of the Erasmus+ KA220 project “Empowering Educational Leaders with AI Strategies” (2024-1-FI01-KA220-ADU-000255928). A PhD holder in International Business and Economics and former NATO STO researcher, Romanian representative on counter-radicalisation issues, Dr. Ploae combines deep

academic expertise with extensive practical experience in international academic cooperation, mobility funding, partnership development, and the strategic internationalisation of higher education institutions.

[Abstract \(Day 1, Session 1\): The ASE Partnership Matrix: A Roadmap for Global Engagement](#)

The presentation, addressing one of the major topics for discussion within this area, proposes a clear, structured model for how ASE manages and prioritizes its numerous international relationships. The key focus is on moving beyond a flat list of agreements to a hierarchical, multi-level engagement model that maximizes resource allocation. Partnerships are categorized across three tiers: Tier 1 for strategic, deep engagement (joint degrees/research); Tier 2 for broad mobility and competence development; and Tier 3 for exploratory, emerging market connections. Progression from an emerging Future Partner (Tier 3) to an Anchor Partnership (Tier 1) is governed by a Decision Framework assessing criteria like research output, regional influence, and discipline strength.

Martin POVAŽAN | Head of International Relations, Comenius University in Bratislava



[Speaker](#)

As Head of the International Relations Office at Comenius University, Martin works across strategy, partnerships, coordination, and student/faculty experience, operating from inner reflection and common ground. Through steadiness and presence, he allows intuition, emotion, and rational insight to work together in decisions and relationships.

In this spirit, Martin led a university-wide internationalization project, coordinating 30 colleagues to successfully deliver all planned measures and supervising the creation and operationalization of the Welcome Centre for international students and faculty – the first of its kind in Slovakia.

Previously, he served in programme and communications roles within the United Nations system in New York, covering high-level meetings, coordinating multi-agency initiatives, and supporting delivery across Central Asia and the Middle East in multicultural teams and politically sensitive environments.

[Abstract \(Day 1 - Session 1\): “Depth over Transaction: How Institutional Self-Reflection Leads to Purposeful Partnerships”](#)

In my presentation, I proceed from a simple premise: strategic partnerships begin at home. In my first year as Head of the IRO, I intentionally turned the focus inward—coordinating with faculties to simplify processes, align services, nurture a shared understanding, and build a university-wide database of agreements to reveal our full landscape and potential synergies. This inner work—what I call conscious internationalization—builds the integrity and capacity we need before we reach out.

From there, we move to a strategic analysis of regions and partners, grounded in departments, study programmes, and realistic collaboration potential. Much like community-building, partnership is about choosing where depth can grow: engaging a smaller number based on clear criteria so that people, time, and resources are used wisely and respectfully—for ourselves and for our partners. In this spirit, purposeful partnerships arise when the institution is coherent inside and selective outside, turning exchange from a transaction into a sustained dialogue of meaning, value, and shared impact.

Anastassia ZABRODSKAJA | Professor of Intercultural Communication, Tallinn University



Trainer (Day 2, Workshop)

Dr. Anastassia Zabrodskaia is a Professor of Intercultural Communication at Tallinn University, where she teaches intercultural communication. Since 2022 until 2026, Anastassia is the principal investigator of the COST CA21143 project "Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe" in Estonia. Her publications focus on identity, language contacts, code-switching, and the linguistic landscape.

Stefan ZOTTI | Deputy Head of Unit, Higher Education Unit, DG EAC, European Commission



Speaker (Day 2 | Erasmus+ corner)

Stefan Zotti, currently Deputy Head of Unit "Higher education" in the European Commission (DG EAC), holds a PhD in Catholic Theology as well as a master in European Studies and has a longstanding professional experience in the national and European public administration, inter alia as adviser to the Austrian Minister for Science and Research, and cabinet member of Commissioner Johannes Hahn (Regional Policy, 2010-2013). Before rejoining the Commission 2020 as team leader in DG EAC, he was Director of the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (OeAD-GmbH) and Vice-President of the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) from 2016-2018.