

SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH ART AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF REFUGEE AND MIGRATORY CRISES

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Abstract

The “refugee and migratory crises” started in 2015 in the European Union has brought the need to consider the role of culture as element that could ease up social integration of refugees, no matter the place they are. Thus, in the last three years, the European Union is giving an increasingly attention to projects that are aiming to integrate refugees into the destination countries. In this regard, culture is one of the major domains through which social integration and inclusion of refugees could be facilitated. In brief, the social integration and inclusion of refugees is considered to be widely complex and very dynamic, defined as a “mutual, multi-faceted and on-going process” (UNHCR, 2002). Against this background, is necessary to adopt a multidimensional perspective which involves – among other aspects, a structured analysis on how the refugees could be well prepared to adapt into the host societies or communities without having to give up their own social and cultural identity. Moreover, after the onset of the “refugee and migratory crisis”, European countries are facing new challenges, including demographic and social ones, in order to deal with this situation by promoting sustainable solutions.

Keywords: refugees, social integration, cultural activities, strategies, demographic challenges

Résumé

La « crise des réfugiés » commencé en 2015 dans l'Union européenne a débattu la nécessité d'examiner le rôle de la culture en tant que facteur qui peut faciliter l'intégration sociale des réfugiés. Dans ce contexte, l'Union européenne prêter plus d'attention sur les projets qui se concentrent sur l'intégration des réfugiés dans les pays de destination. Ainsi, la culture est l'un des principaux domaines par lequel l'inclusion et l'intégration sociale des réfugiés pourrait être facilitée. Résumant, l'intégration sociale des réfugiés est considéré comme ayant une dynamique complexe et unique, qui est défini comme « un processus mutuel qui comprend de nombreux aspects et qui est constamment en cours » (UNHCR, 2002). Dans ce contexte, il est nécessaire d'adopter une perspective multidimensionnelle impliquant – entre autres une analyse structurée en ce qui concerne la façon dont les réfugiés pourraient être prêts de s'adapter aux sociétés ou communautés d'accueil sans renoncer à leur identité socioculturelle. En outre, après l'installation de « crise des réfugiés » les pays européens sont confrontés à un certain nombre de nouveaux défis, notamment des facteurs sociaux ou démographiques, afin de gérer la situation de manière optimale en promouvant des solutions durables.

Mots-clés: réfugiés, intégration sociale, activités culturelles, stratégies, défis démographiques

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Rezumat

Recenta “criză a refugiaților” începută în 2015 la nivelul Uniunii Europene a adus în dezbatere necesitatea considerării rolului culturii ca element ce poate înlesni integrarea socială a refugiaților, indiferent de locul în care aceștia se regăsesc. Pe acest fond, în ultimii trei, Uniunea Europeană acord o atenție crescândă proiectelor care sunt centrate pe integrarea refugiaților în țărilor de destinație. Astfel, cultura este unul din domeniile majore prin care integrarea și incluziunea socială a refugiaților ar putea fi facilitată. Sintetizând, integrarea socială a refugiaților este considerată a fi de o complexitate și o dinamică aparte, fiind definită drept “un proces reciproc ce cuprinde o multitudine de aspecte și care se află în continuă desfășurare” (UNHCR, 2002). În acest context, este necesară adoptarea unei perspective multidimensionale care implică – printre alte aspecte, o analiză structurată privitoare la modalitățile prin care refugiații ar putea fi pregătiți să se adapteze în societățile sau comunitățile gazdă fără a renunța la propria identitate socio-culturală. În plus, după instalarea “crizei refugiaților”, țările europene se confruntă cu o serie de noi provocări, printre care se numără și cele de ordin social sau demografic, în vederea gestionării optime a situației prin promovarea de soluții sustenabile.

Cuvinte cheie: refugiați, integrare socială, activități culturale, strategii, provocări demografice

1. Introduction. General facts about “refugee crises”

The refugee and migratory crises started in 2015, when 1.25 million refugees came in Europe (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017), Germany, Italy and France being the main countries of destination (Eurostat 2018). According to Eurostat (2018), between 2015 and 2017, in European Union (EU) were registered 3,3 million asylum applications, mostly from Syria and Iraq and also mostly less than 35 years old (82%). The main countries of destination were Germany, Italy and France. In this context, the latest surveys (Pew Research Center, 2018) has shown that most europeans suport the idea of taking refugees from countries where fleeing violence and war, while they dissapprove how EU is dealing with the refugee issue. Moreover, the special *Eurobarometer on integration of immigrants in European Union* (2018) concluded that immigrants could enrich the cultural life of their destination countries (61%) and, in the same time, is important to share the cultural traditions of the host society (76%). The major concerns of europeans about a succesfull social integration of immigrants are related to limited efforts done by refugees or immigrants to integrate, difficulties in finding a job or discrimination against immigrants. All these briefly results mentioned above emphasize that European Union is actually struggling with

a demographic challenge which could bring for host societies many advantages if the policy makers are able to find feasible measures in order to face with this phenomenon.

2. Theoretical perspectives regarding social integration of refugees and migrants

The refugee and migratory crises from the European Union has brought the need to consider the role of cultural diversity or multiculturalism concepts, as elements that could ease up social integration of refugees, no matter the place they are. According to Kylimcka, “multiculturalism is characterised as a feel-good celebration of ethno-cultural diversity, encouraging citizens to acknowledge and embrace the panoply of customs, traditions, music and cuisine that exists in multi-ethnic society” (Kylimcka 2010, 98). However, Vertovec (2007) is talking about “super-diversity” and its implications, a notion that encompasses the complexity of demographic and social challenges which are characterizing the contemporary societies.

In nowadays, the social integration and inclusion of refugees is perceived to be widely complex and very dynamic, defined by United Nations Refugee Agency as a “mutual, multi-faceted and on-going process” (UNHCR 2002). Against this background, is necessary to adopt a multidimensional perspective which involves – among other aspects, a structured analysis on how the refugees could be well prepared to adapt into the host societies or communities without having to give up their own social and cultural identity. In this regard, Ager and Strang had analyzed integration in connection with four major dimensions: “achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education and health; assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social connection within and between groups within the community; and structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture and the local environment” (Ager and Strang 2008, 166). So far, in the last decade, studies emphasized and took into account the integration of refugees in existing political and economical structures in the destination countries, but they rarely described and analyzed the impact of art and culture as means to enhance the process of social inclusion (DiMaggio and Fernandez-Kelly 2015). Therefore, social integration could be defined as a two-way process which “claims that both refugees and host society members play a crucial role in making sure that

refugees have access to education, housing, health, culture and language and that they feel part of the new environment, instead of problematizing refugees.“ (Alencar 2018, 2). This two-way process regarding social integration and inclusion of refugees and migrants involves a structured intercultural dialogue¹.

3. The role of culture in social integration of refugees

Concordant with *Guidelines for cities on the role of culture in integration of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers* (EUROCITIES, 2016), there are three major roles that culture and art are playing in social integration: empowerment, communication and exchange and change of perceptions. By engaging in cultural and artistic activities, refugees could enhance their social skills and could make a contribution to their host communities, which aids in raising the sense of belonging (empowerment). Also, cultural institutions are appropriate settings that facilitate dialogue between destination communities and refugees, overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers (communications and exchange). Finally, by gradual involvement of refugees and migrants in cultural activities, the public perception about them could be improved in order to avoid stereotypes and the raise of xenophobic and discriminatory movements (changing perceptions) (see **Table 1**).

Through art refugees can communicate emotions or personal histories in order to express their own social and cultural identities, using them to create comprehensive connections with people from the destination countries. Moreover, these means are presently initiatives or means to create a dialogue between refugees and host communities. Concordant with these means, the most predominant initiatives are actually an invitation to reflect on the challenges and difficulties that refugees are facing after the forced or unwillingly leaving of their country. These kind of changes trigger a real cultural shock and also “a discrepancy between expectations and achievement, and acceptance by the new nation” (Bhugra and Becker 2005, 19).

¹ Intercultural dialogue is “an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It operates at all levels – within societies, between the societies of Europe and between Europe and the wider world.” (Council of Europe 2008)

Table 1. Role of culture and art in social integration

<p style="text-align: center;">EMPOWERMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The involvement in cultural activities is giving to refugees a sense of community and belonging and is enhancing their skills and self-esteem. • Refugees have the possibility to make a contribution to their host city. 	<p>ROLE OF CULTURE AND ART IN SOCIAL INTEGRATION</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">COMMUNICATION AND EXCHANGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The arts create a basis for communication beyond cultural or linguistic barriers. • Cultural institutions/ activities can help facilitate exchanges about different views, beliefs and social rules; raise awareness about different cultures and identities; and identify common interests and goals.
<p>CHANGING PERCEPTIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration is not just an issue of social welfare and economic policy, the emphasis should also be on engaging people in valuable cultural experiences and achievements. • Discussing and presenting different cultures promotes a positive public perception of migrants. • The “cultural capital” gained from migrant involvement in cultural activities can lead to new artistic expressions. • Host cities also get an opportunity to widen their cultural perspective and to reflect upon their own cultural experience. 		

Source: Guidelines for cities on the role of culture in integration of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers (EUROCITIES, September 2016, pp. 1-2)

3.1. European strategies for social integration of refugees through cultural activities

In the current global context, the European Community is directly interested in identifying optimum solutions in order to facilitate an efficient way for integrating refugees in host countries. In this regard, one of the major directions addressed is social inclusion/ integration through the involvement of refugees in a number of cultural activities which are aiming to create solid social links with the members of the destination communities. This fact is relevant as the immigration crisis came up with a series of challenges related to radicalization and the rise of xenophobia in the European Union which were largely presented in media coverage (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore 2016).

In 2016, E. McGregor and N. Ragab published a report named *The Role of Culture and the Arts in Integration of Refugees and Migrants*. The authors made a research using mapping exercise which involved a descriptive analysis on 96 recent cultural initiatives held in Europe (Barcelona, Berlin,

London, Eastern Europe cities, other EU cities and other non-EU communities) dedicated to refugees and migrants. The main conclusions of the study were:

- The three main types of initiatives were about “art and culture (diverse)”, “theatre” and “visual art”;
- The main target group of cultural projects were young people, mostly of them with refugee background;
- Most of the analyzed projects were implemented by the civil society and Non-Governmental Organizations. Although, the role of Governments has been summed up to the financial support of the projects.
- In only six cases, from 96, have been identified evaluations of the implemented projects, based on a qualitative methodology.

Taking into account the above introductory aspects, in this part is presented a short chronology regarding recent EU initiatives, projects and strategies started after 2015 which were focused on social integration of refugees in Europe through art and cultural activities.

After the monthly peak in October 2015 when 221.000 refugees crossed Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR 2015), in November 2015, in Europe were held various preliminary debates on how culture and intercultural dialogue could improve the social integration of refugees. The main conclusion of those debates emphasized the importance of a more comprehensive approach to culture, based on global solidarity.

Therefore, one month later, in December 2015, has been developed *Work Plan for Culture 2015-2018*, which comprised a various scheduled outputs in order to provide an affordable and inclusive culture for refugees. The authors of the report outlined that education authorities, cultural institutions, professionals or policy makers might edit guidelines or good practices reports containing case studies regarding the importance of culture to social inclusion of refugees.

In June 2016, has been started the initiative named *Voices of culture*, which aimed to construct a structured dialogue between the European Commission, civil society and the cultural sector from European countries². Consequently to this initiative, had been organized brainstorming sessions on the role of cultural activities in promoting the integration and inclusion of refugees and migrants. Against this background, in September 2016 was held a dialogue meeting between EU civil society stakeholders (*Voices of*

² https://ec.europa.eu/culture/news/2015/1103-voices-culture-structured-dialogue_en

culture) and the European Commission on the role of culture in promoting inclusion in the context of migration. As a result from this dialogues, in March 2017, European Union published the report *How Culture and the Arts Can Promote Intercultural Dialogue in the Context of the Migratory and Refugee Crisis* in which are presented various case studies, strategies and practices that could enhance the participation of refugees in cultural and societal life from their destination countries.

Since December 2016, the Network of European Museum Organisations (NE-MO) is collecting data about the individual museum projects that are facilitating inclusion and welcoming of refugees and migrants in Europe. Moreover, many reports and scientific papers are perceiving museum institution from the perspective of a space that is fostering intercultural dialogue (Bodo, Gibbs and Sani 2009), being also an agent of social inclusion (Sandell 1998) and having a formative role (Coffee 2008).

3.2. Relevant examples of cultural projects and activities fostering refugees social integration

In this part is highlighted in brief a series of projects which had the purpose to engage refugees or migrants in various cultural and artistic activities in the destination countries in order to facilitate their social integration.

In United Kingdom, from 2012 is organized Refugee Week³, an umbrella festival, in which are conducted various cultural activities for better understanding refugees experiences. Between 2015 and 2018 were held across UK in worldwide prestigious cultural institutions, including British Museum or Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), more than 2100 events in order to achieve some pivotal goals like promoting anti-discrimination, tolerance and intercultural dialogue, enhancing social integration and inclusion of refugees into host societies and also raising awareness about universal human rights. One relevant example of such an event is related to an art exhibition suggestively entitled *All I left behind. All I will discover* (2017) supported by British Red Cross which comprised a number of artworks created by unaccompanied young refugees settled in Calais/ France camp (also named as “The Jungle”) during refugee crises, mostly of them from Eritrea, Syria or Sudan. By involving children and youth in such kind of activities, they are able to express personal and intense emotions or feelings in profound ways rather than writing textual marks.

³ <http://refugeeweek.org.uk/>

One of the most significant projects launched in United Kingdom in 2013 is called *Migration Museum at the Workshop*⁴. Within this project, in 2016 was held the exhibition *Call Me by My Name: Stories from Calais and Beyond* which gathered in a gallery space a series of artistic works – paintings, draws, photos made by refugees in the Calais (France) camp. The aim of the exhibition was to highlight the refugee perspectives, experiences and stories by means of their own creations made in a very dramatic context. Therefore, the visitors had the opportunity to get in touch through those visual artifacts with real-life refugees' experiences. Another major initiative of Migration Museum at the Workshop called *Room to Breathe* will be held between November 2018 and July 2019. This project is tending “to serve as a setting for a series of residencies by migrant artists, who will be invited to use one part of the exhibition space as their studio”⁵.

In October 2016, 12 cultural and art projects supporting the social integration of refugees have been financially funded with €2.35 million, after answering April 2016 special call of *Creative Europe*⁶.

- *Re-build Refuge Europe* implemented in United Kingdom, Netherlands and Italy between 2016-2017 was a collaborative and mutual learning project between refugees and European citizens by using culture and art (through workshops, non-formal educational activities and so) in order to raise awareness about the general issues that refugees are confronting.
- *A Million Stories* project which is running since 2016 in Denmark, Greece, Sweden and Germany is offering the opportunity to refugees to tell their own personal stories and experiences, which are audio-video recorded and disseminated to host populations.
- *Shared History*, implemented since 2016 in Sweden, Poland and Latvia is a collaborative project between artists from above mentioned countries and artists who have a refugee background, in order to reflect through artworks exposed in various exhibitions, the contemporary Europe in relation to the refugee situation.
- *Storytellers Without Borders* is running since 2016 in Sweden, Greece and Denmark and the main target group are young refugees. In order to tell their own stories and to share individual experiences, avoiding

⁴ <https://www.migrationmuseum.org>

⁵ More details are available at: <https://www.migrationmuseum.org/exhibition/room-to-breathe/>

⁶ <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe>

language barriers, the young refugees are using the animated movies and short films techniques.

- *BEYOND THEATER – creative platform for professional skills* implemented since 2016 in Poland, Italy and Belgium is a project that aims to facilitate the socio-professional integration of refugees in their host communities, making participants eligible for careers in various fields like art, culture, gastronomy or craft.
- *Refugees Engagement and Integration through community theatre* was a project held between 2016 and 2017 in United Kingdom, Netherlands and Italy. This cultural project aimed to engage refugees in live theatre performances organized in the local communities in order to reveal through discussions, role-play and improvisations their own dramas.

As can be seen from the few examples listed above, cultural projects aim to establish a close connection between refugees and destination communities. This is done through actions that are encouraging the artistic expression of one's own experiences, emotions and histories, linguistic barriers being overcome. Most activities are oriented both in the short term by establishing intercultural dialogue between refugees and the citizens of the destination countries, as well as in the medium or long term, cultural involvement helping refugees to prepare for a further professional integration.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, through culture and art the refugees are able to better communicate their life experiences. On this background, since 2015, many guidelines, scientific papers and reports are outlining the importance of social integration as a two-way process – between refugees, migrants and host societies, or newer as a three-way process by including the countries of origin as a potential key factor (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016). In addition, there are platforms and grants allocated for developing good practices and strategies in this area. Even though there are very few empirical studies and researches on how culture and artistic behaviour could improve social integration and inclusion of refugees and migrants (McGregor and Ragab 2016; Martiniello 2015; DiMaggio and Fernandez-Kelly 2015), it's interesting to analyze in the future – by using content analysis research method, the impact and the outcomes of major projects which are implemented in nowadays.

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