

## D5.7 - Policy Paper 2

# Recommendations on policies to promote mutual understanding between refugees and the local communities in Europe

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### Summary

Based on the experiences and perceptions of selected stakeholders, this policy paper assesses the needs, identifies the challenges, and draws policy-relevant recommendations about the valorisation and the use of the memory of the past to promote social cohesion and to favour the encounter between local individuals and communities and new coming individuals and communities (with particular regard towards refugees and asylum seekers).

## 1. Introduction and background

Since the early 1990s, the theme of memory has become more and more important for the European societies, as for at global level.

According to the historian Pierre Nora, this great interest is due firstly to an “acceleration of history”, a situation in which the change speed and the inability to foresee the future pushes people to look for a reference point in the past, and secondly to a process of “democratization of history”, in which every human group within a society claims its own peculiar vision of the past. Other US historians and the Italian Enzo Traverso read the phenomenon in terms of an answer to the collapse of political

ideologies able to design the future: when Utopia is missing, the Past Revival activates (Focardi, Groppo 2013: 7-8).

What seems to be clear in both these interpretations is that there is a cultural and political use of the past as an effective tool to build a strong collective identity. The idea is that memory and remembrance can be considered simultaneously both as the origin and as the reproduction tool for the self definition of a person, of a community and of a group. Memory is not then a truthful transcription of the past but above all it is continuous reading and interpretation. In this process, both singular and cultural memories can be rewritten, and traditions invented (Violi, 2014).

Due to these fundamental attributes of mobility and partiality, memory and its politics are strictly linked and almost *connaturalized* with politics in general: reading decisions about memory means to read about power dynamics, social control logics, identitarian strategies, political hegemony projects. If this is true, it means that having as goals the horizontal and democratic distribution of power, the idea of a cohesive society, the goal of an open and respectful definition of identities, memory can be effectively explored and activated to build a welcoming, inclusive and human rights - based society, capable of giving voice and listening to different experiences and cultures.

The idea behind this document is that sharing the memory of past forced displacement and migration in Europe could contribute to the promotion of mutual cultural and life experience understanding between local communities and newly arrived migrants and that ad hoc policies are to be implemented in order to favour this understanding. Based on the experiences and perceptions of selected stakeholders, this policy paper attempts to assess needs, identify challenges, and draw policy relevant recommendations about the shared experience of forced displacement between refugees and the local communities in Europe. Within the So-Close project, 15 focus groups were conducted in 2020 across the following four EU Member States: Italy, Spain, Poland, and Greece. All these countries have witnessed exile and forced migration themselves, and focus groups were meant to investigate possible lines of interaction between local individuals and communities and refugees / asylum seekers individuals and communities, with a particular interest devoted to ideas for co-creation of innovative technology tools and their meaningful exploitation.

The policy brief is divided into three parts: (I) an overview of the key findings and political implications; (II) a set of policy recommendations based on findings and (III) a concluding section.

## 2. Key findings and socio-political implications

The findings of this report are based on the review of academic literature and the analysis of focus group findings. Some key topics include integration, public policy, civil society, memory of the past and cultural heritage.

### 2.1. Mapping figures and contexts

The number of refugees hosted by each of the countries where the So-Close research developed varies and they are not all affected in the same way by asylum requests. At the same time, each national social, jurisdictional and geographical context determines very different conditions for the interaction between local communities and the newcomers.

Nevertheless, it seems there is a common feature characterizing the attitude towards one another, not strictly depending on data: the perceived level of “otherness”, the perceived distance between the host community and who is entering the country. In the same way host communities have images - informed or stereotyped, it does not matter - about the countries of origin of refugees, migrants also have images of each European country and of the EU in general. These two reciprocal representations influence a lot the level of commitment for social inclusion, apparently increasing when *the other* seems to be closer or more similar and lowering when *the other* seems to be farer or too different.

### 2.2. Memory of the past

One of the core elements determining this level of *otherness* is the missing acknowledgment of the history of *the other*. What clearly emerged from local stakeholders and refugees in the focus groups is that local communities are perceived as having consolidated and rich traditions as well as deep histories. The histories of refugees and asylum seekers, however, are merely seen as histories of journeys. This determines that the local community is recognised as a complex one, in which individualities and nuances are highlighted, while the refugee community is named exactly only as a community, with no inherent differences because every member originated from the same traumatic moment that cancelled every trace of the past and stopped every progress toward the future. The host society can express a big and comprehensive

narration, a historical one, while the most that is allowed for refugees and asylum seekers is to be listened to in terms of quite standardized personal storytelling.

Deprived of any possible historical frame, the shapes in which people moving from their country of origin compose their experiences were found to be linked to 3 possible definitions: conquer, escape, fulfilment of a personal ambition.

On the other hand, the context of economic, political and social crisis the EU is experiencing in the last 5 years results in the use of historical discourse as a weapon of confrontation against the “newcomers”. That is to say that episodes, events or periods of the past of a host country appear to be more and more frequently selected in order to foster a nationalistic narrative opposing the “foreign” enemies.

Depending on which point of view is selected, an invasion corresponds to a conquer, an attack corresponds to an escape, and the hopelessness for the future could link to the fulfilment of a personal ambition. All these six clusters of meaning and their possible declinations are somehow applied when local-native communities and refugees/asylum seekers get in contact about their respective narratives of the past. A side effect to this quite conflictual dynamic is that in the relationship between local-native communities and refugees/asylum seekers recalling of the past, memory embodies and expresses in reference to an indefinite and apparently eternal past time. At the same time, food traditions, religious ceremonies, sometimes art and cultural heritage in general, are perceived as a safer space than memory of the past for personal sharing and they are preferred.

### 2.3. Social Cohesion

Both refugees and other stakeholders agree that common and shared ideas about refugees cover a variety of images. As mentioned, diversity in these ideas is said to be connected with political views

and opinions, and prejudices that nationalist parties are spreading through the media are more commonly detected. On the other hand, it is not so easy to detect stereotypes or prejudices when they are not openly part of a nationalist discourse. Implicitly, even people supporting refugees, underline they have to prove to deserve ‘the right to stay’. Actually, asylum has nothing to do with the value the host society assigns to a refugee, it is a basic human right, no matter how good or ugly one is. In recent years, nevertheless, media and communication has focused on showing refugees as a resource, mainly in economic terms, in an effort to convince the host society not to reject them. When not emphasizing this narrative, media and public opinion rely on an equally dangerous reading of reality: defining and considering refugees and asylum seekers as, and only as, victims. Victimhood often causes misunderstandings in interactions with members of the host society, who tend to link refugees to all misfortunes in the world, and risks turning in another kind of ‘merit’ that grants the right to stay: the *heroic or winner* quality of a refugee, because he/she survived.

Nevertheless, between the everyday struggles for rights’ fulfilment and the complexity of challenges caused by living in an unfamiliar environment, refugees and asylum seekers claim the need and the will to be recognised as full human beings, possibly carrying a lot of suffering, but also - as every other human being - eventually expressing prejudices, fears, misconceptions and stereotyping towards multi-faceted hosting societies.

### 2.4. Cultural Heritage

To improve social cohesion, almost all local stakeholders and refugees / asylum seekers involved in So-Close research believe in the potential of sharing cultural heritage and individual stories and creating meeting spaces on topics of common interest. There are different ideas about



what to share and how to do it, some oriented towards showing traditional aspects of refugees' culture, others more focused on the experience in the host country, to raise awareness of the reality of migration or to exploit the potential that refugees bring to the host country in terms of energy and knowledge. Once it comes to the cultural aspects to be shared in order to enhance social cohesion, suggestions are linked to cultural traditions such as dances, paintings, music or artefacts, the mother tongue, concrete aspects of everyday life, such as food, and intangible aspects such as concepts and visions, personal stories and experiences or the collective history. Working on culture and memories can enrich both the host country and the refugees themselves. People can learn new perspectives, enrich their knowledge, empathize more with others, reflect on interpersonal and social dynamics. Learning about others' culture can help to spread a greater sense of security and knowing different perspectives can generate cultural bridges that contribute to the reduction of hate speeches and racism. The moment of attention comes considering that sharing heritage can be a further vector of generalization, stereotypes and exoticism if it is neglected the fact that every person actually comes from different places, has a different story and considers "his/her culture" as something personal, linked to his/her family or community and not necessarily with the people, the tribe or the nation state of birth.

### 3. Voices from the field: policy recommendations

Several implications arise from the findings of this research. Taking these outcomes into consideration, we suggest a number of policy recommendations.

#### 3.1. Encouraging processes of truth acknowledgement and restorative justice

The European Union can be a respected and influential actor in starting, supporting, fostering and enhancing transitional justice processes within the context of the countries of origin of refugees and asylum seekers. It is true that many of the people leaving the context of origin are leaving during a period of open and violent conflict but it is also true that a not reconciled society can be a continuous source for injustice and sufferance, for violence and abuses. Legacies of gross human rights violations cast a shadow on transitions from repressive regimes to participatory and democratic forms of governance as well as they can represent an obstacle to a personal and collective elaboration of trauma. When wounds remain open, the level of strength for a new commitment in terms of memory sharing (i.e. with the memory of the host country) is almost null and unsolved fractures in the vision of one's own past can influence negatively the approach to others' legacies and heritages. Favouring this kind of processes can surely help to break the usually rigid representation of refugees and asylum-seekers as pure *victims* and it can help in supporting different images such as the ones promoting the idea of *survivor* or society *new builder*.

#### 3.2. Fostering decolonization processes on European memory and memorialization

The European Union rightly devoted great attention and resources to programmes and initiatives aimed to research, analyse and pay tributes to the troubled past linked to WWI, WWII, the Cold War and the mass atrocities connected to those events. Even if mainly on European soil, those historical facts affected the entire world and, in some way,

set a turning point in the path of the international humanitarian law and in the frames of memorialization pattern. Nevertheless, the So-Close investigation highlighted once more the need for EU to pay the same attention to those historical phases in which European countries expressed their will of conquest, domination and supremacy, namely colonialism. Political efforts could be put in strengthening initiatives of re-signification and processes of inclusive meaning making towards all those monuments, places, dedications, civil commemoration calendars, ceremonies that still celebrate an unbalanced, violent and unjust pattern of relations among countries and populations. The idea would be properly not to delete those parts of the heritage from the European landscape while to promote ways of treating and using them characterized by truly and vastly collaborative and participative practices of re-definition.

### 3.3. Encouraging inclusive curricular study programs

History and memory are usually seen as tools for a better future. They are usually considered essential in relation to new generations that are supposed to learn from the past mistakes and tragedies. In one of his researches, the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov said that “If you don't want the past to come back, it's not enough to re-evoked it superficially”. Superficiality, in terms of the So-Close findings, means that history and memory are continuously and mainly tackled by a Western-centered perspective, which usually causes a hierarchical and limited selection of what can be considered important and relevant in terms of cultural and historical preservation and transmission. Education can and should be the proper environment to build and spread and reinforce a more complex vision of past historical events and culture, in order to overcome dominance biases in considering other continents' history and culture. This is particularly important in relation to what mentioned in the

recommendation 3.2. Not all the EU countries were colonial countries, but the colonialism left a quite deep footprint in the cultural mindset of all the EU countries: it seems always possible to consider someone else outside EU as inferior, underdeveloped and in need for civilization. Education can contribute a lot in thinning out this shadow, promoting the acceptance in public opinion that not only Europe but also other countries and continents have a respectable history. Education can enhance the idea that different memories can dialogue and there's no need for one to assimilate the others.

### 3.4. Taking actions towards a more shared system of policies for refugees and asylum seekers in all the EU countries

There are multiple factors which prevented until now shared policies towards refugees and asylum seekers. Geographical position of countries and the sovereignty on borders of course are relevant elements, as well as the differences in societies throughout UE. It seems therefore very difficult to overcome the destiny of EU countries to be an entry or transit country or a target country.

No matter how hard it could be, it would be then really relevant to have a more homogenous system, based on best practices, empowering both host societies and refugees to develop relations and mutual understanding.

It is true that So-Close investigated the conditions only in 4 EU countries, but it is also true that from those investigations some possible best practices to spread emerged:

- preference for first and above all second reception system made of many and small residential solutions instead of few and vast centres of lodging;
- consequent preference for locations within the residential areas of the host countries



instead of isolated places. That is a particularly important point in terms of the So-Close consortium because it relates directly with the possibility of cultural heritage sharing and exploitation. Residential centres offer usually accessible cultural infrastructures while isolated places often prevent easy fruition and development;

- implementation of early-age educational services in order to favour the inclusion of minors and through them the inclusion of adults. Often, public services for babies and children care are not easily accessible and (mainly) women are meant not to work and to stay at home for family care. If early-age schools are implemented, not only babies and children grow in the host context perceiving it and being perceived as familiar, but also their parents can leave the home context and meet members of the community, interacting with them and unbuilding the diffidence wall that often persist between locals and new-comers;
- support to common activities to be held in public space in order to break the (self-)confinement of individuals and communities. This appears to be the natural consequence of the previous recommendation. The educational system can do a lot but there is a whole society that needs to have spaces for encounters and shared moments. Public parks, libraries, squares are all places that people use and cross regularly, often without a conscious goal. These places can offer events, courses, initiatives breaking the possible barrier of fear of the unknown, favouring spontaneous participation and proximity.

In order to extend the list of best practices and above all in order to be able to transfer and adapt them in the different contexts of all the 27 EU

countries, an important part of this recommendation is to support a tailored research and investigation in each country. This crucial step would provide conditions for cultural, memory and history inclusivity.

## 4. Conclusion

As Proust described in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, memory, loss and rediscovery chase each other constantly, and only when they meet, they manage to recognise each other and give each other meaning. Nevertheless, far from Proust elaboration, memory is not only involuntary, nor at individual level or at collective one. And, unfortunately, memory is not something that brings only happiness and joy but it can be triggered as a means of division and subjugation.

The European Union can and should shape an inclusive memory, born out of the processes of truth acknowledgement and reconciliation, at last addressing bordering and colonial issues, in order to favour inclusion and mutual understanding.

The European Union can and should get the most out of its tragic and divisive past and empower the peaceful and democratic cables connecting its members and its people to welcome and include every human being.

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