

The migratory experience: adopting a three-generational perspective



"My new country did not want me... Years of complete uncertainty came for me, without any valid documents, health insurance, social or physical security. Grey years, years of struggle. Struggles for survival, struggles for identity." – Dragan



In many ways, these words act as an overarching expression for migrants worldwide. They are spoken by Dragan, a man who felt the impact of Slovenia's independence in 1991 for years.

While factors and reasons for migrating vary across centuries, his story encapsulates the emotional experience migrants endure. Navigating the hardships of integration in a new culture and struggling to shape a new identity in a foreign environment are demanding processes which many migrants share. An international project took these processes to a new level by conducting interviews with the descendants of migrants such as Dragan, and found how much the following generations are affected as well.

IDENTITY ON THE LINE

Identity on the Line (I-ON) is a large-scale cooperation project, co-funded by the European Union and conducted by six cultural history museums and one university from seven European countries.

It aims to explore the long-term consequences of migratory movements on the identity-building process of the people involved, and of their children and grandchildren. The project focused on collecting, analysing, and showcasing experiences from specific migratory processes that took place over the course of the last 100 years in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia and Croatia.

The main findings are now summarized in a package of materials for educational and cultural institutions, as well as the general public, through physical and digital exhibitions, movies, publications, school packages – and now also a series of recommendations for policymakers.

CONTEXT

Europe, both as a geographical continent and a cultural entity, is built on a diverse and vibrant mosaic of cultures, languages, and traditions. The motto of the European Union, "United in Diversity," encapsulates its commitment to celebrating this diversity, while fostering a sense of shared identity and common purpose.

Yet, we live in a time where many political parties combine pro-EU policies with critical stances toward immigration and multiculturalism. A growing number of European governments point to multiculturalism as a negative phenomenon that leads to economic inequality, social fragmentation, and a loss of cultural identity.

In the last few decades, people have been fleeing to Europe in large numbers – many escaping conflict, terror, and persecution in their own countries. Since Russia's military aggression in Ukraine in February 2022, Europe has received the largest number of people fleeing war since World War II.

This has put further pressure on the political discussions around migration, which increasingly rely on a 'fortress Europe' approach to close immigration opportunities and harden the EU's external borders.

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PROJECT FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the I-ON project are more relevant today than ever. They raise the awareness that migration policies should not only look at the short-term economic and social effects of migratory movements, but also at the long-term consequences that they have for the migrants themselves and their descendants. Traumatic experiences can haunt former migrants, their families, and local societies for decades, and this comes in addition to the demanding personal attempts to shape a new identity in a new country.

Through joint approaches and the conduction of more than 160 in-depth interviews in all countries, have the project partners to identify common reactions to trauma and how trauma transfer takes place. The joint outcomes of the project gave informants an opportunity not only to tell their stories for the very first time, but also to start personal healing processes and make their voices available to the general public.

Informants were given a chance to talk, and to be heard.

Through a multilateral approach, the collection of empirical data, and the use of a methodological and analytical framework, I-ON has transformed its research on these experiences into concrete recommendations for European policymakers. We invite regulators working on migration policies to:

1. **Raise awareness about the long-term consequences of war and forced migration** by always applying a three-generational perspective.
2. **Intensify efforts to provide multidisciplinary support after collective trauma**; support by cultural mediators, ethnologists, anthropologists, historians, sociologist, ideally in collaboration with psychologists and psychiatrists.
3. **Support and enable professionals and institutions** working with cultural heritage to raise public attention towards sensitive and contested historical events, and apply a multi-vocal perspective.
4. **Intensify initiatives on societal and political levels to diminish all forms of stereotyping** of migrants
5. **Initiate further research** on how public interpretation and display of contested history can positively impact individual and societal physical and psychological wellbeing.

LOOKING AHEAD

These recommendations are a contribution to long-term solutions for an issue that is often seen as a short-term urgency. I-ON provides ideas for initiatives that are designed to foster societal cohesion and avoid critical pitfalls on the way to more sustainable societies.

Museums and academia can make a real difference in the communities they operate in – by providing a safe space where unheard voices can be heard, by facilitating a unique access to information on sensitive experiences, and by creating an arena for participation and intercultural dialogue. These are crucial components in the healing of collective trauma.

This is, however, a collective social effort that needs concrete support from all institutions in the European Union – one that requires everyone to work together for the well-being of today's and future Europeans.

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“Today, I don't see this as a problem anymore, but as something that enriches me. Because of this, I can get along with different people and environments. With migration and unconditional support, my parents gave me a broader perspective.” – Lidija

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