

UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration
Episode 51: Learning to Belong: Reinterpreting culture through a migrant integration programme (28/06/2023)

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Dr Gameli Tordzro

Welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and Arts. We bring you sounds to engage with you and invite you to think with us.

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Tawona Sitholé

Hekani. Welcome. My name is Tawona Sitholé and I'm Artist in Residence with the UNESCO Chair for Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts. Today's episode is a recording of a presentation from our Spring School: The Arts of Integrating, which took place in May 2023. We will be hearing from Kirstin Sonner Kirstin has a background in teaching languages and is currently working for a European network which aims to integrate lifelong learning in higher education. As a researcher at the University of Malta, she is also part of a research project investigating hate speech based on racism and xenophobia in Malta. In 2021, Kirstin graduated from the Erasmus Mundus International Master in Adult Education for Social Change, delivered jointly by the University of Glasgow, the University of Malta, Tallinn University and the Open University of Cyprus. As part of her degree, she undertook research on Malta's migrant integration program, "I Belong", which is what she will be talking about today. Enjoy our podcast.

Kirstin Sonne

You've probably heard of the tests migrants have to pass to become citizens of certain countries. The Life in the UK test, which consists of questions on the history, culture and politics of the UK, is just one of many, and similar tests exist across Europe, including in the Netherlands, France, Switzerland and Germany. Often they're combined with a language component, and while in some countries applicants just need to sit for the test. In other, they may also have to attend classes regularly. Increasingly, they're not just a prerequisite for obtaining citizenship, but have to be taken by people seeking residency or even entry to a country. They may also be a condition for accessing certain rights or benefits. Critics have interpreted these programmes as governments' attempts not only to limit the number of migrants settling within their borders, but also to ensure that those who do so are the kind of good immigrants who adapt well to the host society. They're seen as a response to the so-called failure of multiculturalism, and as a way for governments to pander to the far right in their fears of society becoming more fragmented due to an increase in ethnic diversity. In terms of their contents, these citizenship tests or programmes increasingly not only assess migrants' knowledge of the host society's dominant culture, but also of the values that are believed to underpin that culture, and that are often framed as the foundations of a liberal Western democracy, including personal freedom, secularism, gender equality, but also individual responsibility and a strong work ethic. For these reasons, these tests have been criticised for embodying what political sociologist Christian Joppke calls 'illiberal liberalism',

as they are imposing these so-called liberal values through illiberal or even coercive means. Most of these critiques have been based on analyses of migrant integration programmes in traditionally migrant receiving countries. But what's interesting is that these programmes have proliferated across Europe, including in countries with a more recent history of immigration, such as Malta. Malta is a small island nation which, due to its geographical location in the central Mediterranean, has become an outpost of the so-called fortress Europe and an important player in the securitization and criminalization of migration to the EU, which Malta has been part of since 2004. In 2017 it introduced its first migrant integration strategy and launched the I Belong programme shortly afterwards. The I Belong programme consists of a Maltese language and cultural orientation programme and is specifically a requirement for third country nationals, that is non-EU citizens, wishing to obtain long-term residence, so it fulfils the same internal border control function as equivalent programs in other countries, and in practice serves as a filter for migrants wishing to settle in Malta. For my research, I was interested to see to what extent this objective was reflected in the content of the I Belong programme, how it portrayed Maltese culture and whether it displayed the same assimilationist tendencies observed in migrant integration programmes elsewhere. The programme's curriculum, at least, seems to suggest otherwise. Culture is described as a "network of norms, values, beliefs and praxes through which different meanings and actions are shared among members of a particular society." The goal of the program, it goes on, is to induce a cognitive appreciation and/or consideration of Maltese culture without "implying or necessitating adherence to and participation in it." In fact, the goal of integration is defined as "the participatory conviviality of people coming from different linguistic, cultural, religious, ethnic and social backgrounds within a community". But how does this work in practice? How is this participatory conviviality achieved through the I Belong programme and what role does culture play in it? For my research, besides looking at the curriculum, I interviewed 15 students and 4 teachers on the programme and observed several online classes. What emerged from this fieldwork is that Maltese culture was presented as distinctly shaped by the recurring invasions and waves of colonization that Malta has experienced throughout its history. Without doubt, one of the most important historical national narratives in Malta, and one that was taught extensively on the programme, is that of the Great Siege, which happened in the 16th century and was an unsuccessful attempt by the Ottoman forces to capture Malta. Interestingly, learning about this and other invasions and occupations that occurred throughout Malta's history helped students make sense of the hostility they had experienced in Malta. Here's what one student had to say about this.

Student

They explain to us a lot about the history and how the historical events affect the Maltese mentality. And the reason why you guys are reserved sometimes, or let's say always thinking what we're trying to invade, you know? It's because of your history.

Kirstin Sonne

It wasn't only the students, though, who compared migrants to the invaders of previous centuries. One of the teachers drew similar parallels.

Teacher

Yesterday we celebrated Freedom Day and suddenly you have people who are migrants coming to Malta. Like those people who lived back then are still alive right now. And the generations fought for independence, for freedom and now migrants are coming to Malta. Those people are still alive, that's what I mean.

Kirstin Sonne

Both students and teachers were thus interpreting racism and xenophobia as a manifestation of Maltese culture and identity, which by nature of its long history of colonisations, they understood as being closed, defensive and especially suspicious of Islam. So here, local culture was constructed in a way to explain, if not justify, these problematic attitudes. The programme, however, did not focus solely on Maltese culture. There were many instances in which students were encouraged to share aspects of their own culture too, and compare it to Maltese culture. Teachers even learnt about students' cultures and incorporated this in their lessons. And this was one of the aspects that students really valued about the programme, as the following quote illustrates.

Student

What I enjoy most in the class is it's not about learning what we need to know in Malta, but we are trying to learn about everyone's ethnicity, traditions, so we are like the Russian, Serbian, Filipinos. Everybody's there, you know? You have a lot of continents in one room.

Kirstin Sonne

However, these attempts to bring in students' cultures, often framed as a learner-centered approach, also led to instances in which students were cast as representatives or spokespeople of their culture, and they were asked to comment on aspects of their culture that were considered more problematic or even morally wrong. In one lesson that I observed, which was dedicated to children's rights in Malta, the teacher brought up child marriage and listed a number of countries in which it is legal, asking a student from one of those countries to take a stance on this. In the quote we're about to hear, a student describes a similar experience, explaining how he was required to debunk stereotypes that his classmates, and more worryingly, his teacher had about Islam.

Student

But the idea is that, you know, they're going to speak about different things to understand different cultures. I mean, I had the chance to clarify a lot of cultural differences. I had the chance to clarify why Muslims are being referred to as terrorists. I had the chance to clarify why, that thing with 72 virgins or whatever, which is not the case.

Kirstin Sonne

Another student recalled how during discussions on LGBTQ rights, educators held an assumption that Muslim students would find the topic difficult. Homophobia was a frequently discussed topic on the I Belong programme, and there was an implicit expectation that students from countries considered to have a poor record when it came to LGBTQ rights would distance themselves from such views, as the following testimony illustrates.

Student

I told them, listen, in my country, if I am gay, I will be stoned to death, you know? It's barbaric. And then make me understand this is barbaric. So they make me believe those things.

Kirstin Sonne

According to the literature on migrant integration programs, presenting homophobia is incompatible with European values and as a barrier to integration is a common trend among migrant integration programs. It has been pointed out by scholar Alicia Heinemann that this is a way to "legitimise Western self-representation as liberal and modern", often ignoring the prevalence of homophobic attitudes within the host society itself. Could the same be said about the I Belong program? Here's what one teacher on the program had to say about getting to know students and their beliefs, especially in relation to LGBTQ rights.

Teacher

It's not about how much they open their mouths. I mean, after nine months, you get to know them. You get to know them well. And you know who has actually integrated, who is making a show of himself, who will never manage to adhere to our laws. You know, they'll say, I'm against gay people. In Malta, you cannot be against gay people, for example.

Kirstin Sonne

What this particular testimony shows is that it was not enough for students to simply demonstrate their knowledge of the host society's values in the test, or even to comply with them outwardly. Instead the programme aims to examine migrants' attitudes and beliefs, and to ensure that they have embraced those sanctioned by the programme at a personal level. In fact, there is no final written test that the I Belong students need to pass, but rather an interview in which they reflect on what they have learned on the programme and on what integration means to them. Their participation and attitude is also monitored constantly throughout the course. According to the programme's evaluation criteria, students are expected to "engage positively with controversial issues, ask questions when not understanding or agreeing, and demonstrate wonder, curiosity and interest in all members of the group." Moreover, as the quote from the teacher we just heard suggested, they are expected to do so over a significant period of time. At 100 hours of required attendance, the programme is a huge time commitment for its participants. Combined, the programme's length and the emphasis it places on regular attendance, active participation and adopting a set of attitudes seem to foster a culture of self-improvement and individual responsibility amongst participants. Many students I spoke to felt that after attending this program, they deserved to have more rights in Malta as they were making a visible effort to integrate. They also expressed that those who were not taking the program seriously or not engaging enough were missing out on an opportunity or even doing their classmates a disservice.

To sum up, the role that culture plays in integration through the I Belong program is threefold. First, it presents Maltese culture in a way that justifies certain attitudes and behaviours among the local population. Second, it engages migrants in the construction of Malta as a multicultural, diverse and liberal society on the condition that they publicly reject the more problematic aspects of their culture. And third, it fosters a culture of self-improvement and individual responsibleisation among migrants. Having said all of this, the

effect that the programme had on migrants' own understanding and practice of culture in the broader sense, shouldn't be over-emphasised. Most of my research participants stressed how integration and belonging were a highly personal matter, and talked about how they were creating their own cultures through their families, workplaces and social circles in Malta. The I Belong programme too formed part of this process. Many students, especially those who attended the course in person before the pandemic, stayed in touch with their classmates and supported each other with everyday integration requirements and bureaucratic issues, including their application for long-term residency. For many, this was a more important takeaway from the programme than what they learnt about Maltese culture. Nonetheless, even if for many migrants these integration programmes are little more than a box-ticking exercise, albeit a very time-consuming one, they do tell us a lot about how countries portray themselves and their cultures, and it is worth investigating further how they operationalise culture to justify what is essentially a form of racialized border control.

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Dr Gameli Tordzro

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