



by Milena Karisic

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# Social cohesion, mobility and migration: The refugee youth perspective

**“All human beings are in truth akin – All in creation share one origin**

**When fate allots a member pangs and pain – No ease for other members then remains**

**If, unperturbed, another’s grief canst scan – thou are not worthy of the name of man”**

**Saadi**

Social cohesion, mobility and migration: For some these concepts are familiar, for young refugees, however, these terms can be misleading. How can young refugees be a part of the social cohesion process when they have to lead clandestine lives? And how can young refugees experience their youth when life, war and poverty makes them adults in one night?

VYRE is a network aiming to raise the voices of young refugees, to make them more visible, and to advocate for their rights and their inclusion into the host societies. (To get involved either as an individual or as an organization all you have to do is to communicate your interest by sending us an e-mail to [vyre.net@gmail.com](mailto:vyre.net@gmail.com) where you may request more information and the membership form).

Back in 2006, we stated that **“We did not reach Europe by accident. Migration and refugee flows do not exist in a vacuum. People left their home countries for a reason, strong enough to undertake the risk of dying. This situation cannot be combated with any restrictive border policy”**. For young refugees, mobility and migration is not primarily a matter of choice. It is matter of life, preservation and hopefully a dream of a better world. The journey to the host country is a perilous one and arrival in the host country cannot always guarantee safety and refuge. As we said in 2006 **“The sun shines differently behind bars”**. This is a reference to detention of refugee youth which is becoming all the more the rule instead of the exception.

Arrival in the host country is a new page in the book of challenges refugee youth have to face. Some young refugees will have access to protection and legal documentation. While

others have no other choice but to live clandestinely in deplorable conditions, like ghosts not existing for the law but being there, present, fighting for their lives. Both situations are challenging.

In 2006 we underlined that **“After a long journey full of fear, loneliness and darkness, in the back of the truck, I have reached a destination that promised “safety”, but where am I? Who are these people? I do not understand...”**

For refugee youth with access to protection the new chapter of integration begins. Facilitated or not, it is a challenge. A new language, new societal and cultural norms. Assimilation or integration? What is my identity? Do I belong here? Can I be a part of this society? Am I welcome?

Can I travel abroad without my fear of borders? **You have no idea how hard it was for me to come to Strasbourg...Why do capital and goods circulate freely and not me? Being fully aware of your rights is not always granted. How to claim your rights when you do not know them?**

For refugee youth, forced into a clandestine life, arrival in the host country is simply a matter of survival. Almost literally, these youths do not exist. They have no papers, they have no existence... They have access to nothing and learn to live with fear. Fear for everything.

In this framework the discussions on social cohesion, social inclusion and mobility seem obscure. It is a sad truth but refugee youth feel excluded. Refugee youth might be mobile but at the same time stand stranded between administrative malpractice and hard legislative barriers. Exemptions to this

reality do exist but remain only a few. It is important to learn from them.

Indeed, migration can contribute to diversity and mobility but young refugees firstly need to be given the access and right to contribute to diversity and cohesion. And this circle of exclusion is a vicious one. The more excluded young refugees feel, the more difficult it is to encourage their active participation.

Back in 2006, when the campaign “All different-All Equal” was still on we encouraged people to **“Just look around!”** and assess to what extent we are indeed all different-all equal. We also asked all stakeholders **“to go back in time and think how often young exiles are offered to participate in national or international youth events”**.

To this end we recommended that *the initial practical introduction to the host society is an essential part of the long-standing integration process. The host societies should put more effort into transforming assimilation into a two way process, with mutual respect and understanding*. Furthermore we called for *active participation of young exiles in national youth activities in the host country and recommended that States and Youth organizations should encourage and support young exiles participation in various activities that could contribute to their empowerment and facilitate the integration in the host community as well as reintegration in the country of origin.*

In June 2009, during VYRE’s Study Session «Participation as a tool for social inclusion» we concluded that it is «the role of all» to promote tolerance, open-mindedness, respect for difference and others’ values. Cultural diversity in Europe should be taken as an advantage and celebrated, instead of being seen as a negative thing.

There is a need for more opportunities to learn about people from other cultures in Europe, and governments have an «important influencing role» to help establish or facilitate frameworks to aid social cohesion.

Valuing multiculturalism is also another important aspect for social cohesion: A cohesive society does not think in an either/or way about issues concerning migrants, newcomers, and refugees.

The importance of communication between diverse groups, has underscored the need for a common language, therefore assistance with learning local language(s) is crucial. As well as encouraging migrants to retain their native languages, the learning of other languages should be promoted as a way to appreciate different cultures and world views.



VYRE sees education as one of the main factors contributing to social inclusion. People who cannot speak the language of the dominant majority fluently and who do not have an educational background that gives access to information, or permits them to be employed in more stable and sustainable jobs, are bound to remain socially excluded and discriminated against.

In this regard, VYRE is doing its utmost to assist refugee youth in their self-empowerment and to raise awareness of all relevant actors that refugee youth have a strong potential to be a part of social cohesion. And hopefully, in this common effort of all we have found support by the Council of Europe and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and our local organizations that together with us as individuals constitute the life and spirit of VYRE.

We, refugee and exiled youth **“Carrying the burden of our personal testimonies, life stories, having suffered and escaped from terror, violence, armed conflicts, persecution, fears, poverty/Traumatized by witnessing atrocities and being tortured by uncertainty of the fate of our beloved ones left behind/Wandering around feeling nowhere as home/But armed with determination, ideals and hopes”**... Continue in **“Keeping faith in solidarity and humanity”** we are **“Strongly convinced in our common future”**. ■

• Coyote Theme

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