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Volunteering as a Means of Fostering Integration and Intercultural Relations. Evidence from Six European Contexts

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Migrant integration remains a continuous challenge in many EU countries, as shown by the retreat from multiculturalism and the concerns regarding Muslim migrants. In recent years, the increase in asylum-seekers has added further complexities to the issue. Meanwhile, volunteering is considered to be an important aspect of today's society and a thermometer of civic well-being. Bringing together the field of migration studies and research on volunteering, we investigate whether volunteering would foster processes of integration and intercultural relations. We do so by presenting an innovative empirical study based on interviews and self-administered questionnaires conducted at two points in time over a period of about a year in a specific setting that brought together EU and third-country nationals in volunteering activities in six European contexts. Thus, we are able to provide an in-depth account of volunteering experiences and their effects on intercultural relations and processes of integration. The research highlights how volunteering fosters social interactions, intersecting with dynamics of inclusion. It is a valuable tool that strengthens the community as well as the process of social integration, helping to overcome the tensions and conflicts that persist in European societies. At the same time, we argue that volunteering cannot make up for all integration challenges since the process of societal integration requires a more comprehensive approach which includes tackling discrimination in structural integration.

Keywords: migrants, volunteering, youth, integration, intercultural understanding, belonging

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Introduction

Migrant integration remains a continuous challenge in many EU countries, as shown by the retreat from multiculturalism and concerns regarding Muslim migrants. In recent years, the increase in the number of asylum-seekers has added further complexities to the issue. Integration is, indeed, a highly challenged and much-criticised term. If it is true that, in most immigration societies, there are certain ideas about how migrants are to be incorporated into society, what this process should look like in concrete terms and what is meant by the term integration, however, is diverse, undecided, often contradictory and dependent on the respective social and political situation. In this context, this paper contributes to the understanding of processes of integration, adopting a bottom-up perspective that focuses on the micro-level and individuals' experiences. In particular, we address processes of integration, looking at the social interactions and intercultural understanding between young people with and without a migrant background that occur through volunteering.

Volunteering is considered to be an important aspect of today's society and a thermometer of a society's civic well-being (Bedford 2015: 464). Thus, volunteerism is supported by many European countries as well as EU institutions; indeed, it is estimated that around one third of EU citizens take part in some form of volunteering activity. Bringing together the field of migration studies and research on volunteering, we look at volunteering as one piece in the broader puzzle of the process of integration. We investigate whether and to what extent volunteering would foster processes of social integration and intercultural relations. Could volunteering facilitate community-building and bring young people – both with and without a migrant background – closer together? Could volunteering help people to feel part of a community and foster intercultural understanding and relations? What are the effects of volunteering experiences on interpersonal contacts, senses of belonging and processes of empowerment? Addressing these questions, our analysis highlights how volunteering is a form of positive social interaction, that intersects with dynamics of inclusion and helps to overcome the tensions, conflicts and problems that persist in European societies.

We analyse the experience of a group of 30 young people (aged 18–27), composed of EU and third-country nationals, who were selected to carry out volunteering activities in the realms of creative arts/culture and/or sports in six European contexts (Vienna/Austria, Rotterdam/the Netherlands, Zagreb/Croatia, Slovenia, Glasgow/Scotland and the Italian province of South Tyrol).¹ In this way, we aim to provide an in-depth account of volunteering experiences, focusing on their effects on the participants' intercultural understanding and relations, interpersonal contacts, sense of belonging and processes of empowerment. The analysis is based on data collected through self-administered online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the group of volunteers, conducted in two phases both prior to and towards the end of the volunteering experience. The volunteers carried out volunteering activities, in mixed-gender and intercultural settings in the framework of a volunteering association, for almost a year.² Scholarship on volunteering/migrant volunteering rarely relies on this type of research design, preferring large surveys and/or analysis conducted at a single point in time.

It should be noted that the analysis involves a variety of geographical contexts, representing a microcosm of the EU. Thus, it is necessary to highlight the differences between these contexts in terms of migration and volunteering experience. Indeed, they range from countries with a long experience of migration (Rotterdam/Netherlands, Vienna/Austria) to areas that have started to deal with it only recently (Ljubljana/Slovenia and Zagreb/Croatia). Furthermore, in South Tyrol and Glasgow/Scotland, recent migration patterns intersect with the presence of national minorities or peripheral nationalism. In some cases, like South Tyrol and Vienna/Austria, volunteering is a more popular, more structured and regulated phenomenon. Finally, some volunteering activities took place in large cities such as Vienna and Rotterdam, whereas others were based in smaller urban contexts like Bolzano/Bozen in South Tyrol.³ Before proceeding with the analysis, the next two sections delineate the theoretical approach and the methodology of the research.

At the intersection of integration and volunteering: Theoretical approach and state of the art

Though the understanding of migrant integration has evolved over time, it remains a contested concept. Early conceptual models of integration predominantly assumed a homogeneous majority society and a relationship between an ‘us’ and the ‘them’, with distinctions based on cultural, religious or ethnic affiliation or nationality. Thus, built on nation-state epistemologies that downplay hierarchical power relations, these models perceived differences and foresaw a straight-line process of adaptation of those defined as ‘different’ in order to produce a whole (Dahinden 2016). More recently, civic integration has become a fashionable concept which requires migrants to prove their willingness to integrate into the host society by, for example, taking language courses and classes on specific features of the country (see Goodman 2014). Alternative ideas on integration focus, instead, on the notion of diversity, reflecting the increasing social complexity in immigration societies resulting from manifold processes of social, cultural, religious and economic heterogenisation in a globalised world. The introduction of the term ‘inclusion’ as an alternative in the debate added to the complexity of the discussion but did not necessarily offer a solution. Both approaches – integration and inclusion – are concerned with the question of access to and participation in, *inter alia*, subsystems such as education, employment and housing. However, while integration places a stronger emphasis on the active participation of individuals, expecting them to have a desire to integrate, inclusion starts from the assumption that society is interested in ensuring it as kind of a societal obligation.

Though contested, rather than discharging or substituting the concept of integration, we argue in this contribution for the necessity to highlight the complexity and multifaceted aspects of processes of integration. Indeed, as long recognised, integration is not only a two-way process of mutual adaptation that involves two types of actor (the migrant individual and society at large)⁴ but is also, as pointed out by Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas (2016), a multidimensional non-linear phenomenon. According to Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas (2016: 14–16), integration unfolds at different paces along three interrelated dimensions: the legal-political dimension, which concerns the recognition of migrants’ residence and political rights; the socio-economic dimension, which pertains to migrants’ access to socio-economic institutions such as the labour market, housing and education; and the cultural–religious dimension, which refers to the culture and customs of migrants and the host society and their intersection. Similarly, Heckmann and Schnapper (2009: 10) operationalise the concept of integration in terms of ‘structural integration’ (the acquisition of rights and access to core institutions) and ‘cultural integration’ (cognitive, cultural, behavioural and attitudinal change). In addition, the authors speak of ‘social integration’, which concerns the private sphere and private relationships (social relationships, friendship, weddings, voluntary associations and so on), whereas feelings of belonging and identification compose the ‘identificational integration’ (Heckmann and Schnapper 2009: 10; see also EFFNATIS 2001: 9).

Building on these insights, we consider integration as an open process that reflects the fact that societies are never ‘finished and completed’ but in constant transformation (Salat 2013: 137) – thus, how people form and become part of a society also changes over time. This process unfolds at the individual as well as at the societal level. The former involves, on the one hand, ‘social integration’, which concerns an individual’s personal relations, social networks and civic and political engagement. On the other hand, individuals should enjoy ‘structural integration’ which implies that they are able to access key areas like housing and the labour market. At the societal level, the focus is on society at large. Integration implies the commitment by society to pursue ‘social cohesion’ with specific tools – such as the recognition of civic, political and social rights, anti-discriminatory measures, diversity and multicultural policies and the promotion of civic activities. These different aspects are complementary and interrelated; a socially integrated individual might still struggle in a disintegrated society where s/he suffers from structural discrimination. In other words, we argue for the individual’s integration in

a society that is integrated; namely processes of integration should not be centred exclusively on the degree to which individuals become part of communities – society as a whole needs to be integrated.

Within this framework, we focus in this article on processes of integration at the individual level. In particular, we address individuals' experiences of integration at the micro level, focusing on volunteering activities. We trace how taking part in volunteering interacts with intercultural understanding and social relations between young people, both with and without a migrant background. Several studies have analysed the consequences of volunteering from different perspectives, e.g., measuring its economic value or considering its social, political and/or structural effects. Scholars have highlighted several benefits of volunteering, from enhancing mental and physical health, to strengthening self-esteem, increasing social contacts and gaining skills (e.g. Schmedemann 2009; Sherraden, Lough and McBride 2008). It has been noted how volunteering intersects with personal identity, people's relationship with society, sense of mattering and processes of empowerment (Piliavin 2010; Wilson 2012). Studies on the impact of volunteering refer in general to the contribution of volunteering to different forms of individuals' capital – i.e., human, cultural and social (Smith, Buckley, Bridges, Pavitt and Moss 2018; Smith, Ellis, Gaskin, Howlett and Stuart 2015). However, the extent of these benefits depends on the type of volunteering as well as on the specific features of the volunteer (Piliavin 2010).

On the other hand, research on the interplay between volunteering and migration has produced manifold and, to some extent, ambivalent scientific findings. Indeed, the relationship between volunteering and migration has often been seen in problematic terms because the presence of migrants has been blamed for eroding social cohesion; erosion which, in turn, reduces the willingness of people to volunteer. Furthermore, migrants appear to be less involved in volunteerism, though their participation increases with the length of their residency; scholars have pointed out various factors hindering migrants' decision to volunteer, such as a lack of language proficiency and cultural heritage and bureaucratic barriers (Khvorostianov and Remennick 2017; Manatschal 2015; Voicu 2014). Finally, there is a tendency to see migrants mainly as passive recipients of volunteering activities (Ambrosini 2020: 11); alternatively, some scholars have criticised volunteering by migrants as a form of free work through which people have to prove their commitment to integrating, which has a negative connotation (Pasqualetto 2017).

More positive perspectives on the interplay between volunteering and migration come from those scholars who call for the focus to be on migrants' active volunteering experiences, which is considered as a form of active citizenship that fosters confidence and relieves social marginality (Ambrosini 2020; Slootjes and Kampen 2017). From this perspective, citizenship is not just the recognition of a juridical status from above but, rather, a process – or better, a social practice – through which people acquire rights, access to services, skills and recognition (Erminio 2022). Volunteering is an act of practicing such 'citizenship from below', which signals individuals' social competences and relations and their contribution to and participation in society (Ambrosini and Baglioni 2022: 16). In this regard, volunteering by migrants is seen as an indicator of their successful integration. Volunteering can provide several benefits to migrants, like lessening labour-market discrimination (Ambrosini 2020: 17; Baert and Vujić 2016). In particular, as pointed out by Handy and Greenspan (2009), volunteering can attenuate the negative effects of the migration experience, fostering the social and human capital lost in the relocation process. Indeed, research shows that, among the reasons why migrants volunteer, gaining a foothold in the new place, socialising and enhancing their self-esteem and their skills all play an important role (Cattacin and Domenig 2014). Thus, volunteering can act as 'a path leading to gradual social inclusion' (Khvorostianov and Remennick 2017: 353). Building on these insights, this paper intends to contribute to the understanding of the role that youth volunteering plays as a tool to strengthen the community and sustain social integration.

Methodology: Pre- and post-measurements through interviews and questionnaires

This analysis is centred on the micro-level experience of a group of young adults, both with and without a migrant background, who volunteered with an association in the field of sport or creative art/culture in mixed gender and intercultural settings. The research adopted a holistic and temporal perspective in order to grasp the complexity of volunteering and its role on young adults' intercultural understanding and relations, interpersonal contacts, sense of belonging and processes of empowerment (Hardill, Baines and 6 2007: 401). To assess and measure the effects of volunteering experiences, we used mixed techniques for gathering data, combining self-administered online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the volunteers who participated in the research.⁵ The interviews were given a more prominent role in the analysis. The questionnaires and interviews were first conducted between May and June 2019, before the beginning of the volunteering activity, whereas the second phase of data collection took place from March to April 2020, towards the end of their volunteering experience and at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of this latter and the related lockdown measures implemented in various countries, the second wave took place mostly online, without any physical interaction.⁶

Both the interviews and the online questionnaire addressed issues related to the volunteering experience, interpersonal relations, sense of belonging and empowerment, lasting 45 to 80 minutes and 10 minutes respectively. In the second phase of data collection, questions were included on the participants' subjective view of the perceived effects of their volunteering experience.⁷ Interviews allowed the researchers to delve into people's feelings of belonging and their perception of being or not being part of a community and any potential changes in their networks of friends and social contacts. In this regard, a social mapping exercise was used as an analytical tool in order to trace people's social networks (Greene and Hogan 2005). The first and second interviews were then summarised and coded – using the computer-based analysis programme Atlas.ti – and examined by applying thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules 2017). The questionnaires were developed with tested item batteries from established quantitative research and provided hints on changes over time and the extent of such changes. The questionnaire datasets of both waves were merged and analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software and disaggregating the data by gender, EU/non-EU origin and the intensity of volunteering engagement. Both interviews and questionnaires were anonymised using an ID code. The data from the questionnaires and interviews were combined by triangulating the results.⁸

The group of 30 young adults involved in the research included 17 EU citizens (EUN) (two of whom were born in a non-EU country) and 13 third-country nationals (TCN) with various legal statuses and lengths of residency in the country and born in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia and Turkey. The group of volunteers was composed with an eye to respecting the gender balance – with a prevalence of 18 women – and reflected different levels of education and social class.⁹ Of the 30 young adults, three were volunteers in Glasgow/Scotland, four in Rotterdam/the Netherlands, five volunteers each in Slovenia and Zagreb/Croatia, six volunteers in Vienna/Austria and seven in South Tyrol. In these six contexts, they engaged in formal volunteering, defined as an activity carried out through an association or organisation willingly and without being forced or paid to do so (except for the reimbursement of expenses). It should be noted that most of the participants had already been engaged with volunteering associations in several fields and in various roles, including administrative tasks, teaching and translating, in sectors such as humanitarian aid, music and sport.

For the purpose of this research, the volunteers collaborated with associations involved in the field of sport or creative art and culture, which provided a volunteering experience in gender-mixed and intercultural settings. Many of the associations represented a bridging form of volunteering, which 'targets members of

other social and ethnic groups' (Khvorostianov and Remennick 2017: 338) *and* some of them addressed issues related to cultural diversity.

The volunteers engaged in volunteering activities with varying degrees of commitment, ranging from a few hours every day, one day a week or a few times a month to an occasional engagement. Indeed, some needed time to find a suitable volunteer position, had to change their voluntary role and organisation or had to interrupt their volunteering engagement for personal reasons or due to time limitations encountered in the course of the project. Over a period of about a year, each of them spent on average 52 hours volunteering. Three out of four volunteers were involved on a regular basis, weekly or monthly, with an average duration of involvement of seven months, whereas seven participants volunteered for four months or less.

Volunteering roles and activities varied between the participants and were decided in collaboration with the volunteers, the associations and the researchers, based on the individual's personal skills, interests and time constraints. Activities ranged from training football (soccer) teams to collaborating in theatre performances, planning events and teaching circus skills to children, with fluent transitions between roles. It should be noted that, with the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic, volunteering activities were changed and adapted to the new conditions – by switching to online mode – or were ultimately stopped.

Empirical findings

In what follows, we examine the issue of whether these volunteering experiences offer the opportunity to promote social integration. Based on the responses of the 30 participants, we look in detail at the development of intercultural exchange and personal networks as well as the sense of belonging in the intercultural settings created in the various sites. Finally, we look at whether and how volunteering has influenced personal skills and empowerment. In practical terms, we proceed in the following manner: as an introduction, we start with an overview of the results from the self-administered online questionnaires. In the next step, we present the results from the qualitative in-depth interviews in each section. Here, we zoom into the statements of our participants, so to speak, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the different dimensions of social integration.

Volunteering and intercultural understanding

The results of the self-administered questionnaires show that the participants became more accustomed to dealing with cultural diversity during their voluntary engagement. The majority of the volunteers (25), regardless of gender or nationality, noted that their relationship with other cultures and their experiences in encountering difference changed positively whereas, for the remaining five persons, it did not change at all. No participant stated that the relationship with other cultures had changed in a negative way during volunteering.

Obviously, the social encounters within the volunteering context allowed the participants to reflect on their own cultural habits and self-perceptions and to learn through personal exchanges and active listening about the points of view of persons with a different background. For example, as pointed out by a volunteer with a migrant background in Rotterdam, interactions during volunteering made her wonder 'why people act the way they do, why they are different to me in what way' and made her more aware of the Dutch customs she had unconsciously acquired. In addition to learning about other customs, cultures and traditions and how to deal with differences, volunteers highlighted the pronounced similarities with their counterparts since, as youth, they often share common goals and interests and experience similar life events. Thus, a volunteer in Croatia mentioned how she has only now realised how culturally similar she is to people of Bosnian descent.

Thus, the interactions during the volunteering activity helped people to recognise their intermediate status between different cultures, allowing some of them draw the best from each.

A young woman of Armenian descent, born and raised in Turkey and who volunteered in Slovenia, explains how shared goals and activities in a multicultural setting made her feel quite comfortable and how she enjoyed this experience:

The team was me and two other volunteers – one from Turkey, one from Spain. One was helping in culinary tasks, in the kitchen; one was putting on cultural events and assisting, helping, like me. And the rest of the team was from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, India and Algeria. So, it was a very mixed space (...) and of course Slovenian. It was mixed and we were getting along so well. And we were not feeling any different, really. It was so nice actually.

Concrete contacts in the volunteering environment offer the possibility to actually learn about the personal stories and hardships of, for example, refugees. At the same time, the potential tensions between the similarities and differences resulting from the mix of cultural backgrounds may come to the fore. These are well reflected in a statement by an Austrian volunteer who was born and raised in Vienna:

So, what it means to be a refugee and to be repressed or expelled, is something that I could not have imagined before. And I mean, I would not say that I can imagine it now either, but at least now I certainly have a better insight. That has nothing to do with culture per se. Interculturally, I think, on the one hand, what has been confirmed for me is that the differences between people are not so big – whatever culture they come from – and, on the other, my understanding has its limits. For example, when we talk about things such as not letting girls play football (...) it depends on how you define understanding but I don't think that that is okay; I lack understanding on the one hand and, on the other, I understand now where they [participants with a refugee background] come from, better.

The quote provides a more nuanced picture of the issue of how diversity and cultural differences can be negotiated in the context of joint activities. Though this volunteer is not ready to agree that women should not play football, he at least tries to understand the reasons why, in other cultures, this view is widespread.

The volunteering experience helped some participants to rethink their stance regarding intercultural cooperation. In that vein, a female volunteer in Glasgow, of Nigerian descent, stated that.

I never knew I could enjoy working in a team. Then I knew I could enjoy going... with, like, new people from different countries and all that stuff. So, it's made me realise that maybe I actually love, you know, to be really open to all those culture(s) and I never realised that but now I do.

Though most volunteers reported an increase in intercultural understanding, the specific context and the related opportunity structures affected volunteers' experiences. Indeed, from the interviews, different levels of familiarity with diversity and intercultural relations emerged. For volunteers who live in superdiverse cities like Rotterdam, Glasgow or Vienna, multiculturalism and intercultural relations were seen as the norm in their daily life as well as during volunteering; however, at the same time, volunteers in Vienna highlighted how migrants and refugees are actually on the margins of society. In a more positive direction, a volunteer in Rotterdam pointed out that

Rotterdam is a multicultural city. The volunteering place really mirrors that (...) Every time you enter it, you encounter different cultures... It is normal, that just happens here (...) we just know how to deal with each other and different cultures. That is the fun (...) That creates the mood at [the volunteering place]. I find that very positive. We are rich in that sense. In that sense, I notice it, in a positive way. But it is not remarkable to me.

In contrast, in countries with less experience of migration-related diversity, such as Croatia and Slovenia, volunteers pointed to a different scenario. In particular, volunteers in Croatia stressed the presence of tensions between the majority of the population and minorities, especially Roma and Muslim minorities.

Volunteering and interpersonal relations

Engaging in volunteering activities can be an opportunity to increase a person's social networks, to meet people and to make new acquaintances and friends. In the questionnaires, we asked the participants whether or not they had gained new friends through volunteering and whether they think that these friendships will last beyond the voluntary engagement. The majority (24 of the 30 volunteers) indeed met people with the prospect of lasting friendships. Participants with a migrant background appear to be more optimistic in this respect, with seven of them indicating that they are quite sure that they have made new friends.

However, as emerged in the qualitative interviews, personal characteristics determine the social relations developed during the volunteering experience. In this regard, our participants can be divided into two groups. Those volunteers who were already socially highly active persons and engage in various social circles are not necessarily in need of establishing new ties, even though they did so. More-insular persons who find meeting new people and interacting with strangers quite difficult, appreciated the setting of the volunteering experience and associations since it facilitates social interactions. In particular, male third-country nationals seem to have benefited from the volunteering experience by gaining new friendships. Indeed, only six of the 30 volunteers did not spend time with their fellow volunteers outside the volunteering associations, while six of the eight male TCN participants met up with many people they had known through volunteering, apart from their actual activity.

In the qualitative interviews we found examples of volunteering as an occasion to develop various types of social relationship, some of which can be perceived as deep as family ties, as a female volunteer in Austria who was born in Iran remarked:

(...) Not that we are just a soccer group and that we meet and train every week, or twice a week but it is like a family. There are also exchanges between the coaches and players, we exchange opinions, we exchange memories or, now, especially in this corona crisis, especially the problems we have or everything, just everything.

Other participants discussed the issues of time and space, arguing that the volunteering activity is one among many other spheres of encounter and activity, which leaves them to restrict the volunteering contacts to this sphere in particular. A female volunteer in Rotterdam whose parents came from Surinam explains:

I always see them there and you have these deep conversations, which you do not have with just anyone. But these [people] are not necessarily friends that I am in touch with every day, but people who you share these conversations with, which you appreciate very much.

For asylum-seekers who find themselves in a completely new environment and who often lack social contacts, volunteering offered the opportunity to deepen their friendships and to find someone to share problems with, as the following example from South Tyrol shows:

I met XY [there]. I knew him before, when we arrived in Italy you know, we arrived on the same day. But we were not as close before as we are now. Yeah, before Volpower we were (just) friends, playing soccer together, but now we are really friends and we tell each other things (...). Now, if I had something in Italy, at work or so (...) the first person I talk to would be him. It used to be my uncle or ZZ but now it's him.

Nevertheless, this asylum-seeker from Nigeria has a small circle of friends and describes himself as extremely shy. However, he argues that the voluntary engagement helped him to relate to other people, which also improved his relations with his colleagues at work.

Volunteering and a sense of belonging

In the self-administered questionnaires, we asked the participants to assess, in a very generalised way, changes in their sense of belonging to the country in which they reside. The question is whether or not the volunteering experience had any impact in this respect. Among the 30 participants, no-one actually reported a negative change. There are remarkable differences depending on the migration background: among the 15 participants with a migration background, the sense of belonging has developed in a positive way for nine of them, whereas non-migrants display more or less the reverse pattern, with the majority (again, nine out of 15) reporting no changes in their sense of belonging. This suggests that a voluntary engagement can have a positive effect on the sense of belonging, especially for newcomers. In addition, we were interested in other dimensions of belonging and again asked about them both before and after volunteering. This exercise revealed a more nuanced picture. Most of the volunteers confirmed that they had a high level of close bonds with family and friends, feelings of inclusion when with other people and, though slightly less strong, feelings of connection with and acceptance by others. On the other hand, there was at the same time a slight increase in the number of volunteers who claimed that they felt like an outsider, as a stranger, when together with other people, isolated from the rest of the world and not being considered by other people. However, it should be kept in mind that the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures applied in many countries might have affected both people's mood and the results of the second wave of the questionnaire, most notably the issues related to social isolation.

By favouring social interactions, the volunteering experience has impacted on people's sense of belonging, inducing volunteers to renegotiate such feelings. Indeed, many volunteers point out that, through volunteering, they developed a feeling of being part of a community. However, the extent of this feeling varies since volunteers note spatial and temporal factors affecting their attachment to and involvement in the volunteering community. For example, whereas a participant, after increasing his volunteering commitment, stresses that 'I really am part of the community now (...) I realise I see it more as a second home than just a place where you are sometimes', another volunteer from Vienna speaks of a 'temporary community' in regard to her volunteering circle: 'Well, it's a community, definitely, but it's what I would call a temporary community. So again and again, suddenly, full of community and then, again, fully away'.

In this vein, the volunteering sphere indeed only plays a small part in the lives of the participants, while for some it is very important and made a great deal of difference – also in regard to belonging and feelings of being included. Others expressed a more negative assessment, like this young woman originating from Turkey and volunteering in Slovenia. She argues that there are spheres of a strong sense of belonging – as in her

workplace – but also spheres of exclusion, like discriminative attitudes towards people of colour in public places.

I mean... I lived as a volunteer here, so what I felt... I do not feel excluded but not super-included. Because if you say 'belonging', I don't think that I belong, I don't feel I belong, but it doesn't mean that I can't stay here... As I said, I have a life here, so I feel I don't need to be 100 per cent included to stay in a place.

Moreover, some volunteers express attachment to the places visited during the volunteering experience which helps them to build relationships and memories and which strengthens their sense of belonging, as can be seen from the statement of another volunteer in Vienna:

Like where we had a match or where we trained or where we met, and that now reminds me that I have a lot of good friends here that I can meet or talk to, and this city is all of us together. That gives me a good feeling when I think that I also belong to it.

The last quote includes feelings of empowerment when the participant talks about Vienna being 'all of us together'. In the final section, we look into this notion in more detail.

Volunteering, skills and empowerment

Volunteering is an opportunity to take on new roles and, in this way, to acquire or improve personal skills. Interviewed volunteers highlighted the broad variety of skills which they had acquired during their volunteering engagement, both practical everyday skills as well as more specialised abilities. These range from organisational skills gained while collaborating in a theatre performance, to the communication skills necessary to participate in sporting activities, creative abilities developed in dancing or circus activities and leading skills used to guide groups of people. For those who do not know the official local language well, volunteering also becomes an occasion to practice speaking it in an informal and more relaxed setting. This might also come in handy in other spheres – like looking for a job – or other situations related to spheres of structural integration.

Turning from skills to empowerment, in the self-administered questionnaire we operationalised this complex issue by posing questions on self-determination and decision-making processes. Skills and empowerment are, of course, highly interrelated with individual competences, enabling the individual empowering processes of young adults. Feeling in charge of one's own life situation diminishes slightly when comparing the assessment in the questionnaires before and after the volunteering experience. One has again to keep in mind the beginning of the sometimes quite strict measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic around the time when the second wave of data collection was taking place. These events left many individuals – and not only young people – with a feeling of loss of control.

Nevertheless, the results of the qualitative interviews reveal that volunteering contributes to the empowerment of the participants, who point out that they have grown on a personal level by committing to and successfully pursuing a goal and showing perseverance even when the volunteering activity became difficult. Volunteering is a time-consuming choice that requires individuals to reflect on their priorities, become more aware of their own capacities and embark on new and challenging activities. As summarised by a volunteer active in Rotterdam, 'those are experiences that you take with you. I consider it a backpack that I take everywhere'.

Thus, volunteering is seen as a strategy enabling participants to work on their personal weaknesses and strengths, thus helping them to achieve their personal goals. The following quote by a participant in Rotterdam is proof of how empowering an activity may be, as young people need to leave their 'inner comfort zone' which might, at first, make them more vulnerable but which might, in the end, make them proud if they succeed, thus giving them more self-confidence:

To stand for something and speak up. To feel confident. To go for what you want. That sort of stuff. Dance is personal growth too. It goes hand in hand. The show is one thing but the classes as such, you show yourself, which is quite vulnerable. That alone is a big step. But if people look at you and you learn something new, that is what you must get over. That is what I have learned from dancing but also music and culture. You can also find me in music studios. Show a bit of yourself, be vulnerable. It is scary but also powerful. I think I learned to do that better. That obstacle becomes smaller every time the more you do it.

Other participants discussed issues of courage and confidence in relation to building networks and making friends. A volunteer in Glasgow, to give one example, felt at first that others rejected her because of her skin colour; however, she realised that it was partly her own lack of courage in trying to make new friends. Volunteering gave her the confidence to approach others and join in with new activities.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the volunteering experience in intercultural settings by a group of young adults both with and without a migrant background sheds new light on the role that youth volunteering plays in society and, more specifically, on how it intersects with dynamics of inclusion and processes of integration. Indeed, through an innovative approach which combined self-administered questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and foresaw pre- and post-measurements, the paper has provided an in-depth picture of formal volunteering and its effects, revealing how it influenced people's intercultural understanding, positively changing their perceptions of difference. Furthermore, volunteering affects individuals' network of social contacts, providing opportunities to develop new friendships, believed to last over time. This seems to be particularly relevant for vulnerable groups, like the male TCN participants, who might have limited social networks. In this way, volunteering experiences prompt people to renegotiate their sense of belonging, improving their access to the community in which they live, though with variations related to spatial and temporal factors. Finally, through volunteering, individuals might acquire new sets of skills and increase their feelings of empowerment by becoming more attentive to their weakness and strengths and achievement of goals. The different contexts and countries in which the volunteering activities took place does not seem to have played much of a role, though a few differences did emerge, for example in regard to how living in a superdiverse city affects the volunteering experience. However, it goes without saying that it is not possible to make broader generalisations or develop proper comparisons due to the limited number of participants. Further research is necessary to evaluate the role played by specific ambit and contextual factors in the intersection of volunteering and processes of integration.

To summarise, therefore, this contribution has highlighted the interaction between formal volunteerism and individuals' human, cultural and social capital, showing how it affects intercultural understanding and interpersonal contacts, a sense of belonging and skills and processes of empowerment. Thus, we point to the micro-experience of volunteering as an opportunity and a resource for social integration that fosters social intercultural interactions and sustains people's empowerment, helping people to navigate in their daily life.

Volunteering can be seen as a bottom-up beneficial and valuable device that strengthens society and its members as well as the process of migrant integration.

At the same time, the visibility of volunteers with a migrant background might help to change perceptions of migration and give a positive image of migrants – presenting them as ‘one of us’, as active citizens who contribute to society – rather than as a problem, as victims, as passive receivers of help or, worse, as a threat and as welfare abusers (Ambrosini 2020; Weng and Lee 2016). By favouring interactions and cultural exchanges among persons with different origins and cultural backgrounds, volunteering can support society in the process of its becoming more inclusive of people with different backgrounds.

However, we recognise that volunteering has its limits, since it cannot make up for all the integration challenges – such as those related to structural integration and the lack of social cohesion in society – for example, for being excluded or discriminated in other spheres of life, such as access to housing and the labour market or having a weak legal status. This point was clearly highlighted by a male volunteer, born in Eritrea, who arrived in Slovenia through the EU relocation scheme. He points out the difficulties in finding accommodation and how he gets rejected by the lessor when making a phone call: ‘Every day I feel comfortable. But when I’m looking for a new apartment, it’s hard. When I call, they cannot accept me... they ask “Where are you from?”’ In a similar way, a volunteering experience does not encompass the complexity of people’s sense of belonging. Indeed, how people negotiate belonging mirrors the different paces in the various dimensions of processes of integration. As emerged in our analysis, volunteering might have fostered feeling of inclusion in a specific social arena but people might still feel excluded in other settings. Mattes, Lehner, van Breugel and Reeger (2020) speak in this regard of ‘bubbles of belonging’ to capture this complex scenario of feelings of inclusion and exclusion in different spheres (see also Lehner, Mattes, van Breugel, Reeger and Scholten 2022). Yet, apart from such limits, our research has highlighted the extent to which volunteering can sustain people’s social integration.

To conclude, we are aware of some of the limits of our study. In particular, the analysed volunteering experiences concern a specific form of volunteering which we, as researchers, have supported along the way. However, we believe that the analysis contributes to the understanding of processes of integration in general and of social integration in particular, stressing the role that youth volunteerism could play in this regard. Thus, we call for further policies and measures to support youth volunteering and volunteering associations, addressing the particular challenges that might hinder the involvement of young migrants in an always more diversifying European society.

Notes

1. Regarding participants in Scotland, the terms ‘EU citizens’ and ‘third-country nationals’ refer to the period before Brexit. In the case of South Tyrol participants volunteered in the provincial capital Bolzano/Bozen and few others surrounding towns. In the case of Slovenia, volunteering activities took place in Ljubljana and surrounding areas.
2. This volunteering experience was enriched with activities organised for the volunteers within the framework of the Volpower project, such as a social media workshop held in Zagreb.
3. More detailed information on each context can be found in Volpower (2021).
4. The European Commission has defined ‘integration’ as a ‘dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States’ (Commission of the European Communities 2005: 5). See also OSCE (2012).
5. The research design and data gathering in all settings had to comply with the respective national legal situation, as well as those set out by the research institutions participating in the Volpower project, the

EU research integrity and ethics guidelines and finally the ‘Guidance Note – Research on Refugees, Asylum-Seekers and Migrant Refugees’ of the European Commission. Participants were informed about all steps in the project, had to give their informed consent and were guaranteed anonymity. Asylum-seekers and migrants were considered a particularly vulnerable group who needed strong safeguards in terms of research ethics. The procedures and safeguards followed in this project took this vulnerability into account and had been already approved as part of the project’s award process.

6. In this regard, it is necessary to keep in mind how the specific situation might have affected some of the participants’ answers in the second phase of data collection.
7. The questions in both the interview and the questionnaire avoided terms such as migrant, foreigner, national, EU nationals, third-country nationals, etc. as far as possible because of the different interpretations these terms might be given by different interviewees.
8. We used the traditional ‘convergence model’, which consists in the triangulation of the results of two datasets collected on the same phenomenon but using different techniques. The results were compared only in the interpretation phase to find convergences and contrasts. The data collection and subsequent analysis took place simultaneously but separately. The purpose of this model is formulating conclusions on a specific phenomenon, well corroborated by the use of more than one technique (see Creswell and Plano Clark 2007).
9. For privacy reasons, we do not provide any additional information on the study participants.

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No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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