



Youth Perspectives on Migration, Empathy, and Intercultural Communication

February 2025

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1. Introduction

The **Youth Ambassadors Project** focuses on empowering young people to address critical social issues such as migration, empathy, and intercultural communication. As part of this initiative, a survey was conducted among local youth from Spain, Finland, and Bulgaria to explore their perspectives and experiences in these areas. The survey aimed to gather valuable insights to design an experiential learning program that equips participants with the knowledge and skills to promote inclusivity and foster understanding between diverse cultural groups.

This report presents the results of the survey, shedding light on young people's understanding of migration challenges, their levels of empathy, and their ability to engage in effective intercultural communication. The findings highlight key trends, attitudes, and areas for improvement, which will guide the development of tailored activities within the project.

By analyzing these results, the Youth Ambassadors Project seeks to contribute to building stronger, more inclusive communities where young migrants and refugees can thrive and local youth can play an active role in creating positive social change.

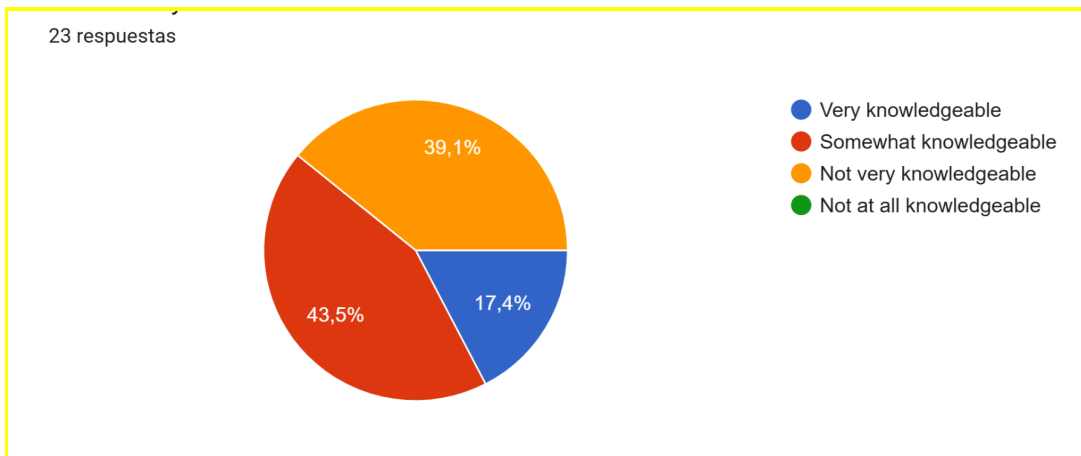
2. Finland

Research conducted by **IYC Suomi** highlights youth perspectives on migration, empathy, and intercultural communication in Finland.

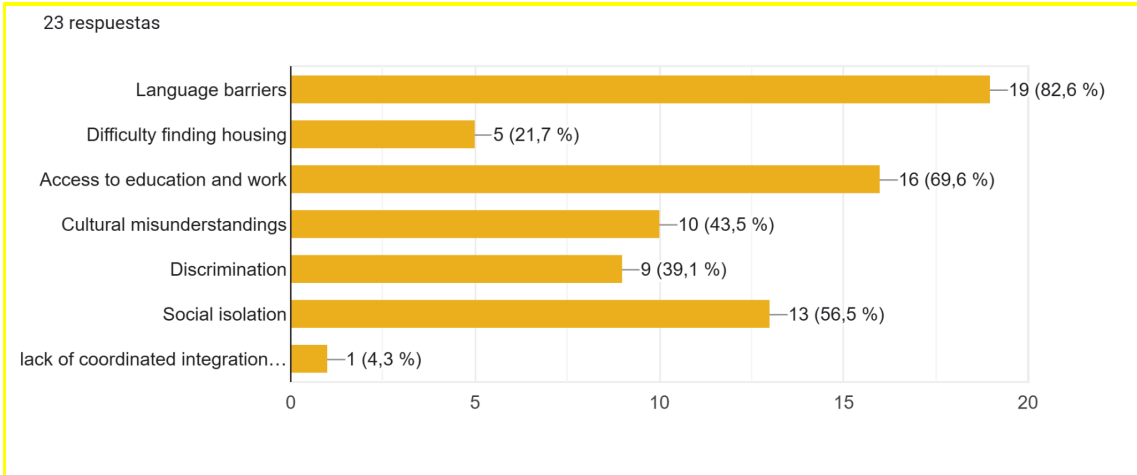
2.1 Survey responses

Section 1: Understanding of Migration Issues

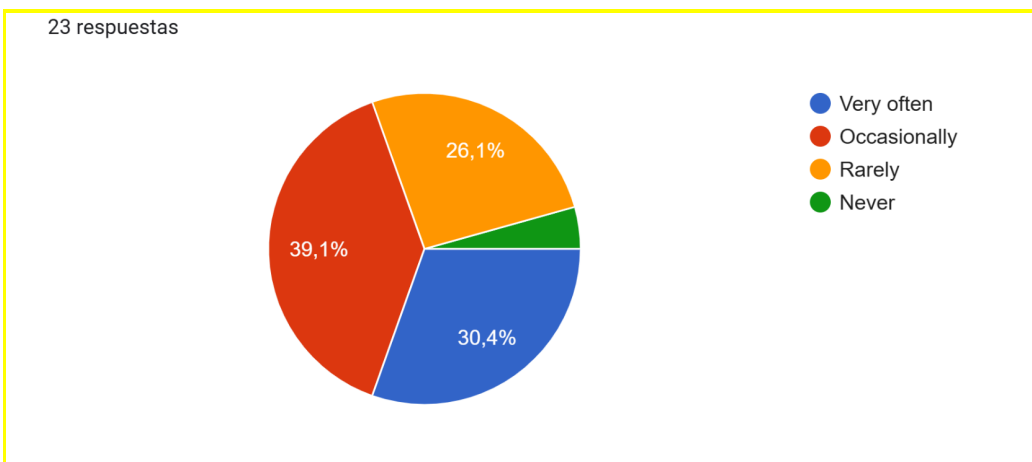
Question 1: How knowledgeable do you feel about the issues faced by young migrants and refugees in your community?



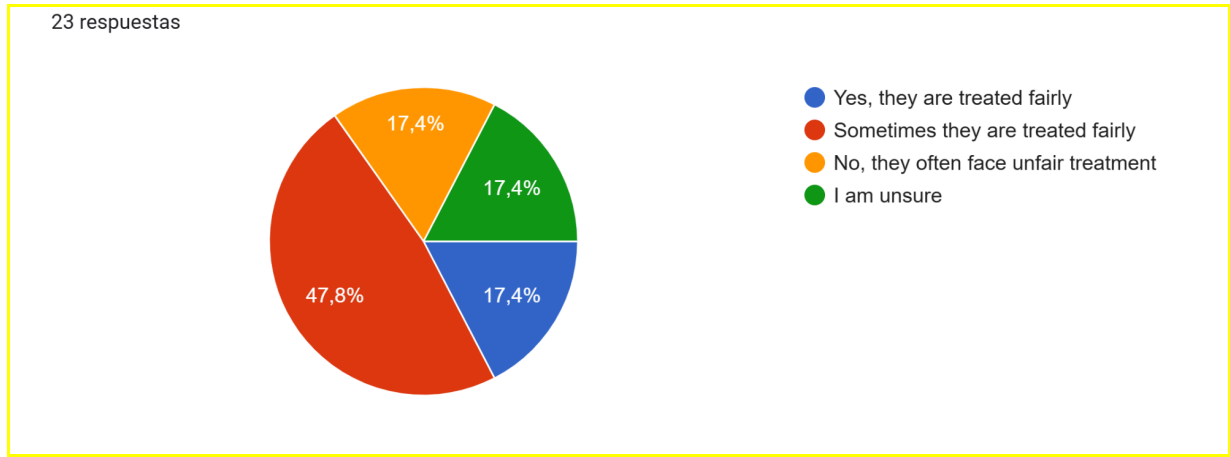
Question 2: Which of the following issues do you believe are most challenging for young migrants and refugees?



Question 3: How often do you think about the impact of migration on your community?



Question 4: Do you think young migrants and refugees are treated fairly in your community?



Question 5: Open-ended response

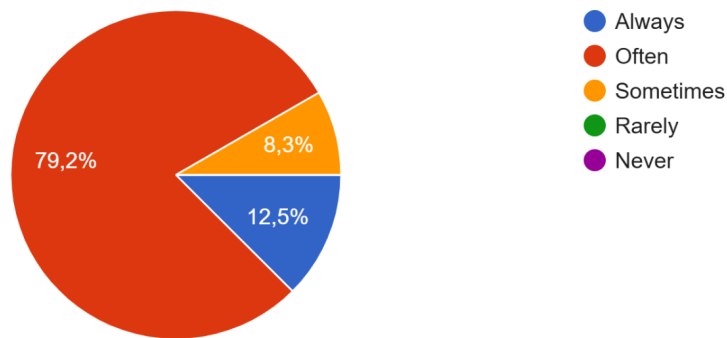
These are the main ideas we got from the 18 responses that we got from this question. They are organized from the most repeated topics to the least:

- Social inclusion, peer support and friendship. The importance of being open minded to new cultures and new situations, to learn from others. The need to help them to adapt to the host country culture to create a sense of belonging. "Learn about the life of migrants and refugees and how they are different from yours or from each other." " Being included in the community and have a group of people that support someone you can fall back on is very essential."
- Advocacy and awareness. Learn from each other and treat every one in a fair way. It was mentioned a few times that even though helping with job search, housing and language is important; promoting inclusive policies is fundamental and of vital importance for the change. "Lasting change comes from legislation and better policies."

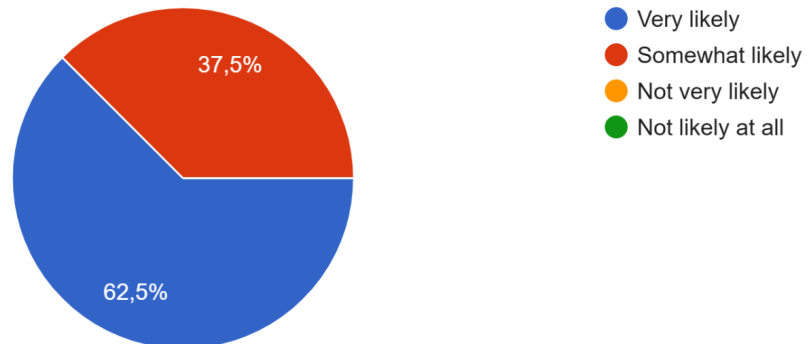
- Solidarity and volunteering. "Creating communities and clubs where help for homework, and job and housing applications is offered", organize activities and facilitate spaces to meet and socialize.
- Mentorship, Language and Learning Support. "Offer guidance on navigating education, employment, and cultural adaptation. Track the results to see if you could answer the real needs and offer new information and opportunities."

Section 2: Empathy Levels

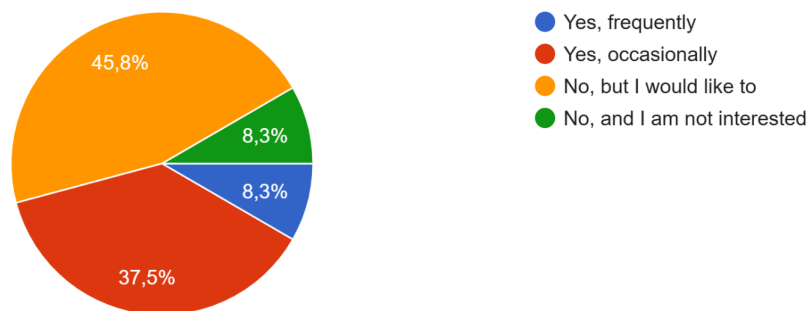
Question 6: How often do you try to understand the perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds?



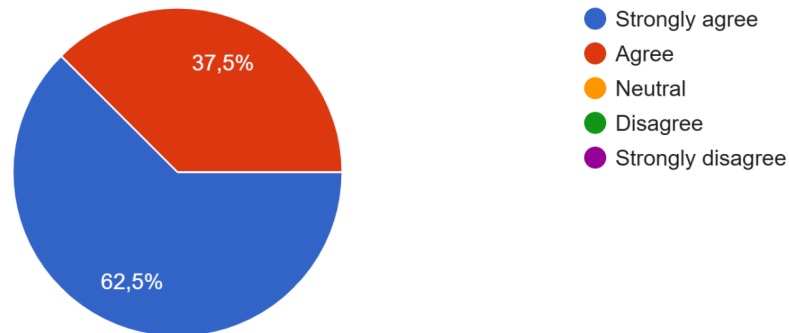
Question 7: When you see someone experiencing challenges related to migration, how likely are you to empathize with their situation?



Question 8: Have you ever taken part in activities or events aimed at supporting migrants or refugees?



Question 9: Do you believe empathy is essential in creating a welcoming community for migrants and refugees?



Question 10: Open-ended response

Understanding different perspectives

- Many respondents emphasized that people's opinions and views are shaped by their upbringing, cultures, and religion, highlighting the importance of listening and respecting differences.
- Some noted that learning from people of different backgrounds is enriching and expands one's worldview.

Challenges of integration

- Respondents observed that language barriers and cultural expectations impact integration, making it harder for newcomers to adjust to a new country.
- Some shared experiences of helping individuals navigate bureaucratic challenges, such as paperwork and job applications, as they had once faced similar struggles themselves.

Inequality and discrimination

- Several responses highlighted discrimination against migrants, such as difficulties in finding housing or employment due to prejudice.
- One person recounted a situation where a friend struggled to find housing because the landlord distrusted people from certain countries.
- Another respondent witnessed how difficult it is for immigrants to secure jobs, even with multiple degrees and experience, leading to stress and frustration.

Social exclusion and belonging

- Some respondents shared insights into how migrants feel welcomed on the surface but struggle to fully integrate into social circles.
- One response noted that migrants are often treated kindly but are still excluded from deeper social bonds.

Empathy through personal engagement

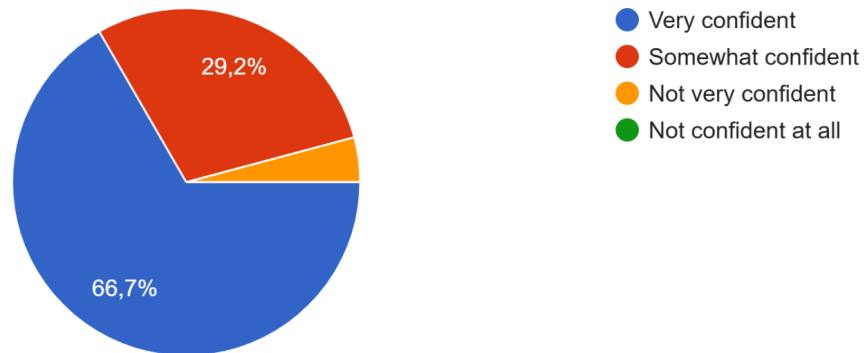
- Respondents mentioned personal experiences where they provided direct support, such as giving food to homeless individuals, helping with paperwork, and supporting refugees in community initiatives.
- A few responses described the emotional impact of hearing migration stories firsthand, realizing the deep stress and anxiety faced by those in uncertain circumstances.

Lessons in compassion and advocacy

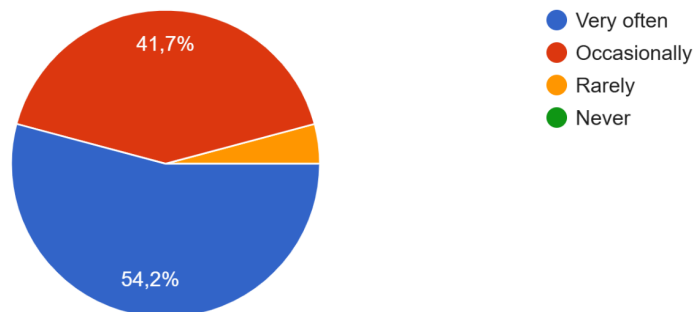
- Respondents highlighted that showing empathy and taking action can create meaningful change..
- Several noted that simply including people in conversations and social spaces can foster a sense of belonging and reduce social tensions.

Section 3: Intercultural Communication

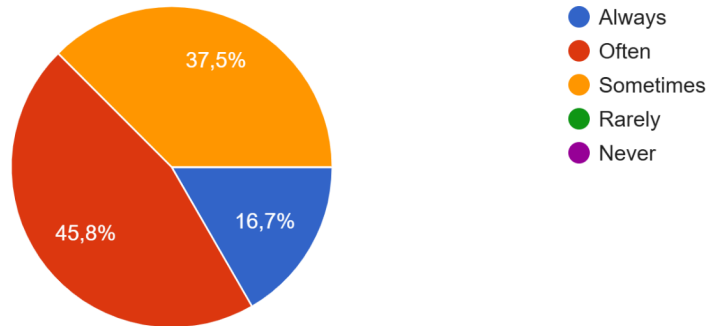
Question 11: How confident are you in communicating with individuals from cultural backgrounds different from your own?



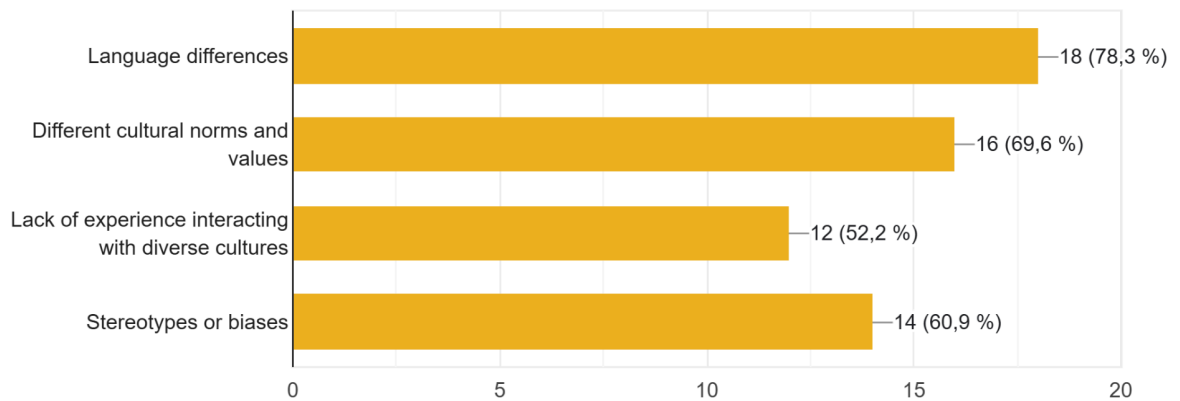
Question 12: How often do you communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds in your daily life?



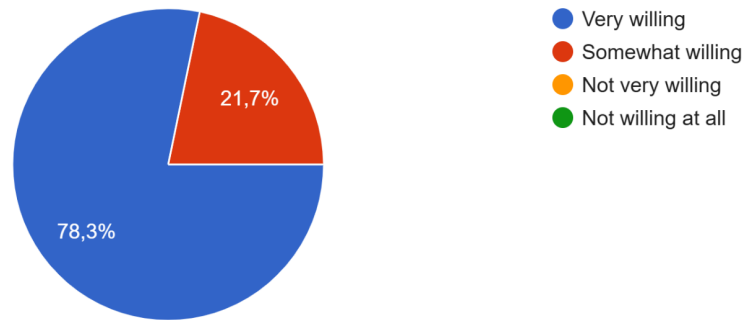
Question 13: When you communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds, do you feel that they understand you well?



Question 14: What barriers do you think prevent effective communication between people from different cultural backgrounds?



Question 15: How willing are you to improve your intercultural communication skills?



Question 16: Open-ended response

Creating spaces for interactions: Organizing events, activities, and workshops to encourage natural engagement.

Overcoming the language barrier: Providing Finnish and English language courses to facilitate communication.

Using shared activities: Sports, music, art, and cultural events can help connect people beyond language.

Encouraging openness: Motivating local youth to be more welcoming and step out of their social "bubble."

Providing more opportunities for face-to-face interaction: Enabling direct encounters to foster mutual understanding.

2.2 Focus Group Findings

2.2.1 Key Discussion Points by Theme

Theme 1: Understanding Migration

Main insights or challenges shared by participants:

The focus group brought together a diverse group of participants including international students, native Finns, PhD candidates, and young professionals. Their collective insights revealed several key challenges faced by young migrants in Finland, with language barriers and cultural differences emerging as the most significant obstacles to integration.

Language proficiency was identified as the primary barrier to effective communication and participation in Finnish society. While efforts to learn Finnish are generally appreciated by locals, the widespread use of English often limits real opportunities for migrants to practice and improve their Finnish skills. This gap contributes to feelings of isolation and exclusion from local communities, particularly outside of academic settings.

Participants also highlighted Finland's social culture—marked by a preference for personal space and minimal small talk—as a challenge for newcomers accustomed to more socially expressive cultures. These cultural norms, while deeply rooted in Finnish society, can be perceived as aloof or unwelcoming by migrants, hindering the formation of local connections. Participants made clear that once you understand the culture and realize it is nothing personal, doors start to open and it is easier to understand and bond with Finns.

Another major issue raised was the limited availability of communal spaces and social activities, especially outside of work or academic environments. This lack of

informal gathering spaces further restricts opportunities for meaningful interaction between migrants and local residents.

Geographical differences were also noted: Helsinki's international and multicultural environment offers more integration opportunities, while smaller cities tend to lack such diversity, often leading to greater social isolation for newcomers.

Finally, several participants shared that they had not been able to build strong connections with Finns, but had instead found a sense of community within international peer groups. While these networks provide essential emotional support, they may also reinforce separation from the broader society.

Suggestions or ideas for improving integration:

Participants shared a range of suggestions aimed at improving the integration of young migrants and refugees into Finnish society. These ideas reflected both personal experiences and broader reflections on what has worked—or could work—to foster deeper connection and inclusion.

One recurring theme was the importance of creating informal and inclusive spaces where locals and migrants can interact naturally. Participants suggested increasing access to community activities, shared hobbies, and public events (e.g. sports, cooking, art, and outdoor activities).

Language learning was seen as a cornerstone for integration. Participants recommended more accessible and engaging Finnish language courses, ideally integrated into community settings or everyday activities, to encourage practice and real-life application. They also emphasized the role of locals in supporting this process by encouraging and welcoming language learners.

Several participants noted that integration improved significantly when migrants showed genuine interest in Finnish culture and traditions, such as sauna, avanto

(ice swimming), and seasonal celebrations. Therefore, introducing cultural orientation programs or shared cultural experiences could help break the ice and create mutual understanding.

Another suggestion was to promote interaction through structured programs, such as mentorships or local pairing schemes, where locals and newcomers are intentionally brought together for cultural exchange or peer support.

Lastly, participants emphasized that respect for local customs is essential and that integration should also be a two-way process. Locals, institutions, and communities need to be open to cultural diversity and recognize the value of a blended identity, where migrants can feel they belong without giving up their own cultural roots.

Theme 2: Empathy in Practice

Stories or experiences shared about connecting across cultures:

Participants shared various personal experiences that highlighted the importance of cultural exchange and shared activities in building connections. A recurring example was how engaging in Finnish cultural traditions, such as sauna or avanto (ice swimming), helped break down initial social barriers. These experiences not only introduced migrants to local customs but also created common ground where authentic interactions with Finnish people could take place.

Some participants reflected on academic environments as settings where cross-cultural friendships formed more naturally due to the presence of international peers, structured support systems, and activities designed to promote interaction. In contrast, those who arrived in Finland outside of academia—such as accompanying a partner—reported finding more difficulties to settle their lives in Finland, finding a job, for example.

One participant shared a personal story from a different context—his time living in Scotland during the COVID-19 pandemic. He described the emotional impact

of isolation and how simply walking around the city helped him feel connected to his surroundings. Although not specific to Finland, this story resonated with the group as it reflected a common challenge for migrants: the struggle to build a sense of belonging in a new environment, especially during uncertain times.

Another story that resonated in the group was about a qualified psychologist who, despite the high demand for mental health professionals, was unable to practice in Finland due to language requirements and bureaucratic hurdles; even though she has a very good level of English and could work with international clients. This story opened a deeper reflection on how systemic obstacles can isolate skilled migrants and prevent valuable contributions to the community, sparking empathy among others present.

Some participants noted that they had never fully integrated with Finnish communities, but instead formed close bonds within international circles. While these networks offer vital support, they can also create unintended separation from the host society.

Key factors that helped foster empathy:

Participants identified several factors that fostered empathy between migrants and locals:

- Cultural curiosity: When migrants showed interest in local traditions and customs, Finns responded positively. This mutual cultural exchange laid the foundation for deeper understanding.
- Shared activities: Engaging in group experiences—whether cultural, academic, or recreational—helped both parties connect beyond language and cultural differences.
- Openness about struggles: Participants emphasized that empathy often emerged from honest conversations about personal difficulties.

Vulnerability, especially in relation to loneliness or integration challenges, helped others relate and offer support.

- Daily exposure and small interactions: Simple actions like taking regular walks in a new city helped create a sense of connection with the environment and opened the door to informal social encounters.
- Recognition of structural challenges: Listening to stories about bureaucratic and professional limitations (such as the psychologist’s case) made others more aware of the invisible burdens migrants carry.

Theme 3: Intercultural Communication Challenges

Barriers identified in communication with other cultures:

Participants identified several communication challenges that emerge in intercultural interactions, particularly between migrants and the Finnish host community.

One of the most significant barriers discussed was the difference in communication styles. Finnish culture values directness, personal space, and minimal small talk, which can be perceived as cold or distant by individuals from more expressive cultures. For example, Spanish participants noted the contrast between Finland’s quiet, reserved social settings and Spain’s more vibrant and loud social environments. Such differences can lead to misunderstandings or discomfort during initial interactions.

Another commonly mentioned challenge was the reluctance of Finns to initiate conversations. While Finnish people are often very helpful when approached, their tendency to avoid small talk or personal questions can limit spontaneous connections, especially for newcomers unfamiliar with these norms.

Language and identity also emerged as a communication barrier. Many participants observed that individuals express themselves differently depending on the language they are using. This can affect emotional expression, humor, and confidence—making it harder for migrants to show their “true self” when

speaking a language that is not their own. Furthermore, language limitations often prevent migrants from fully participating in conversations or navigating everyday interactions confidently.

Cultural misunderstandings were also highlighted as a barrier. Without prior knowledge or exposure, individuals may unintentionally misinterpret social signals, leading to feelings of exclusion or frustration. The need for open-mindedness and patience was emphasized when engaging with people from diverse backgrounds, both ways.

Proposed solutions or strategies to overcome these barriers:

Participants shared several practical strategies to overcome intercultural communication barriers and foster better understanding between cultures.

A key recommendation was to engage in shared activities, such as sports, cooking, or hobbies. These provide informal and low-pressure environments for people to connect naturally and build relationships, even when verbal communication is limited.

It mentioned the importance of choosing a path and following it, staying active and having a goal. During that process, achieving that goal will guide you to encounter other people with a common goal and, little by little, will build a connection and a sense of belonging.

Learning the local language, even at a basic level, was seen as crucial—not only for day-to-day interactions but also for showing effort and respect toward the host culture. Participants noted that Finnish people tend to respond warmly when they see foreigners making an effort to speak the language.

Showing genuine interest in Finnish customs and traditions—like sauna culture or outdoor activities—was also seen as an effective way to break the ice and demonstrate a willingness to integrate. This mutual exchange often led to more open and empathetic relationships.

Participants highlighted the importance of being honest about personal difficulties. Sharing struggles related to adaptation or isolation helped create deeper emotional connections and invited empathy from others who may have experienced similar challenges.

Finally, several participants stressed the importance of stepping out of one's comfort zone. Approaching locals with curiosity and openness, even in small ways, can lead to meaningful exchanges and foster a greater sense of belonging over time.

2.2.2 Solutions and Next Steps

Activities or programs participants think could promote inclusion:

Participants identified several informal and accessible activities that could effectively promote inclusion among young people in multicultural communities.

One widely supported idea was to encourage participation in hobby groups and sports. These spaces offer a relaxed environment for young people to connect with others who share similar interests. Sports, in particular, were highlighted as a natural way to build teamwork, trust, and communication skills—especially helpful for those who may feel hesitant due to language barriers.

Community events and workshops—especially those focused on shared interests such as music, cooking, or creative arts—were also seen as key to inclusion. These provide settings where cultural exchange happens organically and participants can bond over mutual enjoyment without the need for high-level language skills.

Participants also highlighted libraries as important hubs for integration. Many libraries in Finland already host cultural groups and activities, making them a valuable and accessible resource for inclusive programming.

Finally, several participants suggested cooking and sharing traditional meals from one's home country as a way to foster cultural connection. Food was

described as a universal language that brings people together, creating emotional comfort and opening the door to dialogue.

Specific actions young people can take to support inclusivity:

Young people can play a key role in promoting inclusion through both personal initiative and community engagement. Participants shared several practical actions they believe young people can take:

- Join and commit to regular group activities: Choosing one path—be it a sport, hobby, or community project—and sticking with it allows for repeated exposure, builds familiarity, and encourages meaningful connections over time.
- Volunteer for local organizations: Volunteering offers opportunities to collaborate with others while contributing to shared goals. This creates a sense of belonging and reduces the pressure of having to initiate deep conversations immediately.
- Create or co-host inclusive spaces: Young people can help by organizing informal gatherings, open workshops, or intercultural events that welcome diverse participation and encourage shared experiences.
- Encourage participation from newcomers: Being proactive in inviting migrants and refugees to join existing groups or events—especially in the early stages of arrival—can make a big difference in how welcome they feel.
- Practice empathy and patience: Taking the time to listen, understand different perspectives, and respect each other’s cultural backgrounds fosters a supportive and inclusive environment for everyone involved.

2.2.3 Additional Comments

Any unexpected insights or observations during the session:

The focus group discussion brought forward several enriching and unexpected insights that added depth to the topic of migrant integration in Finland.

It is important to note that this focus group was specifically designed for young locals. In our approach, we defined “young locals” as not only Finnish nationals, but also young people with dual nationality and those who have lived in Finland for several years and hold permanent residence status. This inclusive definition allowed us to bring together a diverse mix of perspectives—from native Finns to second-generation migrants and young people who arrived in Finland for various reasons, such as studies, family, or work.

This diversity of backgrounds greatly enriched the discussion. Participants were able to reflect both as members of the local community and as individuals who had experienced migration themselves, directly or indirectly. The range of voices—national, bicultural, and migrant—provided a multidimensional understanding of integration in Finland. It enabled the group to explore the enrichment side of cultural belonging, communication styles, and inclusion from multiple viewpoints.

One particularly striking insight was the contrast in integration experiences between those arriving through academic pathways and those who relocated for other reasons. Academic environments tend to offer more structured support and opportunities for international connection, while others often face more isolated and unstructured paths.

Another meaningful observation centered around the emotional complexity of language and identity. Participants discussed how their personalities shift depending on the language spoken, and how migrants may struggle to fully express their “true selves” in a second language.

A story shared by a participant about coping with isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland underscored how even small daily actions—like walking around the city—can foster connection and a sense of belonging.

Lastly, sharing food and traditional meals emerged as an unexpected but powerful tool for connection, comfort, and cultural exchange.

Overall, the atmosphere of the session was marked by openness, reflection, and empathy. The variety of perspectives created a safe and thoughtful space, where participants could express vulnerability and genuinely listen to each other. This richness in backgrounds and lived experiences elevated the discussion and contributed to a deeper collective understanding of what it means to connect and belong in a multicultural society like Finland.

2.2.4 Final Reflections

General conclusions or highlights from the session:

The session concluded with a series of reflections that highlighted the importance of both personal effort and community openness in achieving meaningful integration. Participants agreed that respecting the local culture is essential when living in another country, not as a demand for assimilation, but as a gesture of openness and mutual understanding.

One key point was the value of learning the local language. Even a basic effort to speak Finnish was seen as a sign of respect and commitment, often met with appreciation and encouragement from locals. Language was not only framed as a communication tool, but also as a bridge to understanding humor, social norms, and deeper cultural layers.

Participants also noted the importance of understanding Finnish humor and indirect cultural codes, which can help newcomers better navigate social interactions and feel more connected.

A powerful reminder emerged: immigrants often represent their home countries through their behavior, especially in smaller communities or first impressions. This sparked discussion on the need to avoid stereotypes and promote empathy on both sides.

Finally, the group agreed on the need to foster more intentional interaction between migrants and locals, rather than relying on parallel systems such as segregated language courses. Integration, they concluded, happens best through shared spaces, real conversations, and human connection.

2.3 Conclusions

The focus group in Finland brought together a rich variety of voices and lived experiences that allowed for a deep and honest conversation about integration. By including native Finns, young people with dual nationality, and long-term residents with migrant backgrounds, the session offered a multi-layered view of what it means to be “local” in a multicultural society.

Across the discussion, several key themes consistently emerged: language as both a barrier and a bridge, the importance of cultural curiosity and mutual respect, and the role of everyday social interactions in building connection. Participants emphasized that integration cannot be achieved through policy alone; it requires human connection, empathy, and shared experiences.

The group highlighted that integration is not a linear process, nor is it about becoming fully “native.” Rather, it is about finding a space between cultures, where people can maintain their identities while participating meaningfully in the life of their communities. The session reaffirmed that inclusive societies are built not only through structures and programs, but through personal effort, dialogue, and openness—on both sides.

As a result, this focus group not only generated valuable insights for the Youth Ambassadors project, but also served as a small-scale model of the kind of respectful and constructive space that young people can create when given the opportunity to share, listen, and reflect together.

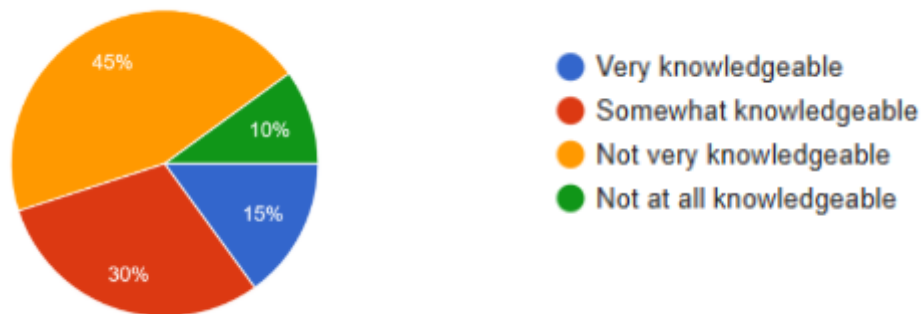
3. Spain

Research conducted by **Hi European Youth** highlights youth perspectives on migration, empathy, and intercultural communication in Spain.

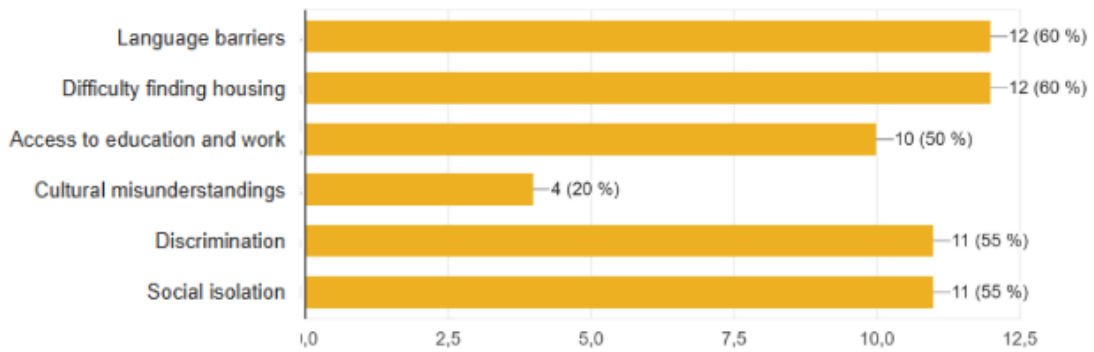
3.1 Survey responses

Section 1: Understanding of Migration Issues

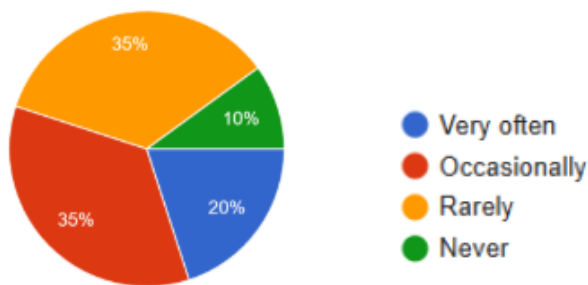
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Question 2: Which of the following issues do you believe are most challenging for young migrants and refugees?



Question 3: How often do you think about the impact of migration on your community?



Question 4: Do you think young migrants and refugees are treated fairly in your community?



Question 5: Open-ended response

From the 20 responses collected, several key themes emerged regarding how young people can actively contribute to the inclusion of migrants and refugees.

1. Promoting Cultural Exchange and Mutual Learning

- Some participants emphasized teaching migrants about local culture to help them adapt more easily.
- Others highlighted the importance of learning from migrants' cultures, recognizing that cultural exchange benefits both individuals and society.
- Example response: *"Leaving prejudices behind and allowing ourselves to learn from their cultures. In this era of globalization, having international friends helps both individual and collective development."*

2. Individual and Community Engagement

- Many respondents mentioned direct, personal interactions as a way to foster integration:
 - Forming friendships and including migrants in daily activities such as social outings and sports.
 - Pairing each migrant with a local volunteer to provide personalized support, similar to a mentorship or "buddy" system.

- Example response: *"I think integration starts at the local level. There are migrants in our schools, universities, and communities—welcoming them personally is the first step."*

3. Volunteering and Participation in NGOs

- Several participants suggested joining NGOs or community initiatives dedicated to supporting migrants and refugees.
- Example response: *"Participating in volunteer programs, staying informed, and supporting projects that help migrants integrate."*

4. Education and Language Support

- Some participants proposed teaching Spanish to migrants and helping them practice the language in social settings.
- Example response: *"Giving Spanish lessons, teaching them about the culture, and integrating them into everyday activities."*

5. Creating Inclusive and Supportive Environments

- A recurring theme was the need to foster welcoming spaces free from discrimination.
- Social media was also mentioned as a tool to raise awareness and advocate for inclusion.
- Example response: *"We can use social media to raise awareness and participate in volunteer programs that promote inclusion and mutual support."*

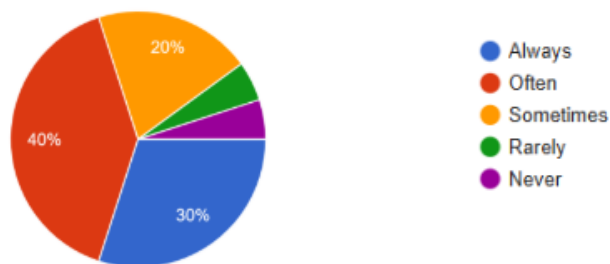
6. Sports, Group Activities, and Social Engagement

- Some participants suggested group sports or joint activities as effective ways to break down social barriers.

- Example response: *"Organizing group sports activities from different countries, educational talks, and cultural events to bring people together."*

Section 2: Empathy Levels

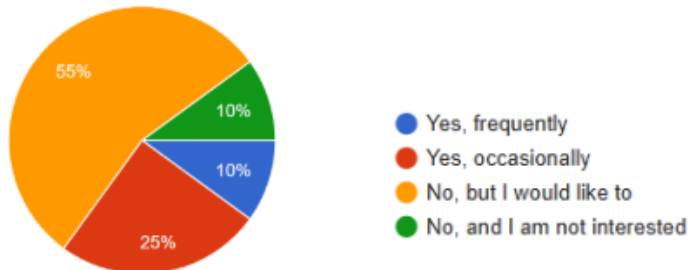
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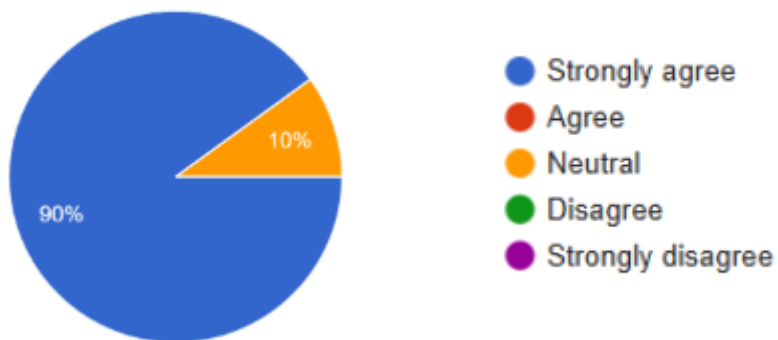
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Question 8: Have you ever taken part in activities or events aimed at supporting migrants or refugees?



Question 9: Do you believe empathy is essential in creating a welcoming community for migrants and refugees?



Question 10: Open-ended response

From the responses collected, participants shared diverse experiences where they empathise with someone from a different background. These stories highlight key lessons on understanding, solidarity, and personal growth.

1. Recognising that everyone has a different reality

- Many participants acknowledged that each person's struggles and experiences are unique.
- Example response: *"I learned that we never truly know the difficulties someone is going through. Whenever we have the opportunity to help, no matter how small it may seem to us, it can mean a lot to someone else."*

2. Meeting people from different backgrounds through education and work

- Several respondents mentioned that university exposed them to people from diverse cultures and social classes, which changed their perspectives.
- Example response: *"During my studies, I met people from different places and social classes. In a short time, I went from being a 'conservative' person to realizing that diversity and exchange bring social and intellectual wealth."*
- Others shared that interacting with patients, classmates, or coworkers from different cultural and economic backgrounds helped them develop empathy and break down stereotypes.

3. Learning from first hand stories of hardship

- Some participants empathized deeply when hearing personal migration stories, particularly those involving war, poverty, or persecution.
- Example response: *"A woman who came to clean my house told me about the situation in her country and how she had nearly been killed multiple times. I realized how much we take for granted."*

4. Volunteering and firsthand engagement

- Many responses emphasized volunteering with migrants, refugees, or underprivileged children as a powerful way to build empathy.
- Example response: *"I volunteered at a school where most students were immigrants. I saw how crucial their adaptation was for them to develop normally in society."*

5. Supporting migrants in personal networks

- Some participants shared how they helped friends or acquaintances who were migrants with language, paperwork, or integration.
- Example response: *"I have a friend, Elías, who came to Spain illegally in a small boat from Algeria. My boyfriend's family is helping him get his papers, and we support him in learning Spanish, finding work, and adapting. I believe it's important to help, but also to teach them our values, as that's what drew them here."*

6. The power of small actions and human connection

- Some responses highlighted how simple acts of kindness, such as eating with someone, helping them navigate social situations, or listening to their stories, created meaningful impact.
- Example response: *"A new classmate had trouble with her friends and wasn't sure if it was due to cultural differences. I learned that kindness and empathy transcend all cultural barriers."*

7. Lack of personal experience

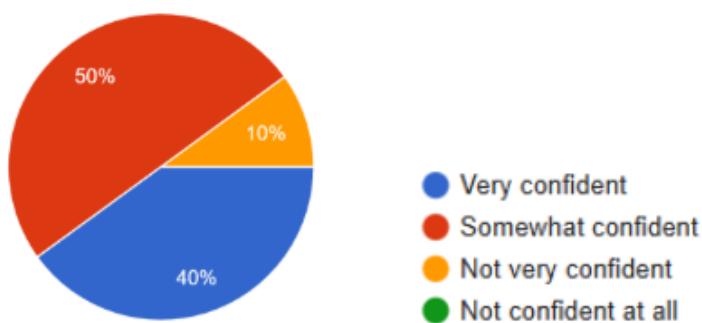
- A few participants admitted they had never had such an experience, indicating a need for more opportunities for cultural interaction.

Key takeaways from these experiences:

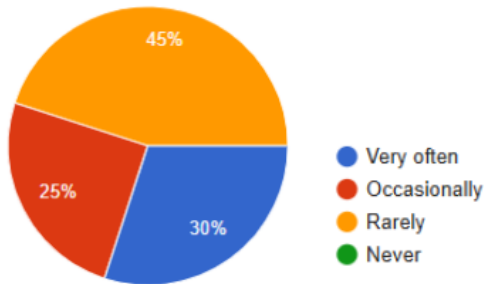
- **Empathy grows through direct interaction:** meeting and supporting migrants and refugees firsthand helps break down prejudices and fosters understanding.
- **Listening to people's stories can be eye-opening:** many participants realized the hardships migrants face and the privileges they often take for granted.
- **Volunteering and education play a crucial role:** schools, workplaces, and social initiatives provide spaces where people from different backgrounds can connect.
- **Small actions can make a difference:** whether through friendship, mentorship, or simple acts of kindness, young people can actively contribute to a more inclusive society.

Section 3: Intercultural Communication

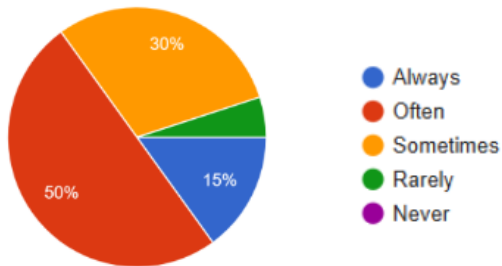
Question 11: How confident are you in communicating with individuals from cultural backgrounds different from your own?



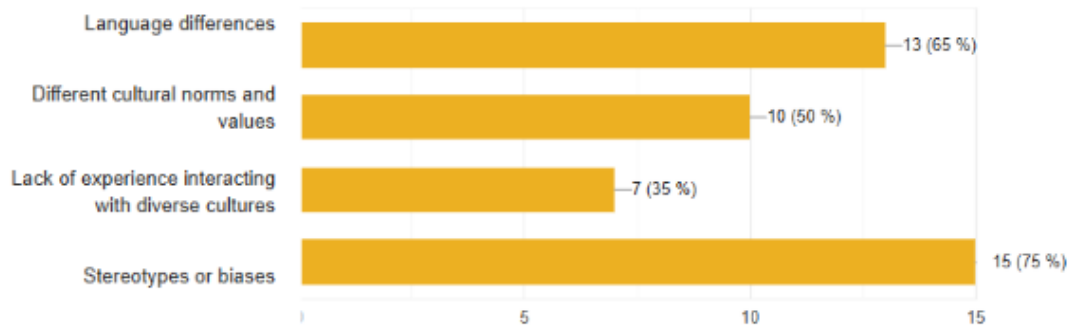
Question 12: How often do you communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds in your daily life?



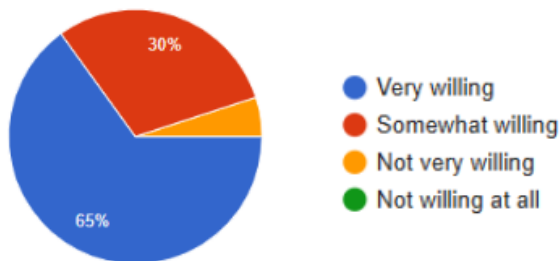
Question 13: When you communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds, do you feel that they understand you well?



Question 14: What barriers do you think prevent effective communication between people from different cultural backgrounds?



Question 15: How willing are you to improve your intercultural communication skills?



Question 16: Open-ended response

From the 20 responses collected, several key themes emerged regarding how to improve communication and connection between young locals and migrant or refugee communities.

1. Encouraging personal interactions and breaking stereotypes:

- Many participants emphasized that simply getting to know migrants as individuals would help young people realize that they are no different from themselves.
- Example response: *"Meeting them and seeing that they are people just like us, accompanying them in their journey."*
- Others suggested eliminating prejudices and prioritizing a person's character over assumptions.

2. Promoting intercultural exchange as a valuable experience:

- Some responses suggested shifting the perception of migrant interactions from being a necessity to being a privilege that enriches personal growth.
- Example response: *"Frame these relationships as something to be admired, not just an alternative. Sell the idea that getting to know different cultures is like traveling through people."*

3. Creating spaces and opportunities for communication:

- Several participants recommended structured opportunities to interact, such as:
 - Cultural exchange events (e.g., international clubs, integration spaces).
 - Joint sports activities to naturally build relationships.

- Social gatherings and activities where young people can meet migrants in a relaxed environment.
- Example response: *"Sports events where they can get to know each other and create a bond."*

4. Encouraging open-mindedness and empathy:

- Several responses stressed the importance of developing an open mindset and a respectful attitude.
- Example response: *"Promote an attitude of respect."*
- Others suggested that young people need more exposure to different realities to develop greater empathy.
- Example response: *"Being in situations where we are required to communicate with migrants and refugees."*

5. Language as a key factor in communication:

- Many participants identified learning the language as one of the biggest barriers to communication.
- Example response: *"They need to learn the language."*
- At the same time, locals could also make an effort to help migrants practice the local language.

6. Providing training and skills for better communication:

- Some responses suggested that young people need guidance on how to approach and support migrants effectively.

- Example response: *"We all have an inner desire to help others, but to do so with people who are very different from us, it is essential to understand how to act in different situations."*

7. Changing Social Attitudes and Cultural Norms

- Participants noted that society needs to foster a culture of openness, as many young people tend to be socially closed off.
- Example response: *"First, we need to promote a culture of 'openness'—we are very closed-off as a society."*

Key takeaways from these responses:

- Facilitating personal connections between migrants and locals is essential for improving communication.
- Framing multicultural interactions as a privilege rather than an obligation can make young people more willing to engage.
- Creating spaces for exchange—through sports, social activities, and structured programs—can help break barriers.
- Language learning is crucial—both for migrants and for locals who wish to support them.
- Providing young people with skills and confidence to engage with migrants can make interactions more effective.
- Encouraging a shift in social attitudes toward inclusivity and open-mindedness is fundamental to long-term change.

3.2 Focus Group Findings

3.2.1 Key Discussion Points by Theme

Theme 1: Understanding Migration

Main insights or challenges shared by participants:

- Language barrier: Not speaking the local language is one of the biggest challenges.
- Economic difficulties: Access to housing and financial stability is a major issue.
- Social barriers: Feeling isolated and not knowing anyone upon arrival.
- Prejudices and stereotypes: Migrants often face societal biases, being perceived as threats or intruders.
- Cultural differences: Adapting to a new way of life and understanding the local customs can be overwhelming.
- Access to education and employment: Some migrants struggle to validate their degrees or find work opportunities.

Suggestions or ideas for improving integration:

- Encouraging social interactions: Participants highlighted the importance of locals reaching out, for example, by inviting newcomers to social gatherings or events.
- Language support programs: Providing free or affordable language courses to facilitate communication.

- Creating welcoming spaces: Establishing community centers where migrants and locals can interact and support each other.
- Awareness campaigns: Educating society to reduce prejudices and stereotypes against migrants.
- Peer mentorship programs: Connecting migrants with local youth who can guide them in adapting to their new environment.
- Policies for equal opportunities: Ensuring that migrants have fair access to education, employment, and financial support.

Theme 2: Empathy in Practice

Stories or experiences shared about connecting across cultures:

- One participant recalled a Ukrainian student in their university who struggled to integrate due to the language barrier. She would sit alone in class with headphones on, making it difficult for others to approach her. Some classmates tried to communicate with her, but the lack of a common language created distance.
- Another participant shared an experience from an international trip, where cultural misunderstandings arose due to different customs. For instance, in some countries, toasting is seen as rude, while in others, it is a sign of respect.
- Some participants mentioned instances of helping migrant workers in their families or communities, understanding their struggles, and learning about their home countries through these interactions.

- One person recalled how hearing migrants' personal stories made them more aware of their challenges. When they realized that many migrants leave everything behind for survival, it changed their perspective.

Key factors that helped foster empathy:

- Personal storytelling: Listening to migrants' experiences firsthand helped participants understand their struggles and motivations.
- Finding common ground: Relating migration challenges to personal experiences, such as moving to a new school or city, helped participants empathize.
- Cultural exchange activities: Events like international food festivals, dance performances, or storytelling nights were seen as effective ways to foster cross-cultural understanding.
- Encouraging dialogue: Open conversations about migration, stereotypes, and integration challenges helped break down misconceptions.
- Building friendships: Having direct social interactions with migrants or refugees created long-lasting connections and increased understanding.
- Exposure to different cultures: Traveling, learning new languages, and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds helped broaden perspectives.

Theme 3: Intercultural Communication Challenges

- **Barriers identified in communication with other cultures:**

- Language barrier: The most frequently mentioned difficulty was the inability to communicate due to language differences. Many migrants struggle to integrate because they don't speak the local language fluently.
- Stereotypes and prejudices: Participants acknowledged that preconceived notions about certain nationalities or ethnic groups impact communication and create distance.
- Cultural misunderstandings: Some customs and social norms differ significantly between cultures, leading to confusion or unintended offense. For example, behaviors considered normal in one culture may be seen as rude in another.
- Social isolation: Migrants often hesitate to approach locals due to fear of rejection or feeling unwelcome. Meanwhile, locals may avoid interaction because they are unsure how to engage with someone from a different background.
- Education and professional challenges: Some migrants struggle with integrating into schools and workplaces due to differences in educational systems, work ethics, or expectations.

- **Proposed solutions or strategies to overcome these barriers:**

From the discussion, participants suggested several ways to improve communication and integration between migrants and local communities.

These include:

- 1. Encouraging Active Social Inclusion:**

- Organizing social events where locals and migrants can interact, such as cultural festivals, international food markets, or themed celebrations (e.g., Chinese New Year, Oktoberfest).

- Hosting shared experiences and storytelling sessions where migrants can share their backgrounds and personal stories to foster understanding.

2. Education and Awareness Programs:

- Implementing intercultural awareness training in schools, universities, and workplaces to educate people on cultural differences and combat stereotypes.
- Providing language learning support for migrants, while also encouraging locals to learn basic phrases of migrants' languages to facilitate communication.
- Establishing mentorship or buddy programs, pairing migrants with locals to help them navigate their new environment.

3. Creating Open Spaces for Dialogue:

- Setting up forums or discussion groups where migrants and locals can express their concerns, experiences, and perspectives without fear of judgment.
- Encouraging schools and universities to include courses or workshops on multiculturalism and diversity to help students understand different cultures.

4. Practical Inclusion in Education and Workplaces:

- Universities should ensure that migrant students have proper language support and preparatory courses before enrolling in full-degree programs.
- Workplaces could offer diversity and inclusion workshops to help integrate migrant employees.

5. Changing Social Attitudes:

- Encouraging locals to be more proactive in approaching newcomers instead of waiting for migrants to integrate on their own.
- Raising awareness that migrants often face systemic barriers, such as financial struggles and discrimination, which can make it harder for them to integrate.

6. Creating Safe and Welcoming Environments:

- Establishing community centers or youth spaces where migrants and locals can interact in an informal and supportive setting.
- Ensuring that migrants have access to legal and social support services to help with housing, employment, and education.

3.2.2 Solutions and Next Steps

- **Activities or programs participants think could promote inclusion:**

Participants suggested various initiatives that could foster inclusivity and cultural integration:

1. Workshops on Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity:
 - Hosting intercultural communication training in schools and workplaces to help break stereotypes.
 - Organizing storytelling sessions where migrants and locals can share personal experiences to foster empathy.
2. Cultural Exchange Events:
 - Creating "International Culture Days" where different cultural groups showcase their traditions, food, music, and customs.

- Organizing language exchange programs where locals and migrants can teach each other their native languages.
 - Hosting movie nights, book clubs, or discussion panels on migration-related themes.
3. Mentorship and Buddy Systems:
- Pairing local youth with migrant students or newcomers to help them navigate their new environment.
 - Encouraging universities and community organizations to set up peer mentorship programs.
4. Social Media and Awareness Campaigns:
- Launching online campaigns to raise awareness about migration challenges and highlight success stories of inclusion.
 - Using platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to share videos, testimonials, and interactive challenges that encourage people to engage with different cultures.
5. Community-Based Integration Initiatives:
- Establishing youth centers or community spaces where locals and migrants can meet, learn, and collaborate.
 - Encouraging local businesses and organizations to host cultural diversity days or networking events.

- **Specific actions young people can take to support inclusivity:**

1. Be proactive in welcoming newcomers:

- Initiate conversations with migrant students or coworkers instead of waiting for them to reach out.
 - Invite them to join local events, social gatherings, or study groups.
2. Challenge stereotypes and prejudices:
- Speak up against discriminatory comments or behavior.
 - Educate others about the realities of migration and cultural diversity.
3. Engage in cultural learning opportunities:
- Take part in language exchange programs or cultural immersion activities.
 - Stay open-minded and seek to learn about different traditions and experiences.
4. Use social media for positive impact:
- Share content that promotes inclusivity and highlights the value of cultural diversity.
 - Follow and support migrant-led initiatives or organizations working for inclusion.
5. Encourage inclusivity in schools and workplaces:
- Propose inclusive policies or activities to student councils, youth organizations, or local government representatives.
 - Suggest diversity-focused clubs or networking spaces within schools and universities.

3.2.3 Additional Comments

Any unexpected insights or observations during the session:

- Limited social interaction with migrants or refugees:
Participants generally expressed that they do not interact with migrants or refugees because they are in different social environments. Migrants are often not present in their university or social circles. One participant mentioned a Ukrainian student at their university and acknowledged that no one makes an effort to talk to her. They also criticized the university system for providing her with a scholarship but failing to support her in learning the language, making integration nearly impossible.
- Perceived inequality in financial aid and support:
Some participants voiced frustration about the financial aid system, arguing that migrants and refugees receive scholarships and assistance more easily, while local students struggle to access similar support. This perceived disparity contributes to a sense of distance and division between local youth and migrant communities.
- Need for greater openness and social integration:
Participants admitted that, in general, young people need to become more open-minded and proactive in promoting inclusion. They recognized that this project is necessary because few people actively think about helping others or working towards integration. Additionally, they noted that social divisions are not only an issue for migrants and refugees but also among local youth themselves. Young people tend to separate based on fashion styles, lifestyles, and interests, making it difficult to connect with those who are different from them.

3.2.4 Final Reflections

- General conclusions or highlights from the session:

The Focus Group discussion confirmed the necessity of the Youth Ambassadors project, as it highlighted key gaps in social inclusion and intercultural understanding among young people. Several critical points emerged:

1. Lack of social interaction between local youth and migrants:
 - Many participants admitted that they rarely interact with migrants or refugees because they exist in separate social spaces. This is particularly evident in universities, where migrant students often remain isolated due to language barriers and a lack of proactive engagement from local students.
2. Systemic barriers to integration:
 - Participants recognized that integration is not solely the responsibility of migrants; institutions also play a role. The case of a Ukrainian student receiving a scholarship but lacking language support revealed an urgent need for more comprehensive assistance programs beyond financial aid.
3. Frustration over unequal financial support:
 - Some young people expressed dissatisfaction with the financial aid system, perceiving that migrants and refugees receive more support than local students. This contributes to resentment and further divides between communities. The discussion made it clear that financial support structures should be fair, transparent, and communicated effectively to prevent misunderstandings.
4. Need for more open-mindedness and proactive inclusion:
 - Participants acknowledged that young people need to actively work towards inclusion, rather than waiting for integration to happen naturally. This applies not only to migrants but also within local youth communities, where divisions based on social circles, fashion styles, or personal interests can prevent meaningful interactions.

5. Importance of the Youth Ambassadors Project:

- The conversation reaffirmed the relevance of Youth Ambassadors in addressing these challenges. Participants recognized that very few young people think about fostering integration or supporting others.
- The project can play a vital role in raising awareness, promoting intercultural dialogue, and creating practical solutions for fostering inclusivity.
- Many of the suggested solutions—such as mentorship programs, cultural exchanges, and awareness campaigns—align with the core goals of Youth Ambassadors.

The insights gained from this session underline the urgency and importance of this project. There is a clear need for structured initiatives that encourage local youth to take an active role in building an inclusive society. The Youth Ambassadors project has the potential to empower young people to break barriers, challenge stereotypes, and create meaningful connections across cultures.

3.3 Conclusions

1. Knowledge about migration and perceived challenges:

- Most surveyed young people have a moderate or low level of knowledge about the challenges faced by migrants and refugees in their communities.

- The most commonly identified challenges include language barriers, difficulty finding housing, access to education and healthcare, and employment opportunities.
- The focus group confirmed a perception of inequality in access to aid and opportunities between locals and migrants, which creates tensions and hinders integration.
- Some participants expressed concerns about social isolation and prejudices, highlighting the need for awareness campaigns.

2. Empathy and connection with migrants:

- The survey revealed that most young people empathize with the difficulties migrants face, especially when they hear personal stories.
- Personal interactions (such as friendships, volunteering, or studying with migrants) were seen as key to breaking stereotypes and increasing understanding.
- Several respondents shared experiences of helping migrants adapt, whether through language support, social inclusion activities, or guidance in bureaucratic processes.
- However, some admitted they had never engaged directly with migrants, indicating a lack of opportunities for meaningful interaction.

3. Intercultural communication and barriers:

- Language barriers were identified as the main obstacle to effective communication.
- Cultural differences and stereotypes were also frequently mentioned as factors that limit interactions.

- Some respondents stated that they often communicate with people from different backgrounds, while others admitted that they lack exposure to diversity in their daily lives.
- The focus group emphasized that educational and social institutions should create more spaces for intercultural interaction to reduce misunderstandings.

4. Proposals for inclusion and coexistence:

- Encouraging direct interaction: Forming friendships and participating in mixed activities to foster cultural exchange.
- Mentoring and support programs: Implementing a "buddy system" where a local young person helps a migrant integrate.
- Using social media for awareness: Creating campaigns that promote diversity and inclusion while challenging stereotypes.
- Organizing inclusive events: Sports activities, cultural workshops, and volunteering projects were suggested as effective ways to build bridges between local and migrant youth.
- Institutional actions: Universities, youth organizations, and local governments should implement programs that encourage multicultural dialogue and language learning initiatives.

5. Final Reflection:

- Many young people recognize the importance of empathy and inclusion, but lack structured opportunities to engage with migrants.
- Addressing language barriers, cultural prejudices, and social exclusion requires community efforts and policy changes.

- Young people play a key role in building inclusive societies, and initiatives like Youth Ambassadors can be a powerful tool to promote intercultural understanding.
- Greater institutional support is needed to create sustainable and long-term strategies that foster integration and mutual learning.

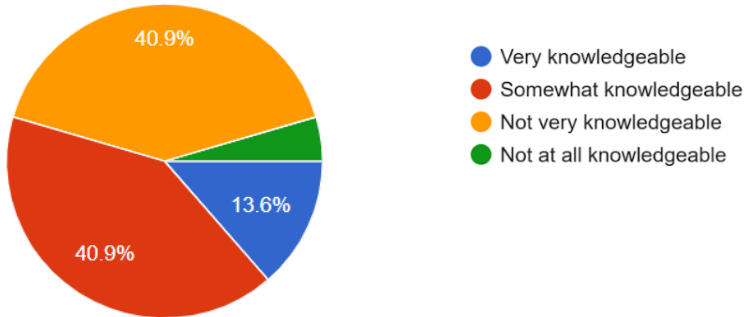
4. Bulgaria

Research conducted by **Foundation “Situational Center Open Doors”** highlights youth perspectives on migration, empathy, and intercultural communication in Bulgaria.

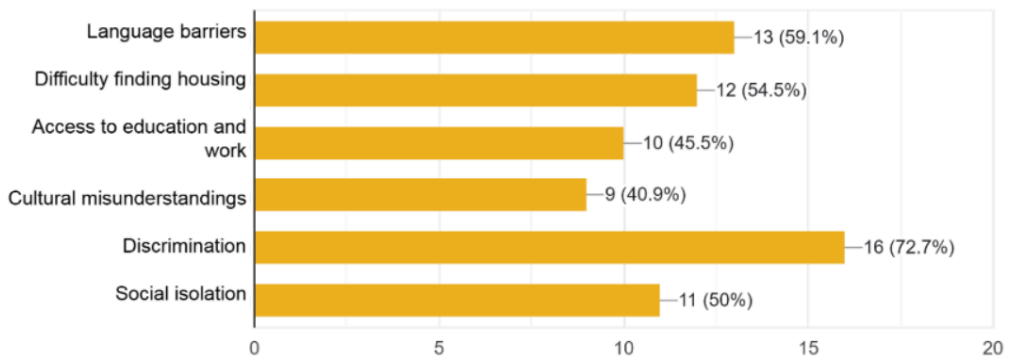
4.1 Survey responses

Section 1: Understanding of Migration Issues

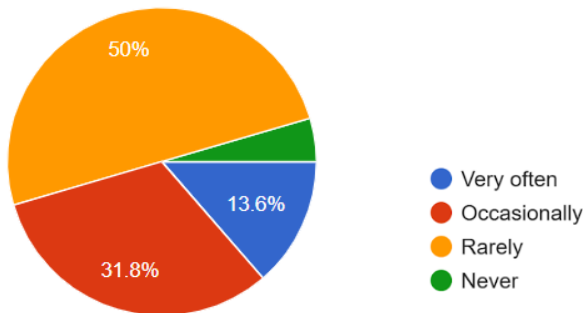
Question 1: How knowledgeable do you feel about the issues faced by young migrants and refugees in your community?



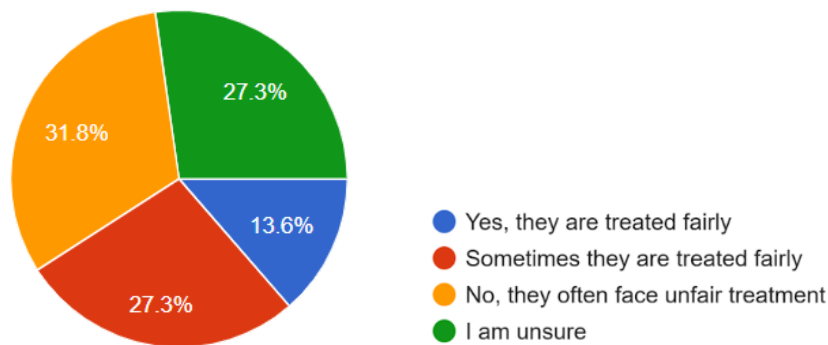
Question 2: Which of the following issues do you believe are most challenging for young migrants and refugees?



Question 3: How often do you think about the impact of migration on your community?



Question 4: Do you think young migrants and refugees are treated fairly in your community?



Question 5: Open-ended response

Based on the 22 provided answers, the most common ways young people suggest to support the integration of young migrants and refugees can be summarized as follows:

- Empathising and Combating Discrimination:** This is the most frequently mentioned category, with 7 occurrences. It includes ideas such as understanding, combating discrimination, promoting tolerance, empathy, and respect as well as taking part in initiatives to provide support, aid, and

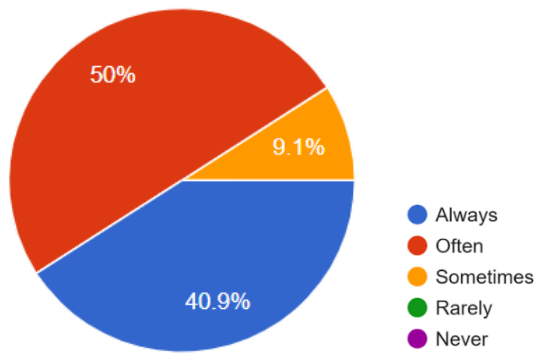
resources to young migrants and refugees, such as helping with finding jobs and housing. For instance: "To be more open to getting to know them and to help them find a job, housing, and more."

- **Raising Awareness and Education:** This category appears 4 times and emphasizes the importance of increasing awareness about the culture, mentality, and background of refugee groups, as well as fighting misinformation and promoting education. One participant suggests: 'To talk to their surroundings in order to dispel myths about migrants and refugees, who are often victims of disinformation campaigns and propaganda.'
- **Social Activities:** Mentioned 2 times, this category focuses on organizing events, games, and activities to facilitate interaction and cultural exchange between young people and migrants/refugees. One participant suggests: 'Organizing fun activities to support integration and help them connect with peers.'
- **Extensive Communication:** Mentioned two times as a way to help break down the language barrier but also contribute to cultural exchange. One participant shares; "Extensive communication between young people and migrants/refugees could not only help break down the language barrier but also contribute to cultural exchange."
- **"Don't Know":** This response was given twice.

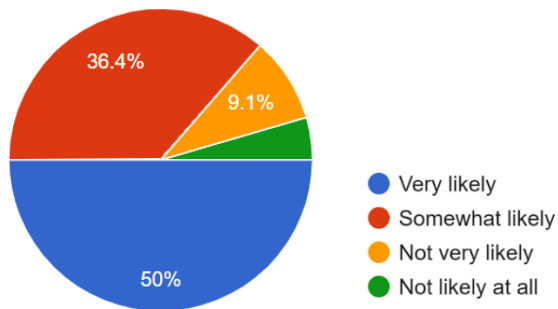
In nearly all responses, the themes of inclusivity and integration are present in some form. In conclusion, the most emphasized approach is combating discrimination and providing psychological or material support, followed closely by raising awareness and promoting education.

Section 2: Empathy Levels

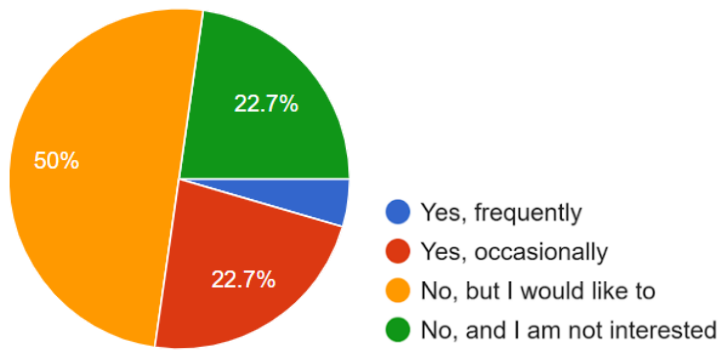
Question 6: How often do you try to understand the perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds?



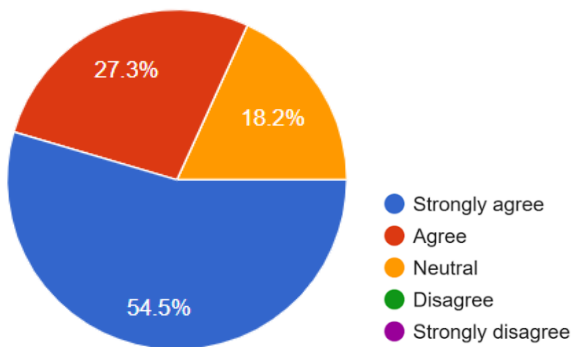
Question 7: When you see someone experiencing challenges related to migration, how likely are you to empathize with their situation?



Question 8: Have you ever taken part in activities or events aimed at supporting migrants or refugees?



Question 9: Do you believe empathy is essential in creating a welcoming community for migrants and refugees?



Question 10: Open-ended response

According to the provided 12 answers based on real-life experience, the most common lessons learned by the participants regarding empathy, migration, and intercultural communication can be summarized as follows:

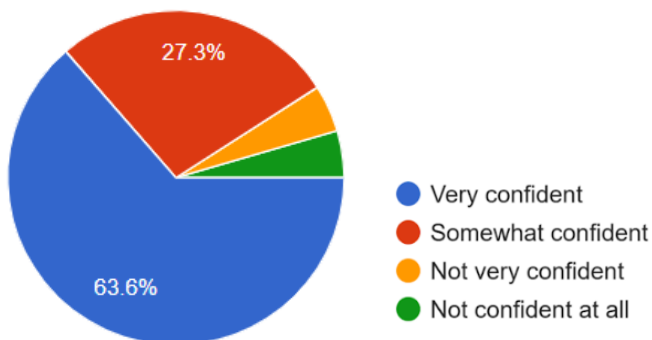
- Understanding the struggle with integration and language barriers:** This is the most frequently observed category, with 6 occurrences. Participants' experiences highlighted the significant challenges refugees and migrants face in integrating into a new society, particularly concerning language

barriers. For example, 2 participants recounted assisting their classmates with Bulgarian classes and providing translation. One participant notes, "I met a migrant from Cyprus who experienced difficulty integrating and learning Bulgarian. I helped him to learn Bulgarian so he could find a job."

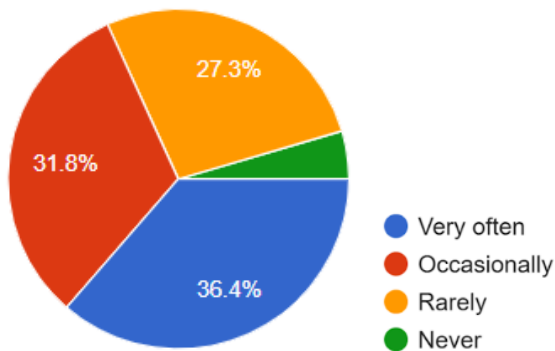
- **Enhanced Recognition of the Psychological Burdens of Migration:** This category, mentioned 5 times, indicates the development of empathic understanding concerning the emotional challenges faced by migrants. One participant has written, "Then I truly understood the suffering and the struggles of these people and began to genuinely empathize."
- **(I haven't/blank):** This response was given 10 times, indicating a lack of direct personal experience, and therefore, a lack of first hand understanding of migrant needs.

Section 3: Intercultural Communication

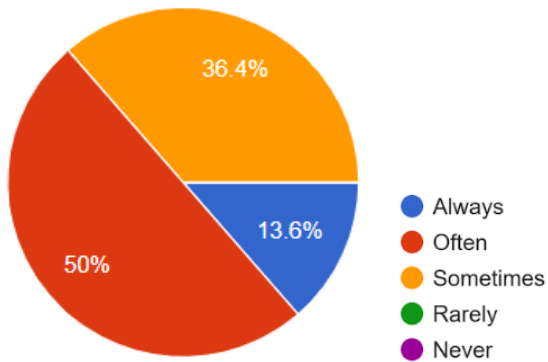
Question 11: How confident are you in communicating with individuals from cultural backgrounds different from your own?



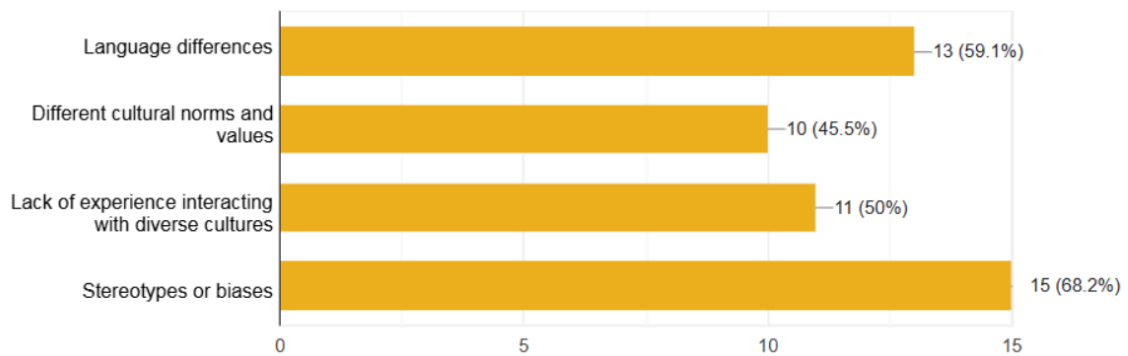
Question 12: How often do you communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds in your daily life?



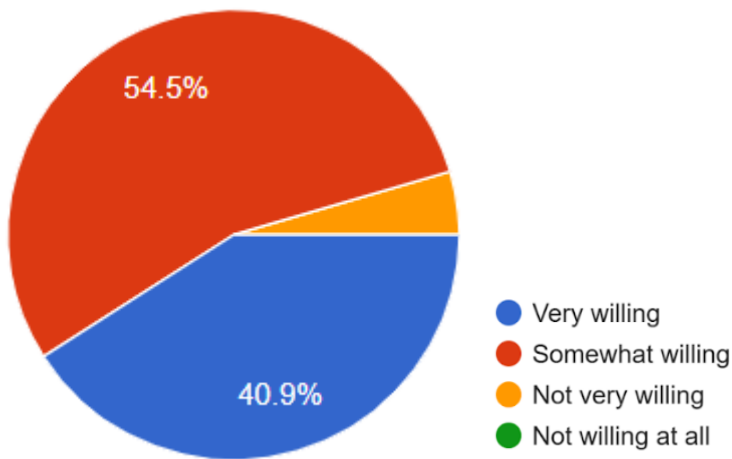
Question 13: When you communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds, do you feel that they understand you well?



Question 14: What barriers do you think prevent effective communication between people from different cultural backgrounds?



Question 15: How willing are you to improve your intercultural communication skills?



Question 16: Open-ended response

Based on the 18 provided answers, here's a summary of what local youth think would help their community communicate more effectively with migrants and refugees:

- **Education and Awareness:** This is the one of most frequently mentioned categories, with 4 occurrences. This includes addressing misconceptions,

increasing understanding of refugee situations, and combating prejudice through information and positive role models. Verbatim examples: "Young people need to understand that migrants and refugees do not take money from the taxpayers, "Removing prejudices, more awareness, and creating recognizable public figures known for their contributions and integrity, whom locals can associate with the entire community of refugees." etc.

- **Direct Interaction and Connection:** This category is mentioned **3** times. It focuses on creating opportunities for young people and refugees to meet, interact, and build friendships. Verbatim examples: "To get to know refugees who have similar interests as them and make friends."
- **Empathy:** This category is mentioned **3** times. It highlights the importance of mutual cultural understanding, both coming from locals and migrants. Verbatim examples: "Young locals should make an effort to understand the culture and background of others, seeking common ground between their own history and that of refugees' countries." and simply "Open-mindedness and responsiveness."
- **Community Initiatives and Support:** Mentioned twice."Any campaigns related to that.", Organizations with such aim".
- **Overcoming Language Barriers:** Mentioned twice.
- **Emphasis on Migrants' Effort for Adaptation:** Mentioned once, the response reflects a belief that migrants bear a primary responsibility for integrating into the local community: "Migrants should try to integrate into society, rather than expecting locals to change for them".

4.2 Focus Group Findings

4.2.1 Key Discussion Points by Theme

Theme 1: Understanding Migration

Main insights or challenges shared by participants:

- Language barriers are a prominent issue according to the participants. As a participant supposed that migrants face difficulties if they don't speak English or do but the older local generations don't.
- Participants shared their belief that migrants and refugees often face "being looked down on especially depending on their ethnicity or religion" and experience prejudices from the locals. For instance, a participant's childhood friend Juwel, a migrant from Bangladesh, faced struggles with employment, despite his fluency and qualifications, highlighted the persistent issue of prejudice and systemic barriers faced by migrants.
- One participant shared a significant observation about the prevailing sentiment within the community, highlighting a critical barrier to cross-cultural connection. They noted a "widely spread belief that people who came from the Middle East are a threat to society." This fear is so ingrained that "most Bulgarian parents teach their kids to be extra careful" when near areas with a higher concentration of Syrian refugees, particularly out of fear for the safety of women and girls. The participant expressed uncertainty about the source of this fear, questioning whether it is based on real threat or rather on misunderstanding and myths about the culture in the Middle-East.
- Cultural Differences and Potential Conflict: The participants mentioned cultural differences that lead to physical clashes with migrants, indicating potential for cultural friction and conflict.
- Critically, there's a perceived lack of motivation for integration in some migrants. A participant shared their uncertainty about whether all migrants are genuinely seeking integration, or if some are primarily focused on returning home which presents a challenge for integration efforts and varying levels of commitment to staying in the host country. Another participant shared their attempt to engage with refugee

classmates was met with disinterest, illustrating that fostering inclusion can be complex and unsolicited.

- Lack of awareness of how the state works and bureaucracy were considered as challenges that hinder the ability to access necessary resources as well as practical difficulties: “Probably harder to apply for education and find a shelter if there aren’t available camps or communities.”

Suggestions or ideas for improving integration:

- A participant suggested access to language courses as a way to help the refugees to be better understood by and understand the locals in the host country.
- It was commonly said that promoting tolerance would benefit the integration and feeling of acceptance.
- Enhanced integration opportunities such as events
- Awareness among locals about other cultures
- Contacts between, migrants and locals

Theme 2: Empathy in Practice

Stories or experiences shared about connecting across cultures: Key Anecdotes and Observations

- **Universality in Communication:** Multiple participants noted a lack of significant communication differences when interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, both within Bulgaria and abroad.
- **Recognizing Shared Humanity:** Experiences abroad reinforced the idea that people share more similarities than differences, promoting empathy and reducing prejudice.

Key factors that helped foster empathy

Education and Increased Awareness: Participants strongly emphasized the need for educational initiatives to combat misinformation, and cultural myths, particularly related to the treatment of women.

Promoting Intercultural Exchange: Participants suggested organizing cultural exchange events like festivals, exhibitions, and culinary nights to facilitate direct interaction and shared experiences. A unique suggestion was to organize activities that do not rely on strong language skills, such as hiking events, to create opportunities for interaction.

Theme 3: Intercultural Communication Challenges

According to the focus group participants, the main barriers identified in communication with other cultures are:

- **Language Barriers:** This was the most frequently mentioned barrier. Participants noted that differences in languages and the lack of a common language (such as English) hinder communication.
- **Stereotypes and Prejudices:** Participants noted that prejudices towards certain cultures can affect how they perceive and react to people from those cultures, which is also a communication barrier. However, one of the participants shared “I used to be more sceptical and prejudiced to foreigners because but now I’m much more open-minded and even desperate for new interactions with as many cultures as possible. So I wouldn’t say I meet any hardships in communication with other ethnicities.”
- **Different Perceptions of Culture, Habits, and Understandings:** Participants mentioned that differences in cultural perceptions, habits, and understandings can also be a barrier in communication.
- **Fanatical Religious Beliefs:** One participant mentioned fanatical religious beliefs as a barrier.

Suggested solutions or strategies to overcome these barriers:

- Participants strongly emphasized the need for educational initiatives, such as workshops and seminars, to inform the community about migration, different cultures, and the lived experiences of refugees.
- Participants suggested promoting cultural exchange
- Participants recognized the importance of fostering open-mindedness within the community
- Participants identified language as a significant barrier and suggested language courses as a practical way to improve communication and integration.

4.2.2 Solutions and Next Steps

Activities or programs participants think could promote inclusion:

- Language courses.
- Educational programs, such as seminars and workshops, to raise awareness about different cultures
- Events that promote cultural exchange, such as festivals, exhibitions, and culinary events. They also suggested activities that don't heavily rely on language, like hiking

Specific actions young people can take to support inclusivity:

- Volunteer with organizations that support migrants and refugees.
- Initiate and join activities that bring together young people from diverse backgrounds, such as sports, hiking, or volunteer projects.
- Attend and participate in cultural exchange events like festivals, exhibitions, and cooking classes.
- Participate in and organize workshops, seminars, and discussions about migration, refugee experiences, and cultural diversity.
- Seek out and share accurate information to combat misinformation and stereotypes.
- Offer language support to migrants and refugees in their community.
- Be open to learning about different cultures and perspectives.
- Make a conscious effort to interact with and befriend individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

4.2.3 Additional Comments

4.2.4 Final Reflections

The focus group discussions reveal a shared understanding of the challenges faced by both migrants/refugees and the local community in building positive intercultural relationships. There's a strong agreement on the need for proactive measures to address these challenges, with a particular emphasis on education, communication, and fostering empathy.

4.3 Conclusions

The focus group revealed that integration is hindered by systemic barriers such as language barriers, deep cultural disparities, entrenched stereotypes, and religious differences. Additionally, physical clashes involving migrants contribute to intergroup tension. These challenges are further compounded by specific cultural fears, particularly concerns about gender inequality stemming from religious canons followed by some migrants. They also expressed their belief that targeted education about the cultural differences and similarities is crucial for behavioral change, while structured intercultural engagement fosters genuine relationships. Crucially, the recognition of personal growth, such as the shift from prejudice to open-mindedness, underscores the potential for positive change. Participants' cognitive dissonance between widespread beliefs and personal experiences highlights the need for individual responsibility in critical thinking. The overarching aspiration is for a cohesive community built on mutual respect and genuine understanding, requiring the direct addressing of specific cultural fears. The reflections convey both a sense of the challenge and a hopeful outlook on the possibility of overcoming these obstacles through collective effort.

5. Global Findings and Overall Conclusions

The **Youth Ambassadors** Project has offered a rich and multifaceted view into the attitudes, perceptions, and lived experiences of young people in Finland, Spain, and Bulgaria regarding migration, empathy, and intercultural communication. While each country presents unique social and cultural dynamics, several cross-cutting themes and conclusions have emerged.

1. A shared but uneven awareness of migration challenges

Young people across all three countries demonstrate some awareness of the challenges faced by migrants and refugees, but the depth of understanding varies. Language barriers, limited access to employment and education, social isolation, and discrimination were common concerns. However, while Finnish and Spanish youth often identified these challenges from both personal and societal perspectives, Bulgarian participants frequently highlighted more intense cultural fears and prejudices, especially toward migrants from the Middle East. This points to a shared baseline of awareness, but also reveals divergent narratives shaped by local media, community experience, and societal openness.

2. Empathy is strong - but often conditional on personal experience

Empathy was universally recognised as essential for integration. Personal storytelling, direct social interaction, and volunteering experiences played a major role in shifting young people's attitudes across all three countries. Participants who had not interacted with migrants often expressed indifference or hesitation. This demonstrates that while the potential for empathy is high, it often remains latent until activated through human connection.

3. Intercultural communication is hampered by deep social divides

All countries identified communication barriers, especially language and differing social norms, as major obstacles. In Finland, a reserved communication culture

added a layer of complexity, while in Spain and Bulgaria, stereotypes and prejudice were often more openly expressed. Participants also discussed how migrants themselves sometimes struggle to engage due to emotional burdens, cultural differences, or feelings of rejection. Notably, some Bulgarian youth expressed distrust toward specific ethnic groups, underlining the urgent need for education and narrative change.

4. Structural and institutional gaps deepen the divide

Young people consistently pointed out a lack of structured, accessible opportunities for interaction between locals and migrants. This includes shortcomings in language learning, insufficient cultural orientation, and unequal access to support services. While many participants proposed mentorship and buddy programs, these ideas often stemmed from a recognition that current systems are fragmented or absent. In Bulgaria and Spain, perceptions of unfairness in resource distribution sometimes fueled resentment, even among those who were otherwise empathetic.

5. Youth are open to change - if equipped and empowered

Despite the challenges, young people expressed a genuine interest in becoming part of the solution. Many proposed concrete actions - from creating inclusive events to raising awareness on social media. However, they also expressed uncertainty about how to act, revealing a strong need for training, facilitation, and institutional support. Several focus groups revealed that young people want to “do more,” but don’t always feel confident in how to initiate or lead such efforts.

6. Importance of creating safe and shared spaces

The call for safe, inclusive, and informal spaces where intercultural interaction can happen naturally was echoed in every country. Whether through sports, food, storytelling, or shared hobbies, youth across all three countries identified these spaces as vital for reducing prejudice and fostering belonging. The data also

emphasized that these initiatives must be ongoing—not one-off events—in order to truly shift attitudes and build sustainable bridges.

7. Areas for focus during the Immersive Learning Experience in Bulgaria

The insights gathered from the survey and focus groups offer clear direction for the upcoming experiential learning activity in Bulgaria. While the final program will be co-created with participants, some areas we could consider focusing on include:

- Fostering interpersonal connections through informal group activities, games, and shared meals that promote authentic relationships between local and migrant youth.
- Overcoming language barriers by using creative tools (like art, music, and movement) and promoting mutual support in language learning.
- Creating spaces for storytelling where participants can share and listen to personal migration or cultural experiences to promote empathy and understanding.
- Encouraging youth-led reflection on inclusion, identity, and belonging through workshops or open dialogue sessions.
- Framing diversity as a value, not a challenge, using experiential exercises that highlight the richness of intercultural exchange.
- Training participants to become future Youth Ambassadors, including practical skills such as facilitation, communication, and inclusive event planning.

These areas will serve as inspiration for our next step as a team, which is designing a meaningful and transformative mobility experience, tailored to the needs and aspirations of both local and migrant youth.

