

Chapter 9

Denying, While Demanding Integration: An Analysis of the Integration Paradox in Malta and Refugees' Coping Strategies



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9.1 Introduction

'Integration is a late bloomer in Malta'. This is what a representative of a ministry in Malta entrusted with family matters, as well as questions of care and solidarity, told Laura in an interview on 06 July 2015. Why is this statement remarkable? In 2015, the arrival of refugees¹ was not a new phenomenon in the island-state: people had been seeking refuge on the island since the 1970s (Pisani 2011, p. 27) and the number of refugee boats crossing the Mediterranean was still significant in 2015. With Malta being located along the route between Africa and Europe, almost 20,000 people reached the island-state between 2002 and 2016 (NSO 2018). Even though this was a well-known fact, an Integration Policy was not passed until late 2017. This lack of official and governmental integration measures was also addressed during a demonstration organised by migrant organisations in the summer of 2015 in Malta's capital, Valletta.

When the representative of the ministry stated that integration is a late bloomer he mainly referred to questions of social inclusion as well as access to specific welfare programs; however, integration had not actually been fully absent in previous

¹The term 'refugee' is not used here according to its legal definition. In this chapter it refers to the experience, the process and the involuntariness of the migrated individual. The term 'asylum-seeker' is only used when we refer to persons whose asylum application was rejected.

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years. With Malta acceding to European Union (EU) membership in 2004, its government was obliged to conform to certain duties derived from EU policies. The Maltese Military Rescue Unit (MRU) became part of Search and Rescue Missions (SAR) at sea, Malta's government had to accept the Dublin Regulation,² and refugees' fingerprints were saved in the EURODAC system.³ Thus, refugees were integrated into a bureaucratic system; social integration, however, was not promoted.

We address this discrepancy of social exclusion and bureaucratic inclusion in this chapter, by analysing two fields of tension: (1) saving refugees at sea versus questions of border control, and (2) demanding the integration of refugees whilst denying them access to mechanisms leading to (social) integration. The chapter is structured as follows: first, we outline our methodological and analytical framework before, secondly, presenting reactions toward boat migration to Malta and revealing local understandings of integration, mainly communicated by governing actors. Third, we explain the field of tension between rescuing refugees at sea and border securitisation. This is, fourth, followed by an 'intermedium', written by Gabriel who was born in the Gambia and has lived in Malta as a refugee since 2014. In the penultimate fifth section, we engage with practices of (dis)integration, focusing on refugees' reception, allocation of status, access to education and the labour market to highlight these dynamics. Finally we present refugees' coping strategies developed against the backdrop of the situations they (inevitably) found themselves in, concluding that (dis)integration does not only depend on legal frameworks but that social interactions and individually denied access are equally efficacious. Throughout the chapter, we refer to refugees' and institutional actors' agency to highlight that legal frameworks must not be viewed as deterministic but are, rather, an arena within which (dis)integration is negotiated.

9.2 Methods and Analytical Framework

This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the cultural anthropologists Laura and Sarah between 2013 and 2018 in Malta. Sarah focuses on refugees whose asylum applications were rejected and are non-deportable; Laura's research focuses on the situation for young refugees categorised as Unaccompanied Minors (UAMs; see Otto and Kaufmann 2018). Laura was in contact with 48 refugees classified as UAMs and 17 young refugees who were not categorised as such; she also interviewed 12 institutional actors. Sarah interacted with 22 refugees classified as rejected asylum-seekers, interviewed 27 officials and held informal talks.

²The Dublin Regulation was adopted in 2003 to determine that the EU member-state in which refugees first entered the EU is responsible for examining the asylum application.

³European Dactyloscopy (EURODAC) is the EU's fingerprint database for identifying both refugees and the member-state responsible for examining their asylum application.

Following the ethnographic tradition, both also conducted participant observation in refugee housing centres and refugees' flats, in ministries and non-governmental organisations' (NGO) offices as well as in public. In the course of a revisit in 2018, we had further joint talks with three institutional actors. We complemented our data with policy documents, newspaper articles and NGO reports.

In line with the overall aim of this book, the border regime analysis which is applied here and which was coined by Sabine Hess and Vassilis Tsianos (2010) following earlier discussions by *Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe* (2007) also emphasises that regimes are not to be understood as totalising but that processes such as (dis)integration are negotiated *in situ* and by migrating and non-migrating, governing and non-governing actors (see Collyer et al. 2020; Rass and Wolff 2018). Our understanding of *how* it is possible to research (dis)integration processes and practices derives from this multi-actor approach including various forms of data. Contradictory logics, conflicting interests, facets of agency and shifting positions can thus be taken into account (Collyer et al. 2020; Hess and Tsianos 2010). However, to research these dynamics also means being sensitive.

The highly politicised field of the border regime raises questions of research ethics concerning both non-refugees and refugees. Conducting research with vulnerable persons – such as young or rejected refugees – presents a unique set of conundrums, contradictions, and conflicts (Chase et al. 2019). Especially when research partners find themselves in institutionalised surroundings, the question of *how* to approach them for research is vital. It was our concern to translate and communicate our research interests in the best possible way, and we obtained the informed consent (von Unger et al. 2014) of the refugees. In our research-ethical positioning we did not orient ourselves along the categories set by the institutionalised border regime, such as the fixation in the category of a minor, in order to decide whether or not persons could participate in our research. We rather looked for 'person-friendly' (Punch 2002) approaches. Our long-term relationships made it possible to reflect the research process with the refugees, and we have discussed interpretations and research outcomes with them. As a result, our research partners often encouraged us to write our articles and monographs, as they communicated the wish to share their experiences with a broader audience. This practice felt better to us than excluding people from research in the first place because of their classification by the border regime, and consequently excluding certain perspectives.

For the protection of the research partners pseudonymisation took place. We decided against a simple anonymisation by numbering or initials, as otherwise important information about the respective persons would be lost. Conclusions about the habitus can still be drawn if a pseudonym is used. Furthermore, we decided on pseudonyms because these facilitate the spontaneous perception of the individual (see Reckinger 2010). Often, our research partners decided on their pseudonym themselves. We were asked to pseudonymise the respective interviewees, but received permission from representatives of institutions to name the institutions. Despite their consent, we have decided to also anonymise the institutions as much

as possible without rendering their function unrecognisable. This said, the pseudonymisation of institutions proved difficult. Given that the island-state of Malta is relatively small, many institutions and above all certain positions which are represented are unique in the country. Even with ambitious pseudonymisation attempts, the respective institution can possibly be identified in certain cases, which is why we are always dependent on the discretion of the readers.

To address issues of representation and analysis of the integration paradox in Malta – not merely from a White perspective (Eggers et al. 2005) – we argue that it is necessary to engage with these issues collaboratively. As researchers, we are involved in (dis)integration processes and might even reproduce these powerful dynamics. By working together with Gabriel we wish to extend knowledge production beyond ‘academic limitations’⁴ (Fontanari et al. 2014, p. 111), thereby transcending the divide between researchers and researched, theory and practise, academic scholarship and active participation (*ibid.*, p. 118, see also Nimführ and Sesay 2019). Gabriel thus wrote an ‘intermedium’ that allows us to gain insights from a person who ‘lived the disaster’ (Khosravi 2010, p. 6). We aimed at presenting an account which does not suggest that researchers who did not go through the same experiences as refugees are claiming to represent the experiences of others (Rodgers 2004, p. 49).

The practices highlighted in this chapter are frequently dependent on the status which refugees receive in Malta. Simultaneously, their integration is nevertheless demanded. This illustrates that (dis)integration is the intertwining of integration and disintegration, created by both legal frameworks and individuals’ action, producing various forms of differentiated in- and exclusion (De Genova et al. 2015, p. 79). Ethnographic accounts, as applied here, offer the methodological tools with which to grasp these dynamics. Consequently, what we understand as both the methodological and the analytical value of this approach is that it highlights how local understandings displayed by governmental actors influence the (dis)integration of refugees within and beyond legal frameworks. Narratives and practices of (dis)integration in relation to legal frameworks build the core of this analysis. Like Nina Sahraoui (2020), we do not further engage with theoretical concepts of integration that are diverse and sometimes contradictory but show how (dis)integration is performed and practiced in daily encounters. We do not understand (dis)integration as something which primarily refugees are engaged in but, rather, as a form of inclusion and exclusion acted out by governing actors and through which the distribution of and access to resources is decided. This understanding means that we are pursuing a structural analysis wherein the refugees in question are not in a position in which they produce disintegration, but are necessarily respondents to the exclusionary conditions they involuntarily encounter. Nevertheless, structure and agency can never be entirely separated and the following empirical analysis also highlights governing and non-governing actors’ agency, highlighting that the conditions the refu-

⁴All references that are originally not English were translated by the authors.

gees encounter do not lead to a situation of their non-agency. Our account thus reveals that the structural analysis we undertake is itself limited and that actors constantly reinforce or circumvent the structures they encounter. This may take the form of volitional action – i.e. intentionally preventing or enabling access – or it may be unintentional, such as when actions nevertheless lead to outcomes where inclusion and exclusion emerge.

9.3 Political and Societal Reactions to Boat Migration and Integration in Malta⁵

Located in the Mediterranean Sea, the Maltese island-state is the smallest member-state of the EU. Although so-called ‘boat refugees’ had already arrived on Malta’s shores in the late 1990s, records of arrivals only date back to 2002 (Pisani 2011). From the beginning, refugees were represented as the ‘others’ (Klepp 2011). In political terms, border securitisation and the need of protection against ‘dangerous/unwanted intruders’ (Pisani 2013, p. 78) were emphasised by governmental actors:

Given Malta’s size you cannot expect the government to release illegal immigrants into the streets, (...). This would send the wrong message and spell disaster for the country (...). As a minister I am responsible, first and foremost, for the protection of Maltese citizens (Minister of Home Affairs and National Security, quoted in Calleja 2009).

Malta’s small size was constantly used by various actors to legitimise an exceptional Detention Policy applicable to all refugees who arrived in unregulated manners.⁶ According to the former Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs, detention is necessary in the interests of ‘national security and public order’ (MFFS and MJHA 2005, p. 11). Since Malta joined the EU, its government has constantly called on other member-states to assist in ‘burden-sharing’ and has argued for a revision of the Dublin Regulation (Mainwaring 2008), as the Maltese government and society do not allegedly possess resources to deal with large numbers of new arrivals and with refugees who already live in Malta (Sansone 2011). Meanwhile, significantly fewer refugees have arrived by boat since 2015.⁷ The MRU of Malta argues that this is caused by the geographical shift of rescue operations: ‘The nature of the operations has shifted southwards. (...) The rescue and distress [now] starts inside the Libyan territories’, claimed a MRU representative in Malta in an interview on 26 April 2016.

⁵ Parts of this section are based on Nimführ et al. (2017). We thank Assoziation A. for the publishing rights.

⁶ Since January 2016 refugees who entered in unregulated manners are firstly accommodated in the Initial Reception Centre, followed by a detention centre or an open centre. Refugees can leave the latter during opening hours. Prior to 2016, refugees were housed in an open centre after detainment.

⁷ To compare: 2015–2017: 150 people, 2014: 569 people, 2013: 2008 people (NSO 2018, 2).

These ‘politics of defence’ materialise in both juridical and social practices – for example withholding legal rights on different levels, thereby placing refugees in a permanent state of insecurity, as a human-rights lawyer of an international charitable NGO in Malta, reflected in an interview on 23 July 2015:

Their well-being is extremely (...) threatened all the time (...) because [if] you lose your job, everything goes. You get sick so you can’t work anymore, everything goes. You have an accident crossing the street and a car runs you over. (...) In one minute (...) everything collapses.

Even though refugees have been reaching Malta for more than a decade, an Integration Policy was not passed until 2017. Looking at the narratives of governmental actors charged with implementing ‘integration’ prior to this policy reveals that integration was broadly understood as a waste of resources, as refugees would want to leave Malta anyway. To legitimise this ignorance, integration was framed as ‘harmful’ to refugees as it would force them to stay in a place where they did not want to be. This was also reflected by the representative of a Maltese ministry quoted on integration in the introductory part:

For a good part of the last ten to 15 years, the thinking was that migrants come, they stay a bit, (...) and then they go and we will live like we used to live before. (...) And therefore there was no investment at all in integration. (...) when some work started to happen it was mostly preparation for the migrants to leave.

What also becomes evident here is that it appears to have been important to maintain a particular lifestyle which was seen as being in jeopardy through the integration of refugees. A representative from a governmental agency also concurred with this assessment in an interview on 25 February 2015:

It is very obvious that no asylum seeker (...) wants to stay in Malta. And I think the more we are making people stay (...) by integration, the more we are doing harm to these people.

In the following section we discuss whether, in spite of this unwelcoming attitude articulated by our research partners holding vocational positions within the border regime, people nonetheless continue to arrive in Malta, whether by choice or by chance.

9.4 Arriving in Malta?

Even though Malta is comparatively small in size, the island-state plays an important role in SAR missions as the Maltese SAR region is with about 251,000 km² relatively broad. The majority of refugees who reached its shores did not intend to reach Malta (Falzon 2012). Due to bad weather conditions or other unpredictable circumstances, however, most did not reach their intended destination – Italy. ‘We never planned to come here. I heard about Malta for the first time when we were

rescued', stated Blaze, a Nigerian refugee. Several thousand more people were saved in joint SAR missions in which Italian coastguards supported the MRU. Whether these joint missions are even initiated also depends on the local coastguards' reactions. If the MRU sights and contacts refugees at sea who do not want to be rescued, they escort them and let them continue with their journey, provided no perilous conditions are forecast as the MRU representative further explained:

So they refuse [their rescue] and in that case everyone has still the duty of care (...). They keep close to the boat, monitoring in case the situation changes, weather changes or they will request to be rescued (...) The same mechanism takes place no matter if the distress call was made or not.

Bilal, a young Somali, described a case in which the refugees he shared the boat with asked to be rescued while at sea. Even though the MRU had offered to accompany them on their passage to Italy – in line with guidelines of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO)⁸ – the refugees made use of the 'request to be rescued', as Bilal explains:

When they [MRU] came they told us that they give us fuel and that we can go directly to Italy. And then the adults said that there are children inside the boat and that we cannot go any further. (...) they rescued us from there.

These processes and negotiations of sea rescues are time-consuming and labour-intensive, thereby entailing long waiting times at sea. According to a MRU representative, the long waiting times may be explained by the assumption that refugees communicate inaccurate positions, leading the authorities to then 'start to localise the position through satellites'. To respond to emergencies on board, the MRU cooperates with Malta's Air Force. Mahad, a young man from Mogadishu, was rescued during an air operation: 'I came by helicopter. Because I was very, very sick on the boat and everybody thought I am dead'. While he was taken to Malta, his boat continued the passage to Italy. But who is saved by whom at sea remains the ultimate decision of the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome (Leurs 2014), that also decides in which EU state the refugees may disembark from the rescue vessel. What the different SAR actors share is the perspective that, as we have shown, rescues are charged with technical feasibility, issues of coordination and disembarkation as well as assumptions about responsibility. Whilst the governing actors exclusively focus on sea rescue and the sea border, the refugees' perspective on the issue of being saved is ultimately also tied to legal status and practices of (dis)integration during and following arrival, as illustrated by Gabriel Samateh in the next section.

⁸The IMO resolution (2004) states that refugees have to be taken to a 'place of safety'. It is not stipulated that this must be a port.

9.5 Journey of Hope and Misfortunes: Gabriel's Account

The night of 06 June 2014 was a distracting one for me, boarding the deadly dangerous, rickety boats in the Mediterranean Sea, searching for a safe destination and a better life. In my boat, there were more than a hundred on board. During the night, the smugglers were beating us and emphasising their power to get us on the boat and then tell one person to drive us. Only God was our guide in this risk of dying. We started moving on Thursday night with everyone thinking about his or her own life and what could happen during this journey of dangerous misfortune because of lots of fighting and quarrels on the boat. The following morning, Friday 07 June 2014 at 2:00 pm, we saw the aircrafts USS Bataan and USS Elrod – on marine patrol looking for boats with problems and in danger of sinking. After 30 minutes we again saw another five migrant boats arriving at the same juncture. One of the boats was damaged and sinking and all the others were leaking and starting to take on water. Then there was an emergency rescue by USS Bataan and USS Elrod (FFG-55), offering rapid assistance to persons in distress for at least 1 h till 3:30 pm. Many died in that sinking boat so we were there waiting for our rescue but it took too long and the day turned into night. All the rescue workers left us and went away. Then everybody else started to go crazy because we thought that we were all going to die because no one was there to rescue us, while our boat was taking on water and other boats ran out of petrol. Then we continued our run without lights or a single directive device to see or know where we were going. We were following the lights we saw from big ships in the very dark Mediterranean Sea until 9:30 pm. Suddenly we saw an airplane giving us a signal light indicating a direction to follow but, due to a termination of contact, we continued our run to an unknown destination for 30 minutes. Then an American soldier with a torch came on a rescue boat, shouting at us to follow them for rescue. When we reached the ship, they took us on board and provided us with food, water, medical attention and temporary shelter until the following morning, Saturday 08 June. In Malta, a few of us, including myself, were brought to hospital for health care emergency. I spent a few days receiving medical treatment there before I was evacuated from hospital to the detention centre. Arriving in detention was another life-devastating experience due to the violations of human rights and the disrespect for my skin colour. I felt uncomfortable asking to be treated as a human being. So there I was detained for 8 months – others for up to 18 months – with security forces on duty 24/7 and all doors locked. We were handcuffed when we went to the hospital or for the asylum interview. I applied for asylum and got rejected after 3 months. The worry of a miserable life prevails. In this situation, freedom was the most important word of wisdom. Everybody in detention wants to hear 'freedom' and some people went mad just for the word 'freedom'. Now, out of detention, still being in limbo as a rejected asylum-seeker, the fear exists of being

(continued)

sent back home, your life in the society is disclosed, you will be not respected, no social benefits even if you work and pay all your taxes, applications are rejected unlawfully. So, finally, I can say that human rights in Malta are zero and, due to this, our lives continue to be destabilised in all ways.

9.6 Life in Limbo

As Reinhard Schweitzer (2020) also highlights in his chapter on irregularised migrants living in Britain, it is not the case that refugees are totally deprived of access to EU territory but that processes of excluding ‘newcomers’ take place *after* they have entered. Keeping refugees at bay thus does not exclusively occur at the sea border but also takes the form of institutional and individual exclusion within Malta. This can be explained by the fact that rescue at sea is still embedded in both refugee and international sea law. These procedures are intensely monitored while, despite intensified processes of harmonisation, the actual treatment of refugees remains under the auspices of the individual member-states (Klepp 2011). As Schweitzer demonstrates, there is a ‘policy trend towards a selective prevention of integration’ (2020, p. 121). Consequently, ‘violence against migrants no longer takes place exclusively at the geographical space between two sovereign territories. Instead border violence today has become much more normalized and diffused into society itself’ (Nail 2012, p. 241). The border, thus, has changed: the traditional nation-state border has turned into a boundary, a less visible, inner-state border, comprising socio-cultural, legal and economic dimensions (Fassin 2011, p. 117).⁹ Refugees are confronted with these dimensions on a daily basis. In the following sections, we focus on four central aspects that highlight these dynamics. We also illustrate how refugees deal with (denied) access and their different legal positionings.

9.6.1 Reception

The arrival of refugees is a frequent topic in Maltese media in which portrayals of demark refugees as undesirable; this feeling of being unwelcome was often also mentioned by the refugees we talked to. The first people they encounter after the boat ride across the Mediterranean are MRU employees in military attire, the immigration police and medical doctors. When an arrival is documented in the Maltese media, people in uniform, handcuffed refugees or doctors in white overalls are displayed (Falzon 2012) marking the arrival of refugees as a ‘border spectacle’

⁹Here, border is understood as a flexible arena negotiated by different actors.

(Cantat 2020; De Genova 2013) and creating the idea that refugees are potentially sick and threatening.

The majority of refugees does not possess the papers required by the authorities in order to enter the territory. This discrepancy between the lack of documents and the state's bureaucracy is always stressed. In an interview on 15 June 2018, the Vice Director of a local NGO told us that, as refugees declare their nationality whilst simultaneously not possessing the required documents, a powerful homogenisation as so-called '*il-illegali*' or as '*is-suwed* [the Blacks]' is efficacious. As the refugees have come from a continent often associated with exotic diseases, they are repeatedly perceived as a health risk (Falzon 2012, p. 1669). A government representative described people's first reactions towards boat migration as follows:

In 2002 people were shocked. That was the reaction of the Maltese society. (...) because we weren't used to have so many immigrants. And African immigrants. (...) (...) Then, just right about last year [2014] things were like settling in. (...) Maltese people then got the feeling that we are a transit country. So it calmed a bit down, because we are like a bus stop.

Mark-Anthony Falzon contends that this 'bus stop' phenomenon is not caused by the refugees but is, rather, grounded in how the Maltese government and society deal with refugees. As he argues the Maltese government creates a transit zone to react to the threat that refugees supposedly represent:

In contemporary Malta, sub-Saharan 'boat' immigrants are imagined and represented as transients and sojourners rather than as settlers (...). Transience is a product actively and agentively produced by the state and other actors in response to a perceived threat from immigration (Falzon 2012, p. 1661).

This state of transit is especially apparent in the practice of detaining refugees after their arrival. Accessing the detention centres is almost impossible for the public and is highly restricted for NGOs, too. Consequently, refugees are initially 'invisibilised'. When they become visible to the public while detained, then this visibility often goes hand in hand with practices that further criminalise them: 'For my age assessment they took me to (...) hospital. (...) And I was handcuffed also and guarded by policemen. Everybody in the hospital was looking at me', Geelo, a young refugee, told us. After detention, refugees are accommodated in so-called open centres, a form of accommodation where refugees can live after release from detention for up to 12 months. Depending on their allocated status of protection, they also receive a per diem. The Vice Director of a local NGO told us in his interview of 15 June 2018 that the Maltese government did not inform local (non-refugee) residents prior to opening these camps in the respective neighbourhoods:

Balbi is likely to be the city in Malta who was hit hardest when refugees came. (...) Shortly after the big arrival of refugees, the so-called Balbi open centre has been established in Balbi, a centre for single refugee men. At that time Balbi had a population of 5000 and the centre accommodated 1500 refugees. This has never been discussed or publicized before. In other words, suddenly, people were surrounded by 1,500 single, dark and strong men.

Only a few open centres are located in urban places like Balbi. The Tal Gebel open centre, in particular, lacks infrastructure, as Elais from Mogadishu told us:

In Tal Gebel there is no life. (...) There is nothing, only eat and sleep. (...) The bus does not come often (...) Sometimes we walk to town, but that takes more than two hours. So how can I go to work from there?

These centres are often fenced in and can only be accessed through security doors, even though they are declared to be ‘open’. According to the security staff of an open centre the fences and security measures supposedly serve to protect the refugees, supposedly from unwanted guests. Being accommodated in an open centre yet again reinforced the refugees’ invisibility and/or criminalisation. Rather, it appeared that reasons for protection were instead used to keep refugees at distance.

This relative inaccessibility of the open centres is consistent with the Maltese government’s reluctance to develop integration policies – which were not passed until 2017. Before that, the Maltese government had not made much effort to invest in structured integration measures, as the Maltese Asylum Status Agent confirmed on 29 May 2013: ‘We cannot really integrate long term all the people that are coming’. Only volunteers offered free English language courses in the centres, as a representative of a governmental authority also stated on 25 February 2015:

We also have independent volunteers who come here, for example, for long holidays and would like to do something fruitful while they are here. It is amazing how many people are willing to help (...) it would be a waste if the state would offer that.

At the same time, she argued that the majority of refugees would in any case not want to stay in Malta, thus making integration measures obsolete:

We are trying to help but nobody wants our help. So it’s useless telling us [to] emphasise on integration (...) integration is not a win when people don’t want to stay (...) We do get cases that do integrate but they are very few.

9.6.2 *Allocation of Status*

Obtaining a status entailed different hurdles for refugees in Malta. Dereje from Ethiopia reported translation problems at court. He was assigned a translator but this person did not speak his language. Dereje tried to explain this to the court staff but they misunderstood him and assumed that he was not grateful enough for the support provided. ‘They told me ‘Alright, you don’t want an interpreter, so here is your reject’’. Dereje felt treated badly. That Ethiopia is a country with many languages went unnoticed by the court staff. They just assumed Dereje’s language affiliation and hired the wrong interpreter which ultimately led to the rejection of his request. Admitting that they lacked political or geographical knowledge about their country of origin often undermined refugees’ trustworthiness, too: ‘I have two rejects now. (...) They were asking me 100 questions about Somalia, but I only know Mogadishu. What shall I tell them?’ reported Samia, who came to Malta as a single woman. These practices often entailed the result that refugees did not receive the legal status they were entitled to. The asylum procedure in Malta can have four

different outcomes: (1) refugee status, (2) subsidiary protection (SP), (3) Temporary Humanitarian Protection (THP) and (4) rejection of the asylum request.

The different legal statuses imply variations in refugees' freedom of movement, access to the welfare system, and the labour market. The most privileged status, that of a refugee, was only granted to 4 per cent of all applicants between 2004 and 2015 (UNHCR 2016). As Tina Magazzini (2020) also highlights with regard to Roma in Italy and Spain, citizenship – the foundation of integration as defined by Ager and Strang (2008) – is not addressed but all asylum outcomes are temporary; in fact, *all* statuses must be understood as temporary solutions. Holders of refugee status can travel freely with a convention pass to all countries, except to the country of origin. Beneficiaries of SP and THP, both international forms of protection, can only travel with a three-month EU visa within the Schengen area. Holders of SP or THP obtain personal documents and a renewable residence permit for 1 year. In contrast to recognised refugees, they have no access to family reunification or citizenship (Aditus and UNHCR 2013). All have access to employment and to core social welfare benefits. To receive an employment licence, the refugee's employer has to file the application before the documents are issued to the refugee, making the latter dependent on the former (Bijl and Nimführ 2019).

A notice of rejection implies the impossibility of having a regular residence permit and any travel documents due to a pending deportation order. The majority of rejected asylum-seekers in Malta are non-deportable¹⁰ and are usually placed in a perpetual 'in-between' situation due to their lack of a legal status (see Hinger 2020). This in-between status is also sanctioned by the EU Return Directive, which does not provide a 'mechanism to put an end to situations of legal limbo that derive from protracted situations of non-removability' (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights 2011, p. 11). To avoid destitution, the Maltese government adopted a policy equipping non-deportable refugees with a so-called 'permit to work'. This 'permit to work' differs from a work permit in that it is only issued for 3 months and must frequently be applied for by the employer to be renewed. Thus, non-deportable refugees are especially affected by (dis)integration practices which are also efficacious over and above their access to social services and the labour market, unless they were eligible for Temporary Humanitarian Protection New (THPN).¹¹ THPN was a non-asylum-linked, national form of protection which was not contained in any law. It was – until the end of 2018 – granted to persons whose application for international protection had been rejected but who could not be deported for medical or other humanitarian reasons (European Migration Network 2009, p. 10). To be considered for THPN,

¹⁰Usually a notice of rejection is followed by deportation. However, there is a clear gap between the issued notices of returns and effective deportations, caused by various legal and practical factors. These can be a refusal of certificates from the country of origin or transit or human-rights-based decisions, and forms of protest and resistance.

¹¹To distinguish THP from THPN, it is important to note that the latter was only granted to individuals who had received a final decision of rejection, whereas the former is granted to those who are not eligible for refugee status or SP.

failed asylum seekers (...) need to present documentary evidence in relation to their integration efforts and their employment history in Malta. Other mandatory criteria for eligibility include living in a private residence in Malta and keeping a clean police conduct (Government of Malta 2016).

Holders of THPN have access to employment and to core social-welfare benefits. When a new Asylum Status Agent took office at the end of 2016, THPN was suspended due to a review process (MHAS 2016). Since the end of November 2018 THPN has been replaced with the Specific Residence Authorisation Policy (SRA) administered by the Identity Malta Agency. The policy addresses former THPN certificate holders and other individuals who do not have international protection and are cannot be deported to their country of origin through no fault of their own. However, not all rejected and non-deportable refugees are entitled to benefit from SRA. The conditions of eligibility for application are ‘subject to the fulfillment of a number of integration measures’ (Grech 2018).

9.6.3 *Participation in Education*

Access to education depends on the refugees’ status as well as on their assigned age, as school attendance is only obligatory until 16 years of age. However, young refugees who were considered to be under 16 often did not attend school. This should not be understood as their lack of willingness but rather as an outcome of the lack of support they received. Elais, who was considered to be younger than 16 years when he first arrived, reported that he received no support to find a school in Malta, even though he asked his social worker to help him:

I thought that I can go to school. (...) When I asked the social worker for help to find a school, she said ‘You came here alone from Somalia and now you tell me you need help? I think you are able to find one yourself’. I didn’t find a school.

Whilst most of the UAMs we talked to did not attend school, it was different for the children of refugee families, who were often much younger than the UAMs. At school, these young children learned English – a language which their parents often did not understand. Furthermore, cultural habits were also taught which irritated the parents and caused conflicts, as Urbi, president and founder of a local migrant NGO, reported on 22 July 2015:

The children, they go to the school and the mums they don't know English at all. So she [mother] don't know what they give him [child] at school and she tries her best to put her culture on him and when he talks to his mum 'No, no this is not right' (...) some of the women they feel desperate, they think they have to stop their children to go to the school, because they think now their children are becoming rebel against her.

Whilst it was understood by most refugees that receiving an education would be good for children, the parents often felt overwhelmed and feared that they would lose their connection with their children at the same time. Even though many told us that they were also interested in further education for themselves, they often

depended on volunteers' offers, as no free English classes were accessible to them. The English courses offered by NGOs are only available to refugees having a protected status, as they receive financial grants from the different EU funding bodies that clearly state the target group – rejected asylum-seekers are not eligible. This example again highlights that integration policies obviously do not aim at the integration of *all* refugees (see Hinger 2020), but that (dis)integration is negotiated via categorisations such as status, as well as understandings of deservingness and undeservingness or age, as Urbi highlighted.

9.6.4 Access to the Labour Market

The labour market presents its own challenges entailing precarious life situations for some refugees. Irregular refugees, in particular, face a higher risk of ending up poor despite having a job. The Vice President of a local NGO explained in an interview on 21 July 2015 that:

The policies allow a broad scope of exploitation for potential employers. Particularly for rejected cases (...) because they [refugees] need an approval of the future employer to obtain their employment licence (...) But there are also a lot of exploitation in the informal sector – many people are waiting as day labourers at the roadside. I've heard of people who were working a whole day for a bottle of coke and a *fira* [Maltese bread].

Accessing the labour market is especially difficult for refugees with children. Since 2014, child day care for those less than 2 years of age is free of charge but to get a place for their offspring, parents have to present a long-term contract of employment. The day-care centres often do not cover the times of the working shifts and are, furthermore, not easily accessible due to bad transport connections. Refugees themselves addressed this gap in childcare and took care of each other's children but also charged five to ten euros per day, per child. This amount is not affordable for many. Hana talked about her difficult situation. She was a single mum and her son was 4 years old. The child's father paid her 120 euros per month, which was her only income. As she could not provide a regularised working contract, she was not entitled to free public childcare and private childcare was not affordable. The 120 euros she received every month was not enough to feed the two of them. This is why Hana felt compelled to give her son to a foster family in August 2015:

This decision wasn't easy. I can go without much food but not my son (...) Working in the hotel without having childcare is not possible. So I asked the Welfare Office to find a foster family for my son (...). But I'm afraid that he won't want to come back to me (...). They can offer him so much more (...) But I have no choice, it will be better for him, that's what I'm always thinking.

9.7 Refugees Between Agency and Vulnerabilisation¹²

Most of the refugees we talked to were united in their wish to leave Malta because, as noted by Ebrima, a non-deportable refugee from Gambia, ‘I really like Malta, [b]ut being in Malta without documents is like walking in a roundabout all the time’. Even though some refugees actually received refugee status after a couple of years in Malta, they still felt unwelcome and insecure, like Yasmine from Syria, who was granted refugee status in 2015 after she had lived in Malta for 14 years under the conditions of holding a ‘double reject’:

This piece of paper [refugee recognition] does not mean anything to me. After living 14 years with a double reject, I’m still feeling rejected. There is always the fear of deportation. Only citizenship would give me security.

Refugees developed different ways of exiting the ‘roundabout’ mentioned by Ebrima. We consequently observed different forms of agency – those wanting to leave Malta either participated in the regularised Relocation Programme¹³ or left the island-state in a self-organised, unregulated manner. The latter path often entailed a Dublin deportation back to Malta – and being returned meant that they would be punished again, as Ahmed, a young refugee, reported:

I also got punishment. (...) I have to go every day and do community work. You know in Paola [town] I cut the trees now. It is very hard work. And I only get 80 euros instead of 130 euros per month from the government.

These measures discourage refugees who are still in Malta. Thus, some of them hope to be accepted for Relocation although only those granted international protection can participate in these programmes while those who have been rejected cannot do so.

Nevertheless, we also met refugees who planned their future in Malta despite the apparent and efficacious practices of (dis)integration. To avoid discrimination in their everyday life, some developed new identities so that their social surrounding did not realise that they had entered Malta by boat, as Elais told us:

At work I don’t tell them that I came from the sea because (...) the people they make jokes about that. Because they don’t know what we have experienced. (...) I say I came for studying that’s it. I don’t want to be boat people or immigrant.

¹²This term is used to emphasise our understanding of vulnerability as a process. The attribution of a need for assistance and protection culminates in portrayals of refugees as apolitical victims, passive beneficiaries and homogenous masses under the guise of humanitarian protection. The representation of refugees as needy collectives trivialises their integration practices and denies their agency and their ability to act. Nevertheless, we do not generally deny refugees their vulnerability, but place them between agency and vulnerability depending on the context they (inevitably) find themselves in (Nyers 2013). By arguing that refugees would per se be vulnerable, one risks to overlook the processes, regulations and political decision that render refugees as vulnerable.

¹³Relocation merely refers to regulated relocations within the EU.

These practices of ‘keeping quiet’ and ‘laying low’ resulted from their fear of being further stigmatised. We were also told about another fear – people whose asylum cases were still pending were afraid of accepting the support of others as they assumed that the authorities might decide negatively on their cases. Nevertheless, some refugees founded their own migrant associations. These organisations are well networked and call attention to the situation for refugees in Malta. Being well connected was one of the most important social pillars in their everyday lives. We observed during our field work that refugees cooked together, shared their money, helped each other out with SIM cards or offered a place to sleep – ‘We share life’, concluded Bilal. These ‘acts of integration’ (Collyer et al. 2020) began soon after their arrival in Malta. Refugees took over practices of integration as they supported each other financially, socially and emotionally and also shared important information on the asylum procedure and the bureaucratic rules in Malta.

9.8 Preserving the Imagined ‘Maltese Mix’

We were repeatedly told that the Maltese were always able to borrow from and adapt to new dynamics, habits and peoples that have come to the island over the past hundreds of years – usually across the sea – which can best be seen when looking at the Maltese language. ‘Over the years and over the centuries we have come to adopt words that come from different other languages’, a highly ranked Maltese politician explained during an interview on 13 June 2018. This willingness to adapt did not seem to apply to the integration of refugees and what changes their presence might bring along over recent years. The refugees we met felt unwelcome due to both juridical and social (dis)integration practices: ‘In Malta they want you to be stupid, they don’t want you to be with their community, (...). Here, they don’t like people from the sea’, Bilal summarised. This is a key message, as he points out that refugees do not appear to belong to the ‘mix’ that would make up Maltese identity in the first place. This materialises in hardened barriers between Maltese citizens and refugees, as Absimil, from Somalia observed:

What has changed over the time is that more refugees think that all Maltese are racists, and more and more Maltese think that refugees are bad people. There is not much interaction, both live in their own worlds. I wish there was more dialogue.

The non-existence of dialogue has become apparent throughout this chapter and is efficacious on different levels regarding disintegration. Between refugee and non-refugee society, between ministries charged with immigration control versus those focusing on their care-taking, and between the government and non-refugee society when, for example, 1500 refugees were placed overnight in Balbi without informing the non-refugee residents.

9.9 Conclusion

We have shown in this chapter that the status assigned to people greatly influences their agency and the (dis)integration they experienced. Whilst they are integrated into the EU's and the Maltese asylum bureaucracy, they are also officially disintegrated from support services and rights, thereby highlighting that integration is misunderstood when it is only equated with a positive experience. The dynamics of (dis)integration are also powerful beyond legal frameworks. As a result, (dis)integration is not only and always organised, but also 'non-organised' behaviour creates these dynamics, and non-governmental actors are also involved in the underlying practices. Thus, (dis)integration not only follows from legal frameworks but also affects the refugees' daily lives and occurs due to unintentional behaviour.

The facets of both the field of tension between sea rescue and keeping refugees at bay and the subsequent dynamics of (dis)integration we analysed clarified our understanding of Malta as a 'bus stop' from the governmental perspective. The processes of security and asylum policies which refugees encounter prevent a safe life (Ralsler 2014, p. 282) and are aimed at making manifest the Maltese government's desire to prohibit permanent integration. As we have shown, inclusion and exclusion or (dis)integration do not merely take place at the nation-state's border: instead, the border is permanently and daily negotiated *in* the territory and *between* different actors. Striking examples are the exclusionary forms of accommodating refugees, their non-entitlement to certain rights and services, as well as the various processes of powerful ascriptions and criminalisation. Not only governmental actors but also some refugees understood Malta as a 'bus stop'. However, this understanding of Malta falls short as other refugees try to establish a more or less normal life, despite the many hurdles they face.

These 'acts of integration', however, face limitations: many refugees lack a safe status enabling them to actively criticise and position themselves against judicialised or individual mechanisms of exclusion. Negative public reactions (Carabott 2015) towards the migrant demonstration, for example, fostered fear among the refugees that they would be treated negatively if associated with these activities. Thus, the agency displayed by refugees must usually be understood as both a reaction towards and interplay of the power structures produced by the state's bureaucracy and society's reactions. Referring again to citizenship and equal rights as the core factors enabling integration, as defined by Ager and Strang (2008), illustrates that legal frameworks have a high impact on (dis)integration. Being granted (temporary) refugee protection, however, does not automatically mean that people *feel* 'integrated', as Yasmine's case has shown. Thus, states can limit rights by granting them only to certain categories of people *and* by limiting access to these categorisations. Yasmine's fear of being deported would only dissolve if she were granted citizenship allowing her full rights of participation. Again, this chapter has shown not only that disintegration occurs when integration measures are absent but also that integration measures can, indeed, be the source of exclusion.

Furthermore, refugees still depend on the discretion of individuals. Passing integration policies can be understood as a change in how refugees and their presence are understood, but a full assessment of whether these policies are implemented requires further research. What we were told during our research trip to Malta in June 2018 was that, until now, ‘the Integration Policy exists on paper but not in practice’. An NGO employee explained that the Integration Policy merely states that refugees are obliged to integrate themselves; the local authorities charged with the task of integration, however, were not given instructions and are still unaware of how to actually implement this policy.

In summary, we would like to emphasise that we understand (dis)integration as a relational concept. Who or what produces (dis)integration? Who (re)acts how? (Dis)integration practices should be seen as an enmeshment of legal provisions, social relationships, individual and collective experiences and actions. These can relate directly to each other, but do not have to follow a common logic. Therefore, (dis)integration is contextual and contingent, and should not be understood as a timeless or consistent phenomenon. To explore these dynamics, we proposed an ethnographic approach that allowed us to take into account different perspectives to incorporate legal documents and to look at how (dis)integration manifests itself in the daily lives of refugee- and non-refugee, institutionalised and non-institutionalised actors.

As argued in the introduction to this volume (Collyer et al. 2020) and demonstrated in Schweitzer’s (2020) contribution, practices of (dis)integration also have an impact on society as a whole. Zygmunt Bauman (2005, p. 11ff.) has already argued that the privileged who produce the ‘excluded’ in the first place should make use of their responsibilities in another fashion by *guaranteeing* human rights instead of circumventing them. In line with Bauman, Busra Fouad (cited in Diacono 2015), head of the Migrant Association, claimed: ‘[P]rotect the lives you have saved by respecting our rights (...) so that we can truly become a part of Maltese society’.

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