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iNTERCULT

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Strengthening the skills and competences of migrants for iNTERCULTural mediation and for better inclusion of migrant communities in the diversified societies

Project number: 2024-1-SI01-KA220-ADU-000255227
Cooperation partnerships in adult education (KA220-ADU)

Analysis on intercultural mediation in the five partners' countries (SI, CZ, FR, HU, IT)

COMPENDIUM OF THE RESULTS

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
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Preface

The iNTERCULT project, co-funded by the European Union on the Erasmus Plus Programme, is a cooperation partnership in the field of adult education, whose objectives are to improve understanding of intercultural mediation and its importance for the inclusion of migrants, as well as to strengthen the skills of intercultural mediators or professionals in similar positions.

The Compendium is the result of in-depth and systematic research conducted in five EU partner countries: Slovenia by Slovene Philanthropy, Italy by Futura Soc Cons. r.l., France by Cap Ulysse, Hungary by Szubjektív Értékek Alapítvány, and Czechia by InBáze, z. s.

The aim of this in-depth and systematic approach was to gather a comprehensive overview of the area and situation in each partner country and, potentially, in a broader context. In the field of intercultural mediation, it was also necessary to understand what works and what does not work, as well as the needs of persons acting as intercultural mediators that still need to be addressed in spite of their years of experience in the field.This understanding also provides, as the compendium will show, an insight into the elements of successful integration of migrants with the help of intercultural mediators.

Introduction

One of the main challenges of the iNTERCULT Erasmus+ project is to define a common line of work between the five partners operating in five different national contexts with five different regulatory frameworks and, moreover, with strong differences on the same formal definition of intercultural mediator. This not only to highlight the similarities that could lead to a common intervention strategy to be implemented especially with the WP3 and WP4, but also to understand whether some of the differences could be seen as an added value that, with all the attention that needs, could be used elsewhere. For these reasons, based on the objectives we have defined in the application, we have addressed the situation on the ground by creating four tools:

In a first phase, a preliminary analysis was carried out through:

- The **collection of good and effective practices from partner countries in the field of intercultural mediation,** enriched by a survey of the international literature on intercultural mediation in other EU countries, and
- **Desk research on what works and what does not in intercultural mediation.**

These preliminary steps gave us a comprehensive overview of our topic, allowing us to outline what is effective and what is not in intercultural mediation. A view that, as we shall see later, will need to be demonstrated, reinforced or refuted by the field research that follows, conducted through interviews and focus groups, in order to be successful in the process of migrant inclusion.

We then moved on to

- An **overview of the situation in each country**, through:

1. The definition of a questionnaire that each partner has completed to provide a clear picture of what intercultural mediation is, how it works in each country, and to collect examples of good practices or other materials in the fields in which intercultural mediators operate most.
2. A questionnaire aimed at those who, for professional or institutional reasons, have employed (as providers or clients of intercultural mediation) mediation figures. This tool allowed us to collect 36 different questionnaires in the five countries from NGOs, cooperatives, municipalities or other public bodies).

- The creation of **focus group with intercultural mediators**, organising at least one focus group in each partner country based on a common set of questions. Once the focus groups were completed, we had eight focus groups with a total of 47 intercultural mediators participating. Through the focus group with intercultural mediators, and beyond the differences in operational and legal/working status between one or more countries, it was possible to identify the specific needs of both migrants and intercultural mediators (often migrants themselves) in order to obtain elements to improve the intercultural mediation service itself. As we shall see, as this is a highly relational job, it is an area of work that is constantly evolving and changing (also from an experiential point of view, for both users and professionals). Understanding their needs, which currently remain unmet despite experience and training (where possible), can become the turning point for planning further activities, from recommendations to specific training courses, aimed at those who decide to become an intercultural mediator or for those who want to implement a mediation service.

The European context: strengths and critical aspect of intercultural mediation

Although it is widely recognised that intercultural mediation is a fundamental tool for facilitating communication between individuals and between individuals and institutions, especially in the presence of newly arrived foreign citizens or culturally diverse groups, defining a common model or operational framework, or even simply a common definition of what intercultural mediation is[1], is still far from being achieved, and not only in the five member countries of the Intercult consortium.

Since it is not limited to simple linguistic translation, but seeks to interpret the cultural codes, values and implicit expectations of the various actors, it promotes inclusion and helps in the prevention and management of conflicts, as well as in the (re)construction of community relations. Hence the concept of a "bridge" between different cultures, individuals and social contingencies.

However, if we take a look at the literature at European level, it seems that each country, and sometimes each region, has a completely different idea of what a model of intercultural mediation might be. Of course, in general, intercultural mediation services are

[1] For example, in Europe, one can easily find definitions of "cultural mediation", "linguistic mediation", "social mediation", "cultural work", "intercultural education", etc.

provided in the health, education and in social sectors, but their formalisation differs. For example, while intercultural mediation is strongly integrated into the healthcare system in Belgium and Germany, in Italy this is only the case in a few regions (e.g. Emilia-Romagna), while mediation is more often provided in reception centres or asylum seekers centres. Once again, while in France and Spain intercultural mediation is formally recognised and institutionalised with specific courses and regulatory thresholds, in Greece the professional path is more in the hands of NGOs and informal agencies.

Despite the many differences found, it is clear that intercultural mediation shows enormous potential and strengths in the paths to inclusion of Third-Country National (TCN) citizens. A list of the most emphasised strengths sees intercultural mediation as a tool that:

- Facilitates communication and mutual understanding because it is able to decode not only verbal language, but also many meanings of non-verbal language or untranslatable cultural elements (beliefs, superstitions, symbolic and religious elements, etc.), helping to understand attitudes and behaviours that might otherwise be misunderstood.
- Prevents or helps to manage conflicts, acting precisely on its "mediating" component, intercultural mediation can help to interpret and resolve misunderstandings and conflicts, proposing shared solutions that take into account the needs of all parties involved.
- Facilitates social inclusion and access to services, providing cultural and linguistic guidance to both beneficiaries and professionals, helping to facilitate access to and use of social, health and institutional services by foreigners (but with benefits extended to all), improving both their inclusion and active participation, but also, on the service side, increasing the success of services provided and the inclusiveness and universality of the services offered.
- Incorporates a potential for transformation and empowerment. Intercultural mediation can promote empowerment pathways for immigrants, contributing to the construction of inclusive citizenship. By acting at the community and neighbourhood network level, it can help create new inclusive and intercultural community identities.
- It performs an educational and training function. The mediator's activity has a strong educational value: simply by doing their job, they educate themselves to critical awareness, deconstruct stereotypes and promote intercultural encounters in areas such as schools, health centres, social services.

At the same time, however, this heterogeneity also reveals many weaknesses in intercultural mediation, including:

- Lack of institutional recognition. In many contexts, mediation is not yet formally recognised or well regulated as a professional skill, and this creates ambiguity in the definition of its roles and in the recognition of its skills and professionalism, even by other professionals in the welfare system, and limits its operational capabilities.
- Insufficient training and methodological shortcomings in training courses. Training is often fragmented, entrusted to training courses that are not uniform in terms of both curricular hours and subject matter, and often not regulated at national or regional

level. Specific training that integrates theory, cultural practice, conflict management and emotional effects is often lacking. Continuous development of cognitive, effective and behavioural skills is necessary.

- Risk of delegation and de-responsibilisation of other operators who, by entrusting the management of cultural differences exclusively to the intercultural mediator, do not encourage the duty/need to acquire intercultural skills themselves.
- Biases related to the mediator's origin. The idea that a foreign IM automatically guarantees greater authenticity or neutrality is risky, especially since they may have different or outdated cultural references. Furthermore, the vehicular language of mediation is not necessarily that of the TNC's origin, not to mention that there are radical differences between high-context and low-context cultures, which complicate the constant adaptation of communication techniques and codes, requiring sensitivity and continuous adaptation.

The situations of the five partner countries

Starting with this preliminary desk research, as mentioned above, we defined the research tools that could allow us to better understand the context, as well as the similarities and differences among the partners (and, of course, the other countries). From the five questionnaires completed by the five partners, the first thing that has been outlined starting from the differences is how to define the intercultural mediator. The definition that takes into account all the different nuances is as follows:

An intercultural mediator is a person (more often a professional) who acts as an actor of integration and dialogue between migrant individuals/persons with a migration background, and another actor (professional, citizen, organisation, community) of the host country. As an agent of an intercultural process, the intercultural mediator, while intervening impartially between the parties, contributes to defining the contours of a third and inclusive relationship between the newcomer (but also with people already settled) and the host country.

Beyond mediation, they play a key role in fostering mutual understanding and co-creating an inclusive relationship, helping to shape a shared, equitable framework in which migrants and members of the host society can interact constructively and sustainably.

Once this has been established, there are still significant formal and substantial differences in intercultural mediation. The first difference is that in Hungary and Czechia, the role of intercultural mediator does not formally exist, unlike in other countries. In these countries, even though the operational boundaries are essentially the same, the professional title is different (e.g. intercultural worker) or there is not a *de jure* formalisation. This also leads to a substantial difference in training and curriculum paths. In fact, while in Italy, France and Slovenia there are formalised paths to becoming an intercultural mediator, with structured curricula and training plans recognised by the state or regions, in Hungary, where there is no formally associated role, competence derives exclusively from curricular experience. In Czechia, it is possible to take an exam to validate skills defined by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and thus acquire the professional qualification of Intercultural Worker (75-020-R). This option is available

without prejudice to the possibility of attending non-formalised courses organised by NGOs or international organisations, such as the IOM.

Of course, in more considerate places, in addition to intercultural mediators/intercultural workers, there are a number of other similar professions working in the field of migration/social inclusion with similar or related skills. Without mentioning legal advisors and employment consultants, who are quite common because they also work with national beneficiaries, there are other very similar or more specialised professional profiles: community interpreters in Czechia and Slovenia, community mediators and social educators in Italy, human rights officers, health transcultural mediators and intercultural psychologists in France, as well as a number of other "non-certified training courses on intercultural skills and mediation" here and there.

In general, and this applies to all of them, there are no special requirements to become a mediator (e.g. having a migration background or knowing a vehicular language or a certain number of other languages), except for knowledge of the national language at least at B1 level and a minimum number of hours of internship or fieldwork.

As for how people normally become intercultural mediators, in all five countries the gateway is after practicing in the workplace, in the field of social work or as a volunteer or interpreter, rather than after an academic path or diploma. This suggests that the qualification or diploma is a way of formalising and highlighting one's skills only when one is fairly sure of the choices made.

With the sole exception of Hungary, which does not require qualifications/titles, in France the IM title is awarded by NGOs, training centres and universities, in Slovenia only by a public authority, in Italy by a public authority but also by vocational training institutes and in Czechia by a public authority and vocational training institutes, but also by NGOs.

Only Italian qualifications appear to be part of the EQF (European Qualifications Framework) and therefore valid in all the other European Union countries, while titles awarded in the other countries of the consortium appear to be valid only at national level.

Training is required to obtain the official IM qualification only in France (140 to 600 hours) and Italy (where the average number of hours required is 450). In Czechia, training is not required, but it may be useful to pass the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs test to acquire the professional qualification of Intercultural Worker. In addition, before starting the profession in Slovenia, proof of 300 hours of work as an intercultural mediator (including on a voluntary basis) is required.

The main subjects studied in the courses to obtain the qualification in the five countries are:

Czechia	▪ Basic interpreting, including community interpreting.

	▪ Communication and counselling skills. ▪ Basic knowledge of social work, migration and integration ▪ Crisis intervention.
France	▪ Building a relationship of trust. ▪ Conflict prevention and management. ▪ Designing and managing social and intercultural mediation projects. ▪ Professional monitoring and sharing. ▪ Cross-disciplinary module and Internship.
Hungary	None
Italy	▪ Knowledge of the social security system. ▪ Knowledge of the law; ability to interact with other people/professionals involved. ▪ Understanding of the needs of the other actors. ▪ Case management skills.
Slovenia	▪ Intercultural mediation in healthcare, education and employment. ▪ Intercultural mediation standards.

Moreover, at the end, they must be able to demonstrate that they possess the following skills:

Czechia	Interpreting skills and the ability to work with people from different cultures are essential for clear communication and fostering an inclusive environment. Professionals in this field must be able to support people in crisis situations, including those who may display aggression, sadness, or distress. This requires basic knowledge of psychology and the application of psychological hygiene practices to maintain one's own well-being and set boundaries. A solid foundation in migration law, general legal principles and a practical knowledge of the social system enable intercultural workers to guide clients through administrative and legal processes. Time management is also crucial, enabling professionals to handle multiple cases efficiently while maintaining a high level of support. Key responsibilities include identifying and analysing the needs of clients with a

	migrant background in adverse social situations and providing counselling and tailored support to address these challenges. Proficiency in administrative law, residence and asylum law, social law and social assistance methods ensures that workers can offer effective guidance. Networking skills and a high level of knowledge of the services offered by other institutions and NGOs play a key role in intercultural education, intercultural communication, and intercultural mediation, promoting understanding and conflict resolution in diverse communities. Their work supports the integration and social inclusion of migrants, refugees and other vulnerable groups, while promoting human rights and social cohesion.
France	Ensure an active local presence with the aim of becoming known and recognised, using "outreach" techniques and identifying and mobilising local network resources. Inform the public to promote access to the law for individuals, while respecting their uniqueness and adopting an ethical approach by targeting appropriate relays and support (social, disability, medical-social, health, legal, etc.) Analyse a request to identify the problems/needs outlined with the people concerned, using active listening and reformulation. Encourage public participation to help people develop and maintain their independence, particularly people with disabilities, by supporting them in exercising their citizenship, while promoting understanding of the roles and positions of the various players in society and supporting the demand and the expression of needs. Be trained in Emérique Cohen's theory of intercultural shock. Be trained in the type of psycho-emotional and psychological impact that migration can have, integration strategies and refugee studies (basic concepts).
Hungary	None
Italy	Management skills Empathy Ability to develop an individual plan of action Conflict management Extensive knowledge of the network of services and facilities
Slovenia	Training is not required. IMs demonstrate their skills by holding a high school diploma, by proving that they have worked at least 300 hours as intercultural mediators and by knowing the Slovenian language at least at B1 level. In this way, they are supposed to have the necessary skills to manage the main aspects of the profession (Intercultural mediation in healthcare, education and employment and intercultural mediation standards).

If the CEFR/CEMR basic level of the national language required to participate in training differs between partner countries, the basic level of knowledge of the national language required to work as an intercultural mediator, where this profession is regulated in some way, is at least B1 (B2 in Czechia and France).

For an IM who wishes to work in certain areas of intervention, there are no other specialised training courses or need for a specific tutoring, with the exception of France, where more specialised training is required for those working in the health sector. This does not mean, of course, that there are no other opportunities for specialisation in the case of work in schools or hospitals. However, this is more a matter of personal choice than a requirement.

Professional and recruitment mechanisms

Only in Italy are there regulatory guidelines that prescribe the use of intercultural mediators (especially in health, education and asylum seeker services) with the aim of facilitating inclusion and care paths. In France, it is the interpreter for legal proceedings, and not the mediator, who performs this task. However, according to the answers, in all countries, intercultural mediators de facto operate in first reception services and, in most of the countries, also in hospitals and health services, social services and services for asylum seekers, and front desks. In Italy, Czechia and Slovenia they are also employed in police stations and educational services for minors. In Slovenia, Italy and France, they are part of the staff of services for victims of exploitation, trafficking or violence.

While the respondents unanimously agree that IMs work in services run by NGOs or international organisations (such as the IOM or UNHCR), they are not necessarily employed by these organisations, with the exception of France, the other places where they work are run by public authorities (state, regional or municipal). Not all mediators are employees; most of the time there is a mix of employees and freelance or self-employed IMs working in the same place. The employer is always a third sector actor (NGO or cooperative), although in Czechia some mediators (intercultural workers in this case) are employed by public bodies.

Despite the variety of workplaces and employers, only in Italy and France is it easy to find associations/cooperatives/companies established by intercultural mediators who provide intercultural mediation services. This is despite the fact that, as outlined by the players who provide or hire intercultural mediation services, they:

- can better distribute skills and abilities among their staff and thus *create a pool of skilled intercultural mediators, that could be beneficial for those who need to hire intercultural mediators, as well as exchange experiences and knowledge (peer-to-peer training) not to mention the fact that this could increase their visibility as professionals. Collaboration within such a group allows mediators to exchange ideas, refine their methods and adopt best practices, leading to continuous improvement in mediation outcomes.*

- Can operate in various welfare sectors at the same time and, as a result, have a wider view of the system. *A collective may bring together mediators with diverse cultural insights, experiences, and skills, which enriches the problem-solving process and fosters more innovative and inclusive solutions.*

- Can better re-arrange their organisation and shifts according to the needs, as well as *support professionals, provide training, establish professional standards and promote social inclusion. An association can build its network and adapt its mission to modern challenges of migration and integration, including by leveraging technology and developing new professional resources.*

- Better manage the "unusual" situations. *Through collaboration, standardisation and advocacy, collective mediation efforts can lead to the development of effective and transferable practices that benefit diverse contexts. As formal entities, associations can often gain credibility and trust within communities and institutions, which helps them promote successful outcomes as models for broader application. Moreover, if the collective entity also consists of people with a migrant background, inclusion among peers can be more fluid, and allow IMs to have more self-confidence and less fear of carrying out administrative procedures, even if they have poor administrative skills.*

- Are driven to constantly improve their effectiveness in order to play on the market. For example, a *collective entity can become a legal entity and thus apply for projects and hire staff within the organisation, but it is also forced to face new challenges. Associations can establish standardised frameworks and procedures, ensuring consistency and professionalism in their approach. This not only improves the quality of mediation, but also creates replicable models that can be adapted to different contexts. Collectives also have greater capacity to address complex or large-scale issues involving multiple stakeholders, ensuring that solutions are comprehensive and sustainable.*

Average of IMs employed:

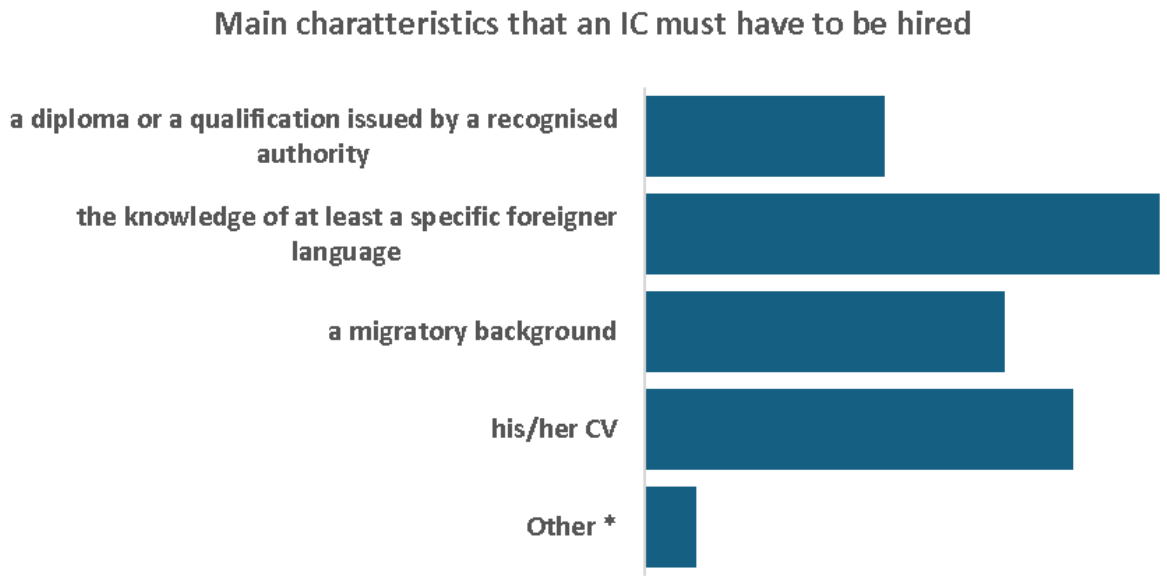
The 36 organisations that answered our questionnaires reported that they have recruited a total of approximately 717 IMs in 2024. The great majority of organisations employing IMs work with an average of 10 or fewer IMs per day, although there is a minority of organisations that may have between 20 and 50 mediators working for them on a daily basis. Comparing the same organisation in relation to the total number of IMs employed in 2024, we can see that the range rises rapidly, with some of them employing 50, 60, 90 or even 154 IMs throughout the year. However, only 21 (sic!) are IMs for whom organisations declare an average number of hours worked on a weekly basis exceeding 24 hours. 458 work less than 20 hours and more than 4, and at least 240 IMs are employed for less than 4 hours per week.

This means that IMs are far from being strongly integrated into most organisations working with migrants, so it is not surprising that only a third of these organisations hire IMs

exclusively as employees without mixing them or resorting to other forms of hiring such as freelancers or self-employed. Furthermore, in less than two-fifths of mediation service providers and clients, IMs are part of the management team, and this is not always related to the number of IMs employed.

In terms of age and gender, IMs are typically females and generally over 35 years of age.

Although there are "priorities", there is no rigorous profile to be adopted in order to be hired as an IM. This is true for many reasons, even where specific qualifications and profiles are required. Therefore, when organisations need to hire mediators, they rely on and choose one or more of the criteria indicated in the following chart, in a more or less rigid manner.



* ***Other***: *length of stay in the country*

Internal training

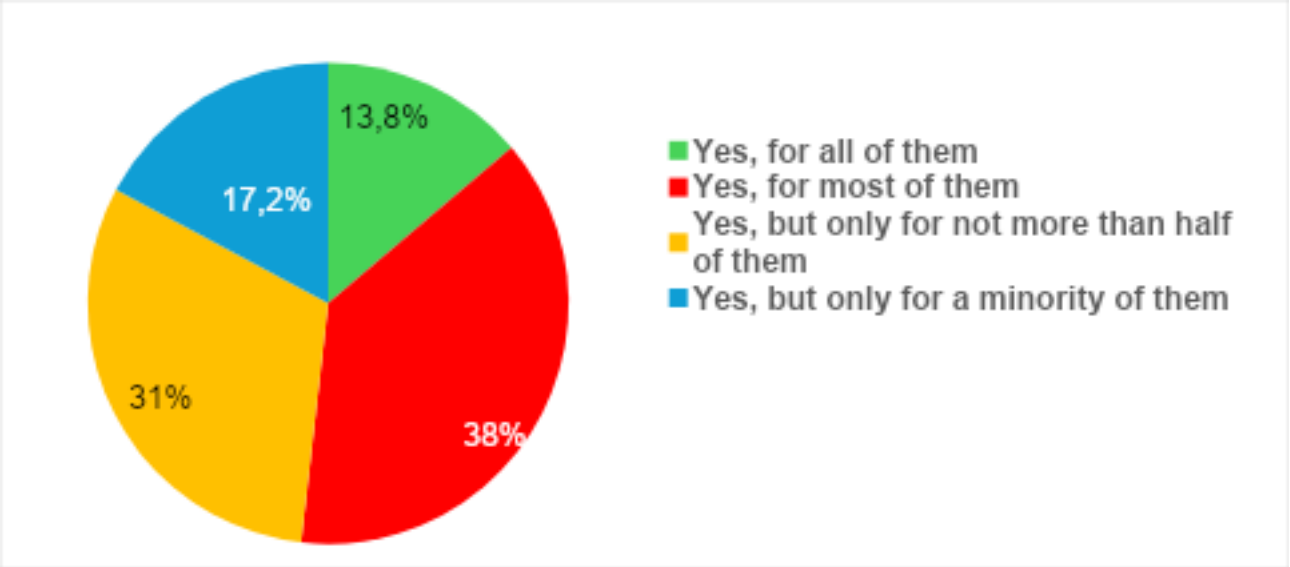
University education (according to the requirements of the social services register for the position "other professional worker")

Most migrants in need come from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Ukraine and the Indian subcontinent, but beyond this "common ground", each of the five countries deals with the differences based on its own historical and political past. It is therefore not surprising that in France there are large numbers of people from the former colonies, or in Slovenia from the former Yugoslavia, or in Czechia and Hungary there are various communities from current or former socialist countries.

To give an idea of the most widely spoken languages, in addition to the national ones, these are:

Arabic	16
Ukrainian	15
French	13
English	12
Urdu	9
Bengali	7
Languages of the former Yugoslavia	6
Dari (Afghanistan)	6
Hindi (India)	5
Chinese	5
Albanian	5
Turkish	4
Farsi (Iran)	3
Russian	3
Vietnamese	2
Mongolian	1
Somali	1

It is interesting to note that when asked whether organisations are able to provide adequate intercultural mediation services for those coming from the above-mentioned areas, the answers are quite positive, with the majority of the public giving an adequate answer.



According to the organisations interviewed, the most significant needs that often do not receive an adequate answer in terms of intercultural mediation are:

- a specific language or dialect: 64%
- an intercultural mediator with specific expertise in health issues: 36%
- an intercultural mediator of a specific gender, if required by the needs: 36%
- an intercultural mediator of a specific religion, if required by the needs: 33%
- an intercultural mediator with specific expertise in exploitation and trafficking: 36%
- an intercultural mediator with specific skills in conflict management: 36%
- an intercultural mediator with specific expertise in victims of torture: 28%
- an intercultural mediator with specific expertise in disabilities: 31%

Individual professional skills and organisational strategies

For the organisations interviewed, the skills most required of intercultural mediators, which they must possess in order to provide an adequate response to the needs of migrants, are, in descending order:

- Intercultural competencies (both formal and informal)
- Communication and dialogue skills
- Linguistic skills (national and foreign)
- Flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness to needs
- Empathy
- Awareness of the role and correct professional approach
- Conflict management and resolution
- Knowledge of the local culture, social systems and laws

- Reliability, confidentiality and patience
- Teamwork and organisational skills
- Interest and understanding of client needs
- Networking skills
- IT skills
- Ability to set and maintain boundaries
- Ability to learn and be interested in continuing education
- Knowledge of intercultural medicine
- Psychological skills
- Migration origin
- Ability to self-reflect

However, what happens when the organisations must respond urgently with intercultural mediation to a special or extraordinary need (e.g. a new language, a victim of torture, a person with a disability, etc.)?

First of all, they are somewhat organised to provide an adequate answer in a short time, half the providers/clients try to do their best with their own staff (2/5); less of a third of them, if they cannot find a solution, are forced to send the person to a more specialised facility. Only a small minority have a list of qualified external intercultural mediators available around the clock or ask their intercultural mediation provider to provide a skilled mediator as soon as possible.

In any case, almost the totality of the organisations surveyed declare that the average skills of intercultural mediators working with them are adequate to their goals. However, even if they are well trained, some important weaknesses in their skills are related to (in this order):

- poor ability to manage the risks of burnout
- poor knowledge of national legislation, bureaucracy and the constantly changing system
- poor knowledge of the national language
- excessive deference to professionals (e.g. doctors, police officers, etc.)
- poor knowledge of the local welfare system
- lack of empathy
- poor ability to be better understood by the institution on how mediation works

When asked what topics professional or internal training should address in order to best prepare intercultural mediators, the answers received show the following ranking:

Conflict management	31
Communication and relational skills	30
National/local legislation	29.8
Healthcare system procedures	29.4
Domestic violence	29.1
Employment opportunities	28.7
Welfare system	27.7
Asylum seekers procedures	26.9
Understanding (and coping with) exploitation and trafficking	26.7
Case management	26.1
Gender equality	25.6
Permit and right to stay procedures	24
Staff and organisational work	22.7
Financing and administrative work	22.6
Guidance and secretariat services	22.5
Job designing and project work	22.3

It is very interesting to note that two-thirds of the respondents provide intercultural mediators with some form of training or internship to improve their skills immediately after they were hired or at regular intervals during their professional life in the organisation, and this applies to over 50% of respondents.

When asked whether the organisation has some strategies or procedures in case of urgent intercultural mediation needs, only a minority of them have such strategies or procedures or open a "ticket" that guarantees availability within a short time (24/36 hours) or through an "on-call duty" service ensured by the intercultural mediators themselves. In one case, a form of supervision has been put in place to ensure prompt availability.

Once again, we asked our organisations, based on their experiences, to rank the areas in which the work of intercultural mediators is most effective. The answers, according to a weighted average, show the following:

Social services	33.0
Hospitals and health services	32.8
Educational services for minors	31.5
Asylum seekers services	30.8
Police stations	30.2
Labour and employment services	30.2
First reception services	29.7
Educational services for adults	29.6
Services for exploited persons, victims of trafficking or violence	29.5
Guidance and secretariat services	28.2
Front desks	25.2

However, what are the main problems or distresses experienced by IMs that may lead to a situation that compromises the effectiveness of their interventions? According to the organisations involved, these greatest risks are:

- job insecurity (72%)
- low pay (61%)
- difficulty in finding a full-time job (61%)
- high levels of stress and risk of burnout (55.5%)
- indeterminacy of the role (47.2%)
- work seen as disqualifying (47.2%)
- high level of turnover (14%)
- need to be elsewhere as soon as possible despite everyday problems (e.g. traffic jams) (2.6%)

One of our last open questions concerned the weaknesses of intercultural mediation as a service provided and what challenges might need to be addressed in order to achieve a sustainable impact of this practice. This is because, despite its critical role in promoting social cohesion and migrant inclusion, intercultural mediation (IM) seems to continue to face significant structural and operational weaknesses. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure its long-term effectiveness. The answers show that our concerns were well founded.

1. Lack of Formal Recognition and Regulation

- The role of intercultural mediators is neither clearly defined nor regulated.
- Intercultural mediation is not strongly formalised in national social service laws, which contributes to the profession remaining largely unrecognised and invisible in many public systems.
- Unlike other social professions, there is a lack of professional standards and frameworks. As a result, self-proclaimed "mediators" may operate outside official frameworks, potentially harming clients and undermining data confidentiality and service quality.

2. Precarious Working Conditions

- Services are often on-call and non-continuous, making stable employment difficult.
- There is a high degree of job insecurity and unpredictability of requests.
- Many mediators face uncertain employment through NGOs with no long-term contracts or consistent funding.
- The profession is underpaid, undervalued and offers limited opportunities for career growth.
- Their number of professional IMs is insufficient to meet demand.

3. Insufficient Funding and Political Support

- Intercultural mediation suffers from chronic underfunding, with no dedicated public financial support, and in the medium term this can seriously affect service delivery, training, and staff retention.
- Political instability and weak legislative support hinder long-term planning and system development.

4. Structural and Systemic Issues

- There is no unified national system for the coordination of IM services.
- The profession is often classified as low-value, particularly in sectors such as healthcare.
- IM is underdeveloped and poorly integrated into public services.
- The necessary quality standards are difficult to achieve due to insufficient structural support.

5. Challenges in Professional Identity and Perception

- The mediator's role is often reduced to linguistic support, ignoring its broader relational and cultural significance. The unique skills and value that IM brings to user-service relationships are not recognised.
- Misconceptions persist, including the prejudice that IM is only about "helping immigrants" and that it encourages system abuse.
- The position lacks public awareness and respect, affecting recruitment and professional development.

This means that in order to strengthen intercultural mediation, it is essential that governments and institutions recognise its professional status, ensure stable and adequate funding, better integrate it into public services, and create support networks for mediators. Without addressing these systemic weaknesses, the effectiveness of IM in promoting inclusion and social cohesion will remain limited.

One of our last curiosities was what new challenges intercultural mediation services might face.

Inevitably, the first challenge is to guarantee sustainable funding for this kind of service, for many reasons:

- To strengthen the sense of security both of IMs and clients and avoid the risks of interrupting the service, so as to ensure continuity of intercultural mediation services
- To transform projects (which have an expiry date) into structured services, preferably integrated into institutions (hospitals, government offices, municipalities and schools) and not only linked to NGOs

- To guarantee IMs more stable employment with an adequate salary, based on a national contract (where not yet established) that also allows those who need it to apply for a work visa or residence permit

- To ensure they also receive better mental health support and burnout prevention

This means that stronger institutional support is required, as well as professional recognition and enhancement of the role. Intercultural mediation must be visible and recognisable by the system. This also starts with their qualifications, which must contemplate a more in-depth knowledge of issues such as national legislation, how to relate to and to manage artificial intelligence, how to cope with mental health, addiction, labour exploitation and human trafficking, workplace safety and how to deal with the rising xenophobia.

This is also because there is no doubt that changes in the structure and scope of migration may lead to even greater diversity of people and cultures, which complicates the selection of suitable IMs for the implementation of quality intercultural mediation.

Finally, we asked organisations what kind of impact the use of AI and other ICTs (such as videoconferencing, translators, etc.) could have on intercultural mediation practices. Surprisingly, albeit with due caution, the answers were more positive and proactive than expected.

- AI could facilitate the work of the intercultural mediators (72.2%)

- AI could facilitate an immediate response, especially in emergencies (50%)

- AI could improve performance and provide better answers (47.2%)

- AI could facilitate the provision of specific answer in particular conditions of need (e.g. rare languages, long-distance services) (41.7%)

- AI could provide mediators with even more skills (39%)

- AI could eliminate much of the "human touch" provided by intercultural mediators (36.1%)

- AI could facilitate the spread of intercultural mediation services because it reduces their costs (19.4%)

- AI could seriously jeopardise intercultural mediation jobs (5.6%)

- AI may entail risks such as misunderstandings caused by incorrect translation by AI translators (2.8%)

Comparative Report on Intercultural Mediation across Five European Countries as a Result of the Focus Group

In the spring of 2025, from March to May, the five partners held eight focus groups with a total of 47 IMs involved. The focus groups were conducted independently by the partners based on common guidelines which described the methods of conduct and the questions to be asked. Some focus groups were held in person, while others were held online.

A set of questions was prepared for the occasion, based on previous questionnaires given to the partner and to stakeholders who provide or host intercultural mediation services. The use of the set of questions, in accordance with the rules of the focus group, which allow a certain degree of flexibility in order to follow the participants' thoughts, was not rigid, so not all focus groups asked exactly the same questions and received the same answers.

The list of questions is the following:

1. Why do you work as an intercultural mediator (or similar)? Was it a choice or a coincidence?
2. Can you describe the essence of your work in 3 minutes?
3. What are you particularly proud of in your work?
4. Conversely, are there things you are ashamed of?
5. If you imagine yourself in three years' time, how do you imagine your occupation?
6. As you may know, the professional background of intercultural mediators in different European countries is very different (in terms of training, qualifications, professional certification, status, etc.). If you had the chance, what would you ask a colleague working in another EU country in terms of work?
7. Imagine now that a colleague from another EU country asks you for some advice because they want to move here as a cultural mediator. What would you suggest?
8. Can you give us (or add) any impressions or suggestions concerning the need to learn how to be a better intercultural mediator or on any other aspect that you think should be developed?

The outcomes

Thematic Area 1: Access to the Profession – Choice or Chance

There are not just a few very distinctive reasons why people choose to become intercultural mediators (IMs). Some of them had no choice at all, as they started mediating for their parents as children, but more generally there is a wide range of different aims (personal, opportunistic, accidental, altruistic, political, meditated, etc.) that lead to the profession and a common thread that ties all these different reasons together: the desire to help others and, in some way, make a difference.

Focus groups testimonies show that some chose to become an IMs because of their personal history (migration experiences and bilingualism are commonly leveraged) or because they started as volunteers in NGOs or other organisations or reception centres for migrants or during times of great need such as migration crises. Others were recruited informally when language interpretation was urgently needed in schools or public institutions and, enjoying the experience, they decided to make it their profession.

Others reveal a deep intertwining of personal migration trajectories and professional commitment, so if they are now IMs, it is because they were once users of the services themselves, and this transition from clients to mediators has enriched their empathy and authenticity. Migration was the fundamental experience: stories of those who had navigated bureaucratic systems alone were common, and this struggle became the motivation to guide others in orientation, thanks to the lessons learned previously.

Not all mediators have a migrant or a social work background. Some of them were born and raised in the country (and not necessarily to migrant parents) and have developed a deep passion for intercultural work. This mix of origins has added both a local and transnational perspective to the field, as has the fact that not all IMs came from adjacent fields of work (e.g. social work, education, psychology or migration services), but had unrelated backgrounds, such as acting or teaching, discovering intercultural work by chance and bringing complementary skills to the table. Certainly, there are also those who started out doing occasional ad hoc interpreting and then evolved into the profession because they enjoy it or are driven by a desire to address migrants' difficulties and needs.

This diversity of backgrounds, on the one hand, underscores the accessibility and flexibility of the profession, but on the other hand, it shows that there is a high risk that mediators will initially suffer from a lack of formal training and will therefore be forced to gain professional skills on the job or at a later stage.

Regardless of the reason why they enter the profession, we can divide this world into two halves: people who become IMs after a meditated path and therefore attend specific training courses (regardless of whether or not they are recognised by the public authorities). Mostly, this theoretical background helps to establish professional identity and mediators may be hired thanks to their qualifications or specialisations (although institutional hiring does not always follow this rule).

Others enter the profession by chance, by opportunity, because they were in the right place at the right time or, at least, not after an academic path. These mediators, who often lack formal training, can acquire a professional qualification retrospectively, surely on the job, but also with a formal recognition of the skills matured in the field, possibly integrated by specific training to fill in the gaps.

"Even though I spoke the language when I arrived here, I didn't understand the system. Thanks to this experience, I now help others not to feel lost."

"I wasn't familiar with the term intercultural mediator... I just wanted to help." "I started as a volunteer after arriving from Iraq."

Thematic Area 2: Description of the Job

"IM is not just interpreting, it is understanding the context behind what is being said." "We help both parties meet halfway." "We are not translators, we are human bridges."

Intercultural mediation is often described by IMs themselves as a multifunctional and demanding profession. Their tasks vary considerably and they often serve multiple roles within a single day, tailoring their support to each context. It is, in fact, a profession that combines various skills and roles in interpreting (but extended to cultural translation), language teaching guidance and systemic navigation (in several areas such as health, education and social services). Frequently they act as trusted confidants and are undoubtedly called upon to build trust, provide legal assistance, psychosocial and emotional support, mentoring and logistics. Moreover, their role is even more fluid especially when assisting asylum seekers or unaccompanied minors.

Mediators support integration by clarifying processes and expectations for both migrants and institutions. Mediators also mentioned acting as informal counsellors, especially where there is a clear lack of formal follow-up systems. Because they *"interpret not just words, but also silences and gestures",* as well as cultural gestures and behaviours to ensure mutual understanding (playing a key role in facilitating communication in emotionally charged contexts such as healthcare), IMs are able to ease tension and convey the message smoothly. For these reasons, they are also involved in crisis mediation (e.g. confronting exploitative employers) and conflict mitigation (sometimes their only presence is enough to do so), thereby improving service delivery.

Even if sometimes they describe their work as undervalued, they are clearly aware that it is essential: "*We work quietly, but often make the biggest difference*". This includes school mediation, healthcare support, social interpretation and administrative guidance.

Some of them pointed out that mediators not only help TNCs understand how institutions and services work in the country (from schools to hospitals, from diagnostics to discipline), but also educate civil servants on how to interact effectively with migrant clients.

Thematic Area 3: Reasons for Pride

IMs do not choose the profession for economic reasons, that is for sure. Therefore, much of their "pay check" consists of intangible assets and expressive motivations. Pride among mediators comes from seeing tangible impacts: facilitating successful communication, resolving misunderstandings, promoting mutual respect and humanising often cold bureaucratic spaces. Not rarely do IMs feel fulfilled when clients take responsibility for their integration processes, accessing education, asserting their rights or securing healthcare. Mediators are proud to be safe spaces for migrants in distress and to make them visible to institutions even when they pretend not to see them.

Many view their work as transformative and empowering, and these feelings go hand in hand not only with the recognition given by migrants, but also with the awareness of being

visible and recognised, in their roles and skills, by institutions. So, when professionals say, "We need you here", you know it matters. Mediators take pride in professional recognition and meaningful team dynamics. They highlight their ability to resolve conflicts, promote trust between institutions and clients, and enhance service delivery. Recognition from both beneficiaries and staff is particularly valued because it allows for smoother integration of migrants and the building of intercultural bridges.

Of course, as in other social jobs, relational achievements are very important, and a tangible sign of this is the long-term collaborations and sense of trust they have built within their communities.

"When someone says to me, I finally feel seen*, that means everything to me."*

"We are not just service providers—we are companions in resilience."

"Rebuilding broken communication is powerful."

"We have become the trusted link between migrants and public services."

"Seeing migrants come back years later with gratitude is deeply rewarding."

Thematic Area 4: Frustrations or Shame

As mentioned above, money is only a small part of an IM's "pay check", which also consists of expressive assets and altruistic motivations, even if the latter do not put bread on the table. Therefore, when complaints about low pay become excessive and start to involve expressive motivations, we may be facing a problem. Of course, a lack of money is a problem for every worker, but many IMs complain of excessive financial insecurity due to short term or part-time contracts, both because not many IMs are called upon every day in a mediation process and also because most of the organisations they work for are not financially sound, but depend on short-term funding, projects, and so on. This weakness can also lead to a continued reliance on volunteer work which, combined with dependence on unqualified online platforms, can lead to a major source of disillusionment and deprofessionalisation (not to mention the fact that the absence of long-term funding stifles innovation).

Moreover, it is crucial when IMs report frustrations such as lack of recognition, blurred boundaries with clients (e.g. late-night calls), feelings of emotional exhaustion and not being recognised by the institutions they have supported. In addition, it is not uncommon for them to have to grapple with a lack of support from the state and institutional rigidity, especially when dealing with people in need.

From what IMs have reported, it is clear what are the risks of burnout: emotional exhaustion and lack of supervision, feedback or follow-up, with no way to process the traumas they have witnessed, lack of formal training, high caseload and systemic

misunderstandings. The need to constantly explain their role, even to officials, is also very frustrating.

Some feel isolated, in a sort of institutional apathy, used only in emergencies, with few opportunities for preventive engagement. Despite doing complex work, they are often treated as peripheral or ad hoc staff. Others occasionally feel inadequate or are worried about unintentionally harming clients due to lack of resources or specific training or in-depth knowledge of the context.

"We need support too: we carry a lot." "Half of us still work without pay. That's not sustainable."

"After 80 clients a day, I'm drained, physically and emotionally." "Even institutions don't know what we do."

"We're called when it's already a crisis. That's too late." "Our value is clear, but our funding is not."

"I feel ashamed when I miss something important due to inexperience." "We care deeply, but we also need tools."

"We never know the outcome: we help and then disappear." "Sometimes we are asked to mediate without any briefing."

Thematic Area 5: Vision for the Future

The vision for the future, for themselves and their profession, may change from country to country and, sometimes, from one generation of IMs to another. In common, they share the aspiration (and even the need) for mediation that involves broader institutional integration and institutional embedment, especially in the health and education fields. Along with these more institutional concerns, there is also the call for stronger collective representation that may help exert some form of influence on policy. They advocate for stronger (and formal) recognition of their profession, with national standards and sustainable contracts. Some are concerned about AI, especially if used as a cost-cutting strategy, and hope for renewed human-centred services.

Mediators call for a future with deeper institutional commitment that could guarantee sustainable budgets and ongoing funding, as a guarantee of a more stable perspective that could allay fears of being forced to leave their jobs overnight, and career paths.

They stress the need for standardised practices, team-based support structures and access to regular psychological supervision, also as a tool of preventing burnout. Professional development and reinforced training are top priorities, as are cross-border exchanges and international collaboration.

"It's time to form a real IM association." "IMs should be present in every public institution."

"Let's make this a real profession, not a workaround." "Authorities should find us as easily as they find court interpreters."

"We need shared standards and real support." "AI can't replace human insight and empathy."

"We need stability to keep doing this work." "Let's learn from other countries and build something lasting."

"We must be embedded in the school system." "Supervision should be part of our job, not an exception."

Thematic Area 6: Questions for EU Colleagues

Participants from the five countries are somewhat very curious about their colleagues abroad, perhaps imagining that they are happier, work-wise, and not realising that they mostly share the same problems. They therefore expressed their curiosity about:

- Legal status and recognition of IMs
- Employment conditions (full-time vs. freelance)
- Pay and funding mechanisms
- Professional standards and codes of ethics
- Role in influencing policy

"How many hours do they work? Do they have job security?" "Are IMs recognised in public administration or are they still linked to NGOs?"

Thematic Area 7: Advice for Incoming Colleagues

The focus groups were asked what kind of advice they would give to a colleague coming from abroad. The same advice, of course, can also apply to a rookie colleague. These were the most frequently mentioned points:

- Be patient, open-minded and empathetic, because it is an emotional job that requires resilience in order to build reflective practices.
- Continuous learning and training, particularly in cultural and legal dimensions, are essential, as are trust and learning from peers.
- Understand the public service ecosystem and the institutional code.
- Consider volunteering first, especially if you do not have any training behind you.

- Focus on cross-border collaboration and promote unified standards.

"Be ready to give your heart, but also protect it." "Start small, observe a lot and stay curious."

Thematic Area 8: Training Needs and Professional Development

The last question in the focus group concerned what might be the most important training needs and the direction in which the profession could develop.

- On a personal and emotional level, which is also essential for preventing burnout, the first thing to do is to make a greater effort to better define and maintain the separation between professional and personal boundaries. Consequently, greater emphasis needs to be placed on emotional literacy, self-reflection techniques, peer support and setting aside time for team reflection (e.g. monthly sessions with psychologists).
- On a professional level, as informal or "workplace-only" learning can leave gaps, a structured training programme (regardless of when or by whom it is organised) is essential.

  From the clients' perspective, greater emphasis needs to be placed on cultural interpretation and intercultural communication, ethics, migration history, trauma-informed practices, crisis management and conflict resolution. Also from an institutional (and workplace) perspective, a solid understanding of the system is needed to provide awareness of contexts (a school is very different from a hospital, police station or employment office), as well as tools to manage institutional resistance, legal processes and psychosocial challenges.

"Learning never ends. We evolve with every case." "Training should match the complexity of the real world, not just theory."

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

As we have seen, in the five countries considered, intercultural mediators operate at the intersection of language, law, emotions and cultural negotiation. While local contexts differ, shared experiences reveal systemic under-recognition, emotional fatigue and a strong desire for professional dignity.

In addition, despite the changing political views, there seems to be a growing interest and greater awareness of mediation services, which, however, does not translate into guaranteed funding and an increase in the number of qualified operators employed. Therefore, at present, due to the lack of uniform and valid provisions at the European (or at least national) level, we face a significant dilemma. If we push for a too high professional qualification threshold without providing adequate compensation, we risk clients either foregoing mediation services or having to rely on more or less qualified providers who may impose excessively high conditions and costs to fill the market gap. Paradoxically, the same risk is run if an adequate number of sufficiently trained mediators is not provided; clients will then seek help from individuals whose sole merit is speaking a certain language, despite lacking minimum basic training and perhaps working in unrelated, high-level contexts (e.g., as a janitor or a stretcher-bearer).

It is therefore not surprising that IMs are calling for a coherent European strategy that validates their expertise, rewards their contributions and ensures sustainable structures for training and support. As we do not believe that this can happen in the short term, it is important that certain strategies are implemented as soon as possible, starting with the definition of some indications for the future based on three main pillars:

1. Education and training
2. Professional status of IMs
3. Professional attitudes

On many occasions, we have found that training is considered insufficient and that, in any case, a formal qualification is not always necessary to work. Moreover, even with the best training behind them, things change and people change too. Migrants are not the same in the places they come from or move to. Mediators also change: they may get older and more skilled, but they also may lose some connection with the countries of origin. Not to mention that working practices and their operating contexts also change from day to day. Therefore, it appears crucial, and this has been demonstrated by the findings of the compendium, that the training of intercultural mediators needs the ADU/lifelong learning. This will certainly be the case until the sector is organised and structured differently at national/EU level.

But who can take action and what needs to be done in this ADU/lifelong learning? There are certainly many possibilities to improve the skills and abilities of IMs, and these can be proposed by different actors and in different contexts. While courses on national legislation or the organisation of different services must necessarily be carried out in a national (if not local) context, courses on European legislation, coping techniques and exchanges of practices can also be held at international level, either in person or by videoconference

and through a common language (which may not necessarily be English, but also, for specific reasons, Arabic or Ukrainian or another necessary language).

There are also many agencies that can implement training courses, from the more formal ones (universities, secondary schools or vocational training schools) to organisations that provide or employ IMs (cooperatives, associations, municipalities, etc.) to the more informal level of peer exchange.

In all this, we must not forget the possibility of recognising skills gained in the field or in previous similar work experiences. In other words, it is a matter of formalising the qualification through the validation (made by a recognised authority) of the skills acquired and activating a training course to integrate those that are missing but deemed necessary for the IM profile.

As for the professional status of the IMs, this is formally and strongly in the hands of the public authorities (State, Regions and Municipalities) and until they define a shared profile (also at EU level within the EQF – European Qualification Framework) of what an IM should do and be, it is also difficult to draw a common training path. Nevertheless, the role of the self-organisation by cooperatives or associations of IMs should not be underestimated. In more than one case, they independently establish a profile of the basic skills required for the IMs that they may hire, which could serve as a benchmark. In the meantime, those collective entities provide IMs with internal training, if necessary, to help them reach the skills needed. In this way, these collective subjects can play this card while they are contracting with the agencies that need their services and, in the meantime, define a baseline of professionalism.

An IM does not work in a bubble made by the client, the other professionals and themselves, so they need to extend their professional attitudes. This is for various reasons: a) the work of a mediator cannot always ensure full-time employment; b) it is a very emotionally engaging job, which requires moments of decompression; c) it is a job that gives better results if carried out in a multidimensional and multi-professional way; d) it is a job that can involve complex projects and even long-term professional relationships. For these reasons, it is important that the IM acquires not only skills closely related to their mediation role, but also skills in emotional management, operational planning (both case-related and system-related), and interprofessional relational skills. These skills are difficult to acquire in basic training, but are essential to be able to operate in a complex full-time context.

The role of the mediator is certainly undergoing a process of increasing professionalisation *ex ante* the work process (even if possession of a formal IM title is not yet a binding condition for an employer), but there is still a great need for self-learning and learning through practice and peer exchange and, of course, lifelong learning (thinking about what is happening with the increasing use of AI and other new technologies or devices gives only a pale idea of the changes in this field and the risk of misunderstandings or underlying racism).

The results of the work carried out show that, in addition to basic training, continuous training is needed and that such training must also be specific to the individual needs of the IM. Surely it is necessary to teach how to operate with professional detachment and how to maintain one's role, while at the same time raising awareness of how important one can be to others, getting to know people and their stories, their diversity, while also being aware of doing something useful and proving to be much more than a "Google translator". Knowing how to define and reaffirm professional boundaries allows you to relate better to the people in need (who should not be allowed to call your private number or outside working hours), but also to other professionals. Acquiring techniques for managing emotions and users also makes it possible to prevent violence and threats or to interpret the signs of burnout in time.

Support and supervision must be provided to give staff the opportunity to discuss cases and to decompress.

The exchange of skills within the reference organisation must be facilitated, as well as the skills acquired among peers, which are a huge pool of experience (just think of their migration experiences or the fact that they are mediators "from birth" because they did it for their parents or as a rebound effect from previous jobs in a similar field: police, interpreting, social services; or because they have benefited from mediation and wanted to "reciprocate").

The "collective" role of mediation through associations, cooperatives and NGOs must be strengthened, and with this it is also necessary to strengthen the planning and entrepreneurial skills of mediators.

Regulatory skills and knowledge of services must be increased (and constantly updated) and multi-professional and networked work, including multi-level work, must be strengthened.

Finally, a code of ethics and greater awareness of the profession are needed, and for this reason, exchanges of experiences with colleagues from other European countries must be facilitated, starting with those dealing with similar issues, common operating standards must be defined and efforts combined to better define mediation in the EU.

To conclude, the results show that the role of IM is crucial in the integration process, carrying out a job that appears increasingly necessary, also in terms of social cohesion, in increasingly diverse societies. A solid perspective passes through the development of knowledgeable professionals, equipped with cognitive, affective and behavioural skills and supported by stable institutional recognition.

Annex 1

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Annex 2

Focus group notes and transcriptions

SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, two focus groups were organised with three participants each, for a total of six participants, one in person on 19th March 2025 and the second online on 28th March 2025.

We followed the proposed questions, structure and timeline.

Intercultural mediators' experiences and insights on their needs

Q1. When did you start working as an IM and why?

Several participants started their work as IMs through voluntary activities, most notably with Slovene Philanthropy. Their motivations varied:

- Some started due to their own migrant background (e.g. coming from Ukraine) and a desire to support their community.
- Others began by interpreting for family members or in schools.
- A few joined in fieldwork as volunteers, where a lack of interpreters led them to take on this role.
- The initial engagement was often informal and perceived as easy at first, but it quickly evolved into more professional and demanding tasks.
- Many improved their Slovenian language skills through their work and built on existing interpretation/translation studies undertaken in their countries of origin.
- The transition from volunteer to paid professional included acquiring national professional qualifications and formal contracts (e.g. with the police).
- The transition from interpreter to intercultural mediator often came when organisations began compensating volunteers, allowing them to acquire a professional identity as IMs.

Q2. Briefly describe the profession of IM

- The work of an IM goes beyond linguistic interpretation: it requires cultural understanding and contextual interpretation of meaning.
- IMs act as bridges between cultures, facilitating two-way integration (between the host population and newcomers).
- The role is described as more demanding than that of an interpreter due to the broader knowledge and soft skills required.
- IMs must understand the country's systems, administrative processes and social services.
- Trust-building, ethical boundaries and managing relationships with both professionals and beneficiaries are key elements.

Q3. What is the best part of your job? What do you enjoy most?

- Immediate and visible impact and meaningful outcomes.
- The high emotional and social value: helping people, solving misunderstandings and facilitating integration.
- Recognition of the importance of the IM profession is growing.
- Exposure to diverse cultures and personal stories was described as enriching.
- Positive experiences of working with people from around the world and from various sectors.

Q4. What do you like least? What should change?

- Beneficiaries often lack knowledge of the system, leading to over-reliance on IMs, sometimes outside working hours.
- Boundary issues: beneficiaries contact IMs privately, sometimes late at night.
- Lack of support structures for IMs: no supervision, debriefing or emotional support.
- Professional boundaries not clearly respected: some professionals focus more on the mediator than on the beneficiary.
- Compensation is inadequate; many continue to work on a voluntary basis.
- The work is sometimes restricted to interpretation, limiting other potential roles.
- Recognition and understanding of the IM's role is insufficient across sectors.
- The profession lacks full-time employment opportunities and a structured framework (e.g. code of ethics, professional association).

Q5. Where will IM be in 3 years?

- Participants are optimistic: they predict that IM will become a well-respected and recognised profession, especially in the healthcare sector.
- Expectations include broader implementation across sectors and at all levels.
- The profession is expected to become formalised through associations and consistent funding.
- The role will be more defined, standardised and better integrated into institutional systems.

Q6. What about trainings in Slovenia?

- There is a lack of comprehensive and practical training.
- The national professional qualification is viewed as symbolically important but not functionally useful for employment.
- Training needs include:
  a) Emotional boundaries and detachment.
  b) Maintaining professional roles and neutrality.
  c) System knowledge and legal literacy.

Q7. What would you ask a colleague from the EU?

- How developed is the IM profession in their country?
- How much work and how many hours do they get per month?
- Are there full-time jobs available for IMs?
- Advice on how to establish and maintain professional boundaries.

Q8. What would you advise an EU colleague?

- Collaborate to strengthen and unify the role of IM across Europe.
- Develop shared standards and frameworks.
- Exchange experiences and best practices to improve the profession across the continent.

What is needed – analysis based on the focus groups' answers

1) **Professional Framework**
   a) Clear definition of roles.
   b) A code of ethics.
   c) Professional associations at national and EU level.
2) **Training and Education**
   a) More structured training programmes.
   b) Focus on boundaries, emotional resilience and system navigation.
3) **Employment Opportunities**
   a) Full-time roles with adequate remuneration.
   b) Recognition in the public and private sectors (especially healthcare, education, police, social services).
4) **Institutional Support**
   a) Supervision, peer support, debriefing systems.
   b) Clear boundaries applied to both professionals and beneficiaries.
5) **Public Awareness**
   a) Campaigns or initiatives to inform institutions and the public about the role of IM.

What is missing – analysis based on the focus groups' answers

1) **Mental Health and Self-care Tools**
   a) No reference to psychological or emotional support mechanisms.
2) **Monitoring and Evaluation**
   a) Lack of mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness or impact of IM.
3) **Digital Tools and Innovation**
   a) No reference to how digital platforms or AI might support or challenge the work of IM.
4) **Data and Research**
   a) Absence of data-driven discussions (e.g. number of IMs, success rates, retention).

CZECHIA

Intercultural Work in Czechia: Lived Experiences, Evolving Practices, and Systemic Reflections

Analytical summary of the focus group discussions

Number of participants: 8 +10 (the outcomes of the second group are marked in grey)

Prepared in April 2025

Abstract

This report explores in depth the experiences, motivations, and systemic challenges of intercultural workers in Czechia and offers an extensive analysis of the lived realities and professional dynamics of intercultural workers in Czechia. Based on two richly detailed focus group discussions, it weaves together personal stories of migration, operational practices, systemic challenges and aspirational visions for the future of the profession. Many participants, themselves migrants who have often navigated complex migration and integration paths, bring unique insights born of both vulnerability and resilience. They described their work as deeply personal – a way to process their own displacement and to empower others navigating similar journeys. In their role, far beyond from being mere translators or simple language mediators, intercultural workers are cultural navigators, crisis responders and trusted companions to their clients, providing administrative navigation, healthcare advocacy, educational support, legal assistance, crisis intervention and emotional anchoring for clients. Yet, they face heavy workloads, minimal institutional support, public misunderstanding of their role, and critically low financial compensation.

The report underscores both the indispensable contribution of intercultural workers and the systemic neglect they face, their high caseloads, the ambiguity of their role, inadequate training, and emotional burnout. Yet, despite these challenges, a profound sense of purpose and solidarity permeates their reflections. Participants unanimously call for formal recognition and professionalisation, structured professional development and systemic recognition both at local and national level, cross-sector collaboration and international exchange to strengthen and dignify their work. Amidst these pressures, they voiced for sustainable pay, better training and stronger mental health support. Participants also expressed curiosity about international best practices, particularly with regard to equal pay, recognition and how intercultural workers abroad shape public policy.

1. Introduction: The Unseen Infrastructure of Integration

As Europe experiences increasingly complex migration dynamics, intercultural workers serve as critical, though often invisible, architects in building social cohesion. Positioned

between public institutions and migrant communities, they translate not only languages, but also systems, expectations and human emotions.

Despite their indispensable role, intercultural workers remain marginalised in formal structures. They frequently operate in conditions of ambiguity and overload, without the institutional scaffolding that recognises their expertise or supports their well-being.

2. Methodology and Approach

The report is based on a focus group conducted in Czechia, with participants from different regional and institutional backgrounds. The analysis applied thematic coding and narrative synthesis, preserving the authenticity of participants' voices through direct quotations.

This methodological approach allows the report not only to present descriptive accounts, but also to capture the underlying emotional narratives and professional wisdom of intercultural workers in their own words.

3. Entering the Profession

3.1 Migration as Foundational Experience

Each participant shared their personal migration journey, which has profoundly shaped their work. These experiences create unparalleled empathy for their clients, grounded in lived reality.

"There were no laws, no support structures. We had to find our way entirely on our own."
"Even though I spoke Czech, I did not understand the system. Now I help others not to feel lost."

Their deep understanding of the bureaucratic complexities and emotional challenges faced by migrants enhances both their technical effectiveness and their moral authority.

The dual identity as former clients and current professionals generates authenticity in their practice. They embody resilience and solidarity, which resonate deeply with the people they support.

3.2 From Clients to Practitioners

A recurring theme was the transition from service recipient to service provider.

"I was a client of the integration centre for a long time. Then I became an intercultural worker."

Such pathways highlight the permeability of roles within the migration services ecosystem, where personal vulnerability evolves into professional capacity.

Some participants were invited into the field by existing networks; others entered during critical migration waves when demand for intercultural services surged. Their entry points were often spontaneous rather than strategic, yet they found enduring purpose in the work.

3.3 Accidental Careers, Profound Callings

Not all participants initially aimed for a career in social services. A particularly striking testimony came from a participant who transitioned from acting:

"I wasn't looking for work in NGOs. I was an actress. But I realised that this was exactly where I was supposed to be."

This underscores how diverse professional backgrounds enrich the field and how unexpected career shifts can lead to deep professional fulfilment.

"When I started helping, I realised this was my place."

Such serendipitous entries into the field underscore the accessibility of the profession and the transformative power of personal engagement.

The story of each participant intertwined personal migration experience with professional motivation. Many began as volunteers, responding to urgent community needs during the war in Ukraine or earlier migration waves.

"When the war broke out, I volunteered immediately. It was my way of processing what was happening in my homeland," said one worker. Another described her entry as follows: "I moved to a small town where many Ukrainians had arrived. People needed help with basic things, even buying a bus ticket."

Some discovered the profession almost by chance, drawn by the possibility of making tangible difference: "I was looking for meaningful work that wasn't just routine. I didn't know this job existed, but it immediately felt like the right one."

The academic backgrounds, language skills and migration experiences all converged to position these workers as vital bridges between their communities and Czech institutions.

4. Expanding the Scope of Intercultural Work: Multifunctional and Evolving Roles

4.1 Language Mediation as a Starting Point

Language support is a foundational function, but only the starting point. Intercultural workers are often the first and sometimes the only point of contact for migrants navigating complex environments.

"Booking a medical appointment is just the beginning. Clients don't understand medical processes or terminology."

Their linguistic facilitation spans from healthcare, education, legal processes and day-to-day administration, but extends to interpreting cultural nuances and procedural expectations.

4.2 Administrative Guidance and Legal Orientation

Intercultural workers routinely assist clients with:

- Residence applications and renewals
- Social benefit systems
- Employment contracts and rights

"We are often the first line of defence against exploitation."

A vivid account illustrates the direct, sometimes dangerous, interventions they undertake:

"I once had to call a mafia boss to get him to return the passports of two Ukrainian workers. He came to the police station within 30 minutes."

Their role frequently borders on that of crisis mediators, advocating for clients in situations of acute vulnerability.

4.3 Educational Support: Unlocking the School System

Educational mediation is a critical and complex aspect of the work:

- Explaining enrolment procedures
- Supporting diagnostics for children with special needs
- Resolving misunderstandings between parents and schools

"Parents don't understand what a pedagogical advisory centre is. It doesn't exist in their home countries."

Their interventions help bridge vast cultural and systemic gaps, ensuring children's educational rights are upheld.

4.4 Psychosocial Support and Informal Counselling

Clients often turn to intercultural workers as trusted confidants.

"It's not just about paperwork. Sometimes we're the only ones they can talk to."

This emotional work, although unofficial, is indispensable. Workers help clients manage stress, uncertainty and cultural displacement, creating bonds of trust that are crucial for successful integration.

4.5 Emerging Specialisations

With growing demand, some workers have developed specialised roles. For example, one has become a recognised expert in *nostrification* (validation of foreign diplomas), collaborating with the Ministry of Education. This evolution marks a shift from generalist roles to specialist skills within the profession.

5. Client Needs: Complex, Layered and Evolving

5.1 Education: More Than Just Access

Navigating the Czech education system is fraught with challenges for migrant families:

- Understanding institutional structures
- Accessing culturally sensitive diagnostic services
- Bridging gaps between educators and parents

Intercultural workers demystify these systems, promote appropriate educational support and empower parents to engage constructively.

5.2 Healthcare: Critical Gaps in Access

Healthcare navigation remains a major hurdle:

- Limited multilingual medical staff
- Complex administrative procedures
- Lack of translated materials and medical interpreters

"I would pay for a medical Czech course out of my own pocket. It's that important."

This highlights the workers' commitment to upskilling in areas of critical need, often at personal expense.

5.3 Legal and Employment Protection

Clients often face exploitation and legal uncertainty. Intercultural workers provide:

- Referrals to legal aid
- Advocacy for employment rights
- Direct intervention in labour disputes

"We are often the first line of defence against exploitation."

5.4 Emotional Support: Keeping Hope Alive

In addition to navigating institutions, intercultural workers serve as emotional anchors, offering relational support in contexts of fear, confusion and trauma. This invisible work is critical to building trust and fostering meaningful integration pathways.

Client Needs: Complex, Evolving and Often Overwhelming

Participants reported that their role extends far beyond language mediation. Clients expect not only translation, but also full-spectrum support: emotional, bureaucratic and social.

"They might come for interpreting, but what they really want is someone to stand by their side", explained one participant. Particularly in government offices and medical settings, clients fear humiliation or discrimination: "Clients get scolded for their Czech or told to go back to their country. ***When we are present, officials think twice about what they say."***

Educational navigation, medical advocacy and employment rights are daily concerns. "Even for me, finding a trustworthy doctor takes hours. Imagine how hard it is for someone who has just arrived," a worker noted.

Misinformation is rampant: "Clients rely on unverified sources because they cannot understand the official ones. We step in to provide reliable guidance," one participant stressed.

However, they acknowledged capacity limits: "Demand far exceeds what we can manage. There are simply too many clients for our small teams," they admitted, highlighting systemic under-resourcing.

6. Professional Challenges: Strain, Misunderstandings and Systemic Gaps

6.1 Overload and Emotional Exhaustion

Caseloads frequently reach unsustainable levels, leading to exhaustion and burnout.

"After a day with 80 clients, I am completely exhausted."

The emotional intensity of the work exacerbates this physical strain.

6.2 Role Ambiguity and Lack of Recognition

Both clients and institutions often misunderstand the role of intercultural workers.

"In our countries, this role doesn't even exist. We have to explain it from scratch."

"We have to explain our role every day, even to institutions."

6.3 Gaps in Professional Development

Workers urgently need formal training in:

- Legal literacy
- Medical terminology
- Crisis management and psychological support

Currently, most learning happens ad hoc, without dedicated resources.

6.4 Institutional Invisibility

Intercultural workers remain outside formal structures, limiting their effectiveness and legitimacy.

"The authorities should be able to find us like they find court interpreters."

Professional Challenges: Underpaid, Overworked and Undervalued

The participants' frustration with financial insecurity was palpable and recurrent throughout the discussion.

"Our salaries are disgraceful for the responsibility we carry," one worker stated bluntly. Another added, "We do essential work, yet we are paid as if we were dispensable." Tight budgets limit their capacity to serve and sustain themselves professionally.

The profession suffers from chronic under-recognition. "People, even officials, don't understand our role. They see us only as translators or volunteers," one participant lamented. Another pointed out the institutional vagueness: "We urgently need a legal definition of our profession."

Burnout is an ever-present danger. "After dealing with 80 clients in a day, you're not just physically exhausted, but you also carry their emotional burdens", someone shared.

Participants noted the absence of emotional support mechanisms: "We work with people who receive devastating diagnoses. But we have no training on how to support them emotionally."

This combination of overwhelming demand, low pay and emotional strain poses a severe threat to the sustainability of the profession.

7. Future Aspirations: Building a Sustainable Profession

7.1 Systematic Training and Development

Participants called for structured pathways for new workers, with clear expectations and continuous professional growth.

"New intercultural workers should know what to expect from day one."

7.2 Institutional Recognition and Integration

There were strong calls for formal recognition of the profession within public administration systems.

"Authorities should be able to find us as easily as they find court interpreters."

7.3 Empowering Clients

Intercultural workers see their ultimate goal as fostering independence among clients.

"Our goal is to make ourselves unnecessary."

7.4 Cross-Sector and International Collaboration

Participants expressed a desire for structured exchanges with international counterparts:

"We want to know: do intercultural workers abroad have influence on policy?"

They were curious to know about:

- Multilingual administrative systems abroad
- Integration of intercultural work into public services
- Established career paths in other countries

"How do they help migrants who don't speak the language to find a job?"

Future Aspirations: Recognition, Training and International Learning

A shared aspiration for robust professionalisation and integration into public systems emerged.

"We want intercultural workers to be as recognisable as court interpreters", declared one participant. Structured training, especially in legal literacy, medical terminology and psychological first aid, was a universal demand: "On-the-job learning isn't enough. We need formal continuous education."

They also called for psychological support systems for themselves: "Without mental health support, we cannot sustain this work," a worker insisted.

Crucially, participants expressed curiosity about practices abroad. "We'd love to know: how are intercultural workers compensated abroad? Do they have influence on policy?" asked

one of them. Another wondered: "What are their working conditions? Are they integrated into public services or do they work only through NGOs like us?"

They sought inspiration from other countries, especially regarding:

- *Equal pay and funding structures*
- *Recognition within government systems*
- *Successful community integration models*
- *International exchange platforms for shared learning*
- *This eagerness for cross-border insight reflected both a desire for improvement and solidarity with global peers.*

Systemic Change: From Marginal Role to Institutional Pillar

Participants demanded transformative changes to elevate intercultural work from a marginal activity to the mainstream.

"Migration will not disappear. The state must prepare itself and institutions must become interculturally open," they urged.

They criticised over-reliance on NGOs: *"Municipalities and state offices should have their own intercultural workers. This is not just a job of NGOs."*

Participants expressed concern about the lack of positive representation: "Politicians only mention migrants negatively. We need stories that show the contribution of our communities," said one participant.

Public awareness remains low: *"Most people, even Czechs, don't know we exist. We desperately need better outreach," they agreed.*

Finally, they stressed the need for digitalisation and administrative reform*: "During COVID, everything was online and it worked well. Why not keep it that way?"*

Their collective vision is clear: intercultural work must be professionalised, visible, sustainably funded, and recognised as essential to the functioning of a modern and inclusive society.

Conclusion: Towards a Recognised and Resilient Future – The Future of Intercultural Work in Czechia

Intercultural workers are architects of social inclusion, translating not only words but also complex systems and human emotions. Their work is vital to the fabric of an inclusive and

resilient society. Despite their critical contribution, they remain under-recognised, under-resourced and overburdened. Systemic gaps — lack of professional training, institutional invisibility, ambiguous roles and emotional burnout — threaten the sustainability of their impact.

However, the participants were not despondent. They articulated a clear and hopeful vision for the future. Yet, systemic reforms are imperative to sustain their impact:

- Formal professional recognition
- Structured training and development pathways to ensure that new entrants are well prepared and supported from the start *"We do this because we know what it means to feel lost. And we want to make it better for those who come after us."*
- Psychological support for frontline workers to counter the emotional toll of relentless caseloads
- Institutional integration, making intercultural workers as accessible and recognisable as court interpreters;
- Systematic training, especially in legal frameworks, medical terminology and crisis support.
- International platforms for policy learning and policy exchange to elevate the profession and align it with best practices worldwide *"We want to know: do intercultural workers abroad have influence on policy?"*

The collective voices of the focus group participants form a compelling call to action. They paint an unambiguous picture: intercultural workers are indispensable yet undervalued, emotionally committed yet structurally unsupported. They are, in many ways, the *de facto* architects of integration, serving as cultural translators, legal advocates, emotional anchors, and daily navigators of the complex bureaucratic labyrinth that migrants must traverse. They translate not only languages, but also systems, values, and expectations, helping newcomers feel less lost in an unfamiliar country. Their first-hand experiences of migration give them not only technical expertise, but also deep moral authority and emotional intelligence in guiding others. However, only with appropriate institutional support can intercultural work can evolve from an under-recognised lifeline into a fully integrated and dignified profession at the heart of inclusive societies.

Their aspiration, therefore, is for a future in which intercultural work is no longer an invisible or improvised service, but a formally recognised profession embedded in the public service ecosystem, empowering clients not toward dependence but toward autonomy.

By heeding these insights, policymakers and institutions have a clear opportunity to transform intercultural work from a marginalised practice to a central pillar of a cohesive, inclusive and resilient society.

FRANCE:

Feedback from intercultural mediators

Two focus groups, three participants each (the outcomes of the second group are marked in grey)

1. <u>Where do you work:</u>

- Interpreter, intercultural mediator - INTERMED Gironde
- CHU Hospital – Arabic intercultural mediator
- Social mediator and Turkish language translator – NGO Promofemmes
- *Valentine – Intercultural mediator, sociologist, president of the Intermed Gironde organisation*
- *Lola – former coordinator of Intermed Gironde, co-founder*
- *Alexandra – coordinator of Intermed Gironde, intercultural mediator*

Valentine, Lola and Alexandra work at Intermed Gironde, an association that has been operating in Gironde for 20 years now. It employs around 35 intercultural mediators, mostly women with migrant background with a need for social and professional inclusion. The association has two aims: First –intercultural mediation and bridging language and cultural gaps between migrants and French society; Second – social and professional inclusion for women who carry out intercultural mediation, offering them a perspective and valuing them and their skills, enabling them to network and to meet other women in the same situation.

2. <u>How did you come to work as an intercultural mediator? = BACKGROUND</u>

Aurélie: I applied for this job to develop my skills in several fields (medical, social, educational, etc.) and use the languages I had mastered in a professional context. I was already doing it informally in my first job (national education).

Abdel: I am a qualified social worker (AS) and I saw an offer on the homepage: GuideSocial. My profile met the requirements because it was in the social sector, so I applied. I have been doing this job for more than 10 years. Being an AS helps me a lot in this job, because when a person does not speak the language of the host country, it means that they have only been here for a short time. We are in a contract-based country, so it is very different from their countries of origin and people do not cope well with this. Out of necessity, these are people who have no means, so there is a big administrative aspect. This is where there is a link between the social assistant and the mediator, there is a complementarity, because we are there to help people understand the system.

Sakiné: To help empower women

Valentine and Lola: In 2000, Valentine conducted a sociological survey on the need for intercultural mediation in the health, administrative and hospitality sectors. The need for intercultural mediation was tremendous – professionals observed – problems of communication, problems of cultural understanding, problems of confidentiality. Children often accompanied their parents and acted as interpreters for them. This highlighted the issue of confidentiality, responsibility and ethics. Children should not be asked to do this. Often other people (neighbours, acquaintances) would came to act as interpreters, which often created even more problems and misunderstandings. With the help of professionals, politicians and influential people, the survey underlined the need for a trained intercultural mediator.

This survey led to the creation of a three-year training course co-financed by CAF, the department and others. A class of intercultural mediators was trained. They were then supposed to be hired by administrative institutions (préfécture, mairie, etc.), but the needs of administrative institutions were more complex (need for several languages, need for simultaneous interventions, etc.) so the intercultural mediators were not hired after their three years of training. This training was only conducted once.

Valentine, Lola and other trainees from the three-year programme decided to found an association (NGO) of intercultural mediators in order to be able to respond to the demand together. They created Intermed Gironde, which now represents 35 intercultural mediators and provides a service of around 20,000 interventions of intercultural mediations per year. Intermed Gironde is working in all kind of sectors (hospitals and health services, transcultural therapy, educational services for minors, educational services for adults, social services, services for asylum seekers, services for victims of exploitation, trafficking or violence, guidance and administrative services, etc.)

All intercultural mediators have an official working contract for the NGO and are paid when they work. They are paid for all training and times spent on team regulation.

Since 2004, around 300 intercultural mediators have participated in the association.

3. Can you describe the essence of your work in 3 minutes? = MISSIONS

Aurélie: I enable communication between several people who do not speak the same languages. This facilitated communication allows people to be better supported and to integrate properly, because professionals can refer these people to training courses, cooperative workshops to meet other people, etc. Beneficiaries receive better medical care and professionals can rely on reliable information. When necessary, I provide a cultural insight on the situation, particularly in educational sessions on how to raise children (mealtimes, sleeping with parents, etc.).

Abdel: The intercultural mediator's mission is to act as an intermediary between patients who want to express their symptoms and healthcare providers who want to respond to their needs. I see myself as a relationship facilitator: "The mediator is the one who bridges

the gap between cultures and who is responsible for facilitating the relationship between the healthcare provider and the patients." This is a vast programme that aims to guide two very different cultures towards mutual understanding. Therefore, word-for-word translation is not effective in this case; it is the meaning that we are seeking to bring out. "The mediator in a hospital is there to ensure the interpretation and adaptation of the message. That is to say, we do **cultural decoding of a gesture, a word, of not responding, of looking up, to the right...** Culture is the way of thinking, acting and feeling, and all that is not done in the same way across cultures. So we decode the way of thinking, acting and feeling and pass it on to the service provider so that they can understand the reason for the patient's presence in their practice." Interpretation also involves removing all elements that are not necessary to the message, such as irritation and tension. "It may happen that the patient is nervous, rude or vulgar, or that the service provider is also nervous or loses their patience, and when we are irritated, communication breaks down. The mediator therefore reduces tensions by taking the message and removing all the excess (irritation, vulgarity, etc.) and conveying the message they wish to communicate."

Sakiné: "It is enriching to learn about other cultures and be with them"

4. <u>Speaking of your work, name three things you are proud of.</u>

Aurélie: 1: Breaking the deadlock by re-establishing communication between beneficiaries and staff. 2: The recognition of professionals and beneficiaries. 3: Evolving in a varied professional environment and learning new concepts as a result.

Abdel: At the beginning, this profession was unknown to me and I hesitated to apply, but I learned to love it because when you see that you have succeeded in facilitating the relationship and making care possible, it's great. We also receive feedback from service providers and patients. When patients say to you, "Thank you, I could never have done it without you", or the service provider says to you, "I love it when you are there because you get straight to the point and that makes everything easier". That gives us the energy to keep giving and giving.

Sakiné: Caring, trust, human approach (see the human being in their individuality before seeing their culture)

Valentine, Lola and Alexandra:

- *The creation of the organisation*
- *Our monthly team regulation*
- *Empowering women who become intercultural mediators*

5.<u>Name three things that frustrate you:</u>

Aurélie: 1: When communication is difficult because of details that we were not previously aware of (trauma, pathology, tense environment, etc.). 2: When beneficiaries are faced

with administrative difficulties that have been caused by poor communication. 3: When appointments are cancelled.

Abdel: The most difficult part is managing the day. It can be frustrating. For example, if I have an appointment and I prioritise the emergency over the appointment, the service provider will not accept it or will feel left out. We try to meet all requests, but at times there are too many and it is therefore difficult to juggle appointments and emergencies.

Sakiné: Misunderstandings, judgements, lack of recognition, difficulties

Valentine, Lola and Alexandra:

- *The lack of public financing in this sector*
- *Fewer and fewer demands for our service because NGOs and public institutions lack funds. They intervene when it is "too late" or when there is already a conflictual situation between two parties.*
- *Unfair competition on online platforms; the OFII (French office for immigration and integration) has a translation service provider in Spain; these professionals provide translation over the phone and sometimes they are unfamiliar with the French administrative system.*

6. What major changes do you foresee for the sector of intercultural mediation in the near future?

Aurélie: More recognition, more developed training using psychological tools. I think that we will suffer for a while because of AI, but that structures will return to human professionals because communication, interpretation and, in particular, intercultural mediation are human concepts.

Abdel: Artificial intelligence, lack of funding for my job

Sakiné: Need for more training for future intercultural mediators

Valentine, Lola and Alexandra:

Artificial intelligence, unfair competition from online platforms based in countries where salaries are lower, less public financing in the social, health and educative sectors.

7. The career paths of intercultural mediators differ from one European country to another. If you had the opportunity to meet a European colleague, what would you ask them?

Aurélie: The legal framework for work in their country, the functional framework, how intercultural mediators work in other countries.

Sakiné: The difficulties they have in their working life.

Valentine, Lola and Alexandra:

To learn about the situation of intercultural mediation in your countries (organisation – how they work together, financing, training, fields of intervention, best practices). To reflect together on the future of the profession of intercultural mediator.

8. Is there a training course, best practice or a tool that you would like to share with them?

Aurélie: Training on professional posture, the legal framework and fields of intervention.

Abdel: INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION - TRANSCULTURAL CARE: there are excellent courses in France.

Sakiné: Exchange of best practices between mediators.

Valentine, Lola and Alexandra:

They organise monthly team regulations with a psychologist. These moments are very important for the intercultural mediators in order to exchange views on difficult situations, successful practices and to ask for further training in specific fields. Those moments constitute the training of intercultural mediators: when they arrive at the NGO, there is NO specific training for them.

In general, they follow the charter for interpretation.

The NGO occasionally proposes specific training with experts based on requests from intercultural mediators, **for example on drug addiction, child protection**, etc.

9. With regard to continuing education, what topics are you interested in? In which area would you like to improve your skills? = SKILLS NEEDS

Aurélie: Improve English through exchanges with colleagues, the legal framework.

Abdel: AI and technology, conflict management, social mediation

Sakiné: Cultural codes

Valentine, Lola and Alexandra:

- on the posture of an intercultural mediator, general approach on a professional posture in this field (to define in detail)
- intercultural communication – intercomprehension and non-verbal communication adapted to different cultural backgrounds
- history of migration, refugee studies, migration phenomena, basic introduction (anthropology and sociology)
- interpreting techniques and translation. Total of training time: two half days (7 hours in total). They have to pay their intercultural mediators when they participate in training. We will look into whether it is possible to obtain French public funding.
- online meetings organised by language (Turkish group, Arabic-speaking group, etc.) on the exchange on problematic situations, work experiences, best practices and challenges OR by topic like interpreting in childcare, in transcultural therapy etc.

10. Would you be interested in participating in an online meeting with other intercultural mediators in Europe?

Yes for Aurélie and Sakiné and other mediators from Intermed Gironde; meeting with the president at the end of April.

YES –16th July and later on

11. In which languages can you communicate with others:

Aurélie: Portuguese, Spanish, French and English (a little)

Sakiné: French and Turkish

Valentine, Lola and Alexandra: English, Turkish, Arabic, Bulgarian, Dari, Farsi etc.

HUNGARY

Report

"Intercult: Strengthening the skills and competences of migrants for intercultural mediation and for better inclusion of migrant communities in the diversified societies"

Abstract

This report presents the qualitative findings of interviews conducted in Hungary with eight individuals currently working as intercultural mediators within various NGOs and organisations. These professionals support diverse migrant populations and play a critical role in facilitating access to services, bridging cultural gaps and promoting understanding between migrants and host institutions. The interviews explored the mediators' daily experiences, the challenges they face and the skills they consider essential for their role. Participants consistently described a lack of institutional recognition, insufficient training opportunities, and unclear professional paths. Their insights point to an urgent need for comprehensive skill development, structured support systems, and formal acknowledgment of intercultural mediation as a key component in fostering inclusion and equitable communication in Hungarian society.

1. Introduction: An Invisible Profession with a Tangible Impact

In Hungary, intercultural mediation occupies an ambiguous space within the broader ecosystem of migrant support services. Although not formally recognised as a distinct profession within national legal or institutional frameworks, the function of intercultural mediation has emerged in practice as an operational necessity, especially in the work of non-governmental organisations, humanitarian agencies and, occasionally, in municipal-level projects.

The country's approach to migration and integration has undergone significant political and administrative shifts over the last decade, often marked by restrictive migration policies and a centralised state apparatus that offers limited space for participatory or community-based models of inclusion. Within this context, intercultural mediators often act as informal bridges between service providers and migrant or refugee communities, particularly in urban centres such as Budapest and Szeged, where asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international protection and third-country nationals are concentrated.

Most individuals performing intercultural mediation in Hungary do so in temporary, project-based jobs, frequently linked to EU-funded programmes or civil society initiatives. Their roles vary considerably in scope and structure, often shaped more by gaps in service provision than by clearly defined institutional mandates. This contributes to inconsistent role definitions, fragmented practices and a lack of long-term sustainability.

Moreover, **public institutions, especially in the areas of healthcare, education and social services rarely have formal mechanisms in place to engage systematically intercultural mediators**. As a result, collaboration often depends on individual relationships, organisational flexibility or the availability of external funding, rather than on structural integration or state policy.

Despite these limitations, the practice of intercultural mediation in Hungary continues to gain relevance due to increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, persistent bureaucratic barriers and a growing need to provide culturally competent service. The profession, although informally configured, remains critical to ensuring access, equity and fundamental rights for migrant populations navigating complex administrative systems.

2. Methodology and Approach

This report is based on focus group interviews conducted in Hungary in April 2025. Participants were selected based on their professional experience in activities directly related to intercultural mediation, broadly understood as facilitating access, understanding and interaction between migrant populations and institutions of the host society. Given the practical limitations in convening a collective focus group – due to the geographical dispersion of participants, their varied schedules and other logistical constraints – individual interviews were chosen as the primary methodological tool. This approach not only offered greater flexibility in scheduling, but also allowed for in-depth and reflective engagement with each participant's professional journey and perspective.

The interviewees represented a heterogeneous sample in terms of background, institutional affiliation, and target populations. Some were migrants themselves who had gradually taken on intercultural roles through community engagement or professional integration. Others were Hungarian nationals with long-standing involvement in social work, legal aid, healthcare or education, who had taken on mediation responsibilities in their daily work with clients of foreign origin. What unified all participants was direct, field-based engagement with migrant communities in Hungary, often in contexts marked by limited institutional resources and ad hoc coordination.

Importantly, the scope of their work was not limited to asylum seekers or refugees. While several participants had experience in supporting individuals with international protection, the majority described working with a broader range of third-country nationals, including migrant workers, international students, long-term residents and individuals arriving through family reunification channels. This diversity reflects the complexity of the migration landscape in Hungary, particularly in urban areas where legal status, cultural background and language proficiency vary significantly across the migrant population.

Interview transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis, combining inductive and deductive coding strategies. This allowed for the identification of recurring themes while also capturing nuanced, context-specific insights. Codes were developed iteratively and then grouped into analytical categories that highlight the structural conditions, emotional dimensions and functional dynamics of intercultural mediation practised in

Hungary. This process enabled the synthesis of shared patterns across interviews, as well as the recognition of divergent experiences related to specific institutional settings or personal trajectories. Selected direct quotes from participants are included in the findings to preserve the authenticity of their voices and to provide a grounded understanding of the practical and ethical complexities involved in their work.

Participants:

1) Naser. Iraq. Menedék Association. Supporting migrants and refugees through community and educational initiatives. Works as a cultural mediator in Hungary.

2) Hanis. Hungary. Menedék Association. Social Integration counsellor and volunteer coordinator. Works as a cultural mediator in Hungary.

3) Souphaluck, Laos. International organisation (unspecified). Educator with experience in junior high and high schools. Works as a cultural mediator in Hungary.

4) Soomin. South Korea. Joseon Institute. Educator with international experience in Thailand and El Salvador. Works as a cultural mediator in Hungary.

5) Irina. Georgia. Egyesek NGO. Volunteer and master's student in social integration. Works as a cultural mediator in Hungary.

6) Gabriela. Hungary HOOK. Student support and mentor for international students. Works as a cultural mediator in Hungary.

7) Safaa. Morocco. ELTE University. Worked in the Governmental Asylum Seeker Shelter in the Netherlands. Support staff for international students. Works as a cultural mediator in Hungary.

8) Luciano. Argentina. Youth for Understanding. Worked at the University of Pécs. Cultural exchange and education coordinator. Works as a cultural mediator in Hungary.

Interview Guide:

- Why do you work as an intercultural mediator (or similar)? Was it a choice or a coincidence?
- Can you describe the essence of our job in 3 minutes?
- What aspects of your job are you particularly proud of?
- On the contrary, are there any aspects that you are somewhat ashamed of?
- If you imagine yourself in three years' time, how do you picture your occupation?

- As you may know, the professional background of intercultural mediators in different European countries is very different (in terms of training, qualifications, professional recognition, status, etc.). If you had the chance, what would you ask a colleague working in another EU country in terms of work?

- Now imagine that a colleague from another EU country asks you for some tips because they want to move here as a cultural mediator. What would you suggest?

- Can you give us (or add) some impressions or suggestions concerning the need to learn how to be a better intercultural mediator, or any desired areas for development?

3. Results

3.1 Being an intercultural mediator: by choice or by chance?

Interviewees described diverse entry points into intercultural mediation, ranging from deeply personal life experiences to deliberate career decisions. Several participants emphasised volunteering as a gateway, often starting without a formal awareness of the term intercultural mediator, but growing into the role through practice, motivation and exposure to migrant-related work. For others, entry into the profession was clearly driven by personal values, such as a passion for helping others, an interest in multicultural environments or a desire to build bridges across communities.

Still, for many, the journey was not entirely linear. A combination of choice and circumstantial opportunity was a recurring theme. Some interviewees came to mediation work after displacement or migration themselves, which shaped their empathy and connection to the role. Others entered the field through university programmes, internships at NGOs, or professional contacts who introduced them to migrant-focused initiatives.

Overall, the motivations for becoming an intercultural mediator reflect a blend of intentional commitment, personal history, and contextual factors, underscoring the non-standardised and highly individualised nature of this professional path in Hungary.

"I wasn't familiar with the term "intercultural mediator" before this interview… but after a youth programme in the US, I was really into the idea of putting 'my grain of sand' on that field." (Luciano)

"I think it was by choice because this was something I was always interested in… but it was also by chance because I was offered the opportunity by one of my professors." (Safaa)

"We came here [to Hungary] and then the war broke out in Iraq… we couldn't go back. I started as a volunteer and now I work as an Arab intercultural mediator." (Naser Ali Zeinab)

3.2 Defining the Role: Tasks, Functions and Everyday Realities

When asked to describe the core of their job, most intercultural mediators pointed to supporting the integration of migrants, refugees or international students into new environments. Whether through education, logistics, mentoring or psychosocial support, their job involves being a cultural and practical bridge between communities.

Many interviewees coordinate or assist in programmes that cater to specific groups, such as refugee children, international students or asylum seekers. Tasks include everything from organising camps or workshops, teaching local languages, translating documents, managing cultural events and providing logistical help, such as finding accommodation or navigating paperwork.

A recurring theme across interviews is the personalised and human-centred nature of this role. Several participants stressed the importance of empathy, cultural sensitivity and empowering newcomers to take part in their own integration, rather than being passive recipients of support.

What also stands out is the multidimensional nature of the role. Intercultural mediation is rarely a single-task job: it spans education, administration, coordination, emotional support and, sometimes, advocacy. The diversity of responsibilities speaks to both the complexity of migration and the adaptability required of those working in this field.

"We try to integrate asylum seekers, but we involve them in the process, making them feel that it is not something forced. It's a bottom-up approach." (Safaa)

"What we do here is a bunch of activities that are geared towards the integration of refugees... we work mostly with Ukrainian, Pakistani and Iranian refugees. We also organise community events and sometimes give funds to communities." (Hanis)

"We (Hungarian) mentors are responsible for the international students from the moment they arrive (in Hungary), helping them with paperwork, accommodation, translations and creating programmes for them. Basically, everything." (Gabriela)

3.3 Sources to be proud

When reflecting on what they are most proud of in their roles, intercultural mediators spoke with passion about the tangible and emotional impact they have had on the communities they serve, especially on children and young people.

One of the main sources of pride was creating opportunities for empowerment. For example, Naser Ali Zeinab described organising a fundraising dinner with refugee teens to

help finance their summer camp. This participatory approach was not only aimed at raising funds, but also at giving young people a sense of ownership and agency:

"It was us and the kids: we did everything together... They knew that if they came and worked, they would get their summer camp. And in the end, it happened."

Others emphasised the simple act of being present, of spending time with marginalised communities not to "fix" them, but to offer them connection and care. As Hanis shared:

"We don't do anything, we just go there and spend time with the kids... We draw, we play football and we eat together. I'm very proud of that."

For some, the source of pride came from witnessing a transformation, particularly among children or young people who were beginning to question inequalities and stereotypes. Souphaluck Noudeang reflected on how children had become more confident and critical:

"They ask, 'Why can't I play sports? Why do girls have to behave?'... They're starting to question things, and that makes me proud."

Others drew pride from more personal dimensions, such as the ability to communicate in the refugees' native languages (Irina), or humility and openness to feedback, which are essential in cross-cultural work (Safaa):

"I do feel that it is an achievement if you are able to be humble enough to accept criticism… because you are dealing with people with different perspectives."

Finally, Gabriela was proud to be a mentor who inspired others to follow in her footsteps:

"I feel like I did a great job… that I made it special for them in some way that they want to do what I did for them."

3.4 Professional Frustrations

Most interviewees were hesitant to frame their experiences in terms of "shame," but many described moments of discomfort, emotional frustration, or self-doubt. These feelings often stemmed from structural challenges, communication barriers, or personal limitations in their roles.

Naser Ali Zeinab highlighted the emotional weight of trying to support refugees and migrants in a society that does not offer them equal footing, explaining how difficult it is "to make them believe they have a place", noting that many don't feel safe or entitled to exist fully in Hungarian society. The frustration seemed to stem more from systemic injustice than personal guilt, but the emotional impact was clear.

Irina expressed a more inward-facing concern: the sense of being unable to truly relate to people who have experienced traumas she has not lived through herself. "I kind of feel incapable of connecting with them on that level," she admitted. Her reflection touches on the ethical tension between wanting to support and recognising the limits of one's own empathy.

Safaa shared a very sincere moment of vulnerability:

"Sometimes I feel ashamed… if I'm not being sensitive enough. Not because I don't want to be, but just because I'm not aware of it."

This shows a deep level of self-reflection and the ongoing challenge of staying alert to one's own blind spots when working with diverse groups.

For others, frustration came from practical challenges. Gabriela, for instance, finds it hard when mentees become passive and disengaged:

"Even when we organise something for them… they don't even reply."

Although not described as shame, it reflects an emotional strain and a sense of failure in reaching the people they care about.

Souphaluck Noudeang described having to prove constantly her competence because of her gender and age. At first, she was not taken seriously, but over time she gained respect. "We had to fight with our work," she said, which speaks to how social biases can lead to internal pressure to over-perform.

Interestingly, a few participants outright rejected the idea of shame. Hanis acknowledged the challenges, especially language barriers and the way refugees are received, but chose not to frame them in negative emotional terms:

"I hate to look at things as… you know."

Similarly, Luciano said:

"I wouldn't say I feel ashamed of any task", although he admitted that "it can get tricky" when students resist the help offered.

In summary, while few used the word "shame" directly, most participants identified moments when they questioned their effectiveness, struggled emotionally or had to face internal and external limits. These reflections reveal the emotional complexity of working in intercultural and humanitarian contexts, where caring deeply often comes with personal doubts.

3.5 Looking Ahead: Professional Aspirations and Future Outlooks

Interviewees expressed a strong sense of fulfilment and privilege in their roles as intercultural mediators. Many emphasised the importance of their positions, particularly in Hungary, where helping migrants and refugees can be challenging. One interviewee mentioned feeling fortunate to hold a position where they can act as a crucial link between migrants and the local system:

"I feel pretty privileged actually to have this position, because as I said before, Hungary is making it pretty difficult to help or to have these organisations help migrants and refugees, so I feel very privileged to have this position, and to be able to be the connection between the migrants and refugees and the Hungarian system." (Naser Ali Zeinab)

This sense of privilege is closely tied to their belief in the meaningful impact of their work. For them, it's not just about facilitating administrative tasks but also about fostering deeper connections between communities.

However, there was also considerable concern about the sustainability of their roles, particularly when living abroad. Although they are deeply committed to their work, the uncertainty of long-term living arrangements abroad leads them to reconsider the future. One interviewee shared:

"I am not sure how long this can last and how long I will have to keep going back and forth. So I'm trying to seek a domestic position that is still multicultural and deals with intercultural issues." (Soo Min)

This concern about the challenges of a transient lifestyle and the potential need for stability suggests a desire for roles that allow them to continue working on intercultural issues without the uncertainty of international relocation.

Another important theme was the emotional and relational aspect of their work. Several interviewees emphasised the significance of creating a safe and welcoming environment for migrants, particularly to help them integrate into their new societies. One interviewee highlighted the emotional toll that migration can take, sharing their desire to provide a supportive environment:

"Just to make them feel safe and welcome, help them integrate well in the new society. I know how scary it can be to move abroad to a new country, especially when you hadn't really planned it." (Irina)

This statement underscores the emotional role that intercultural mediators play in supporting migrants, showing that their work goes beyond just providing practical assistance. It also involves providing comfort, reassurance and a sense of belonging.

Finally, many interviewees acknowledged the unpredictability of their professional futures. The dynamic nature of migration and intercultural work means their roles are always

subject to change, whether due to shifts in migration policy, personal circumstances or broader social factors.

"You can't really predict the future. You know, so far, I find this to be the most fulfilling category of people to work with. But because, you know, you can't really predict the future or anything, it might change." (Safaa)

This recognition of uncertainty points to the fluid nature of intercultural mediation. Despite the challenges, the interviewees remain committed to their work, showing a willingness to adapt and navigate the evolving landscape of intercultural exchange and migration.

3.6 Cross-Border Dialogue: Questions for European Peers

Interviewees provided insightful perspectives on what they would ask their colleagues working in other EU countries in the field of intercultural mediation. A common theme emerged around the desire for mutual learning and sharing of best practices to improve the impact of their work.

One interviewee expressed a desire to understand how others might make their mediation efforts more impactful, particularly in fostering continuous communication with the people they serve. They highlighted the importance of staying connected with migrants, even after the immediate need for assistance had passed. They mentioned:

"I feel like it's really important to keep talking to these people, to keep listening to what they say, how they are fee, what they do in life. How we can help them more or what we could do differently." (Naser Ali Zeinab)

This comment underscores the importance of maintaining ongoing dialogue, which can lead to better-informed interventions and ensure that mediation efforts are more responsive to migrants' evolving needs.

Another key area of interest was the need for cultural sensitivity training, not only for migrants but also for the host communities. One interviewee emphasised that creating awareness about cultural differences could lead to greater coexistence and understanding. They stated:

"We need to do a lot of cultural sensitivity trainings for the host community… so that people will understand that there are as many cultures as there are people on the face of the earth." (Hanis)

This highlights a strong belief in the power of education to reduce prejudice and create a more inclusive environment for migrants. It also points to the mediator's role in fostering this understanding through structured training and awareness campaigns.

Several interviewees also expressed interest in understanding how their colleagues manage the broader challenges migrants face, such as access to education, healthcare and employment:

"What can we do to support them? Can children receive an education, housing and be able to work in the beginning? Or how do they manage it?" (Souphaluck Noudeang)

This suggests that the interviewee is seeking more systemic approaches to integration, emphasising the importance of providing sustainable support to migrants beyond immediate humanitarian aid.

Another common question revolved around the integration of different professionals into mediation work. Interviewees wanted to know how colleagues collaborate with other experts, such as therapists or child counsellors, to better serve migrant populations. One participant mentioned:

"Do you invite other professionals like a therapist or someone else if you work with kids? How do they integrate different roles or different professions?" (Irina)

This reflects an understanding that intercultural mediation is often multidisciplinary and requires cooperation with other professionals to address the complex needs of migrants.

Finally, some interviewees expressed curiosity about how cultural adaptation processes differ across European countries. They recognised that each context presents unique challenges and opportunities for integration. One interviewee noted:

"I would like to learn about the differences in the adaptation process and worries that people who are settling in a specific country vary from region to region… Things are different in Finland if compared to Greece." (Luciano)

This indicates an awareness of the importance of context in the adaptation process and a desire to learn from colleagues in various regions to better understand these nuances.

Overall, the interviewees' questions reflect a commitment to improving the quality and impact of their work by learning from others and sharing experiences across borders. There is a clear desire for more collaboration, better cultural training and a deeper understanding of the challenges migrants face in different European countries.

3.7 Local Insights: Advice for Incoming Mediators in Hungary

When asked what advice they would offer a colleague planning to move to Hungary as a cultural mediator, interviewees highlighted several key aspects of the profession that are crucial to succeeding in this role. One significant theme was the need for patience and understanding that the integration process takes time. One interviewee emphasised the importance of managing expectations, stating:

"Integration and getting people to include others don't happen overnight. It takes time. It takes patience, so... just know that it takes time and it takes patience to be able to do that." (Hanis)

This underscores the understanding that cultural mediation is a long-term endeavour that requires persistence and a realistic approach to the challenges involved.

Along with patience, some interviewees stressed the value of cultural sensitivity, particularly the necessity of learning the language of the host country. One participant shared:

"I would suggest learning the language of the country they will be dispatched to, as it helps a lot in understanding the culture and makes it easier to communicate with colleagues." (Soo Min)

This suggestion reflects the belief that language is key not only for communication, but also for fostering deeper connections with the community and facilitating the integration process. In this sense, practical language skills can be considered a fundamental tool for any cultural mediator.

Several respondents also highlighted the importance of being open-minded, empathetic, and non-judgmental. For example, one interviewee pointed out that cultural mediators must understand that it is migrants who face the most difficult challenges and it is crucial to approach them with kindness and an open mind:

"Always be kind and open-minded to your mentees. Because they are the ones in trouble, not you." (Gabriela)

This advice underscores the empathetic nature of the work, in which mediators are expected to prioritise the needs of migrants while maintaining a professional and supportive attitude.

Another key piece of advice was to gain practical experience through volunteering or internships before fully committing to a career in mediation. One interviewee noted:

"They should try maybe like internships or volunteering... It's not something you do just because you want to. It's something you do because you are the kind of person who can add value to it." (Safaa)

This statement emphasises the importance of intrinsic motivation and personal suitability for the role. It stresses that cultural mediation is not just about desire, but also about having the right mind-set and a strong sense of responsibility.

Lastly, several interviewees emphasised the importance of informal events and activities in creating an environment conducive to integration. One participant recommended

organising activities such as cooking traditional dishes or dancing, which could help bridge cultural gaps in a relaxed setting:

"What can be done... is probably to have more informal events and activities for mediation, like cooking traditional dishes or dancing and singing." (Irina)

This approach highlights the value of creativity in the mediation process, allowing for cultural exchange in an enjoyable and non-intimidating way.

In conclusion, the advice offered by the interviewees focuses on the need for patience, cultural understanding, professional preparation and empathy. They emphasised that cultural mediation is not only about technical skills, but also about emotional intelligence, adaptability and commitment to the well-being of migrants and the host community.

3.8 Learning and Development: Competencies, Needs and Professional Growth

Participants stressed that development as an intercultural mediator is a lifelong process that demands both formal and informal learning. A recurring concern was the lack of structured educational pathways specific to this profession in Hungary, highlighting a gap between the increasing multicultural needs of society and institutional recognition of the mediator's role.

"I don't think Hungary has formal education for intercultural mediators… this job is not really taken seriously by the majority of the population."(Naser Ali Zeinab)

Superficial or checkbox-style training was broadly criticised, particularly when institutions offer it only to meet diversity requirements rather than to meaningfully address intercultural issues.

"I think it's important to be wary of the fixation on intercultural training or education in the workplace. I became sceptical working in a multicultural setting when the mandatory sensitivity training provided by the workplace was only superficial and no one paid attention to it, considering it rather as another duty to complete." (Soo Min)

Alongside calls for structured education, the importance of experiential learning was a consistent theme. Participants emphasised that theory alone is insufficient and that mediation skills must be refined through repeated and hands-on exposure to diverse cultural situations.

"You always need to learn how to be a better mentor than you have been… and you can only do that with experience." (Gabriela)

"Especially if you work with people from different countries… they change all the time… you don't always know how to act." (Irina)

While some acknowledged that certain individuals might have a natural aptitude for cultural mediation, this was not seen as a substitute for structured development. Relying solely on instinct or personal background, without ongoing training, was seen as a limitation to professional growth.

"Some people have naturally the ability to be intercultural mediators… but we shouldn't rely on that. Learning… never ends." (Safaa)

The need to broaden skills beyond cultural knowledge was also emphasised. To respond effectively to the complex realities of migration, displacement and adaptation, intercultural mediators must be equipped with soft skills and interdisciplinary competencies.

"It requires constant learning… not just about different cultures, but also about communication styles, generational differences and even mental health awareness." (Luciano)

Collectively, the interviews underscore the need to combine formal education, reflective practice and emotional literacy in the professional development of intercultural mediators. This field, situated at the crossroads of ethics, empathy and expertise, cannot afford stagnation or superficiality.

4. Conclusion

The interviews carried out in Hungary with active intercultural mediators working in a variety of NGOs and organisations offer a rich and grounded picture of mediation practice in a national context marked by growing diversity and institutional challenges. These professionals work with different migrant communities, ranging from refugees and asylum seekers to labour migrants and international students and navigate the complexities of identity, institutional culture and social integration on a daily basis.

One of the strongest themes across all interviews is the critical importance of intercultural mediation in facilitating migrants' access to basic rights and services. Mediators reported acting as cultural and emotional translators, explaining institutional processes, advocating for fair treatment, and helping migrants feel seen and heard. Their role was described not as neutral facilitation, but as active negotiation: mediators regularly encounter asymmetries of power, cultural misunderstandings and systemic barriers that require them to exercise judgment, empathy and resilience.

Despite this centrality, participants unanimously pointed to the lack of formal recognition and consistent support for their work. Many described precarious contracts, limited or unpaid roles, and a lack of clarity about their status within organisations. Some felt that institutions viewed them more as informal helpers or community insiders than as trained professionals. This undermines the long-term sustainability of their contribution and creates tensions around professional identity and expectations.

Another key finding concerns the training and skills required for effective mediation. While language and cultural awareness were considered essential, participants emphasised the need for broader competencies, including psychological support, institutional knowledge, conflict management and communication under pressure. Many noted that they had developed these skills "on the job," often without structured guidance or feedback. Several expressed a desire for training that also includes reflective practice, helping them to process their own position within the systems, manage the emotional work and set healthy boundaries.

The emotional and ethical complexity of the work was also highlighted. Mediators often experience moral tensions, caught between organisational constraints and the needs of the people they serve. They are frequently the only staff members with close ties to migrant communities, and this unique position can be both empowering and isolating. Without peer support, supervision, or institutional backing, some mediators reported experiencing burnout, frustration and doubts about their impact.

Participants shared several suggestions for improving communication and professional development within the field:

1. Establishing structured, modular training programmes that include practical and psychological dimensions of mediation work.

2. Creating official accreditation paths to protect the status and stability of the profession.

3. Strengthening support networks among mediators, including mentoring systems and facilitated peer exchange.

4. Increasing institutional awareness of what mediation involves, ensuring that organisations understand the complexity of the role and provide appropriate resources.

Finally, a message shared across all interviews was that intercultural mediation cannot succeed in isolation. For mediators to be effective, organisations and institutions must also evolve to become more responsive, inclusive and self-aware. Mediation is not a one-way act of translation, it is a dynamic process that requires openness and transformation on all sides.

In summary, these Hungarian-based mediators demonstrate that intercultural mediation is a vital yet fragile bridge within increasingly diverse societies. To strengthen this bridge, stakeholders must move beyond viewing mediators as informal helpers and recognise them as trained professionals whose work is essential for inclusion, equity, and mutual

understanding. The voices of these individuals offer a roadmap for more humane, informed, and resilient intercultural engagement in Hungary and beyond.

ITALY

The **iNTERCULT focus group organised by Futura** was held online on the 19th March 2025 with nine intercultural mediators operating in different areas and in various provinces of Emilia-Romagna. Despite the awareness of some limitations related to meeting online rather than in person (greater formality, fewer relational exchanges, lack of the warmth typical of face-to-face meetings), the choice to carry out the focus group online was made mainly to be able to obtain different and varied testimonies, including with regard to territorial peculiarities.

After explaining the rules of engagement for the meeting, we proceeded to briefly introduce Futura and its staff members. The project and the partnership consortium were then presented, and the objectives of Intercult were illustrated, starting from the recognition of how mediation is progressing in different countries and then trying to build something common.

First, the IMs were asked to introduce themselves and say what they do as IMs.

N. is an IM for other organisations and a social worker in a centre for asylum seekers in Finale Emilia. She has regional qualification as an IM. This dual role sometimes causes her difficulties, because being a social worker is one thing and being an Ombudsman is another. But this was the only way she could achieve stability in her work.

A. has been working since 2001 as an IM in the health sector in a centre for the health of foreign women in Emilia-Romagna. In order to have a more stable and remunerative job, she works also as an intercultural operator in a cooperative that operates in the migration field on behalf of some municipalities. For this project, in addition to her mediation skills, she also uses language skills.

B. is an IM who works for a cooperative. He has been an IM for several years, but he also has to do other jobs in the social field.

R. is an IM for Urdu and Punjabi in Reggio Emilia and works for a cooperative. Although she has only been an IM for six months, they have been intense months in which she has had the opportunity to learn a lot and certainly still has a lot to learn. Of Pakistani origin, she was born and raised in Italy.

S. is both a social worker and an IM (recently and particularly in Spanish). She has been in Italy for five years and in this period she has dealt a lot with social issues. She has a degree in psychology.

M. is Slovenian and she is mainly a social worker, but also an IM for the languages of the former Yugoslavia for a translation, telephone and online mediation agency that operates

throughout Italy. A job she found by chance, after a stronger initial commitment in the 1990s and early 2000s, but which she continues to do.

O. works for a cooperative in the province of Ravenna, where she deals with intercultural mediation in schools and in social services, and therefore she works in several areas. She is also an Italian language teacher for foreigners.

Na. is an employee of a cooperative in Reggio Emilia and she has been an IM since 2001, in particular for Arabic and French, both in schools and in the social and health fields.

F. is Senegalese and she has been involved in intercultural mediation since 2006. She works for two cooperatives dealing mainly with mediation in schools, but also in social work (here she also works for the "*pink line",* a hotline for women who are victims of violence) and in the health sector.

Why and how did you become IMs?

F.: At first, in 2006, it was by chance. She was working in a school canteen, but after giving a lesson at her daughter's kindergarten, she was asked to come back to talk about her culture. She went with another Senegalese mother and had this experience. After some time, a teacher came to her to tell her that she knew they were looking for a Senegalese woman who spoke Italian to mediate in schools. So she started out, first by holding meetings in schools where she explained Senegalese culture, then she started working for a cooperative that trained her and also helped her get her middle school diploma. She became so passionate about the work that she stopped working in the canteen.

O.: In Ukraine, in addition to being a teacher, she was involved in the fight against gender-based violence as a researcher and populariser. Her skills and experience in communicating with institutions and students was also useful when she arrived in Italy, where she came across an association where she was able to apply her skills, i.e. teaching and helping with relationships. Her experience in combating gender-based violence was also useful since the same association (which later became a cooperative) worked with the anti-violence centre managing the "*pink line*". This work coincides with her idea of being able to help people feel good, to support them on a journey that takes them from one country to another. It is a special task because migrants are often completely uprooted and lost for a certain period of time, almost without an identity, and experiences many emotions that are often not positive. Being able to help them overcome these difficulties is the aspect that most attracts her to this task.

N. says that, since she was a child, she has always been a mediator because she used to translate for her parents and friends. As an adult, this activity turned into a passion, and the beauty of being an IM, which she really enjoys, is that it gives her the opportunity to mediate in multiple sectors, from social services to health services, from the police to lawyers. All this allows her to gain experience and acquire skills in various fields.

R. hooks up, showing full agreement with what N. said. For her, too, becoming an IM was a free and desired choice, so much so that since she was a girl, she has sought information regarding the presence of mediation services in her area of residence. She also mediated by accompanying parents, family and friends, feeling satisfied because she knew she was helping someone. In addition, as N. said, it is also a way to learn and grow in skills. So you give, but you are also receiving something in return.

Na. declares that perhaps she represents the older generation of IMs (because she sees N. and R. as the second or third generation). She did not choose this field, but had enrolled in university. Then, a friend who was an IM, when she had a large amount of work that she could not keep up with, asked for her help. She therefore started with translations, then slowly worked in person until a course for IMs was activated, which she enrolled in. Then with the arrival of her children and the fact that she was a foreigner, which did not make it so easy to find other jobs, she became an IM. There was, and still is, a need for staff in this sector. Although the role has changed, just look at the second or third generations, who speak Italian much better and are more integrated, there is still a lot to do, starting with research to understand what it takes to become an IM, also gaining experience in various areas and clearly establishing one's skills. Although they have been around for a long time, there are still some who are unfamiliar with this role, which is always very necessary. She likes this job and it is nice because it is never boring, but there is always something new to learn. There is always a chance that something will surprise you, that it will make all your certainties fall or that it will put a strain on what you have learned. There are always constant novelties, just think of the changing generations, politics and geography and with this, the approach to culture and expectations also changes. You always have to be up to date and ready for surprises, and that's why she likes it.

A. is the only IM without foreign origins in this group. She too is "also" an IM because you cannot live on mediation alone. She works in the healthcare sector, as an Italian teacher and as a telephone translation operator. Loving languages, she studied them as an interpreter and, since there were exams that could only be passed by going abroad for at least six months, she had more than one experience in which she felt like a foreigner.

It was precisely because she felt like a foreigner and loved languages that she approached the profession. She also feels part of the first generation of IMs, with an additional difficulty, namely that at the time Italians were not considered as possible IMs because they were not foreigners. She bravely swam against the tide, confident that having travelled a lot, having lived abroad and having married a foreign man, she had all the credentials to be able to empathise with anyone. Of course, you have to learn how to do it and clearly you have to have a passion for both language and culture and know that it is a constantly evolving job.

Of course, there is always the case that displaces us, that catches us unprepared, there is always a dialect or cadence that is used in a given region of a given country that is poorly represented in Italy.

Being an IM is also a bit like giving something back, knowing that not all women in the world can study, can be free to do what they want, even choosing their partner, choosing their studies and, if so, which ones, taking care of themselves and so on. There is a sense of duty towards these women and the awareness of being useful. Dealing with immigration always allows you to learn a lot. There is a completely huge, enormous human aspect that makes you feel good. Of course, we must not forget the fragility of the work from the point of view of contracts and recognition.

S. found it very useful to cross-reference the work of as an IM with her academic career as a psychologist, as both aspects complement each other and help to understand both different cultures and to understand emotions a little better. Initially, she did not know of the existence of this figure, so the choice was random.

However, she certainly likes to do it and it has been nice to find these opportunities and also to discover many areas in which she can work, such as healthcare, social services, etc. In Emilia-Romagna in general, she now sees that there are many realities, even in agreement with her colleagues, where this role is still very ambiguous.

B. has a *sui generis* background. He became an IM by chance because he had been welcomed in a reception centre for unaccompanied foreign minors and was immediately able to learn to understand and speak Italian, much better than the average of the others. Therefore, the other guests relied on him when there was no IM appointed by the facility, helped by the fact that he spoke many African languages, such as Manding English, pidgin English and other unofficial languages. Having always tried to act as a link between the children and the operators at the centre, this ability became a professional opportunity. Now he is also studying languages at university, remaining in that field for the moment, which he continues to enjoy and in which he feels comfortable.

(This question was not included in the schedule, but it is linked to what was said in the previous answers.) Based on your experience, have you noticed any changes in the attitude of the organisations or entities for which you act as a mediator, including towards foreigners? In other words, do you think that public services have opened up and are aware that there are citizens of other origins, or do you think that there is still a certain degree of close-mindedness and that it is still difficult to interact with the public administration?

O.: This question includes various answers and must always refer to whom you are dealing with: generalising how the municipality, the police headquarters or the public health system react to a concrete need must always refer to how their employees behave towards customers. We always talk about one-to-one relationships, therefore there is both openness and closed-mindedness. If civil servants and public operators have also taken a training course to understand how various things work, it is easier to find ourselves in front of people who are willing to help and who try to make a difference, who try to welcome and help people. But there are always people who are very closed, and here an IM has a very difficult task, not only to act as an intermediary between the user and the Authority, but

also to establish a professional relationship with these public operators. The answer is that it depends on what we find in front of us.

Na.: Agreeing with what her colleague has just said, she adds that it often also depends on funding, on the investments made in the service and, when it comes to integration, sometimes also on who won the elections. It also depends on the possible emergency of the case that we encounter and on which we are working anyway. Projects are made that naturally have a beginning and an end, but no more long-term, structural investments are made. There is no change in this regard. Of course, the second and third generations have now arrived and the structure of citizenship has changed, but the system remains.

F.: she hooks up with O. and emphasises how to give an answer because, as mentioned, it depends on the situation but also on the cases. It happens that when there are certain requirements or needs for attention, the IM is involved and well trained on the case, otherwise the IM is used and thrown away like a rag.

A.: Agreeing with what her colleagues have said, she adds that beyond the language requests, there is a request for intercultural interpretations, and not necessarily for newcomers. She cites the case of a teacher who asks about Ramadan in relation to a second-generation girl, born and raised in Italy with an excellent command of the language, who speaks Italian very well, asking not only about fasting, but also about why she had never refused to do certain things in the morning. The IM is also called upon for cultural aspects that may not be immediately apparent and cannot be found on Google if you do not know what to look for. However, precisely because it always depends on the operators of the services we are dealing with, the definition of "emergency" also changes, as does their perception of need and, consequently, the need to request mediation.

Na., taking A.'s word as an example, points out how absurd it would seem that in schools in 2025 there would still be a need to explain what Ramadan is and what this practice entails. If this were the case for everyone, nothing would have changed. This would make it clear that a lot of work still needs to be done on intercultural projects, also preparing teachers (and other public workers) for cultural diversity. A teacher who is familiar with different cultures cannot be surprised if there are so many absences during Ramadan or if they do not want to play sports. Moreover, the children's parents themselves should not be ashamed to say: tomorrow they will not be coming to school because we have the "feast of breaking the fast", perhaps writing as a justification for the absence that the child was not feeling well. We must insist on these projects of cultural awareness so that we can call on the IM to make more appropriate mediation interventions.

We talked about the beauty of helping other and the satisfaction that this can bring. Your work. On the other hand, what is the meaning of dissatisfaction or frustration from a more professional point of view? What are the least satisfying aspects of your mediation?

Na.: During mediation, we enter deeply into the experience of a person or a family, but once we have done our small part, we are not sure about continuity. Either because the

service no longer needs to make further interventions or the entity for which the mediation service is provided is unable to guarantee its continuity due to a lack of resources. Since we work a lot on empathy in our relationship with the user, when the service is interrupted, difficulties arise for both the IM and the user. If there are fragmented interventions with the same person, it is even worse: because they have to tell the same story again. Their suffering is that of explaining and re-explaining if they forget any part of it. For the client it is normal to think that we work as a team and that there is a folder like the one used by social services. But this is not the case. Not only are the cases unknown to other IMs, but the information is often fragmented, with some pieces known to some people and not to others. Without a folder or a constant exchange of handovers, the IM cannot understand whether they have done a good mediation job or whether there is something missing that needs to be addressed in future talks. In addition, they don't know why, because you learn by doing, but you don't know the final outcome. Once you have had that situation at the beginning, which you know well, after six months or a year you can no longer see the progress, the difficulties and the things that need to be fixed. That question mark always remains: did I do well? Did I do wrong? Shouldn't I have said that? … And that's a big difficulty.

F. adds that there is also a lack of respect for IMs, so much so that they are often not notified in the event of the absence of the user with whom they are mediating, or they are given an hour of mediation in a hospital, perhaps to be reached by car, and then once there, they discover that thanks to another patient or an orderly person who speaks the language, they have used this person as a IM. And this is absolutely not okay. Not only because once you arrive there is no longer any need, but above all because professionalism, respect for privacy and the cost of all this are ignored. Think about when they may use the husband to mediate on issues that the husband should not know about or that she was at the origin of the problem.

N. noted that often, especially in social services, they call for an initial briefing to explain the purpose of the intervention. Then, once the mediation intervention has been carried out, a debriefing is also done to get the IM's opinion. Unfortunately, this does not normally happen in other areas (school, health) and yet it would be very important.

O. A big problem is travel, when the job includes, for example, two hours at one school, two hours at another, one hour at social services and finally one hour for any other need. It is very difficult to organise schedules according to various needs. However, it is claimed that it is the IMs who have to adapt to the schedules of the people in schools or institutions, without considering the fact that there may be commitments already set for months, given that we are really busy and therefore we are always talking about joint work and not something planned. These joint tasks, combined with travelling from one place to another, create considerable stress.

A. In some realities, IMs are part of the staff of the health service, which means that the idea of working by projects is outdated. Working on a project basis always gives the idea that migration is an emergency, while it is something structural, so even those who have skills in this area should be structural and work together from the planning stage onwards, rather than being called in when needed. The IM is therefore considered contractually to

have a diploma profile, but instead should be considered as having a degree because they always have to study and learn, almost as doctors do.

She then adds that there must be the right to the supervision by a psychologist in order to have the opportunity to work on the emotions that are absorbed in the heat of the moment in the original language and therefore come across directly. By mediating, everything is transformed into Italian and weakened, but the original version remains and changes people because it comes back to mind even in moments of relaxation. These impressions, on the one hand, allow you to learn, but in the end they can have retroactive effects and therefore there must be a right to have supervisors who help in this sense.

M.: Sometimes mediation is confused with translation. It has happened that in court, for example, the IM called was used as a translator instead of an interpreter. Therefore, there is a distorted use of mediation. Then it happens that where the language is not known, nationality is used as a synonym for language, but nationality and language are different things. For example, in Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union there were many languages but only one passport.

In three years' time, do you see yourself still working as an IM and, if so, in order to continue being an IM with certain levels of competence and satisfaction, what kind of training needs do you feel you need most? What is the challenge in saying that you will be there in three years' time provided that...?

S. would like to continue to be an IM, certainly, but she would also like to start her career in psychology or psychotherapy. If she continues to be an IM, she would like to organise the mediation methods so that there is a possibility of managing emotions and not taking them home. She would also like psychological training on managing emotions to avoid damage from stress.

O.: Your cooperative is discussing how to stabilise IMs, starting with better planning of interventions in schools, with IMs also taking on the role of educators. But this also means that the need for training is no longer linked only to immigration, but also to reception and didactic and pedagogical processes, so as to help foreign students not only with the language, but also with other subjects of study. Without forgetting that skills must also be acquired in order to be able to address the specific educational needs of pupils. If the IM becomes part of the school staff, it is very right and far-sighted for the future to get better training to make a difference in teaching.

In three years' time, she hopes to be an IM, but in a new form, because if you do not change, it is difficult to continue without risking burnout. She would also like to improve her language skills, not only in Italian, but also in her mother tongue or other vehicular languages, because languages change, cultures change and countries of origin change too. And you definitely need to keep up to date with what is happening here in Italy, but without forgetting what is happening in you countries of origin. She would also like to see employees with dark skin or wearing traditional clothing in health services, schools or municipal offices: she would like to see multiculturalism within the services.

A.: She emphasizes the need for training in helping relationships, but also in self-awareness, that means knowing how to understand one's own "centre", where we are and how we are. This is because after a long time you acquire skills, but you lose others. Although she has regular supervision with a psychologist every two months, there is no doubt that IMs are exposed to the most diverse and dramatic situations. Imagine that in the majority of workplaces, IMs do not have this opportunity; therefore she would like psychological training on how to interface with those suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, to grasp their symptoms and to be able to have them treated by specialists. She is not asking to become a psychologist, but to be able to better understand some situations. In three years' time she would like to continue being an IM, but with a certain degree of economic security. If you choose to be an IM, you should not be forced to depend on a partner who can support you or have money from your parents to pay the bills, but have an economic capacity that allows you to have a family and children. And there must be honesty on this point.

F. says that she would accept anything for training because life requires you to always keep up-to-date, anyway it is a good thing and it does not hurt. Training, however, must be an exchange; it is not only you who must be trained, but also be trainers, but also a point of respect for skills. Other professionals who turn to IMs must therefore also respect the professionalism and training behind their figure.

In three years' time, she would like be doing the same job, as long as the contractual and remuneration aspects are strengthened and better regulated.

R. hopes to be still an IM in three years' time, but obviously it also depends a little on the circumstances and whether the changes that will take place allow it. As far as training is concerned, she agrees with the aspect of psychological skills because if you have more awareness in this area, you can notice things that can be helpful both for yourself and for others. So, if you are aware, you facilitate both your own work and that of others, noticing things that perhaps without training you would not be able to do. Working with users with mental health problems, she is doing training on these issues with her cooperative. In addition, she believes that this training can be useful to everyone because it offers the opportunity to learn a lot even if you do not necessarily have to deal with mental problems.

Is there anything you envy about brokers who work in other countries, or would you like to go and work abroad? Conversely, what would you like to say, advise or suggest to someone who would like to come to Italy to work as an IM?

Na. is familiar with the French and Canadian situations and knows that the IMs are part of the service staff and work as a fixed presence together with the service staff. This guarantees the continuity of the presence of the IM, the knowledge of citizens and also future planning on a concrete basis. In Italy, on the other hand, we are never part of the planning table; we only receive projects made by others. The advice she would give to

some IMs from other countries who want to come and work in Italy is to have the guarantee of another salary, not to be just an IM.

A. would greatly appreciate the possibility to take part in exchange experiences, even if only for a few weeks, to see what it is like elsewhere and thus learn good practices. Here there are very good practices that perhaps do not exist in other countries, which have different migration experiences or other political and administrative structures, and vice versa. Once in London she visited a school and saw that among the staff there was a woman dressed in traditional Bengali clothes. Upon asking, she learned that this person was part of the staff who prepared the canteen menus and gave instructions on halal foods. Knowing that there can be figures like this, who are part of the staff, is important and you can only find this out through exchanges.

M. knows the Slovenian reality quite well because she studied there and has many colleagues who work there. She knows that the figure of the cultural IM is quite new because the migration phenomenon itself is new in Slovenia (of course there has always been internal immigration from Yugoslavia, but the language problems were certainly less evident). She knows that schools and health services now offer all the necessary services to help fragile people: social workers, educators, psychologists and, more recently, also cultural mediators, especially for young people, minors and unaccompanied children. However, if a Slovenian IM came to work in Italy, she would tell them that they need to have a plan B, that mediation alone is not enough and, especially for the Slovenian language, there is very little work.

Do you have any other training suggestions for the future?

Na. would like intensive training on legislation, particularly with regard to applicants for international protection, since legislation is constantly changing.

She would also like to better understand the "visions" of the various services in order to share their purposes, while also knowing the necessary precautions to take in health services where there may be dangers of contagion.

A. has been threatened by the husband of a woman she is helping to escape from a situation of domestic violence. It would be very interesting to acquire tools on how to deal with people who are in a state of alteration, on their decision-making capacity and to learn and acquire these signals. A colleague of hers in social services said never to keep scissors on the table, and this is no exaggeration because in any case it is always a job involving emotions and sometimes exasperation. From an emotional point of view, but also from a physical point of view, you are present and therefore you should also know the techniques to be able to understand in a trivial way that you must always have a way out, keep an eye on the goal and have postures with positions that do not increase aggression and that allow you to save yourself, especially when you are not in a triad.

R. adds that there are not only threats, but also inadequate approaches, especially from men towards female mediators. In these cases, you don't know how to behave, and it

becomes very difficult to get out of the situation or you don't know how to behave to get out of the impasse.

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