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TRAST

Transmedia Stories of Insularity Reserch

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Migrants and Refugees in Europe

1. Need Analysis

Migrants and refugees are among the most vulnerable populations in Europe, facing numerous socio-economic and cultural challenges that significantly impact their lives and communities. This group includes asylum seekers fleeing war and environmental disasters, economic migrants seeking better opportunities, and refugees escaping persecution and violence. Europe's current migration landscape has been profoundly altered by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which has dramatically increased the number of refugees entering the continent. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Europe hosts over 12 million refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons, with significant populations from Syria, Afghanistan, and more recently, Ukraine (UNHCR, 2024). By mid-2024, over 8 million Ukrainian refugees were recorded across Europe, with the majority residing in Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic (The New Humanitarian, 2024).

The European Union's response to this influx has been multifaceted, encompassing immediate humanitarian aid, policy adjustments, and financial support to frontline countries like Poland. However, the integration of refugees into host societies presents complex challenges that extend beyond logistical concerns, touching deeply on societal attitudes, cultural perceptions, and the political will to foster inclusion. Successful integration of refugees requires not only physical accommodation but also a deep understanding of their cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and the psychological impact of displacement. For integration to be effective, it is essential to provide comprehensive support that addresses these factors. However, challenges such as language barriers, limited access to employment, education, and public services often obstruct this process. Additionally, the spatial distribution of refugees—many residing in peripheral urban areas or rural settings—further isolates them, complicating their ability to fully integrate and participate in host communities.

These challenges are particularly evident in the Ukrainian refugee crisis, which has reshaped migration dynamics in Europe, making Poland a major hub for displaced Ukrainians, hosting over 1.5 million displaced persons since the war began (NRC, 2024). The influx of Ukrainian refugees has created both humanitarian and logistical challenges in Poland, a country that has traditionally maintained cautious migration policies. However, Poland has demonstrated an extraordinary level of solidarity with Ukrainian refugees, implementing an "open-door policy" and providing temporary protection status under an EU directive that automatically granted refugees—unlike those from other regions—the right to live, work, and receive social benefits. According to Eurostat, over 4.2 million Ukrainian refugees are currently registered for temporary protection that automatically granted them the right to live, work, and in EU states, quarter of them in Poland. In Poland roughly 1 million Ukrainian refugees are registered for temporary protection (1.5 million since the beginning of the war), representing the highest number of all countries (The Kyiv Independent, 2024.)

While the refugees who have registered for temporary protection in Poland were met with an unprecedented welcome, rising economic challenges such as inflation and economic shifts have complicated the situation. Recent amendments to Polish law have required Ukrainian refugees to bear an increased percentage of shelter costs. The refugees face challenges such as overcrowded accommodations, language barriers, and difficulty finding employment. The demographic profile of Ukrainian refugees—comprising mostly women, children, and the elderly— exacerbates their vulnerability, making them susceptible to exploitation and discrimination (The New Humanitarian, 2024).

Two years into the conflict**,** Ukrainian refugees in Poland are grappling with destabilizing questions about their futures: How much of a new life should they build, and when—if ever—will they be able to return home? While approximately 65% of Ukrainian refugees in Poland have found employment, the overall number of refugees has stabilized at just under one million (The New Humanitarian, 2024). Some refugees have chosen to return to Ukraine, driven by the desire to reunite with family, while others have moved to different EU countries or exchanged their temporary protection status for student or employment visas, seeking a more stable future in Poland.

The Polish government and civil society have mobilized significant resources to support Ukrainian refugees, offering financial assistance, free transport, and legal aid. Despite these efforts, the large-scale movement and prolonged presence of refugees have placed immense pressure on Poland's public services, including housing, education, and healthcare. Refugees in Poland have access to these services, but ongoing challenges such as language barriers, housing shortages,

and bureaucratic complexities complicate their full integration. Many live in precarious conditions, relying on host families, temporary shelters, or overcrowded accommodations.

The situation remains fluid**,** with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine presenting uncertainties about the long-term needs of refugees as the war in Ukraine continues without a clear resolution. This has tested Poland's social cohesion, as communities balance the desire to help with concerns about the sustainability of such support amid economic pressures and the rising cost of living. The influx of refugees underscores the broader challenges Europe faces in creating sustainable and inclusive systems to support those displaced by conflict and instability.

2. Political, Social, and Cultural Contexts Around Insular Groups

The political and social contexts surrounding migrants and refugees vary significantly across Europe. The political landscape is complex and often polarized, reflecting deep-seated cultural attitudes and national policies. Migrants and refugees in Europe are often perceived through a politicized lens, where immigration policies are shaped by public sentiment, political agendas, and economic considerations. While countries like Germany and Sweden have been more welcoming, implementing integration programs and providing substantial support, offering language classes, job training, and pathways to citizenship, others like Hungary and Greece have taken more restrictive stances, often characterized by hostile rhetoric, tightened border controls and poor conditions in refugee camps. (Baglioni & Calò, 2023). The Italian government, dealing with constant arrivals from the Mediterranean, often struggles with overcrowded reception centers and inadequate resources, leading to tension between refugees and local communities (Federico, 2021).

The European Union (EU) has struggled to find a unified approach to migration, which has led to uneven and often inadequate responses across member states. The Dublin Regulation, for instance, places the burden of processing asylum claims on the first EU country of entry, disproportionately affecting border countries like Greece, Italy, and Spain. These nations, often lacking sufficient resources, face challenges in providing adequate support, resulting in substandard living conditions and human rights violations.

Socially, the integration of migrants is hampered by significant barriers, including xenophobia, racism, and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments fuelled by far-right political discourse. Hate crimes against migrants are increasing across Europe, further marginalizing these groups. The perception of migrants as cultural and economic threats, particularly visible in the rhetoric of political figures like Marine Le Pen in France, has influenced public attitudes and policy decisions, making it difficult for migrants to integrate socially and economically.

Culturally, migrants face the ongoing challenge of preserving their own identities while adapting to the cultural norms of their host countries. This struggle often creates a sense of dislocation and loss as they navigate the pressures of maintaining their heritage alongside the need to assimilate. Compounding this issue is the frequent misrepresentation of migrant narratives in the media, where negative framing reinforces harmful stereotypes and biases. Despite these challenges**,** the cultural and economic contributions of migrants are immense, enriching host societies through diverse perspectives, skills, and traditions. Migrants significantly impact areas like the arts, literature, and cuisine, as well as the economy, where they often fill labour market gaps, drive economic growth, and establish businesses that create employment opportunities. According to Meinhof (2013), migrants are not just economic contributors; they are cultural innovators who bring new perspectives, creative energy, and a sense of global interconnectedness to Europe. This integration fosters mutual benefits, as migrant communities enhance cultural diversity and reshape the local traditions of European cities, creating more vibrant and dynamic societies. For example, Syrian chefs in Berlin and Afghan artists in Paris are reshaping Europe's cultural landscape through their unique contributions. Salma Al Armarchi: "There is a lot of focus on cuisine here in Europe. And we are happy to be bringing people new tastes. Now more people are breaking down the barrier, trying our food, and liking it." (UNHCR, 2020.)

However, many migrants and refugees continue to be perceived as burdens rather than valuable contributors, leading to environments of exclusion and distrust (Baglioni and Calò, 2023). These perceptions overshadow the significant cultural practices migrants bring, from culinary arts to music and literature, which help to redefine the cultural fabric of Europe.

Meinhof's (2013) work highlights that migrants' artistic and culinary innovations challenge existing cultural norms and promote a more inclusive European heritage, highlighting the mutual benefits of cultural diversity. Migrants enrich social

fabric of European societies by introducing new cultural practices, fostering artistic innovation, and enhancing multicultural dialogue. They play a crucial role in redefining Europe's cultural scene, celebrating diversity through cultural festivals, and integrating new art forms and cuisines, which broadens a more inclusive European identity. Migrants are not just economic contributors but cultural innovators, transforming public discourse and reshaping cultural identities through artistic endeavors. This dynamic reimagines what it means to belong in Europe, making host societies more resilient and adaptable.

By engaging in cultural production, migrants actively contribute to the evolution of their host countries. Recognizing them as cultural innovators counters negative stereotypes, fostering a more cohesive society. Their contributions in music, literature, and the culinary arts serve as bridges between communities, enhancing social and cultural resilience.

The European Commission's migration policies focus heavily on border management and security, selective integration, often sidelining more comprehensive social inclusion strategies (Geddes and Scholten, 2016). This selective approach neglects the broader need for frameworks that address the socio-cultural dimensions of migration, resulting in restrictive asylum processes and limited integration support for non-European migrants.

This policy gap is evident across Europe, where migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia face perilous journeys and restrictive asylum processes. In 2023 alone, over 90,000 migrants attempted to cross the Mediterranean, with at least 1,800 recorded deaths, highlighting the ongoing dangers faced by those seeking refuge (Frontex, 2024). Even for those who survive, the challenges do not end; restrictive asylum processes, inadequate living conditions, and limited access to social and economic opportunities continue to hinder their integration. This lack of comprehensive support exacerbates social exclusion, trapping many in a cycle of marginalization and vulnerability. The absence of targeted policies for cultural and social integration not only impedes the full participation of migrants in their host communities but also diminishes the potential benefits that migrants bring to European societies.

Addressing these issues requires a shift in EU migration policy from a purely security-focused approach to one that recognizes the complex needs of migrants and refugees, ensuring access to services, opportunities for cultural exchange, and active participation in social and economic life. By implementing inclusive policies that go beyond mere border control, Europe can better harness the positive contributions of migrants, fostering resilient and diverse communities that reflect the values of mutual respect and shared prosperity.

Poland's Response to the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis

Poland's approach to Ukrainian refugees contrasts sharply with its historically strict stance on non-European migrants. Driven by historical ties and cultural similarities, Poland's response has been overwhelmingly positive, with widespread grassroots initiatives providing support. While the country has shown exceptional hospitality towards Ukrainians—granting temporary protection, social benefits, and access to work—this openness does not extend to migrants from the Middle East and Africa, highlighting broader European tensions shaped by political, social, and cultural factors.

This divergence in Poland's response reflects its historically restrictive migration policies. During the 2015 refugee crisis, Poland refused to accept quotas of non-European refugees, citing security concerns and cultural incompatibility (Federico, 2021). This restrictive attitude resurfaced at the start of the Ukraine war, where reports of discrimination and racial profiling emerged. Non-Ukrainian nationals, including foreign students, faced barriers to entry, prolonged identity checks, and, in some cases, detention upon failed verification (Temporary Protection Poland, 2023).

As the largest host under the Regional Refugee Response Plan, Poland faces complex integration challenges. By the end of 2023, around 1.1 million Ukrainian refugees were anticipated to reside in Poland, creating diverse social and economic needs (Poland: 2024 Regional Refugee Response Plan, 2024). While Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed due to cultural similarities, the persistence of the conflict has shifted the focus from immediate relief to long-term integration challenges. The initial solidarity has given way to concerns about job availability, resource distribution, and the sustainability of refugee support systems amid rising economic pressures (OECD, 2021). The labour market, while initially welcoming, has faced pressures as the availability of jobs fluctuates, and the demand for specific skills rises. Cultural differences, although less pronounced compared to other refugee groups, still pose barriers to social cohesion and mutual understanding.

Women, children, and the elderly comprise over 90% of Poland's refugee population, straining schools that must accommodate many children without sufficient language support. Language barriers, employment disparities, and social exclusion risks have emerged as critical concerns**.** Alongside this, many refugees face diminishing resources and heightened vulnerabilities (Poland: 2024 Regional Refugee Response Plan, 2024.). According to the Multi-Sector Needs Analysis, 38% of households reported affording fewer goods and services than the previous year, and 49% had at least one chronically ill member (UNHCR, 2024).

As public attitudes in Poland evolve, there are growing concerns about the sustainability of refugee support**.** With many Ukrainians intending to stay, the need for sustainable solutions in employment, education, and social integration is becoming increasingly urgent. The shared cultural and historical narratives between Poles and Ukrainians foster a sense of belonging, yet the realities of displacement, unfamiliar environments, and uncertain futures complicate successful integration, revealing the deeper complexities of integration beyond shared cultural ties.

3. Academic Context and Need for Multimethod Research Discourse and Experimental Research Practice

Migration and inclusion have been focal points of academic inquiry, particularly given the rising complexity of global migration patterns, ongoing humanitarian crises and their impact on European societies. The integration of migrants and refugees, particularly from recent conflicts, has highlighted the limitations of traditional research methodologies in capturing the nuanced, lived experiences of migrants. Scholars increasingly recognize that simplistic narratives of migration fail to address the complex interplay of cultural, economic, and social factors influencing migrant inclusion in host societies (Geddes and Scholten, 2016). The existing body of research has primarily focused on economic integration, labour market participation, and access to education. However, there is a growing need to explore the cultural and psychosocial dimensions of migration, which are critical for fostering inclusive and supportive environments for migrants.

Given the complex nature of migration, there is a need for a research approach that integrates varied methodologies, theoretical perspectives and methodological strategies,
and embraces innovative practices. Multimethod research discourse goes beyond the traditional mixed methods paradigm by incorporating diverse analytical strategies, participatory approaches, and experimental practices that reflect migration and inclusion complexities (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007.). This approach is particularly suited to studying migration, where societal concerns demand integrated research design that incorporates theoretical perspectives and methodological strategies.

Multimethod research uses diverse practices such as narrative inquiry, participatory digital storytelling, and co-creative artistic methods, exploring migration beyond traditional statistical analysis. Incorporating multiple disciplines —including sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and museology—, performative and practice-led research, this approach addresses the fragmentation of cultural identities, situates social issues historically, and examines the shaping of migrants' personal and professional identities, thus influencing integration and reflecting migrants' lived realities. By applying performative and practice-led research, scholars can explore the socio-symbolic dimensions of migration, addressing the dynamics of identity formation, cultural adaptation, and social integration.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Methodological Contributions
A critical component of this approach is the integration of postmodern critical theory, which values multiple perspectives and reconciles the divide between epistemic (explanatory) and non-epistemic (interpretive) approaches. This theoretical framework situates social problems within their historical, cultural, and social contexts and uses a mix of first-person, second-person, and third-person perspectives to capture the lived realities of migrants. Such a perspective allows researchers to understand the complexities of fragmented cultural identities, especially those shaped by migration.

Incorporating actor-network theory (ANT) further expands the research scope by recognizing the agency of material objects, technologies, and ideas in social processes. ANT underscores the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, highlighting the dynamic interactions that influence cultural narratives and practices. This theoretical lens enables researchers to explore how cultural artifacts and creative practices contribute to new narratives of identity and inclusion, making these elements active agents in shaping social realities.

To address the complexities of migration, experimental and practice-led research methodologies are crucial. These approaches align with constructivist epistemology, prioritizing co-creation and participatory engagement with migrant communities. This involves using narrative inquiry, life histories, and observational techniques, which allow for a deeper exploration of migrants' subjective experiences. By incorporating new media, digital storytelling, and other creative forms, experimental research challenges traditional methods and seeks innovative ways of representing cultural heritage and migrant identities. This participatory research not only offers new insights but empowers migrant communities by recognizing them as co-researchers and active contributors.

Innovative Contributions to Migration Research
The integration of diverse research methodologies—including participatory, performative, and experimental approaches—underscores the importance of cultural innovation alongside social innovation. This approach emphasizes creating new narratives of identity and inclusion, which align cultural production with broader goals of social transformation. By involving migrants in the research process, this methodology challenges stereotypes, fosters mutual understanding, and builds a more inclusive societal framework. This is especially vital in the context of migration, where traditional academic approaches often overlook the cultural and symbolic dimensions of migrant experiences.

The Need for a New Research Paradigm
The evolving landscape of migration research necessitates methodologies that go beyond static representations of cultural integration. By utilizing participatory, experimental, and practice-led approaches, researchers engage directly with the dynamic, lived experiences of migrants. This paradigm shift emphasizes co-creation and collaborative inquiry, recognizing migrants not just as subjects of study but as active participants and cultural innovators, engaged in the creation of social-symbolic work and new narratives of identity and inclusion. The need for such a research paradigm is driven by the complexities of modern migration, which require inclusive, adaptive approaches that capture the transformative potential of cultural diversity. Ultimately, this methodology contributes to a more inclusive and culturally enriched European society, bridging the gap between academic research and real-world impact.

Cultural institutions, including museums and community centres, play an essential role in this context by providing platforms for storytelling and cultural exchange. These spaces allow refugees to share their experiences and foster empathy among host communities. Initiatives such as participatory exhibitions and community art projects help bridge cultural divides and promote inclusivity (Wagensberg, 2019).

4. Exploring the Interconnection Between Migrants and Places

Insularity, often seen as geographical isolation, also reflects the social and cultural detachment experienced by many migrants and refugees, who live in liminal spaces—physically present in host countries but socially and culturally separate. The interconnection between these insular groups and their surroundings is complex, shaped by both the barriers they face and their resilience.

Migrants and refugees often find themselves as insular communities, both geographically and metaphorically formed by shared experiences of displacement. These communities create social and cultural enclaves within host cities, providing a sense of belonging and mutual support. In Poland, Ukrainian refugees and non-governmental organizations have formed tight-knit communities that help navigate challenges such as housing, education, and healthcare. Cities like Warsaw, Kraków, and Gdańsk have seen the rise of Ukrainian cultural hubs offering language services, cultural events, and community support such as:

- The Ukrainian Educational Hub in Warsaw supports the integration of Ukrainian refugees into local communities.
- The *Poland-Ukraine Institute Foundation* in Kraków assists Ukrainians in adapting and developing in their new environment. https://uainkrakow.pl/who-we-are/
- **Foundation Ukraine,** in Lower Silesia provides support for migrants through education, development, and cultural integration initiatives.

However, while creating parallel societies where refugees interact primarily with each other rather than the host population, these communities can also become insular, limiting broader social integration and reinforcing divisions. This phenomenon is common across Europe, where migrant communities often cluster in specific neighborhoods, reinforcing social and cultural boundaries.

The physical geography of insular living—such as refugee camps, overcrowded urban areas, and peripheral settlements—complicates integration. These settings are often marked by poor infrastructure, limited public services, and few social engagement opportunities. Refugees constantly negotiate their place within new countries while maintaining ties to their homelands.

Cultural insularity is another significant aspect, as migrant groups strive to preserve their heritage while adapting to new surroundings. For Ukrainian refugees in Poland, maintaining cultural practices, language, and traditions helps sustain their identity and retain a sense of home but also risks creating parallel societies that coexist with, rather than integrate into, the host culture, thus contribute to social separation rather than integration.

Insularity impacts how host societies perceive refugees, often breeding misunderstanding and prejudice fuelled by media portrayals that emphasize migrants' 'otherness.' Bridging these divides requires deliberate efforts to create inclusive spaces, foster dialogue, and bridge cultural gaps. For many refugees, cultural insularity means balancing the preservation of their heritage with the need to adapt. In Poland, Ukrainian refugees maintain their cultural practices, which helps them

5. TRAST's Role as a New Model

TRAST fills gaps in existing programs by integrating creative, participatory, and transmedia approaches that actively engage refugees and migrants as co-creators. Unlike traditional models, it emphasizes personal storytelling, collaborative art, and cultural production, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. TRAST seeks to redefine insular identities by combining traditional support with innovative cultural practices to build inclusive communities.

The model's reflective and autoethnographic elements capture personal narratives and cultural heritage, enriching both migrant integration and Europe's cultural landscape. This participatory approach enhances existing social and cultural programs, offering a more inclusive and transformative experience for migrants and refugees across Europe.

Conclusion

Migrants and refugees face multifaceted challenges that extend beyond immediate needs, highlighting the urgency for innovative, inclusive approaches to integration. Traditional methods often fall short in addressing the complex cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of migration. The evolving context demands new models that prioritize participatory, creative, and multimethod research practices, fostering co-creation and shared narratives of belonging. By embracing these approaches, we can develop more dynamic and adaptable solutions that empower migrants and strengthen communities, ultimately transforming migration from a challenge into an opportunity for societal growth.

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Islands

1. Need Analysis

The islands of Vis, Brač, and Hvar are witnessing a decline in their everyday life, leading to a reduction in population. With lower population density (Brač 35.6 people per km2, Hvar 37.1, Vis 40.1), these less populated islands are grappling with a rising trend of youth unemployment. This issue arises as a result of the exceptional inflexibility of the labor market and the entrenched traditional island way of life, occurring within socially and economically challenging circumstances. The aging population and emigration of young people further compound the islands' long-term economic and financial sustainability challenges. The diminishing and aging population not only affects the economic aspect but also leads to a decline in bearers of the island's identity and various components of cultural heritage passed down to younger generations.

The micro-social environment on the islands is marked by a 'disappearance of life', characterized by a lack of social and cultural content and resources tailored to the inhabitants. Young people, forming their identities under the influence of digital technologies and the island's unique lifestyle, find themselves in an unequal position compared to their mainland counterparts. Departures of young islanders are attributed to an environmentally and socially unfavorable situation where the dominant older population leans towards traditional living and one-dimensional mass tourism for quick profit.

The challenges faced by islands are multifaceted, encompassing tourism deregulation, physical and psychological isolation, economic inflexibility, unemployment, a dwindling youth population, unfair distribution of tourism-related benefits, and a decline in the fishing culture. This complex scenario is exacerbated by the tourism approach. It not only jeopardizes the island's cultural identity and impacts the identity dynamics of island communities, fostering a sense of lost community and identity, but also contradicts principles of sustainable development, hindering the inclusion of new products, quality enhancements, and market diversification.

In response to these challenges, there is a need for new perspectives and an inclusive model of cultural and artistic practices that can enrich the identity of these communities and individuals. This model should involve co-creating narratives to redefine the perception of insularity. It should transform islanders' memories, preserved in stories and objects, into a transmedia product and setting. Additionally, fostering digital cultural engagement, utilizing creative languages, and promoting participation in cultural activities can connect individuals with similar cultural identities, fostering a sense of belonging and rejuvenating the cultural vibrancy of these islands.

Building on this imperative for transformation, redefining perceptions of insularity requires acknowledging the prevailing notion of islands as isolated worlds with varied symbolic implications, encompassing both positive and negative connotations. Islands are often seen as peripheral, neglected, or unimportant areas, representing ecological and economic self-sufficiency, anachronistic spaces, places of solitude, objects of desire, perfect or utopian worlds, enclosed and conservative settings, refuges, areas with homogeneous communities, and embodiments of harmonious yet fragile socio-economic balance. The conventional idea of insularity tends to suggest anachronism or temporal delay, frequently exploited in the tourist branding of Mediterranean islands. Embracing these challenges prompts the exploration of new creative practices that can redefine the narrative of insularity, connecting it with the contemporary dynamics of global society and steering away from static stereotypes. (Jenić 2017, 101)

Contrary to the notion of islands as isolated worlds, considering them as dynamic nodes anticipates experimentation and future forms of social organization, encompassing modes of production, consumption, governance, and systems of exploitation. The current depiction of islands as dynamic, open, and bustling island-beehives during summer presents a paradox, as the media's promotion of islands as retreats attracts a growing number of tourists, transforming these locations into dialectical opposites of their initial symbolic representation. The prevalent archetype of insularity, portraying islands as isolated worlds, becomes evident only in winter.
This situation challenges the traditional concept of island heritage, urging a redefinition of islands as integral components of a broader landscape. In this redefined narrative, society, economy, art, and culture thrive together, shaping the identity of both the territory and the community, alongside diverse symbolic meanings associated with islands. For islands like Vis, it is imperative to delve into the manifestation of these two complementary archetypes of insularity, examining how everyday experiences and symbolic representations intersect to shape the perceptions that islanders hold of themselves, their island, and the surrounding world.
The paradoxical nature of islands, depicted as dynamic and bustling during summer while traditionally perceived as isolated worlds in winter, challenges the conventional understanding of island heritage. This necessitates a redefinition of islands

as integral components of a more expansive context, prompting a deliberate re-coding of the meanings associated with insularity and islands, considering them both as isolated worlds and dynamic nodes. In this reframed narrative, society, economy, art, and culture converge, fostering a harmonious identity for both the territory and its community. Diverse symbolic meanings linked to islands contribute to this enriched narrative. Specifically, for islands like Vis, exploring the manifestation of these two complementary archetypes of insularity – isolation and dynamism, becomes imperative. This exploration involves examining how everyday experiences and symbolic representations intersect, shaping the perceptions that islanders hold of themselves, their island, and the surrounding world.

There is a pressing need to transform the island into a dynamic and sustainable destination, avoiding the pitfalls of turning it into a hub for temporary migrations and exploitative tourist spectacles that threaten the island's identity, fragile ecosystems, and social solidarity, and hinder the emancipatory forms. The challenge lies in resisting the "familiar game of staged authenticity" and its utopian narratives, which can distort identity dynamics and contribute to a loss of community and a sense of belonging among island residents. This is particularly evident in the context of island gentrification, where the influx of visitors can displace locals and alter the island's character.
To address these challenges, efforts must be made to support the emancipation of island communities, strengthen cultural identity, and promote solidarity through progressive, sustainable and humane development policies. This involves bridging professional and popular, as well as national and local discourses about the island, encouraging residents to critically examine current practices and develop strategies for sustainable resource use and community resilience. The goal is to foster a balanced approach that preserves the island's unique identity and supports its long-term viability.

2. Political, Social, and Cultural Contexts Around Insular Groups

The symbolic meanings associated with the geographical term "island" are deeply embedded in political, social, and cultural contexts. These meanings evolve over time and are subject to intentional or unintentional manipulations. Tourist publications and advertisements play a significant role in shaping these meanings, portraying islands as serene havens detached from the modern world, shaping them into desirable tourist destinations. This intentional manipulation, often for commercial purposes, creates symbolic associations linked to the idea of insularity.

These manipulations and intentional changes in the metaphorical meanings of spatial concepts–are not solely driven by commercial motives or primarily benefit those residing outside the relevant areas - non-islanders.; they can also be influenced by political and cultural factors. The portrayal of islands as isolated worlds carries political implications, affecting national spatial policies that concern islands. The experience of *isolation* and the discourse *on* the isolation of Eastern Adriatic islands (especially the more distant ones such as Vis) is dual. On the one hand, there is the negative concept of isolation, partly coinciding with the way in which the islanders experience their own living condition, which has often been an object of scholarly research in the past decades and is one of the crucial issues in national spatial policies that concern islands (Jenić 2017, 101). In this respect, isolation is experienced as, and associated with, peripherality, loneliness, a limited range of life perspectives, lack of social events, neglect, oblivion, and so on.

Redefining the images of insularity can help initiate an emancipatory process where islanders and those experiencing insularity for various reasons move beyond being passive recipients or targets of external influences, policies, or cultural representations. This approach encourages them to become active participants, contributors, and shapers of their own narratives, policies, and cultural expressions, empowering them to reclaim control over their identity and the future of their communities.
On the flip side of negative associations with island isolation, positive associations are actively employed by the tourism industry, contributing to the cultural context around insular groups. Notions such as tranquility, idyllic rurality, authenticity, simplicity, genuineness, purity (of nature), naivety (of the local population), and utopian harmony (of the socio-ecological community) are utilized to attract tourists. Despite seeming contrary to the negative political discourse on island isolation, both perspectives ultimately contribute to the marginalization of islands as cultural and political subjects.

The historical context of Eastern Adriatic islands further illustrates the intertwined political, social, and cultural dimensions. The islands, serving as crucial intersection points in maritime trade routes and offering refuge to refugees, have a history deeply rooted in geopolitical changes. The perception of islands as dynamic nodes challenges prevailing notions of isolation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of insular groups with broader political and social landscapes, revealing that isolation was not their inherent characteristic. At the time of their annexation to multinational empires and modern national states, the Adriatic islands resembled dynamic nodes more than isolated worlds, with a strong connection to the

development of mainland traffic. From the Greek colonies of Issa on Vis or Pharos on Hvar to the demise of the Venetian Republic and the subjection of Dalmatia to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 19th century, many islands served as crucial intersection points in maritime trade routes and provided shelter to refugees from unsafe mainland regions. This historical context underscores that Eastern Adriatic island communities, much like island communities worldwide, owe their existence to migrations and migrants (Jenić 2017, 101).

In contemporary Adriatic Island life, the influx of summer tourists and seasonal workers shapes the experience of islands as both isolated and interactive spaces. The media's portrayal of islands as places of retreat during winter and dynamic, open, and bustling island-beehives in summer adds another layer to the cultural context. These representations influence the political and economic dynamics, affecting the identity of both the territory and the community.
Addressing the challenges faced by insular groups requires a comprehensive understanding of the political, social, and cultural contexts surrounding them. The intentional and unintentional manipulations of insularity meanings, coupled with historical and contemporary dynamics, shape the identity and perceptions of islanders, making it imperative to explore these contexts for informed research and policymaking.

3. Societal, Cultural, or Academic Context That Necessitates the Research

The societal, cultural, and academic context necessitating this research revolves around the intricate duality of the experience of isolation on Eastern Adriatic islands, with a particular focus on more distant ones like Vis. This duality is marked by contrasting perspectives, contributing to a nuanced understanding that spans scholarly, policy, and societal dimensions.

Scholarly research in the past decades has delved into the negative concept of isolation, aligning with islanders' lived experiences. This extensive academic exploration has identified isolation as a multifaceted phenomenon associated with restricted life perspectives, social deprivation, neglect, and a sense of oblivion. The scholarly discourse recognizes the significance of isolation as a crucial issue, shaping the landscape of national spatial policies dedicated to islands. Simultaneously, the societal discourse on island isolation is marked by a contrasting narrative actively employed by the tourism industry.

This intricate interplay between scholarly, societal, and cultural dimensions underscores the need for comprehensive approach to provide a foundation for understanding the complexities of insularity and islands' identities, drawing attention to the multifaceted challenges faced by insular communities. The societal and cultural dimensions illuminate the broader discourse surrounding islands, reflecting contrasting narratives that influence public perception and policy formulation.
It is imperative to navigate this dual discourse, bridging the insights with different societal and cultural narratives related to insularity. This holistic approach is needed to unravel the layers of insularity and insular identities, offering valuable insights for academia, policymakers, and the broader society engaged in shaping the narrative and future of these insular communities.

4. Exploring the Interconnection Between Insular Communities, People and Places

The island of Vis, along with its towns such as Vis and Komiza, embodies distinctive topologies within the Croatian, Adriatic, and broader Mediterranean geographical and historical contexts. Insular groups, intimately tied to these specific places, find their identities shaped by the unique physical features, topography, climate, and resources of the islands. The constant interplay between local and global dynamics challenges the conventional dichotomy of center and periphery, emphasizing the importance of an archipelagic paradigm for new creative practices.

Vis and Komiza have a rich history, witnessing prehistoric times, ancient cultures of Greece and Rome, the Renaissance, and 19th-century struggles. From the Austro-Hungarian Empire to conflicts involving Italy and England, these towns have experienced various cultural influences. The wave of emigration to America at the beginning of the 20th century and Vis being the only free territory in the Adriatic in 1944 further shaped their unique narrative. Despite having a small population and being geographically isolated, Komiza and Vis are urbanized places with a pronounced linguistic, cultural, economic, and social identity. This distinct identity provides the foundation for developing new symbolic value, where the constant

interplay of local and global dynamics is reflected in creative practices, annuling the dichotomy between center and periphery.

Culturally, islands in the Adriatic, including Vis and Komiza, significantly contribute to the broader regional identity. Socially, the interaction between people and their island environment fosters a profound sense of community and belonging. Close-knit island communities develop robust social ties, sharing common experiences, values, and challenges. Social identity becomes intricately linked to the collective history of the island, intertwined with shared narratives that evolve over time. The historical influences from various civilizations are interwoven into the traditions, customs, and cultural practices of the inhabitants.

The very topology of the location, with its historical, cultural, anthropological, and social idiosyncrasies, serves as the foundation for creative involvement and a conceptual frame for research into the formation of both island and people's identities. This connection between islands and places, particularly in Croatia, is multifaceted and deeply intertwined with people's identities. Islands, with their distinct physical features, geographical characteristics, and historical contexts, become integral components of the places they are part of, influencing daily lives, cultural practices, and economic activities within the island communities.

Island Vis, with its vast surrounding marine expanse, highlights a profound connection between people and places. The sea is more than just a geographical feature; it acts as both a barrier and a bridge, a mythical realm, an economic resource, and a life-sustaining force. It represents the island's dual nature as a place of isolation and connection, reflecting the deep and multifaceted relationship between the land and its inhabitants.

This connection is rooted in the island's unique topology, where historical, cultural, anthropological, and social elements are deeply intertwined with the everyday lives of its people. The sea, along with the land, influences the identities of the islanders, shaping their way of life, traditions, and sense of belonging. The island's history and cultural landscape are not just backdrops but active elements that continuously inform and shape the experiences of those who live there.

The relationship between people and places on Vis is a rich interplay that underscores how environment and identity are interconnected. The island's distinct characteristics create a unique setting that profoundly impacts the identities of its inhabitants, making the connection between the two inseparable and deeply personal.

5. Experience and Synergies with our Other Social Action Programmes

Our organization's current approach is deeply informed by the successes and lessons learned from two previous projects:

1. PAIC project funded from the European Union (grant agreement No 570584-CREA-1-2016-1-HR-CULT-COOP1
2. Programme: the museum exhibition as a tool for educational and social change in society

1. PAIC Project

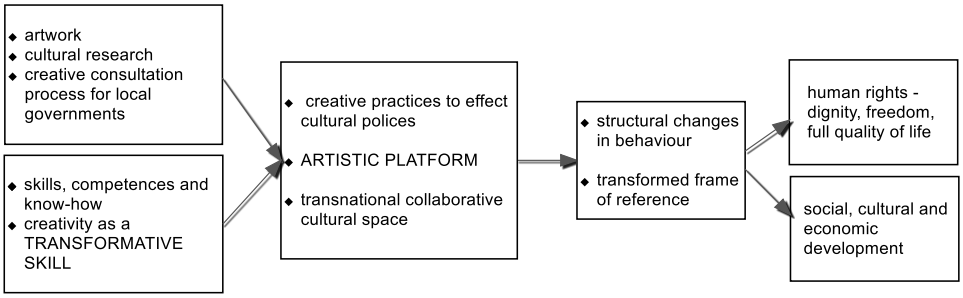
This initiative had a fundamental goal of actively engaging new audiences, especially those from marginalized communities, in cultural participation. The strategy employed encompassed the development of creative skills, competencies, and a critical understanding of cultural production through a variety of activities such as workshops, know-how sessions, and participatory events like roundtables and forums.

For PAIC, the design and methodology were intricately linked to the local context, drawing on international best practices in art activities. The resulting methodology now stands as a valuable resource for artists, creative practitioners, and culture venue staff involved in participatory settings with marginalized populations. The adaptability of creative workshops to diverse contexts, coupled with PAIC's networking activities, equipped artists with the necessary capacities for effective participatory artwork. This not only drove social actions but also mobilized communities for positive change.

Beyond its immediate scope, PAIC's outreach education program invited secondary stakeholders to contribute and disseminate project outputs to a broader audience. It established effective relationships with local communities, contributing significantly to their cultural life and social well-being. The impact was not only broad but also specific, addressing the unique needs of diverse communities facing issues such as isolation, social and cultural disconnection, and economic disadvantage.

The arts and culture interventions facilitated by PAIC provided a platform for individuals to articulate needs, explore solutions, and develop their potential, fostering both personal and communal change. This was achieved through a combination of information sharing, community visioning meetings, round tables, and the formation of partnerships between artists, cultural organizations, and community members.

PAIC, as a participatory, research-based, and action-oriented project, along with its role as a social, artistic, and community network, delved into innovative methods for cultural development and the nurturing of local social capital. The project harnessed socially engaged art strategies, intending not only to influence, interact, and transform social spaces and instigate social change in deprived communities but also to markedly enhance the capacity and visibility of these communities, along with the artists and institutions involved.



The chosen local areas, each with its unique characteristics, served as the backdrop for exchange, learning, artistic practice and cultural activities. Artists, working across different mediums and engaging with diverse and multicultural audiences, had the opportunity to blend levels of experience. This resulted in performative public events, exhibitions, videos, blogs, and other works grounded in dialogue, collaboration, and exchange. Various art and cultural forms, such as art installations, performances, and digital storytelling, were employed, contributing to a deeper understanding of diverse customs, landscapes, and historical heritage.

The creative participatory workshops yielded sustainable and shareable tools that encouraged individual creativity and raised aspirations within communities. These tools provided ongoing support for cultural development beyond the project's immediate timeline.

Furthermore, PAIC actively advocated for creative practices pertinent to future cultural policies in deprived communities. Deliverables, including a documentary film and an e-book featuring curriculum findings, case studies, and professional texts, were designed for a transnational audience. These materials documented the project's theoretical model, offering critical reflections on the process and outcomes. Broadly speaking, these outputs encouraged shared community initiatives aimed at reimagining specific contexts. They emphasized emotionally engaging activities to foster connections within the local environment, transcending age, cultural background, and circumstances.

2. Programme: the Museum Exhibition as a Tool for Educational and Social Change in Society

Drawing on the concepts of total museum (Wagensberg, 2005) and Gesamtkunstwerk as potential approaches to ensuring cultural sustainability of local communities, our programme explored what happens when culture works as a process and as a medium for making meanings and becomes the platform for societal change. This concept was investigated through the development and unveiling of the Hidden Museum,

This concept was explored through the development and presentation of *Hidden Museum*, an engaging participatory exhibition and curatorial initiative. The Hidden Museum employs a novel object-based, visitor-centred, storytelling epistemology, challenging visitors' memory and prior knowledge while stimulating their thoughts and reflections. Hosted in the historic steam-powered flour mill, Paromlin, in Zagreb, this initiative sought to pioneer new methods and tools aimed at elevating knowledge and fostering transformative skills among individuals. It envisioned the *Hidden Museum* as a thinking device, a starting point rather than the culmination of visitors' museum experience. The objective was for it to serve as an instrument for a common purpose, acting as a catalyst to trigger events and changes within the community, thereby contributing essential components to ensure the sustainability of cultural practices.

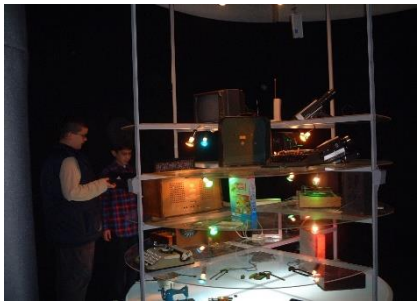
The Hidden Museum served as a high-impact social action, employing the museum exhibition as a tool to break through invisibility, raise awareness, install a sense of community responsibility. The exhibition was dynamically integrated "into the flow" (Groys, 2013), aligning with the flow of time and functioning as a stage for the course of events and a place where things happen, fostering an environment where meaningful interactions could occur. Citizens were actively engaged through an open system for collecting items for the museum exhibition and invited to participate in various stages of its development, including planning, research, mapping local history, creating exhibits, dolls, models, and engaging in promotional activities.

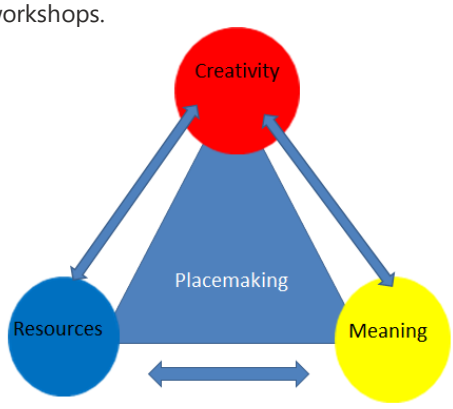
Prosvjed limača na Jelačićevu trgu

Mali sudionici ZKM-ove radionice Heureka prosvjedovali su jučer na Trgu bana Jelačića tražeći više slobodnog prostora u gradu, na kojem bi se mogli izraziti. Uz potporu Irene Sertić, voditeljice udruge i roditelja, djeca su svoje želje i zahtjeve napisala na transparentima.

Porukama "Iako smo mali, potrebe su nam velike" i "Zašto učenje ne bi bilo zabava" mali prosvjednici apelirali su na gradske vlasti da im ustupe više gradskog prostora. *(pb)*

Aligned with the concepts of both the total museum (Wagensberg, 2005) and Gesamtkunstwerk (total art- integration of different art forms), the exhibition embraced an interdisciplinary methodology, creating a totalizing experience that considered the building totality (Caulton, 1999) —people/visitors, ambiance, environment, feel, accessories, objects, exhibits, design, and setting. This holistic approach transformed the abandoned steam-powered flour mill into a visitor-friendly and child-friendly space, showcasing carefully curated pictures, images, photos, specially designed showcases, installations, and interactive exhibits like dolls, models, mobiles, puzzles, video films, and workshops.





Within the framework of the total museum concept (Wagensberg), the exhibition delved into contemporary societal needs by integrating heritage into present functions. Concepts like creative environments and the creative class were explored, emphasizing the museum's role in serving the current cultural landscape. The innovative museum activities, deeply rooted in local community involvement, fostered connections among community members, forming a "creative museum community." Through this, the exhibition demonstrated specific methods aimed at reshaping museum exhibitions to meet the demands of contemporary times.

The exhibition adopted a constructivist approach, emphasizing its transhistorical and communicative character. In a "constructivist "manner (Caulton, 1999), it oriented itself toward reality, knowledge, and identity shaped by diverse social and individual processes, offering different perspectives and representations of the world. Visitors did not merely append information to their existing knowledge; rather, they actively participated in forming their own patterns of knowledge and meaning, continuously reorganizing information through interactive experiences.

Applying the Constructivist method and drawing from recent research indicating that the most effectively retained information incorporates specific individual experiences, the exhibition positioned visitors in an active role of problem-solving and exploration. Rather than receiving pre-packaged or ready-made information, they were encouraged to build their knowledge from scratch, each person following their unique path.

The inclusion of secret spots, interactive activities, and culturally engaging elements guided visitors to explore the past experientially, fostering a dialogue between old and new in a captivating and emotional manner. This immersive approach created a dynamic tension between reality and simulation, offering an authentic yet simulated experience of meaning. Interactive installations and objects became emotional and intellectual companions, empowering visitors as integral parts and active contributors to the creation of historical meaning in a transcendent, temporal experience.

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Insular People and Communities in the Aftermath of the Earthquake

1. Need Analysis

On March 22 this year, Zagreb was hit by a devastating earthquake, the strongest in this area in the last 140 years, that damaged many cultural monuments leading to the complete destruction of not only the historical city center (Lower and Upper Town), but also the historic city districts. The largest number of damaged buildings that make up architectural and monumental heritage are located in the protected historical, architectural and urban area of The City of Zagreb, some of them no longer statically safe and thus in use. Dating back from the 14th century to the first half of the 19th century (neoclassic buildings) they constitute basic elements of the cultural historic context of the City and include iconic places and the most visible symbols of the city.

The area affected by the earthquake is determined by the natural, topographic, cultural, historical, and developmental features acquired during the creation and development of the city and forms the Historical Urban Entity of the City of Zagreb (an area of about 18 km^2) and represents the foundation of the cultural and historical identity of Zagreb and the people of Zagreb. It combines two successive development zones, distinguished by the different geometrical and morphological characteristics of their urban web. Out of a total of 913 protected cultural assets in the City, the largest part is located in this area.

People and communities in the aftermath of the earthquake that face challenges such as social isolation and exclusion from the wider society, uncertainty, and social vulnerability caused by the traumatic events that led to a break in individual stories and local communities and lack of a cohesive and inclusive rehabilitation plan. Displacement from their homes has made it difficult for many citizens to establish social connections and get support from their families. Additionally, they lack the necessary social and cultural resources to return to normal life and social and cultural spaces and programs that establish a social connection. The inefficiency of national and local authorities and the prevailing engineering-focused rhetoric further complicate and disable the socially sensitive recovery process, achieving little resonance among citizens and concealing the disaster's real social and cultural origins. To achieve post-earthquake recovery and sustainable reconstruction, it is essential to keep citizens actively involved in sharing their experiences, stories, and perspectives, maintain social relationships and cohesion, and combat social isolation. To be successful, the recovery process should consider social and cultural components such as memories, history, interpretations, and access to places and products necessary for cultural and social life. It also requires preserving social and cultural values that help deal with the loss of personal and collective identity and the emotional connection to a sense of place. To respond appropriately to these challenges, the focus must shift from the current top-down approach that builds distrust between earthquake-stricken people, benefactors, and the government, to an inclusive approach that actively involves citizens in the process of post-disaster recovery.

This area with all its cultural assets is a source of benefit to local economies, particularly through tourism, but with a number of significant cultural institutions, it also makes a significant contribution to community life through housing, education, and job. It creates a unique mood associated with memory value and enables the creation of narratives for cultural tourism and experience significance. With a tendency to nurture traditional arts and crafts, it can be a potent driver for community action, community life, and community engagement in cultural tourism.

Further, keeping an attractive heritage environment contributes to the quality of life of the inhabitants by improving the atmosphere and assists in attracting external investment as well as maintaining existing businesses of all types, not just tourism-related.

All of these cultural assets create a cultural and historic urban context with its setting and historic patterns, spatial elements, and social and economic structure whose value should be preserved in order to maintain and improve its identity against harmful and destructive effects. They form the historical urban entity that embodies aesthetic, historic, social, and spiritual values important for the present and future generations of Zagreb citizens and have a very positive influence on many aspects of the way their community develops.

Urgent efforts are required to ensure that heritage preservation remains a focal point in the post-disaster reconstruction, contributing to the resilience of communities and sustaining the cultural legacy for future generations

2. Political, Social, and Cultural Contexts

The devastating earthquake that struck Zagreb on March 22 of this year has left an indelible mark on the historical, cultural, and architectural fabric of the city. The affected area, comprising the Historical Urban Entity of the City of Zagreb, has suffered significant damage to its architectural and monumental heritage, ranging from medieval structures dating back to the 14th century to neoclassical buildings from the first half of the 19th century. The earthquake on March 22 caused extensive damage to the historical city center, including the Upper and Lower Towns of Zagreb. The devastation extended to iconic structures, churches, cultural monuments, and museums, many of which fall under the first category of protection for cultural monuments in Croatia. Iconic landmarks such as St. Mark's Church, St. Stephen's Cathedral, Dolac Market, Ban Jelačić Square, and the "horseshoe park" with its surrounding representative facades have been severely impacted.

This area, covering approximately 18 km^2, is not just a collection of buildings; it represents the foundation of the cultural and historical identity of Zagreb and its people. The affected heritage combines the medieval charm of the town with the structured urbanism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Out of a total of 913 protected cultural assets in the city, a significant portion is located in this area, forming a cultural and historic urban context with aesthetic, historic, social, and spiritual values crucial for the present and future generations of Zagreb citizens.

The heritage in this region is not only a source of economic benefit through tourism but plays a pivotal role in community life, contributing to housing, education, and job creation in the cultural and heritage sectors. The earthquake has not only damaged physical structures but has also jeopardized the unique atmosphere, memory value, and narratives associated with these cultural assets. The preservation of this heritage is essential for maintaining the quality of life for the inhabitants and attracting external investments, emphasizing its irreplaceable role in the identity and development of Zagreb's community.

The research is of paramount relevance within the domain of cultural heritage and citizens' identities, specifically focusing on the profound impact of the earthquake on both the city of Zagreb and, crucially, the identities of its citizens. The affected area, rich with historical landmarks and cultural monuments, forms the cornerstone of Zagreb's cultural and historical identity. Beyond physical structures, the significance encompasses collective memory, traditions, and citizens' sense of belonging, including aesthetic, historic, social, and spiritual values important for present and future generations.

Citizens' identities are intricately woven into the city's cultural heritage, extending beyond architectural losses to symbols of shared history, community pride, and personal memories. It is crucial to delve into the emotional and cultural dimensions of this context, emphasizing the importance of public understanding and involvement in heritage conservation matters. Recognizing the role of public participation in the preservation process, it is possible to achieve long-term sustainability and build community commitment.

Building on this foundation, future activities in post-earthquake recovery should align with established conservation guidelines, acts, and charters that underscore the importance of community participation in the process of identifying values and managing heritage areas. Effective community involvement not only facilitates long-term sustainability but also fosters community commitment and ongoing engagement in the program, promoting the concept of shared responsibility. Public participation in the context of heritage conservation is crucial, providing valuable input, sharing knowledge, assisting in decision-making, and broadening the understanding of the value of heritage. This emphasis on community involvement strengthens the overall framework for preserving and safeguarding Zagreb's cultural heritage, acknowledging the indispensable role of citizens in shaping the destiny of their shared cultural legacy.

However, the mission in the cultural field often clashes with economic, social, or political interests, potentially transforming historical assets or compromising their role as witnesses to the culture of the past and mediums for disseminating contemporary culture. Imposed restrictions on use, changing functions, or neglecting historical assets could hinder sustainability objectives and increase the risk of decay or loss of value. In this context, finding strategies and tools that foster citizen and stakeholder involvement becomes even more crucial, especially in processes of re-use, redevelopment, and regeneration of cultural heritage.

Cities nowadays are increasingly rich in cultural heritage, defined as a moment of "accumulation of the past" by Harrison. Managing such assets is fundamental to prevent disuse from compromising their existence. Solutions must reconcile the economic and social needs of local communities. Citizen participation and involvement have gained importance in Europe, evident in initiatives at the international level, such as the expansion of the WHC - World Heritage Convention's objectives in 2007 to include the "community" point in the Five "Cs" system: credibility, conservation, constructive capacity, communication, and community. This underscores how the revitalization of cultural heritage can only be successful if the identification and recognition of local communities as key players are considered in the wealth enhancement process.

A study exploring the challenges of returning to normalcy in rural earthquake-stricken areas of Iran identified six main concepts related to participants' main concerns: social vulnerability, lack of a comprehensive rehabilitation plan, ignorance of local social capital, waste of assets, and psychological problems (Alipour et al. 2014). Social vulnerabilities were identified as: 1) inefficiency of local non-governmental social institutions, 2) lack of public awareness, and 3) social problems existing before the earthquake ("PLOS Currents Disasters 2021"). The findings highlighted that disasters are intertwined with everyday life and that the severity of damages and consequences depends on various factors, including the socioeconomic vulnerability of the affected population. Participants' experiences indicated that natural events are not the only obstacles to returning to normal life; direct and indirect factors influence the speed and quality of this process. Interventions from local and creative communities aimed at the valorisation and revitalization of cultural and historical heritage not only rediscover the value of the assets but also contribute to the strengthening of social, touristic, cultural, and economic values.

The societal, cultural, and academic contexts of post-earthquake recovery emphasize the importance of heritage as more than just a physical asset; it represents a living connection to the past, crucial for community identity and resilience. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the cultural heritage of Zagreb—encompassing artistic, historical, and architectural significance—serves as a symbol of the city's endurance and its role within the broader European context. Recovery efforts must address not only structural repairs but also the preservation of collective memory, which ties local heritage to a larger Central European narrative.

The recovery process offers a unique opportunity to re-engage citizens in safeguarding their cultural legacy, enhancing social cohesion, and reinforcing a shared responsibility towards heritage conservation. Academically, the focus is on interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate historical research, cultural studies, and community engagement to foster a deeper understanding of how heritage preservation can contribute to social and cultural renewal. This comprehensive recovery strategy underlines the importance of integrating cultural values into post-disaster rebuilding, recognizing heritage as a key element of community resilience and future sustainability, highlighting the unique significance of the affected area not only as a local Croatian cultural value but as a vital part of the common heritage of Central Europe. The historical layers, from medieval to modern times, showcase Zagreb's pivotal role in European history, cultural exchange, and its significant contribution to the broader European cultural landscape.

4. The Interconnection Between Citizens and Places

The greatest damage occurred in the central city area, which includes the oldest urban sites with historical suburbs—the Upper Town, Kaptol, and Gradec, featuring 17th and 18th-century buildings—and the 19th-century urban unit of the Lower Town. These areas, with landscapes that complement the city's historical and spatial framework, form a distinct historical, urban, and architectural entity integral to Zagreb's identity.

Significant damage was done to churches and cultural monuments belonging to the first category of protected cultural monuments in Croatia, such as the Catholic Cathedral in Zagreb, the Orthodox Cathedral Church, and the Mirogoj Park Cemetery, known for its neo-Renaissance arcades and 20 domes. Mirogoj, one of the largest projects in European historicism, serves as a gallery for works by Croatian painters, sculptors, and craftsmen and is regarded as one of Europe's most beautiful cemeteries due to its artistic and architectural value and historical significance.

Many museums holding collections of nationally significant protected cultural goods were also heavily damaged. The Museum of Arts and Crafts suffered severe damage to both its historicist building and the artworks it houses, dating from the 13th century onwards. The 140-year-old building of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, along with its library, was also impacted. The baroque palace that houses the Croatian History Museum, built at the end of the 18th century, was badly damaged. The main building of the Faculty of Law at the University of Zagreb, the oldest continually-operating law

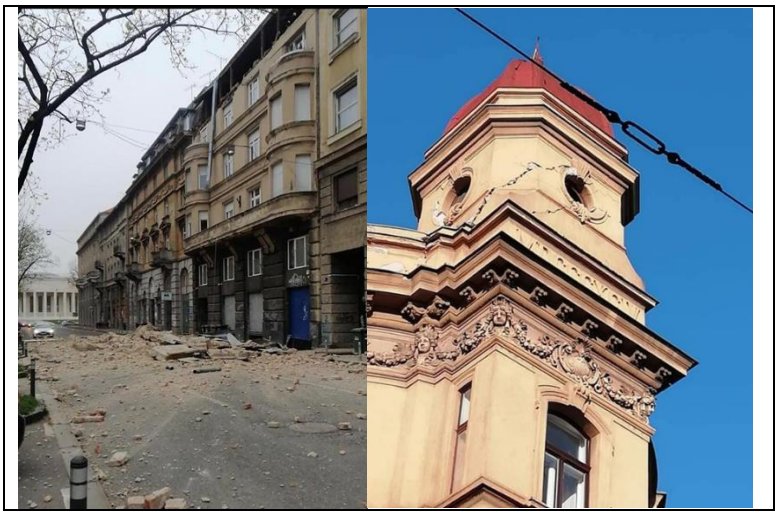
school in Croatia and Southeast Europe, also suffered structural damage, rendering it unsafe. This building, an architectural and urban monument, is located on one of the most representative squares in the city's 19th-century urban landscape.

Other severely damaged institutions include the School of Applied Arts and Design, the Croatian Museum of School, the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, the Modern Gallery, the Art Pavilion in Zagreb, the Croatian Music Institute, and the Croatian Conservation Institute, where over five hundred works of art are currently being restored. Theatres and hundreds of other old buildings in Zagreb's historic center, representing valuable cultural heritage, also need restoration to preserve the city's legacy. Damage to architectural ornaments, turrets, decorative domes, and structural elements such as walls, ceilings, and stairways has been widespread. Many houses, public buildings, and churches are so severely damaged that they are no longer usable, and their restoration is beyond current available means.

School of Applied Arts and Design

Museum of Arts and Crafts

Art Pavilion in Zagreb



The response to the earthquake has been fraught with uncertainties, hesitations, and conflicting opinions regarding damage assessment and redevelopment models for the city. A major challenge lies in the absence of clear strategic procedures, financial models, and legislative frameworks for post-earthquake recovery and multidisciplinary approach to urban crisis management. There is also a critical need to preserve the urban unity and cultural monuments of Zagreb within any redevelopment strategy. Currently, no specific building codes, regulations, awareness, or capabilities exist at the local or national level to ensure the rehabilitation and protection of cultural heritage buildings after an earthquake and keep the historical urban units of Zagreb intact. These urban units, with their unique architectural features and cultural significance, are not just remnants of the past but are essential to the city's identity. They reflect the continuity of community life, the historical narrative, and the collective memory of its residents. Preserving these areas is crucial not only for maintaining the aesthetic and historical fabric of Zagreb but also for sustaining the city's distinctive character, which is deeply intertwined with its urban heritage. Protecting and revitalizing these historical urban units is, therefore, a fundamental step in safeguarding the identity of Zagreb, ensuring that its rich cultural legacy continues to define and inspire future generations.

Unfortunately, current activities and legal proposals overlook the fundamental principles of reconstruction—urban and spatial planning, along with the protection and restoration of cultural heritage. Instead, construction lobbies are pushing for the demolition of damaged buildings within protected historic, architectural, and urban areas of Zagreb, advocating for new construction that threatens to compromise the city's historical identity and integrity. This approach is further underscored by frequent reports of incompetence and mismanagement in handling the earthquake-damaged heritage.

A sociological study conducted as part of the Program for the Complete Restoration of the Historic Center of Zagreb reveals widespread public resistance to drastic changes. Most respondents strongly oppose transforming the city center into a predominantly tourist-business zone and reject the processes of tourism-driven commercialization and "apartmentization" of the historic center. While the majority of respondents are against demolishing most old buildings, about one-fifth still support such measures. For comprehensive urban renewal, respondents emphasize the need for professional input and strict adherence to urban planning regulations and laws to ensure the long-term and widely accepted preservation of Zagreb's historic center.

Despite the severe impact, Zagreb's crisis has not captured the attention of either Croatian or international communities. It is crucial to remember that the heritage of Zagreb holds immense value for its residents, directly impacting their quality of life and preserving the city's unique character.

The greatest threat to Zagreb's cultural identity arises from viewing the post-earthquake situation as an opportunity for economic development focused on short-term, economically viable functions such as entertainment and tourism. This approach risks undermining the city's historical character and displacing residents and traditional activities, such as residence, trade, and services. Such a shift could degrade the urban landscape, corrode the city's distinctive features, and erode its social and cultural identity. In turn, this compromises the quality of life for residents and threatens to destroy Zagreb's essence as Croatia's capital, known for its Central European characteristics, unique architecture, promenades, and parks—all integral elements of European cultural heritage.

The pressure to repurpose historic buildings for incompatible new uses further endangers the city's urban identity and character. The absence of specific building codes, combined with proposals favouring demolition and new constructions, poses a significant risk of irreversible damage to Zagreb's cultural and architectural heritage. Additionally, the neglect of proper maintenance and the loss of traditional knowledge have heightened the vulnerability of these cultural heritage assets. The earthquake has not only inflicted direct material damage but has also jeopardized the intangible cultural heritage embedded in the narratives, traditions, and memories linked to the affected structures.

Additionally, there is a danger that buildings will be repurposed in ways that disregard their cultural significance, exposing them to incompatible functions that diminish their historic value. High renovation costs, difficulties in repairs, lack of financial assistance, noise, increased commercial activities, traffic, and lack of parking further drive residents away from the historic center. When returning buildings to their original use is no longer feasible, new uses must be carefully chosen to preserve the character and quality of the structures, limiting interventions to the absolute minimum.

To restore life to the currently paralyzed city, the comprehensive restoration and revitalization of Zagreb's protected Spatial Cultural-Historical Unit are essential. This includes not only individual damaged objects—both movable and immovable cultural properties—but also the revitalization of urban areas and the broader city environment. This approach aims to maintain Zagreb's character, contribute to sustainable development, and enhance community resilience and ongoing and future cultural heritage management.

A review of the literature reveals that the protection of cultural heritage from natural disasters is insufficiently addressed in EU and national legislation, by-laws, and other official documents. Politicians and governments often marginalize cultural heritage protection, and its significance is rarely well articulated, receiving little media support. Thus, a dedicated platform is needed to raise awareness among politicians, governments, citizens, and business communities about the importance of historic buildings, the unique vulnerabilities of cultural heritage to natural hazards, and the techniques and measures available to mitigate earthquake impacts. This effort is crucial to preventing the permanent loss of heritage following crises like earthquakes, which leave lasting marks on landscapes, buildings, and the lives of those affected.

5. Experience and Synergies with Other Social Action Programmes

On the initiative of ECOVAST's Croatian section, various professional organizations, associations, and institutions have collectively appealed for the protection and preservation of cultural heritage in earthquake-affected areas. Addressed to the Government, relevant ministries, and impacted cities and municipalities, the signatories advocate for a comprehensive, inclusive, and scientifically based approach to reconstruction.

Highlighting past inadequacies in post-war recovery, the signatories emphasize the need for a holistic recovery strategy after disasters, incorporating multi- and interdisciplinary teamwork. They view the earthquake's challenges as an opportunity to enhance the quality of life in towns, suggesting strategic, sustainable approaches to cultural heritage revitalization.

Key recommendations include:

1. Developing sustainable, culturally sensitive recovery models respecting local specificities and residents' ways of life.

2. Embracing multi- and interdisciplinary approaches, combining top-down and bottom-up strategies involving both experts and residents.
3. Respecting cultural, historical, geographical, architectural, urban, and ambient values during renovation.
4. Recognizing that the purpose of revitalization isn't always complete historical reconstruction but finding solutions that integrate historical contents, signs, and symbols into the cultural landscape, serving as inspiration for creating new values (Godeč 2021).

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Bektashi religious group

1. Need Analysis

The Bektashi religious group belongs to the Bektashi dervish order, a liberal form of Islam focused on Islamic spirituality, ritualism, asceticism, and esotericism. They face cohabitation challenges with other societal groups, including social isolation, group anonymity, and exclusion due to their non-compliance with specific Sharia rules and interpretations of Islam compared to Sunni Muslims, their unique culture that deviates from the dominant one in the communities where they live, and distinctive beliefs and practices, such as the veneration of saints, the use of music and dance in worship, the importance of mystical experiences, and a rejection of rigid hierarchies. These distinctions lead to tensions and misunderstandings, sometimes resulting in their persecution as heretics by the Sunni Muslim majority.

The Bektashi Order emphasizes values such as equality, human rights, tolerance towards people of different religious and cultural backgrounds, social justice, and participatory decision-making, setting them apart from many other religious groups. Promoting Bektashi culture through participatory projects and highlighting these values as their contribution to democratic societies can foster respect, acceptance, and understanding. This approach can lead to a greater appreciation of their unique traditions, customs, and practices, and recognize Bektashis as an integral part of the local community.

There is also a pressing need to empower Bektashi community members by providing platforms for them to share their culture with others, opening new avenues for self-expression and collaboration. This empowerment helps break down mental barriers that inhibit their social recognition and emancipation. Bektashis need new tools to define and defend their convictions, build self-confidence and pride within the community, gain respect, and affirm their identity within both the local and broader contexts.

In North Macedonia, the Bektashis face similar challenges, such as social isolation, exclusion, and issues related to coexistence with other groups in society. Presenting themselves as defenders of human rights, gender equality, and universal values of tolerance, love, and respect for all people regardless of race, religion, or nationality, they are often misunderstood and marginalized by other Muslims. They need better means of self-expression and opportunities to integrate their identities into the broader social fabric. Without adequate support from local or national communities, Bektashis continue to struggle with recognition and the right to freely express their religious identity.

Bektashis exhibit unique practices such as the drinking of alcohol, which, according to dervishes, "reveals a man's true character," and they do not impose segregation between men and women or require women to wear veils. Their tekkes differ from traditional mosques as they lack minarets, and the Bektashi babas are buried within them. Like many Sufis, the Bektashis were quite lax in observing daily Muslim laws, and women as well as men, took part in ritual wine drinking and dancing during devotional ceremonies. The Bektashis in the Balkans adapted such Christian practices as the ritual sharing of bread and the confession of sins. Bektashi mystical writings made a rich contribution to Sufi poetry (Bektashi, Encyclopaedia Britannica). Their faith has always valued exchange and interaction with nearby religious communities. Their tolerance, however, has not shielded them from persecution; they have faced pressure from various overlords—Christian, Muslim, and atheist—throughout history.

Being a minority within a minority

The Bektashi Order, or Bektashiyyah, is an order of Sufi mystics that, according to tradition, was founded by Ḥājjī Bektāsh Walī of Khorāsān. The order formed in the 16th century in Anatolia (modern Turkey), adopting elements from the Shīʿite sect, including the veneration of ʿAlī, the fourth successor of the Prophet Muhammad. The order spread throughout the Ottoman Balkans, particularly in Albania. The current demographic of global Muslims is approximately 90% Sunni and 10% Shia, with Bektashis being a small, distinct minority among the latter. Therefore, for many years, the Alevis, adhering to Bektashi traditions, lived secluded lives due to fears of persecution, particularly in Sunni-dominated environments. Their insularity persisted as a strategy for survival; socializing beyond their group was rare as well as venturing beyond their villages, and Bektashi identity was kept hidden (Magra, 2023). This historical backdrop highlights the ongoing need for recognition and broader social engagement to overcome centuries of marginalization.

2. Political, Social, Historical and Cultural Contexts

The Bektashi Order is an order of Sufi mystics—one of many Sufi orders within Islam, with connections primarily to Shia traditions, though historically influenced by Sunni contexts as well.

Sufism

Sufism, existing within both Sunni and Shia Islam, is not a distinct sect but rather a method of approaching and understandi ng the religion. Sufism strives to take the regular practice of the religion to the "supererogatory level" through obligatory religious duties while striving for a deeper, spiritual connection with the Divine. This approach involves delving into the soul to access the domain of the pure, unbound spirit that connects with the Divinity.

In Sufism, the concept of the Holy Spirit (Arabic: روح القدس, ruh al-qudus) is mentioned in the Quran as an agent of divine action or communication. In Sufism, rūḥ (Arabic: روح; plural arwah) refers to a person's immortal, essential self—the "spirit" or "soul." Although the Quran does not explicitly describe rūḥ as the immortal self, it is often portrayed as animating inanimate matter or as a metaphorical being, such as an angel.

Sufis are characterized by their ascetic practices and a strong emphasis on dhikr (remembrance of God). This practice, often called Dhikr-e-Qulb (invocation of Allah within the heartbeats), involves repeating phrases or prayers, often performed after formal prayers. It plays a central role in Sufi Islam, and each Sufi order typically adopts a specific dhikr, accompanied by particular postures, breathing techniques, and movements. Dhikr can be performed alone or in groups, it can be counted on a set of prayer beads or through the fingers of the hand, and is considered one of the best ways to glorify the oneness of God. A person who recites the Dhikr is called a Dhakir, literally "he who remembers." The content of the prayers includes the names of God, or a dua (prayer of supplication). They believe dhikr is one of the best ways to enter the higher level of Heaven and to glorify the "unification or oneness of God."

Sufi whirling, a form of physically active meditation, is still practiced by the Sufi Dervishes of the Mevlevi order, famously known as the "whirling dervishes." This practice involves reciting devotional Islamic prayers while dancing and spinning in circles to reach a state of spiritual ecstasy ("ecstatic trances"). It symbolizes the abandonment of the self, ego, or personal desires through the acts of listening to music, focusing on God, and spinning in repetitive circles, akin to the planets orbiting the sun, as a means of seeking spiritual perfection.

Sufi orders and the Bektashi order

Common Foundation in Sufism: Sufi orders, including the Bektashi order, are branches of Islamic mysticism that seek to deepen the practitioner's relationship with God through meditation, prayer (dhikr), and ascetic practices. They are not separate sects of Islam but represent a method or path (tariqa) for spiritually understanding and practicing Islam beyond the legalistic and ritualistic aspects found in mainstream Sunni and Shia Islam.

Tariqa (Spiritual Path): Both Sufi orders and the Bektashi order operate within the concept of a *tariqa*, which is a spiritual path or brotherhood that guides its followers towards a closer relationship with God. Each order, including the Bektashi, has its own spiritual leaders (like sheikhs, babas, or murshids), rituals, and traditions but all emphasize personal spiritual growth and enlightenment.

Distinct Characteristics of the Bektashi Order: The Bektashi order is distinct among Sufi orders due to its unique blend of Islamic, Christian, and other spiritual traditions. While sharing common Sufi practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God), meditation, and the pursuit of divine truth (haqiqa), Bektashis also incorporate elements from Shia Islam, such as the veneration of Ali and the Twelve Imams. They are known for their inclusive approach, allowing participation of both men and women, tolerance towards other religions, and less strict observance of Islamic law compared to other Sufi orders.

Syncretism and Cultural Influences: Bektashism, more than many other Sufi orders, reflects syncretism, blending Islamic mysticism with pre-Islamic and non-Islamic elements, including shamanism, Christianity, and local traditions from the regions where they are present (such as the Balkans). This syncretic nature differentiates them from more orthodox Sufi orders and sometimes places them at odds with mainstream Islamic interpretations.

Shared Spiritual Goals but Diverse Expressions: While the Bektashi order shares the spiritual goals of other Sufi orders—seeking closeness to God, achieving inner peace, and promoting love and tolerance—their specific practices, rituals, and theological interpretations set them apart. They reflect the diversity within Sufism, which includes a wide range of expressions from conservative to liberal, and from strictly Sunni to heavily influenced by Shia and other mystical traditions.

Sufism - History

Historically, Sufi orders were integral to Sunni Islam for the first five centuries, though certain strands developed within Shia Islam, particularly during the Safavid conversion of Iran to Shia Islam—a process that took place roughly over the 16th through 18th centuries and turned Iran (Persia), which previously had a Sunni majority, into the spiritual bastion of Shia

Islam. The Safavid dynasty's (one of the most significant ruling dynasties of Iran from 1501 to 1736) forced conversions significantly reshaped Iran, establishing Shia Islam as the dominant faith and intensifying hostility with Sunni neighbors like the Ottoman Empire. This period marked a pivotal turning point in the history of Islam.

Sufism became an influential part of Islamic civilization, permeating nearly all major aspects of Sunni Islamic life across regions from India to the Balkans and Africa. It played a key role in the spread of Islam, contributing to the development of Islamic cultures, especially in Asia and Africa. Between the 13th and 16th centuries, Sufism fostered a flourishing intellectual culture, creating lodges that served as gathering places for Sufi adepts, hospices for Sufi travellers, and centres of knowledge and charity for a novice committed to spiritual enlightenment, and Islamic students. No important domain in the civilization of Islam remained unaffected by Sufism in this period.

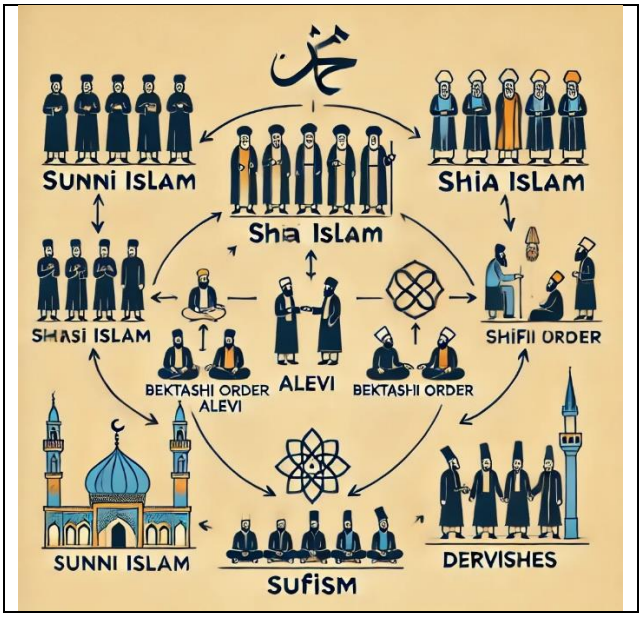
However, the 20th century brought challenges as Sufi orders faced criticism from Islamic reformers, nationalists, and socialist movements for fostering superstition, resisting modern intellectual attitudes, and resisting progressive reforms. Ideological attacks on Sufism were reinforced by agrarian and educational reforms, as well as new forms of taxation, which were instituted by Westernizing national governments, undermining the economic foundations of Sufi orders. Despite economic and ideological pressures, Sufism persisted, continuing to play a significant role in the Muslim world and expanding into Muslim-minority contexts. Its inclusive approach to Islamic identity has made Sufism particularly well-suited for contexts characterized by religious pluralism and diverse and secular environments.

Sufis strive for ihsan (perfection of worship), which means showing one's inner faith (iman) through actions rooted in social responsibility**.** They view Muhammad as al-Insān al-Kāmil ("the complete person") and regard him as the ultimate spiritual guide, embodying the attributes of Absolute Reality. Tariqas, or Sufi orders, provide structured paths for spiritual development, meeting in designated spaces like zawiyas, khanqahs, or tekkes for retreat and character reformation. A tariqa has a murshid (guide) who plays the role of leader or spiritual director. The members or followers of a tariqa are known as muridin (singular murid), meaning "desirous", viz. "desiring the knowledge of God and loving God" (also called a faqir).

The Bektashi order

The Bektashi, an Islamic mystical monastic order, is one of many Sufi orders, united with them through a shared Sufi philosophy but distinguished by its unique rituals, syncretic beliefs, and historical development, reflecting the broad diversity within the Sufi tradition. The Bektashis follow the tariqa, emphasizing Sharia (law), Tariqa (the mystical path), Haqiqa (truth), and Ma'rifa (knowledge). Life in the Bektashi tekke mirrors monastic life in Orthodox monasteries, with celibacy observed by higher-ranking dignitaries. The center of Bektashism was in Turkey until 1925 when Kemal Ataturk closed all tekkes, leading the order to relocate to Albania.

The principles of Bektashism align with broader Islamic teachings, particularly the esoteric dimensions of Sufism that emphasize self-purification and divine knowledge, while maintaining respect for Sharia laws. However, the mystical nature of Bektashism has often been underestimated. Some scholars view it as tolerant of Islam but inattentive to specific regulations and rituals, highlighting its focus on the spiritual aspects rather than outward practices like regular prayer times (Asghari, 2010). Others have framed Bektashism as a modern, progressive sect, with tolerance toward women and civil society values, emphasizing values such as gender equality, secular governance, and universal education: “Bektashis, because of their heterodox Sufi practices as well as their dedication to contemporary principles... are naturally in the front line defending a freedom-loving Islam against radicalism and terrorism” (Asghari, 2010).



The Bektashi order - History

The Bektashi Order gained political significance in the 15th century when it dominated the Janissaries, the elite Ottoman military corps. Although their influence declined after the

Janissaries were disbanded in 1826, the Bektashis experienced a revival through the rebuilding of monasteries and a literary resurgence in Turkey and Albania. By the 18th century, the number of Bektashis and their tekkes had risen considerably in the Balkans, marking the order's expansion despite being viewed as radical compared to orthodox Sunni and Shia Islam.

In 1925, during Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's revolution, which established the secular Republic of Turkey and ended the Ottoman Caliphate, all Sufi orders were officially banned. As a result, Bektashi tekkes were closed, and their dervishes were exiled. The Bektashi community's headquarters were moved from Hacıbektas in central Anatolia to Tirana, Albania. Despite these setbacks, the order established its new center in Tirana in 1929 with support from King Zog I after being banned in Turkey.

The challenges continued as religion was banned in Albania in 1967 under Enver Hoxha's communist regime, which declared the country atheist. During this period, Bektashi leaders, like other religious figures, faced imprisonment, torture, and hard labor. Nevertheless, Bektashi practices persisted among communities in Turkey, the Balkans, and the United States and were revived in Albania following the fall of communism in the early 1990s.

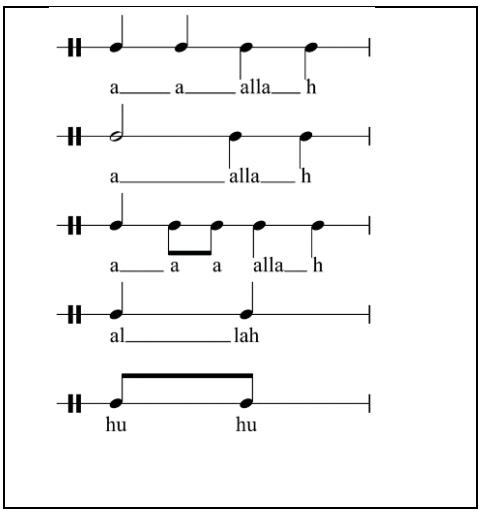
Although the ban on religion was lifted in 1990, the Bektashis continue to face challenges, particularly in North Macedonia, where their religious practices are increasingly threatened by Sunni Muslim influence. For example, the 16th-century tekke in Tetovo was converted into a mosque, with modifications such as the addition of a minaret and the enforcement of worship segregation. In response, the Bektashi community has sought legal recourse through the European Court of Human Rights and the United Nations in a bid to protect their religious heritage.

Historically, the Bektashi order, like other Sufi orders, faced periods of persecution, especially during times when mystical practices were viewed with suspicion or as heretical by more orthodox Muslim authorities. , Christians accusing them of "sheep stealing," and political regimes suspicious of their fiercely independent thinking (Introvigne, "A Visit to the Eight Dedebaba of the Bektashis"). During the Ottoman Empire, the Bektashis held significant influence through their association with the Janissaries, an elite military corps, but were later suppressed when the Janissaries were disbanded. In modern times, Sufi orders, including the Bektashis, were banned in Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular reforms, prompting the Bektashis to relocate their headquarters to Albania.

Alevi-Bektashi

The term 'Alevi-Bektashi' encompasses various heterodox communities spread across Anatolia, the Balkans, and beyond, distinguished by their ethnic and linguistic diversity (Ignatov, 2008). Despite internal differences, Alevis and Bektashis are generally seen as part of a shared cultural tradition. Historically, Alevis lived in rural, isolated areas, while Bektashis were centered in urban environments. Today, the term 'Alevi' is primarily used in Turkey, while 'Bektashi' is more common in the Balkans. Both groups value nature, beauty, music, and poetry as integral aspects of their spiritual expression.

Both the Alevi and Bektashi orders honor Haji Bektash Veli, an Islamic mystic and philosopher from the Khorasan province, as their spiritual guide and patron saint. Khorasan, historically home to Turkic tribes, influenced Bektashi practices with elements from shamanistic, Buddhist, Christian, and Neoplatonic traditions. As Bektashism spread to the Balkans, it continued to incorporate various influences, emphasizing direct religious experiences over rigid Islamic practices and often conducting rituals without intermediaries (Doja, 2008).



Alevi-Bektashi religious culture is marked by its syncretism, blending centuries-old practices and teachings into a tradition that respects all forms of nature, both animate and inanimate. Despite often being marginalized, Alevis and Bektashis have shown resilience, preserving their spiritual heritage in diverse and challenging socio-political environments. Unlike Sunni Muslims, who believe they approach God throughout their lives and only fully connect with Him after the Final Judgment, Sufis, including Bektashis and Alevis, believe that one can embrace the Divine Presence in this life through a primarily ascetic life similar to Christian and Buddhist monastic traditions.

Origins of the Alevi-Bektashi orders

The Bektashi Order, a Sufi Islamic order emerging in the 13th century, has roots in the teachings of Haji Bektash Veli, an Islamic mystic and philosopher. While not the actual founder, Haji Bektash Veli is revered as a spiritual guide and patron-saint. The order integrated pre-Islamic and non-Islamic elements from shamanism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and other ancient religions. As the Bektashis spread into the Balkans, they incorporated further influences, particularly Neoplatonic and Nestorian, reflecting their broader philosophical and mystical orientation (Kressing, 2002).

the Bektashi Order emphasizes spirituality, mysticism, and an esoteric interpretation of Islam, often integrating elements from other religions and philosophies, Alevi-Bektashis represent a broader cultural and religious group that includes a diverse array of beliefs and practices overlapping with Bektashism. Alevism, primarily found in Turkey and the Balkans, often shares Bektashi elements, including the veneration of Haji Bektash Veli as a central spiritual figure. Although Alevis and Bektashis share a focus on spiritual over ritualistic practice, respect for nature, and progressive social values, Alevis encompass a wider range of ethnic backgrounds, including Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab communities.

A commonality among Alevis and Bektashis is their syncretic beliefs shaped by contact with other cultures. They emphasize spiritual guidance from a baba, or spiritual leader, and follow the doctrine of the four gates: Shari'ah (sacred law), Tariqah (the spiritual path), Ma'rifah (true knowledge), and Haqiqah (Divine Reality). Their core principles include love and respect for all people, tolerance towards other religions and ethnic groups, respect for working people, equality of men and women who pray side by side, and the practice of monogamy (Leaman and Nasr, 2001).

Unique Alevi-Bektashi Religious Culture

Alevi-Bektashi religious culture stands out for its syncretism, merging diverse beliefs and practices from across vast territories into a unified spiritual tradition that teaches love and respect for all things in nature. Rooted across two continents, it has endured various social and political challenges, maintaining its unique character and values. Though often considered a minority, Alevis and Bektashis have significant populations in the Balkans and Asia Minor. For many years, they were neglected by central authorities, but their respectful attitude towards nature and harmonious way of life serves as an important example of good cultural practice. Their teachings should become better known and their message of harmonious life with nature should be further promoted. Their voice should be heard by the governments of their countries more clearly and appropriate measures for the sustainable management of protected areas and the environment could be taken.

Alevi-Bektashi worship typically takes place in tekkes (Sufi lodges) rather than mosques. The hierarchical structure within the orders includes ranks such as ashik, muhip (novice), dervish, baba (spiritual guide), and dede. As a mystical order, only initiated members participate in ceremonies, which emphasize a personal and communal connection to the divine (Zeginis, 2001).

Bektashi Tekke

Dervishes as Practitioners of the Bektashi Order

The term "dervish" (from Persian: درویش, Darvīsh) broadly refers to members of a Sufi fraternity or order. Dervishes try to approach God by virtues and individual experience, rather than by religious scholarship. Many dervishes are mendicant ascetics who have taken a vow of material poverty. They focus on universal values such as love and service, renouncing the ego to reach God. They practice dhikr through physical exertion or religious rituals, often seeking ecstatic trances to attain

closeness with God. Their rituals, including singing, playing instruments, and reciting poetry, are recognized by UNESCO as part of humanity's intangible cultural heritage.

Dervishes are individuals who belong to a Sufi order and are dedicated to a spiritual path that emphasizes the pursuit of divine love, asceticism, and mysticism. In the context of the Bektashi Order, dervishes are the followers or members who live according to the teachings and practices of this specific order. They are integral to the life of the Bektashi tekke (monastic lodges), where they engage in communal worship, spiritual practices, and often a monastic lifestyle. Dervish orders differ from Sunni Muslims in their belief that one can embrace the Divine Presence during their lifetime, through ascetic practices similar to Christian and Buddhist monastic traditions.

The Bektashi Order of Dervishes is the most significant Muslim Sufi Order in Albania, with a presence also in the Republic of Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, although their influence extends beyond these regions. Bektashi traditions highlight the syncretic nature of the order, blending elements from various religious and cultural traditions, including shamanism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and other ancient religions. This unique combination fosters a spirituality that emphasizes love, tolerance, and respect for all people, positioning Bektashism as a bridge between diverse religious and cultural worlds, despite historical persecution and marginalization.

Bektashi dervishes live a life that combines communal religious observance with individual spiritual growth. They practice rituals such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God), meditation, prayer, and communal activities that promote brotherhood, humility, and devotion. Bektashi dervishes are known for their inclusive and tolerant approach, allowing both men and women to participate in spiritual practices, which distinguishes them from some other Sufi orders.

Bektashi dervishes are distinguished by specific rituals and practices that reflect the order's syncretic nature, blending elements of Islam with influences from Christianity, shamanism, and other mystical traditions. For example, Bektashi dervishes may engage in ritualistic wine drinking, music, and dance as part of their spiritual observances, which are considered ways to experience the divine and achieve spiritual ecstasy. These practices differentiate them from dervishes in more orthodox Sufi orders.

Bektashi dervishes often live in tekkes (buildings designed specifically for prayer gatherings of Sufi brotherhoods), which are akin to monasteries where they practice a lifestyle similar to Christian monasticism. The life of a Bektashi dervish involves communal living, spiritual guidance from a baba or dede, and a commitment to a code of ethics that emphasizes humility, service, and spiritual discipline.

Dervishes are often seen as symbols of the Bektashi Order's values of peace, tolerance, and the pursuit of divine love. They serve not only as practitioners but also as living embodiments of the Bektashi philosophy, which seeks to harmonize various spiritual elements into a cohesive and accepting worldview.

Hierarchical Structure Involving Dervishes

Within the Bektashi Order, dervishes are part of a hierarchical structure that includes various ranks such as *baba* (spiritual father), *dede* (elder), and *ashik* (lover of God). Each rank involves a different level of spiritual knowledge and responsibility. The dervishes serve as the foundational members who support the spiritual and communal functions of the order under the guidance of higher-ranking spiritual leaders.

Baba Mondi

The Bektashi community is currently led by Baba Mondi, the eighth Dedebaba, or spiritual and religious leader of the Bektashi Order. The headquarters of the Bektashi community are located in Tirana, Albania. Recognized for his efforts towards peace, Baba Mondi was honored as a World Peace Icon by the non-government organization "We Care for Humanity," and he has also had the opportunity to meet with two Popes.

Born Edmond Brahimaj, Baba Mondi, also known as Grandfather Hajji Baba Mondi, is an Albanian religious leader who serves as the Kryegjysh, or world leader, of the Bektashi Order, an Islamic Sufi order with deep roots in Albania and the Balkans. Following the death of Baba Tahir Emini, Baba Mondi was appointed as the overseer of the Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo, North Macedonia, by the dedelik of Tirana. In June 2011, he was officially chosen as the leader of the Bektashi Order.

Baba Mondi emphasizes the core values of the Bektashi faith, stating, "First of all, being a Bektashi means being human. One who is not human cannot be a Bektashi." He highlights that the Bektashi community is built on the principles of peace, love, and mutual respect. In a world often scarred by religious violence, Baba Mondi's teachings reflect a compassionate approach that places personal responsibility on each individual. He stresses that the Bektashi faith does not blame a creed or sacred text for personal actions; therefore, those who commit acts of terror in the name of God cannot be considered true Bektashi believers.

Baba Mondi identifies ignorance, poverty (often rooted in political circumstances), and personal ego as the three main enemies of humanity. He believes that these issues can only be combated and ultimately eradicated through collaboration and mutual support among people. His leadership reflects a commitment to promoting these values within the Bektashi community and beyond.

Harabati Baba Tekke – Tetovo

Located at the exit of Tetovo towards Gostivar, at the foot of the Šar Mountain in northwest Macedonia, lies the Harabati Baba Tekke, the most well-preserved sanctuary of the Islamic mystical monastic order in Europe, and the best-preserved Bektashi sanctuary in Europe. In Macedonia, it is also known as Arabati Baba Tekke. Its construction began in 1538 around the tomb of Sersem Ali Baba, an Ottoman dervish, and was completed by his successor, Arabati Baba, who is considered the chief architect and builder of the tekke and from whom it got its name. However, in many documents, Arabati Baba Tekke is referred to by its founder—Sersem Tekke.

The tekke complex includes a mausoleum, a flower garden, a winter house, a watchtower, a library, prayer rooms, an oven and kitchen with a dining room, two stables, a cemetery for distinguished dervishes, a military house, auxiliary buildings, guest quarters, and a large marble fountain inside a wooden pavilion. Enclosed by walls 7 meters high, this religious site is renowned for its architectural beauty and spiritual significance. Today, about ten strategically placed buildings have been preserved. The central part of the tekke contains rooms used for religious ceremonies, guest receptions, and the daily life of the dervishes. The southern part once housed economic facilities, of which only the foundations remain, while the northern side is protected by a high wall with a tower and living quarters, highlighting the communal and monastic aspects of Bektashi life.

This year, the Arabati Baba Tekke celebrates 486 years since its founding, although the full origins of its establishment remain partly unknown. It is known that Sersem Ali Baba traveled throughout the Ottoman Empire until he reached the Šar Mountain. There, with his four disciples, he peacefully practiced his faith until his death in 1538. After his passing, three disciples departed, while the fourth, Harabati Baba, established the sanctuary in Tetovo, continuing to honor Sersem Ali Baba's legacy.

In the latter half of the 18th century, Rejep Pasha and his son Abdurahman Pasha expanded the tekke. While many of the buildings no longer exist, the courtyard still contains a tower where Fatima, the youngest daughter of Abdurahman Pasha, lived in quarantine due to tuberculosis. Today, the Arabati Baba Tekke stands as a significant historical and cultural monument in Macedonia, attracting tourists with its architectural charm and historical depth.

Prior to the military conflict in Macedonia in 2001, the tekke was managed by the textile company Teteks, which had developed an exclusive hospitality facility within the complex. Following the conflict, Teteks vacated the premises, and the Tetovo Regional Museum, previously located there, was forcibly evicted. Subsequently, the Bektashis expanded into the abandoned museum premises, but they soon found themselves in conflict with the Islamic Religious Community, which also began using several buildings within the tekke.

The Tetovo dervishes and the Islamic Religious Community have since been embroiled in a dispute over the ownership of the Arabati Baba Tekke. The dervishes claim ownership of the tekke asserting that they possess deeds from the Turkish era as proof. On the other hand, the Islamic Religious Community argues that, as representatives of all Muslims, they have the right to use the tekke and transform it into a mosque. The Bektashis have not succeeded in securing a legal status for their religion in North Macedonia, a challenge they face in most countries with Christian Orthodox, Sunni or Shia Muslim majority (Introvigne, "A Visit to the Eight Dedebaba of the Bektashis"). In an attempt to resolve this conflict, the Tetovo Bektashis have taken the matter to the International Court of Justice. However, some sources suggest that the Arabati Baba Tekke remains registered as property of the Republic of Macedonia. Until the dispute is settled, the Bektashis continue to use parts of the tekke, the Islamic Religious Community uses one building as a mosque, and other structures, including the hotel, restaurant, and shadrvan, are gradually deteriorating due to a lack of maintenance (Džikov, 2018).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSoU_RB-EXE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_umJcGodNb0

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ix3yMWjjA0w

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwSAu-Ck3v0

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwLs7v0oejc

Textile company Teteks, Tetovo

3. Introduction to the Societal, Cultural, or Academic Context That Necessitates the Research

The societal and cultural significance of the Bektashi order, particularly in regions like Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo, underscores the need for deeper exploration and recognition of their heritage. The complex history of the Bektashis—from their foundational roots in Anatolia to their current struggles in the Balkans—reveals a persistent resilience against socio-political pressures and persecution.

The Bektashi community today is led by Baba Mondi, who emphasizes principles of peace, love, and mutual respect. His leadership highlights the Bektashi philosophy as one that bridges religious divides, advocating for humanistic values and collaboration. The teachings of Bektashism provide a counter-narrative to religious extremism, promoting a view of Islam that is inclusive, tolerant, and committed to the betterment of society.

Public conferences, such as the symposium on "Bektashis and Alevis in the Balkans and Anatolia," emphasize the community's importance as part of the cultural fabric of the region. They serve as platforms to raise awareness about the Bektashi tradition, which remains an often overlooked but vital part of the region's historical and cultural mosaic.

4. Interconnection Between Bektashis Insular Groups and Places

The Bektashis' insular nature, both geographically and culturally, has been shaped by their distinct religious and cultural practices, and their places of worship, known as tekkes, that play a central role in maintaining their identity shaped their communities in distinct ways. Their tekkes (religious lodges). Tekkes serve not only as religious centres but also as spaces for cultural, spiritual and community life, offering a refuge for believers and a space for preserving traditions. The Bektashis' approach to worship, which includes ritual wine drinking and dancing, sets them apart from orthodox Muslim practices, contributes to their perception as a distinct and sometimes marginalized group and has historically, led to their persecution.

The insularity of Bektashi communities extends beyond their religious practices; it also impacts their social dynamics, social recognition and integration, and interactions with broader society. For example, the Harabati Baba Tekke in North Macedonia is one of the most significant Bektashi sites in Europe, but, despite its status as a heritage site, the tekke has been caught in ongoing legal disputes over ownership and usage rights between the Bektashis and the Islamic Religious Community - it faces threats from Sunni groups who seek to assert control over the complex and faced challenges, including damage during the 2001 military conflict in Macedonia. This ongoing conflict reflects the broader challenges faced by Bektashis in preserving their sacred spaces in the face of political and social pressures and maintaining their religious freedom and cultural heritage in the face of external pressures and underscores the vulnerability of this insular religious groups and their cultural sites in contemporary society. Preservation of such sites is crucial for maintaining the Bektashi identity and ensuring the continuation of their unique spiritual and cultural practices.

Their historical experiences of persecution, whether under Ottoman, communist, or modern regimes, highlight the ongoing need for new approaches to understanding and integrating insular groups like the Bektashis. The community's focus on

individual spiritual responsibility, rather than strict adherence to dogma, offers a model of religious practice that emphasizes coexistence and respect for diversity.

In addition to their historical and contemporary struggles, the Bektashis have also been active participants in broader social and political movements. The Melçan Tekke, for example, played a key role in the Albanian national movement, offering support to early patriotic troops fighting against Ottoman rule. This legacy of resistance and resilience continues to shape Bektashi identity, emphasizing their role not just as a religious community but as active contributors to national and cultural history.

Bektashi communities, particularly in regions like Thrace and Albania, continue to navigate their complex relationship with surrounding societies. In Thrace, Bektashis often live in tight-knit communities that maintain their traditions while grappling with the pressures of being a minority within a minority. This dynamic is further complicated by historical fears of persecution, which have led many Bektashis to adopt a reserved and secluded existence. The recent symposium "Bektashis and Alevis in the Balkans and Anatolia: Worldviews and Practices through Ages and Places," held at the MOHA Center, underscores the importance of recognizing and safeguarding the cultural heritage of these communities.

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Jews in Slovenia

1. Need Analysis

The Jewish community in Ljubljana, Slovenia, is a small, insular group that faces numerous challenges stemming from historical persecution, societal neglect, and ongoing anti-Semitism. Despite Slovenia's constitutional declaration to protect minority rights, Jews remain an unrecognized minority in a largely homogenous society that often ignores or misunderstands their presence and history. This dynamic is exacerbated by the complex legacy of the Holocaust, historical displacement, and persistent stereotypes, which contribute to a sense of alienation and marginalization.

Navigating a landscape shaped by the memory of the Holocaust, displacement, and a form of "anti-Semitism without Jews," the community is subject to widespread negative attitudes, prejudices, and a lingering perception of Jews as an "imaginary enemy who does not actually exist." It faces profound challenges as an unrecognized minority in a country that, despite constitutional guarantees to protect minority rights, struggles with historical neglect, anti-Semitism, and a general lack of awareness about its Jewish population. The physical absence of Jews from public life and their erasure from historical narratives reflect a broader societal refusal to fully acknowledge the complex history of Jewish persecution as well as contributions. This marginalization contributes to a sense of isolation and alienation within the community. Slovenia remains largely homogenous society and, in many ways, insular, despite its attempts to present itself as a modern European nation, often ignoring or misunderstanding its Jewish history and contributions.

Many Jews in Slovenia perceive their surroundings as unsafe or hostile, reflecting societal attitudes that continue to marginalize them. This unease is deeply rooted in historical persecution and compounded by everyday ignorance about Judaism among their neighbors and co-workers. As a result, they are often compelled to navigate complex, place-based identities, adopting divergent cultural norms in different settings, such as the workplace. In this context, new models of cultural and artistic practices are needed to enrich Jewish identity and foster greater inclusivity within Slovenia.

Given these challenges, there is a pressing need for new, inclusive cultural and artistic practices that can enrich Jewish identity and foster greater understanding and integration within Slovenian society. This approach could help bridge the gap between the Jewish community and the broader population, promoting a more inclusive and diverse cultural landscape in Slovenia.

2. Political, Social, Historical, and Cultural Contexts Around the Jewish Community in Ljubljana, Slovenia

Historical Background: The presence of Jews in what is now Slovenia dates back to Roman times, with a more stable community forming in the 12th century when Jewish refugees fled violence and economic hardships in Central and Western Europe during the Crusades. Initially, relations between Jews and Christians in Slovenia were relatively peaceful, allowing the Jewish community to thrive in trade, banking, and other professions. However, starting in the 15th century, rising tensions fuelled by economic jealousy and anti-Semitism led to the gradual expulsion of Jews by the region's nobility, who often refused to repay Jewish moneylenders.

By 1718, Jews had been entirely expelled from the region. Although some were allowed to return under Emperor Charles VI in 1809, this period of tolerance was short-lived, as his successor, Francis I, reversed the decree in 1817. It was not until the Austrian Constitution of 1867 that Jews were granted full civil and political rights. Despite these legal advancements, rampant anti-Semitism continued to hinder the growth of the Jewish community in Slovenia, contributing to a sparse presence by the turn of the 20th century.

The interwar period saw a small resurgence in the Jewish population as an influx of Jewish immigrants fled Austria and Nazi Germany for the relatively tolerant Kingdom of Yugoslavia. However, this revival was short-lived as World War II approached.

World War II and the Holocaust devastated the Jewish population in Slovenia. Jews in regions annexed by Nazi Germany were among the first to be deported to concentration camps, with few surviving. In Ljubljana and other areas under Italian occupation, Jews initially faced less direct threat, but many were eventually deported following the Nazi takeover in 1943. The Jewish community in Prekmurje, which had been home to the majority of Slovenian Jews before the war, suffered a similar fate as Hungarian Jews, with most being sent to Auschwitz.

By the end of the war, approximately 87% of Slovenia's Jewish population had been exterminated, one of the highest rates in Europe. Only about 200 Jews survived, with some managing to join the Yugoslav partisans, who welcomed Jewish fighters, unlike many other European resistance groups. The post-war period was marked by emigration and a long phase of inactivity within the Jewish community as survivors sought to rebuild their lives elsewhere.

Following World War II, the Jewish community in Slovenia remained small and largely inactive, with many survivors emigrating, further diminished by the confiscation of Jewish properties under the Communist regime. With Slovenia's independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, the Jewish community began to rebuild, establishing a Jewish community center in Ljubljana and reorganizing to foster stronger connections among its members. Although there are still challenges, including widespread ignorance about Jewish history and culture, the community has become more organized and visible, with active participation in Slovenia's public and cultural life.

Today, the Jewish population in Slovenia is estimated to be between 400 and 600 individuals, with most residing in Ljubljana. The Jewish Cultural Center (JCC) in Ljubljana serves as the focal point of Jewish life, providing religious services, cultural events, and educational programs that help preserve Jewish heritage. However, the community still faces challenges, including societal ignorance about Jewish history and occasional antisemitic incidents. Despite these difficulties, the community continues to strive for greater visibility and societal recognition, playing an active role in Slovenia’s cultural and public life.

Societal Context: The societal and cultural environment in Slovenia poses significant challenges for the Jewish community, which remains a small and often invisible minority. Despite constitutional protections for minority rights, Jews in Slovenia continue to face widespread ignorance, prejudice, and a societal atmosphere often described as "anti-Semitism without Jews." This reflects a broader neglect of Jewish presence, as evidenced by the lack of Jewish history in school curricula and inadequate integration of Holocaust remembrance into the national narrative. Such omissions contribute to a broader societal misunderstanding of Jewish culture and heritage, leaving the community feeling marginalized and disconnected from mainstream society.

Cultural and Religious Life: Since Slovenia's independence, the Jewish community has experienced a modest cultural revival marked by the reopening of synagogues, the establishment of cultural associations, and the organization of public Jewish events. The Jewish Cultural Center (JCC) in Ljubljana plays a vital role in fostering Jewish life and promoting cultural awareness through theatre, educational programs, and public events. In partnership with institutions like Mini Theater, the JCC serves as a hub for cultural exchange and dialogue, organizing key events such as the European Days of Jewish Culture, which aim to preserve and promote Jewish heritage. However, despite these efforts, support and recognition from the broader public and government remain limited, highlighting the ongoing challenge of overcoming historical and contemporary biases.

The Slovenian government officially recognizes the Jewish Community of Slovenia as a religious organization, yet the absence of a wider acknowledgment of the community's historical and cultural contributions creates an ongoing sense of marginalization. This marginalization is not only a product of historical neglect but also a result of Slovenia's reluctance to fully integrate its Jewish past into the national narrative. The preservation and promotion of Jewish culture in Slovenia are essential for bridging the gap between the community and broader Slovenian society.

Community and Youth Engagement: The Jewish Community of Slovenia is affiliated with the European Union of Jewish Students, providing opportunities for Jewish youth to connect with peers across Europe. Initiatives like the JCC and various educational programs strive to engage younger generations, fostering a sense of Jewish identity and continuity within Slovenia. The community also emphasizes the importance of creating new, inclusive models of cultural and artistic practice that can enrich Jewish identity and promote understanding within the broader society.

Challenges of Recognition and Integration: Although the Slovenian government officially recognizes the Jewish Community of Slovenia as a religious organization, there is a persistent absence of broader acknowledgment of the community's historical and cultural contributions. This ongoing sense of marginalization is rooted in historical neglect and Slovenia's reluctance to fully integrate its Jewish past into the national narrative. The preservation and promotion of Jewish culture in Slovenia are essential for bridging the gap between the Jewish community and broader Slovenian society, ensuring that Jewish heritage is recognized and valued as a vital part of the nation's diverse cultural landscape.

3. Interconnection Between Insular Groups and Places

The Jewish community in Ljubljana represents a quintessential example of an insular group navigating the complexities of identity, belonging, and place. This insularity reflects broader patterns of isolation experienced by minority groups in Slovenia, shaped by historical displacement, societal attitudes, and the ongoing marginalization of Jewish contributions. Living in a country where their history is often overlooked, Jews in Slovenia experience both physical and psychological disconnection from the broader society, compounded by negative stereotypes and a lack of understanding of Jewish culture. This isolation is not just physical but also psychological, with many Jews feeling disconnected from a society that still struggles to acknowledge its Jewish past.

Physical spaces associated with Jewish life, such as cemeteries and synagogues, stand as poignant reminders of the losses suffered during the Holocaust and testaments to the community's resilience, and historical presence. The Jewish cemetery in Ljubljana, the Maribor Synagogue Cultural Center, and the annual Festival of Tolerance serve as crucial focal points for reclaiming Jewish spaces and asserting the community's right to its cultural heritage. These efforts are vital for preserving the memory of the Jewish community and fostering a sense of continuity amid a broader narrative of exclusion.

In Ljubljana, the medieval Jewish quarter, marked by Zidovska ulica (Jewish Street) and Zidovska steza (Jewish Path), serves as a reminder of the community's deep roots in the city. Though the physical remnants are minimal, these spaces hold symbolic significance and continue to act as touchstones for cultural and historical remembrance. However, preserving these heritage sites, such as the Jewish Cemetery in Rozna Dolina, remains a challenge amid limited resources and societal indifference, reflecting broader struggles faced by the Jewish community in asserting their place within Slovenia.

The community's perception of space as unsafe and, to some extent, hostile highlights the broader societal attitudes that have yet to fully embrace the diversity and historical significance of Jewish life in Slovenia. This sense of isolation underscores the importance of cultural recognition and integration. By fostering dialogue and promoting a greater understanding of Jewish history and contributions, Slovenia can begin to bridge the gap between its Jewish minority and the wider society.

Ultimately, the Jewish community's efforts to reclaim and celebrate their heritage are essential steps toward a more inclusive and culturally diverse Slovenian identity. Through these endeavors, the community not only preserves its own history but also enriches the broader cultural tapestry of Slovenia, highlighting the need for greater recognition and respect for minority narratives within the nation's evolving identity.

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