

## **ContactZone – Intercultural dialogue and cooperation**

The Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, is one of the oldest museums in Europe. Its collections include ethnographic objects, writings, photos, drawings, video and sound recordings. Functions of the institute are the collection and preservation of these mediums, scientific research and publication, national coordination of contemporary social research and promotion of lifelong learning through exhibitions, museum education and events.

*ContactZone*, a project addressing not only migrants from different countries, but the museum staff itself, was initiated because the organisers saw the need to change current approaches to museums in Hungary, which are often seen as “sacred spaces” beyond question or challenge, where scientific opinions are preached one-sidedly and visitors enter in reverent silence. The organisers wanted to demonstrate that museums can be “contact zones” which enable different cultures and social groups to meet, represent themselves and engage in dialogue.

The project was an experiment to share the image and knowledge accumulated by the Museum of Ethnography relating to the participants’ cultures, to give migrants the opportunity to confront this image and to give staff the opportunity to understand the migrants’ views of their own contemporary culture. Within the project a long-term dialogue between the museum workers and the migrants in Budapest was to be established. *ContactZone* was also an opportunity to develop internal and external cooperation skills of museum staff.

### **Objectives**

- Initiating dialogue and cooperation between museum staff and migrants in Budapest to discuss how the museum constructs images about migrant cultures (based on the collected objects and existing knowledge), and migrants’ reflections on these images;
- Developing communication skills and a sense of community;
- Enhancing consciousness against prejudice through non-formal learning.

### **Stages**

- Preparation of the project, choosing a facilitator, recruiting participants;
- Revising the project’s structure in consultation with the facilitator and project coordinators;
- Two community-building days, including icebreaker and empathy-building, involving participants into the planning of the following meetings, discussing methods and rules for developing a dialogue;
- Creating a blog (<http://kontaktzona.blogspot.com>) and mailing list;
- Three days for intercultural dialogue (separate workshops focusing on cultures of the Andes, Udmurtia and the Rusyns), including presentations of the given culture and conversations between museum workers and migrants; participants used not only collections, but also personal objects and other material (pictures, videos, music and books) brought by migrants;
- Closing activities including a picnic, a formal evaluation meeting with museum staff and informal evaluation;
- Editing the video presentation.

## Outcomes

The project was a meaningful process towards communication which enabled participants to talk on the basis of equality. The community-building process was successful, although the group had less time to work together than anticipated.

Participants gained new knowledge on and attitudes towards the discussed cultures, as well as renewed knowledge and personal competencies (such as openness, empathy, intercultural awareness and experiences for sharing the idea of cultural relativism). They also gained experience in motivating different people and breaking traditions. On the other hand, some participants dropped out after they had given their presentations. There was also some lack of empathy coming from extremely strong national identities.

The method and attitude of “project-thinking” was of real benefit to the museum. Collections were re-interpreted by representatives of the attendant cultures. Objects brought by the migrants were interpreted by the museum staff and inspired many questions among participants.

As the picnic took part on Young Volunteers' Day, the project received additional media attention. A radio interview also took place with the project leader.

The organisers hope that they have sown the seeds of cooperation between their institution and different migrant groups living in Hungary, which can continue in real space and on the web. Participants are all open to meet each other again in the future to deepen the learning process and find common interests. The idea has been proposed of a regular club where thematic sessions would be introduced.

*The real deep discussions arrived too late, when we had run out of time. We always missed the "main course;" we had just eaten the appetiser. Project organisers*

## Institution

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## Project coordinators

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## Target groups

Migrants to Budapest with different cultural backgrounds (from the Andes, Udmurtia, Rusyns – an Eastern Slavic ethnic group – and Greece) and professions (including a journalist, a university student, a member of a minority government and an engineer); museum staff including a curator, museologists, a cultural manager and a secretary