

Stories of Uncertainty: Migrants' Voices in the SEA-EU Observatory Seminar Series

Dr Damian Spiteri, a lecturer in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing (University of Malta), delivered the seminar “Stories of Uncertainty: Migrants’ Voices and Experience” as part of the SEA-EU Observatory for Migration and Human Rights monthly online seminar series. This is an initiative bringing together nine SEA-EU partner universities over nine months to offer a series of lectures, each focused on a theme related to migration and human rights. He was joined by Assistant Professor Jacob Richard Thomas (Corvinus University of Budapest), also a Research Fellow at Princeton University’s Centre for Migration and Development, whose work examines how socio-cultural forces and migration policy interact to shape migrant flows.

Dr Spiteri opened by noting that, in Malta, migration is rarely discussed quietly: it moves rapidly from headlines and political soundbites to social media and then, almost immediately, into everyday spaces; from the kitchen table and staffroom to the clinic reception desk and the bus. The central concern of his seminar was therefore not only *what* is said about migrants, but *how* migration is narrated and circulated, because public storytelling sets the boundaries of what comes to feel reasonable, permissible, and “common sense.” In Gramscian terms, he suggested, the struggle is not only over policy, but also over hegemony: which interpretations become normalised as “the way things are,” and which voices are sidelined before they are fully heard.

Prof. Thomas developed this point by emphasising that the Maltese case reflects wider international patterns. Across contexts, fast-moving news cycles, official statements, viral posts, and institutional messaging combine to produce dominant ways of seeing and speaking about migration. Drawing on Bourdieu, he framed this as a struggle within a field of meaning-making, where actors and narratives gain authority while others are marginalised. He also linked this to Habermas’s concerns about the public sphere: when public debate is driven by strategic messaging, emotional mobilisation, or “ready-made” frames, the space for careful deliberation, and for migrants’ voices to be received as credible contributions, tends to contract.

Drawing on pertinent literature, Dr Spiteri outlined four recurring storylines that repeatedly shape migration talk in Malta. The first is threat, where migration is framed through danger, disorder, invasion, or loss of control; often reinforced by urgent language, dramatic imagery, and decontextualised numbers that trigger fear and narrow the range of imaginable responses. The second is burden, in which migrants are represented primarily as pressure on housing, hospitals, schools, or budgets. While pressures are real, this storyline frequently removes structural context, i.e. how chronic underinvestment, labour-market conditions, and policy choices shape service strain for everyone. This generates the creation of a context where frustration is likely to be redirected onto migrants rather than systems. The third storyline is humanitarian victim,

centred on suffering and rescue. It can mobilise compassion, but it can also confine migrants to passivity, making them visible mainly through pain rather than agency and ordinary life. The fourth storyline is valued contributor, which highlights work and participation. Dr Spiteri noted that this frame is especially evident in sectors where Malta depends heavily on migrant labour, including health and care services, where there is a heavy reliance on migrant nurses, carers, and support staff to keep services running. At the same time, he cautioned that even this apparently positive narrative can be conditional: belonging is affirmed through usefulness, and recognition can be withdrawn when migrants are no longer seen primarily as “needed workers” but are repositioned as “a problem” in public debate.

A key message from Dr Spiteri was that these storylines are rarely simply “true” or “false.” Each can contain elements of reality, but the problem begins when one frame becomes the default lens through which all migration is read, compressing complex social life into a single, repetitive script. Drawing on Michael White’s narrative work, he noted how dominant public narratives can produce “thin descriptions” that flatten people’s identities into problem-saturated categories, such as “threat,” “burden,” or “victim.” The danger, he argued, is not only distortion, but the gradual narrowing of what society is able to recognise as real or relevant about migrants’ lives. The task, therefore, is to make space for “thicker” accounts in the form of stories that retain complexity while also acknowledging the influence of context, agency, relationships, skills, and everyday meaning.

In Weberian terms, Dr Spiteri suggested, this is also about power: the ability to shape outcomes does not rest only in formal decisions or institutions, but in whose definitions are treated as authoritative, i.e. those whose account of “what is going on” becomes the one that others feel compelled to accept. Building on this internationally, Prof. Thomas added that power often works precisely through these narrative boundaries: not primarily through overt censorship, but through the quiet disciplining effects of categories, labels, and taken-for-granted “truths” that shape what can be said, what can be heard, and which voices are treated as credible while others are dismissed as background noise.

Both speakers returned to the same practical implication: public narratives do not stay in the media. Labels such as “illegal,” “vulnerable,” “essential,” or “crisis” that circulate online quickly travel into workplaces, schools, clinics, and everyday conversations, shaping how people interpret the person in front of them. In this sense, discourse does not merely describe reality; it helps organise it, affecting whether migrants are encountered as neighbours and colleagues, or as problems to be managed.

The seminar concluded on a constructive note. If Malta is to move towards a less polarised conversation about migration, the answer is not to deny genuine challenges, but to support storytelling that is more accurate, proportionate, and humane. In practical terms, the speakers pointed to three approaches: co-authored storytelling that avoids

tokenism by giving migrants real agency in shaping narratives; context-rich use of data that informs rather than inflames through clear sourcing, trends over time, and meaningful denominators; and place-based examples that connect migration to shared local concerns such as education, healthcare, housing, and working conditions. Taken together, these practices can widen the public sphere beyond fear-driven frames and strengthen the conditions for more grounded, democratic deliberation.

