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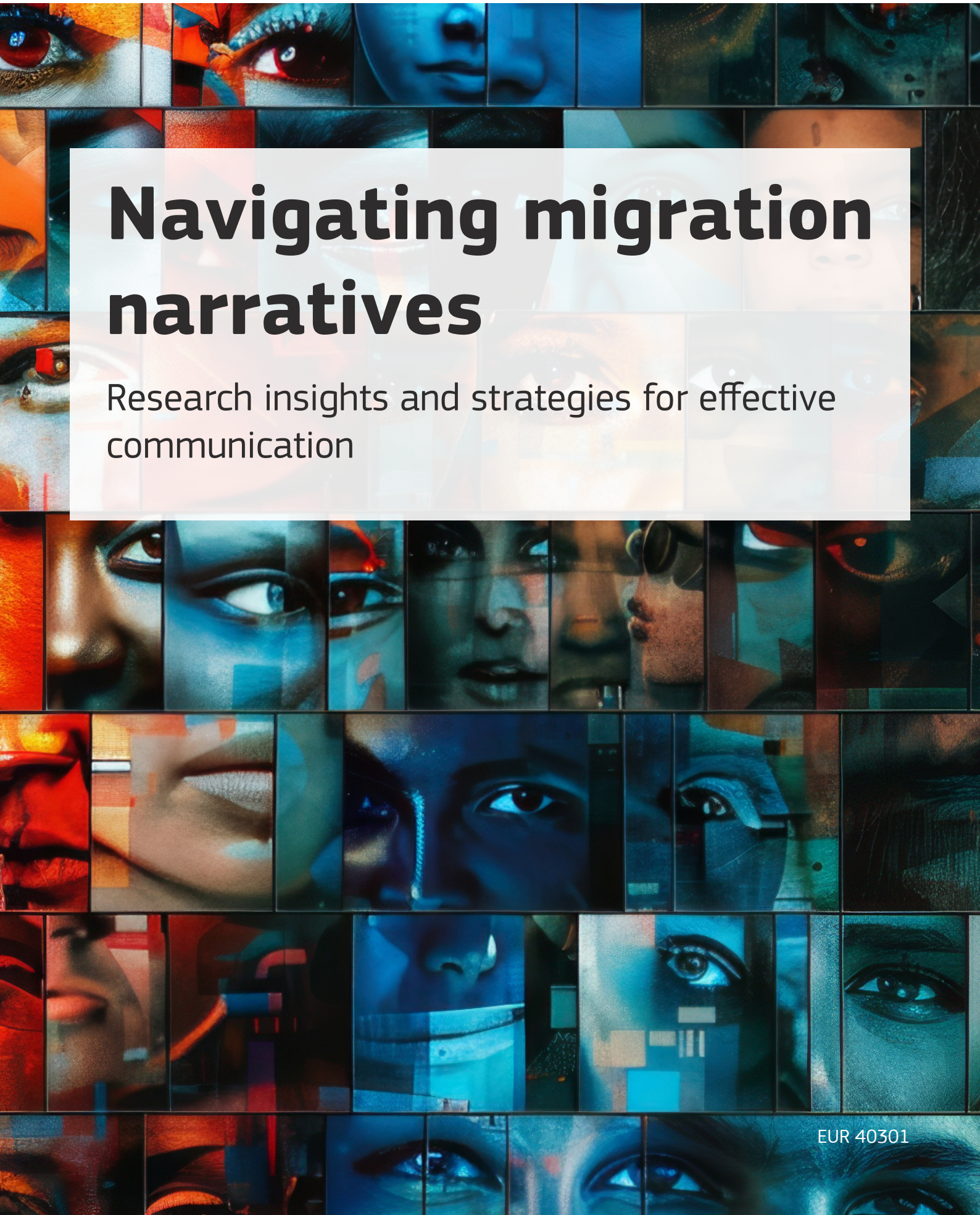

Navigating migration narratives

Research insights and strategies for effective communication

EUR 40301

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Abstract

This JRC Science for Policy report provides a comprehensive understanding of migration narratives and their impact on public perception and policy. It examines dominant media narratives, divisive rhetoric and disinformation related to migration, as well as the attitudes towards migration that these narratives shape.

The report's ultimate goal is to offer practical advice for communicating effectively about migration and promoting a more informed, evidence-based dialogue. The report is based on a comprehensive review of scientific literature, expert studies and data analysis, as well as the collective expertise of the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Policy Centre (EPC) and the European University Institute (EUI).

It seeks to equip policymakers and communication professionals with the insights and tools needed to navigate the complex landscape of migration narratives and promote a more nuanced and evidence-based understanding of migration in a political context often tainted by misinformation and divisive rhetoric.

The report reveals that narratives play a crucial role in shaping public perception and migration policies. While hostile narratives often rely on exaggerations, misinformation and oversimplification, it is essential to recognise and address the underlying concerns about migration in the EU. To build trust, the report stresses the need for an open and honest dialogue, as well as a communication approach that balances messages, acknowledges challenges and considers the wide array of public opinions and personal values. By doing so, EU institutions can position themselves as reliable and evidence-based sources of information on migration.

Executive summary

This JRC Science for Policy report aims to become a reference book on migration narratives that brings together all relevant evidence in one comprehensive report. Drawing from the collective knowledge of the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Policy Centre (EPC) and the European University Institute, the report explores the complexities of migration narratives and their impact on public perceptions and policy. It provides concrete and practical advice for communicating about migration, fostering a more informed and evidence-based dialogue.

The report delves into the intricate role of narratives in shaping public understanding of migration in a climate where migration is often used as a political tool, and where these narratives have significant power in influencing public sentiment and political outcomes. A comparison of several studies shows that there are **six common migration narrative frames** deployed in the mainstream media: the solidarity frame, the humanitarian frame, the economic benefit frame, a pragmatic frame, the threat frame and the crisis frame. The report discusses what makes some narratives more convincing than others, highlighting their alignment with pre-existing beliefs and ideologies, their relevance to current concerns and emotion as key factors for narrative success. In particular, the report emphasises that strong emotional reactions to news, social media posts and videos lead to people rejecting factual knowledge that could change their policy views on migration.

The authors also examine divisive migration narratives. Through an analysis of tweets (posts on X, former Twitter) of European populist leaders, they **identify 11 super-narratives and 52 narratives**, with the "us vs. them" narrative being the most widely used. This narrative is used to discredit political rivals and rally support for anti-establishment agendas, pitting populist leaders and their supporters against a perceived elite. The authors discuss how populist rhetoric and disinformation exploit people's pre-existing fears and anxieties, stressing that both can have serious consequences, including undermining trust in institutions, fuelling xenophobia and exacerbating social divisions.

The report contains five case studies, which examine narratives around climate migration (case study 1); populist narratives around mass migration and population replacement (case study 2); the narratives around the Dutch housing crisis (case study 3); disinformation about the displacement from Ukraine (case study 4); and successful communication actions around migration (case study 5).

Based on recommendations stemming from existing research, including Horizon 2020 projects and expert discussions, the report equips policymakers and communication professionals with practical insights to foster narratives that promote an **evidence-based understanding of migration.** The chapters contain recommendations aimed at addressing the specific challenges linked to countering divisive narratives and disinformation, and provide guidance on more balanced communication approaches.

The authors emphasise that even though communication on migration is often driven by political developments and the EU's political agenda, EU institutions have a critical role in consistently providing factual, neutral information about migration trends at all times. The report proposes **three general priorities** for EU institutions to create an evidence-based information environment around migration:

1. **Become a trusted source of migration-related information in the EU:**

   - Prioritise **building trust and empowering citizens** with facts and information, rather than trying to change their opinions.
   - Adopt a consistent and sustained communication approach, providing **continuous, clear, factual and transparent information** about migration trends and dynamics in the EU.
   - **Clarify complex concepts and terminology**: Explain asylum procedures, different types of migration and support for integration in a clear and concise manner.
   - Provide comprehensive information on **EU achievements and activities**: Share information on the EU's measures linked to migration, including financial assistance, reception centres and partnerships with third countries.

- Go beyond institutional communications, such as press releases, and engage in more **in-depth public discussions and dialogue** about migration policies, including their challenges and successes.

2. **Develop balanced messages:**

   - Create communications that **resonate with all parts of society, addressing legitimate concerns and challenges** related to migration, while explaining the measures being taken to address them. This includes acknowledging concerns linked to job competition, public resource usage and security, as well as the values and concerns of supporters of populist parties. **Be transparent about the potential difficulties** that may arise from migration, such as integration challenges or pressures on local infrastructure, and provide clear information about the steps being taken to mitigate these challenges, demonstrating the ability of governments and the EU to manage migration effectively.

   - **Reinforce perceptions of fairness** and highlight how migration initiatives benefit the local community, for instance through filling labour gaps and stimulating economic growth. Anticipate and address common concerns or misconceptions about migration, including those linked to job competition, distribution of resources and migrant contribution to social welfare systems.

   - **Decouple migration from unrelated issues**: Avoid perpetuating misconceptions that migrants are the primary cause of societal issues like housing, security or crime. Instead, focus on explaining how these issues are being addressed through policies and initiatives.

3. **Create an EU-wide network of communicators:**

   - Encourage **a joint effort between EU institutions, agencies and Member States** to convey the benefits and value of EU migration policies to the public, demonstrating a coordinated and collaborative approach.

   - Build **a network of knowledgeable and articulate individuals,** including politicians, journalists, influencers and other key figures, to share their expertise on EU migration policies and provide context-specific information to various audience segments, offering a range of perspectives.

   - **Use a range of channels,** including television, social media and online news outlets, to engage with diverse audience segments and tailor messages to specific target groups, such as using citizen engagement and dialogues to understand people's concerns.

   - Use television **news programmes, talk shows and documentaries** to provide in-depth insights, educate the audience and promote a nuanced understanding of migration, and amplify these appearances through social media and other digital channels. Partner with media outlets to produce high-quality content that provides factual information about migration in the EU.

Research can inform migration communication efforts by providing accurate data, identifying common misconceptions and shedding light on sentiments and attitudes among target groups, enabling communicators to develop evidence-based messages that resonate with diverse audiences. The authors encourage communication teams within the EU institutions to use the full range of scientific support services at their disposal, including the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and its Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography (KCMD), to inform the preparation of migration communication campaigns.

This JRC Science for Policy Report is published in conjunction with a JRC Technical Report on *Public perceptions of fairness in the EU migration and asylum system*, which describes the results and findings of a survey conducted by the JRC in eight EU Member States, and an expert report on disinformation on migration commissioned by DG RTD, which both feed into this Science for Policy report.

About narratives

Narratives are selective depictions of reality. They focus on certain aspects of issues while ignoring others. This selectiveness can be both beneficial and limiting. On the one hand, narratives are powerful because they clearly convey specific messages. On the other hand, they often exclude aspects or information that does not align with the overall narrative, thereby resulting in misleading depictions of complex issues such as migration.

Migration narratives refer to the stories, ideas and perceptions that people have about migration and migrants. These narratives can be influenced by various factors such as media, politics and social interactions. They can shape public opinion and policy decisions.

Although some narratives are based on solidarity and humanitarian frames, migration narratives are often divisive and negative, perpetuating misconceptions and fuelling xenophobia and racism.

About this report

The report employs a **mixed methodology**, combining insights from a broad range of sources, including scientific literature, Horizon 2020 projects, expert studies and the authors' own media and data analysis.

This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of migration narratives, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data. The report synthesises existing research, analyses media and data and incorporates expert opinions to provide a nuanced understanding of migration narratives and their impact. By combining different methodologies, the report aims to provide a robust and well-rounded analysis of the complex issues surrounding migration narratives.

1. Introduction

Nina Kajander

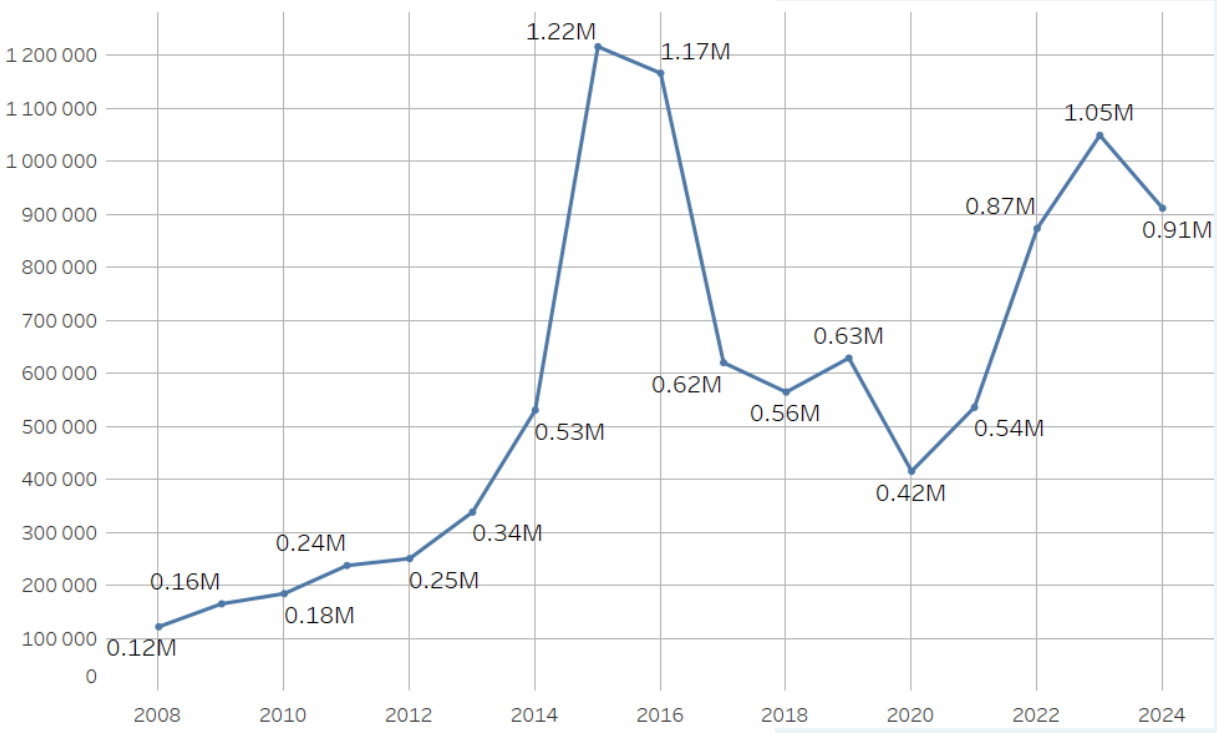
The number of international migrants in the world is increasing. According to the latest global estimates by the United Nations (UN), the number of international migrants increased from 154 million in 1990 to 304 million in 2024, the latter corresponding to 3.70% of the total global population.[1] In line with this global trend, migration to the EU has been on the rise since World War II, influenced by a variety of factors, including conflicts, political instability, economic disparities as well as rapid population growth in other parts of the world.

The overall number of foreign nationals in the EU has also increased over the past years. The number of non-EU citizens in EU-27 has increased from just over 17 million on 1 January 2014,[2] representing 3.9% of the total EU-27 population in 2014, to 29 million on 1 January 2024, representing 6.4% of the total EU population.[3]

The vast majority of immigrants arrive via legal routes for employment, education or for family reunification. Irregular border crossings and migrants without regular status remain the minority, and only a fraction of the overall number of migrants who enter the EU each year.

Eurostat statistics on the annual number of first asylum applications from 2008 to 2024 show an overall upward trend over the past 16 years. Following a gradual increase in the number of annual asylum applications from 2008 to 2013, the EU experienced an unprecedented influx

FIGURE 1. Annual number of first asylum applications by non-EU citizens in the EU Member States



Note: JRC elaboration based on Eurostat data (Source dataset: migr_asyappctza)

1 International Migrant Stock | Population Division
2 Eurostat, retrieved at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/-/3-18122015-bp
3 Eurostat, retrieved at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/migration-2024

of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016, primarily due to the Syrian civil war, conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as instability in other regions, including parts of Africa. In 2015, over 1.2 million people applied for asylum in EU Member States, marking the highest number recorded in a single year.

Following the peak in 2015, the EU implemented several measures to manage and control migration flows more effectively, including increased border controls and agreements with third countries. In the following years, the number of migrants and asylum seekers arriving in the EU decreased compared to the peak years. In 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic led to additional border restrictions and travel limitations, further reducing migration flows to the EU. In 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine led millions of Ukrainian residents to seek refuge in the EU under the Temporary Protection Directive[4] and also the number of asylum applications started increasing again. In 2023, the number of asylum applications reached 1.05 million, nearing the peak of 2015, but then dropped again by 13% in 2024. Migration remains high on the EU political agenda. The implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which aims to help protect people, secure borders, and ensure fair and efficient procedures, is one of the main priorities for the European Commission 2024-2029.

The role of narratives in shaping migration discourse

This demographic trend has significantly influenced the public discourse around migration, giving rise to competing narratives about how migration affects European societies [1]. Some depict rising levels of immigration as a crisis or as a security threat, while others emphasise the positive economic contributions of migrants or highlight the plight of refugees, focusing on their rights and the moral obligation to provide assistance.

These narratives play a crucial role in how we understand complex issues like migration. They serve as essential tools for helping people make sense of a multifaceted and sometimes unpredictable world and offer frameworks through which individuals can understand their experiences. By providing meaning to these experiences, narratives enable people to navigate the complexities of reality and derive personal and collective understanding from the events around them [2] [3].

Beyond mere storytelling, narratives play a crucial role in how people think about migration, affecting their attitudes and beliefs [1] [3] [4] [5]. They play a role in shaping what behaviours towards migrants are considered appropriate [4]. Narratives are more persuasive than bare facts or technical information because they engage emotions and resonate on a personal level. They make complex information more accessible and compelling. Through the stories they tell, narratives shape values and influence the moral frameworks within which individuals and societies operate, guiding people's decisions and actions [3].

Narratives are selective depictions of reality. They focus on certain aspects of issues while ignoring others. This selectiveness can be both beneficial and limiting. On the one hand, narratives are powerful because they clearly convey specific messages. On the other hand, they often exclude aspects or information that does not align with the overall narrative, thereby resulting in misleading depictions of complex issues such as migration [3]. Migration narratives refer to the stories, ideas and perceptions that people have about migration and migrants.

Narratives have been cited as one of the most powerful factors in migration politics and policymaking today [3]. The growing political attention surrounding immigration has engendered more lay (including populist) narratives [6]. These narratives significantly influence how migration issues are perceived and addressed in policymaking. For example, a "securitisation" narrative, which frames migration as a threat, has led to the adoption of stricter border policies, the use of detention centres and a focus on the illegal aspects of migration. This narrative creates an atmosphere of unease and can justify drastic measures that might otherwise be seen as extreme, unjustified or inhumane [3] [4] [6]. Popular narratives may imply unfeasible punitive measures that are inconsistent with democratic norms or international commitments [5].

Some politically driven narratives present a particularly narrow or misleading view of complex issues, shaping public perception and discourse in ways that may not fully represent the underlying realities. This can lead to a skewed understanding of issues, where the nuances are lost in favour of more straightforward, yet potentially misleading, narratives [3].

The media's influence on migration narratives

The media plays a significant role in promoting migration narratives, impacting both public perception and policy

4 N.B. persons covered by the Temporary Protection Directive are not considered asylum seekers.

responses. The media often sets the narrative agenda by choosing which stories to highlight and how to present them. This selective highlighting can shape public understanding and define what is considered acceptable discourse, influencing societal attitudes and policy decisions [4] [5]. Media narratives and political debates often influence each other. Politicians may use media narratives to bolster their political positions, and in turn, political actions and statements generate new media narratives [6]. Depending on their ownership, some media platforms may highlight specific stories and perspectives while omitting others [4] [7]. Social media platforms often prominently amplify right-wing voices through algorithms that prioritise engagement, elevating extreme positions [7] [8] [9].

The proliferation of media narratives on migration can reinforce existing beliefs and biases, as individuals tend to engage with stories that confirm their preconceived notions, while events like the 'Syrian migration crisis' catapult immigration to the forefront of public discourse, invigorating debates and polarising opinions. As these real-life events unfold and are represented in the media, they can activate people's latent dispositions on migration, steering them towards disparate interpretations - some perceiving it as a threat to national security, others as a pressing humanitarian issue - thereby underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of migration narratives.

In the context of heightened politicisation and the prevalence of populist narratives, it can be challenging for EU institutions or national governments to communicate effectively about migration. Navigating a landscape filled with emotional, political and media-driven challenges requires strategic communication and efforts to build trust with the public.

Report structure

This Science for Policy report brings together latest evidence on migration narratives and disinformation on migration, complementing it with our own analysis. Drawing from the collective knowledge of the Joint Research Centre (JRC), Horizon 2020 projects, the European Policy Centre (EPC) and the European University Institute, the report aims to offer actionable recommendations for communication professionals and equip them with necessary insights and tools to communicate effectively about migration in an environment often tainted by misinformation and divisive rhetoric.

The second chapter examines dominant migration narratives as portrayed in mainstream media. It synthesises evidence from scientific literature and notable research initiatives, including the Horizon 2020 projects PERCEPTIONS and BRIDGES, alongside the EU-funded NODES project. This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive overview of migration narratives identified through research and to explore the factors contributing to their appeal. The chapter includes a case study focused on narratives surrounding climate migration.

The third chapter delves into divisive migration narratives. Based on an analysis of social media posts, it offers a mapping of migration narratives propagated by populists, as well as the topics frequently associated with migration in populist discourse. This chapter includes two case studies, one examining narratives around mass migration and population replacement and the other exploring the Dutch housing crisis.

The fourth chapter focuses on disinformation related to migration. Based on an expert study by DG RTD, in collaboration with the JRC, the chapter synthesises existing evidence on migration-related disinformation. Drawing on a vast array of scientific literature, it discusses the impact of migration-related disinformation on the media, policy-making, democracies and societies, and proposes strategies for countering such disinformation. This chapter also includes a case study on disinformation surrounding the displacement from Ukraine.

The fifth chapter explores attitudes towards migration. It examines how individuals form their attitudes on migration and the influence of narratives in shaping them. It also considers the impact of migrants' origin, gender, nationality and religion on public attitudes, as well as the significance of fairness in shaping perceptions and support for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Drawing on a survey conducted by the JRC, the chapter provides insights into citizens' perceptions of fairness in three key areas: the fairness and reliability of the EU asylum system and the treatment of different categories of asylum seekers, the comparison between the treatment of asylum seekers/migrants and host populations and the equitable sharing of costs and benefits across Member States.

The sixth chapter offers guidelines on public communication regarding migration. Drawing on a recent JRC report on trustworthy public communication, it presents ten key recommendations for public communicators working in the field of migration. These guidelines aim to empower communicators to be a positive force for democracy by building trust among audiences and by equipping the public with trustworthy

information. This approach enables individuals to make informed decisions based on the best available evidence and their own values, needs, experiences and realities. The chapter contains a case study on successful communication actions around migration.

The concluding chapter reflects on the implications of divisive rhetoric and disinformation on migration for the EU and proposes three key priorities for EU institutions to create a more evidence-based information environment surrounding migration. It also contains a reflection on how science and research can further support communication efforts at EU level.

BOX 1 What is a narrative?

Narrative frames are ways of presenting information to an audience. They are 'patterns of interpretation through which people classify information in order to handle it efficiently' [10].

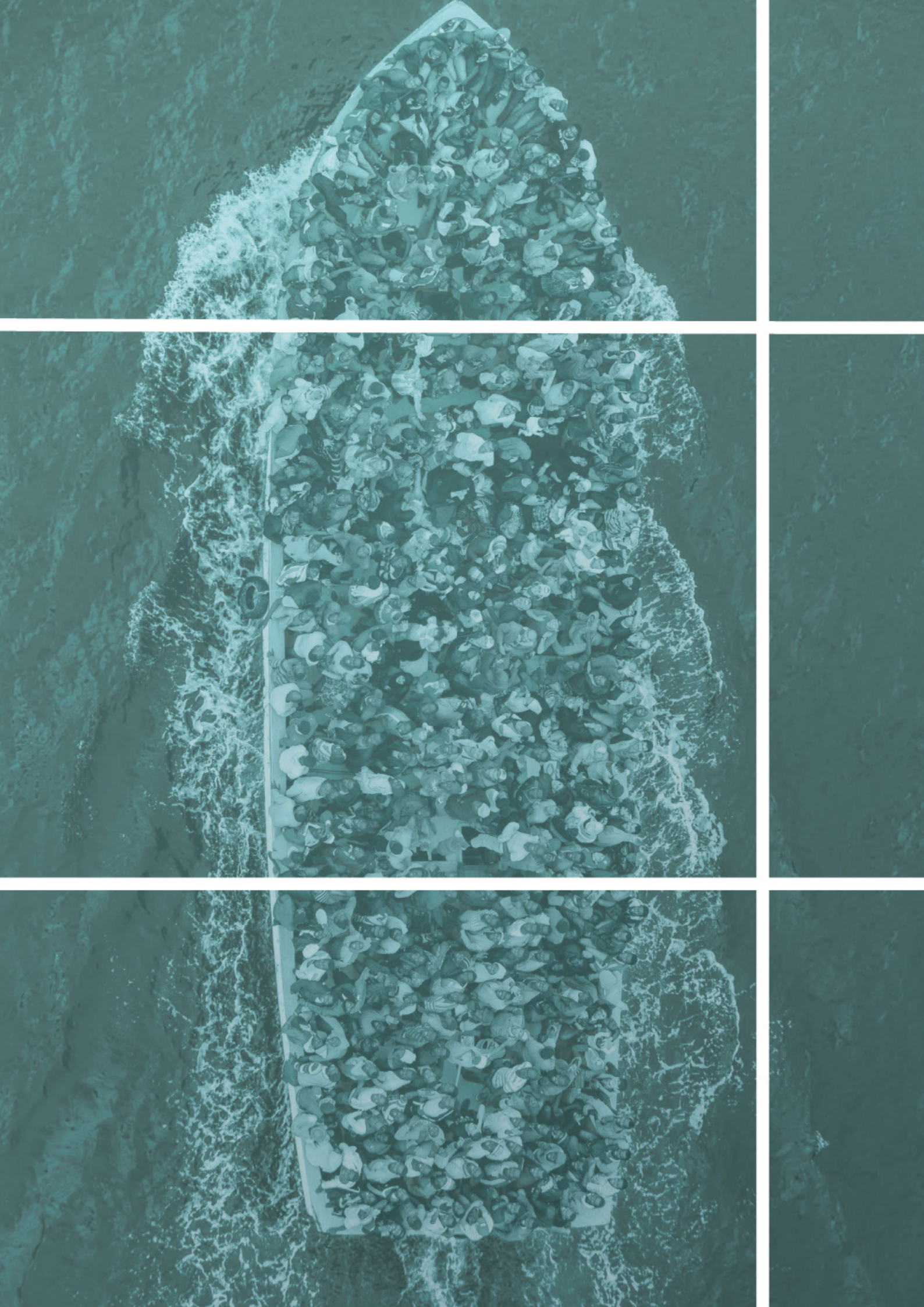
For example: Threat or Crisis are narrative frames.

Narratives are sense-making tools. They include assumptions about causality, responsibility and they communicate values [1] .They are 'selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time' [3] .

For example: 'Migrants are a threat to national security' or 'Our borders are insufficiently controlled' are narratives.

Political and policy narratives are specific types of narratives. They usually contain an answer to the question 'so what?', proposing future policies or political changes based on the acceptance of the proposed depiction of reality. Consequently, such narratives usually have three points in time: the two points that describe the current situation and its causes, as well as a hypothetical future [3] .

For example: Return rates of rejected asylum seekers are low. Therefore, we need more agreements with sending countries to take back their citizens.



2. Dominant media narratives

Fiona Seiger

The framing of migration and its prominence in public discourse have a bearing on how the phenomenon is understood and to what extent it is perceived as a political and societal problem by the public. The media play a central role in shaping the public discourse on migration. A comparison of several studies shows that there are six common migration narrative frames deployed in the mainstream media: the solidarity frame, the humanitarian frame, the economic benefit frame, a pragmatic frame, the threat frame and the crisis frame. Different narratives are more likely to be accepted when they appeal to the values of their audiences. The solidarity and humanitarian narrative frames appeal to people who value self-transcendence. Openness to change is a value mobilised by narratives framing immigration as economic benefit. When migration is framed as a threat or a crisis, narratives typically appeal to values of conservation and self-enhancement.

2.1 HOW IS MIGRATION TALKED ABOUT IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA?

The arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers predominantly from Syria and Afghanistan in 2014 and 2015 was largely framed as a "crisis" in the mainstream media (e.g. in traditional broadcast, press, online news platforms, as well as social media). Research found that media discussions following this so-called 'European refugee crisis' were dominated by the arrival of asylum seekers, eclipsing reports on any other types of immigration. This influenced the public's perception of migration to the EU [11]. Migration narratives in the media contributed to the public's pre-existing, underlying imagination of immigrants, which usually differs from who is identified as immigrant in government statistics [12][5] and led to the frequent overestimation of the number of migrants in different countries [11]. The media thus played a prominent role in shaping public opinion and attitudes towards refugees and migrants.

The framing of migration, in other words the angle through which information is presented and the topic's prominence in the media have a bearing on how the phenomenon is understood and to what extent it is perceived as a political and societal problem. This and individual attitudes towards migration influence policy preferences and can play a role in voting behaviour. Consequently, media portrayals of migration have tracked interest, prompting researchers to investigate how the topic and the different actors in it were presented.

Overall, researchers have found that migration narratives are polarised between portrayals that are sympathetic to migrants and portrayals that are focused on the challenges brought about by migrants to host societies. Both positive and negative frames have in common that they are problem focused. For example, the findings from the Horizon 2020 research projects BRIDGES and PERCEPTIONS indicate that mainstream media predominantly portray migration as a problematic issue:[6] migration is presented as a challenge for host societies grappling with security concerns, public health challenges, social cohesion issues and economic implications. Problem-centred narratives depict migrants as burdens or threats, or emphasise human rights violations, racism and difficult journeys, framing migrants as vulnerable, powerless individuals [13]. The framing of migration as a crisis, highlights humanitarian emergencies on the one hand and problems created by large numbers of immigrants for host societies and border control on the other. Some media narratives focus on solidarity, advocating empathy and the need for humanitarian intervention. Even so, they remain problem focused.

The EU-funded research project NODES investigated migration narratives disseminated via Facebook. Similarly, it identifies both threat and crisis frames, which present

5 Also see reference [5] on the role of media, biased representations and their consequences.

6 The BRIDGES project findings are based on the analysis of prime-time TV newscasts, articles in widely read newspapers (progressive, centrist, right-wing/populist) in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom, as well as data collected from the platform X (formerly Twitter). The identification of migration narratives within the PERCEPTIONS project relied on a systematic analysis of academic literature published since 2015, covering research on media narratives emerging during and after the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers to the EU.

Migration narratives are polarised between portrayals that are sympathetic to migrants and portrayals that are focused on the challenges brought about by migrants to host societies. Both positive and negative frames have in common that they are problem focused.

migrants on the one hand as dangerous, external economic, cultural and security threats and on the other highlight the hardships faced by migrants during their journeys and the responsibilities of host societies to provide support to those in need. The research findings also include narratives framing migration as economic benefits. Hein de Haas [14] identifies four powerful migration narratives with the aim of debunking them as myths: the victim narrative, the migration celebration narrative, the mass migration narrative and the migration threat narrative. The recurring frames are solidarity, humanitarianism, threat and crisis. Overall, there is great overlap in the different research findings, highlighting the polarity of migration narratives and a general lack in nuance.[7]

The mainstream media reactions to the political agreement on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in December 2023 and to the ensuing European Parliament (EP) vote in April 2024 exemplifies this polarity. A preliminary analysis by the JRC of the news articles about these two events indicates that the agreement on the reform was met with severe criticism from groups on both sides of the political spectrum. This included warnings by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that claimed the New Pact would lead to human rights violations and left-wing political groups calling the planned reform inhumane. Far-right political groups claimed the reform would merely increase irregular immigration and challenge Member States' sovereignty by forcing them to accept migrants.

Table 1 compares research findings from various research projects and illustrates the polarisation of migration narratives.[8] This comparison illustrates the great overlap and similarity in the narrative frames identified by the different studies, speaking for the robustness of these findings.

2.2 WHAT VALUES ARE DIFFERENT MIGRATION NARRATIVES APPEALING TO?

Individual attitudes towards refugees and migrants are connected to values. Migration narratives are, by their very nature, a simplified and biased take on reality. They are sense-making tools, and therefore frequently serve interests and political agendas: narratives are used to persuade, garner political support, funding or attract voters [14]. But to do so, migration narratives need to be accepted as a convincing version of true events. This is more likely to happen when personal values find resonance in these narratives. Therefore, whether disseminated via mainstream media, in the context of political campaigns, or in the context of

7 Banulescu-Bogdan [276] too, notes that narratives on humanitarian migrants (asylum seekers and refugees) depict these migrants as either heroes or security threats, as victims or exceptional contributors, as opportunists of exemplary neighbours, without much nuance. Eberl et al. [110] however note that the use of frames depends on who specific stories are about, and what terminology is used. The economic threat frame is frequently applied to groups referred to as 'migrants' or 'immigrants', whereas persons spoken or written about as 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' are more often framed as a burden to the welfare system. Moreover, studies have shown that Eastern-Europeans are more likely to be framed as an economic threat, whereas non-Europeans are more frequently framed as a cultural one.

8 The classification of narratives and the labelling of narrative frames may slightly differ from one study to another. Please note that some studies describe narratives and others describe narrative frames. The different findings remain comparable nevertheless.

TABLE 1. The framing of migration in mainstream media: a comparison of research findings

Source	Solidarity Humanitarianism Economic gain	Pragmatism	Threat (economic, physical, cultural) Crisis	Methods and data sources
Migration to the EU. A Review of Narratives and Approaches. *Bayerl et al. [13]* **PERCEPTIONS project**	Solidarity narrative Victim narrative		Xenophobic narrative Crisis narrative	Systematic literature review of academic research on migration narratives in the mainstream media
The Narratives that shape our world. Narrative Analysis Report. Nowak et al. [15] **NODES project**	Migration is good for the economy Solidarity (re: migrants in the EU) Tragedy (re: migrants outside the EU)	Crisis and regulation	Migrants do not integrate Migrants are stealing what's ours We are under siege	Empirical data collection from official Facebook accounts of political parties, leading politicians, NGOs and major newspapers Languages of the corpus of data: English, French, Spanish and Polish
Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives: BRIDGES key findings. Berta Güell & Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas (coord.) [5] **BRIDGES project**	Migration as a problem for refugees (refugees are victims who suffer and face rights violations or racism).	Migration as a problem for both, refugees and host societies.	Migration as a problem for host societies (migration is a problem in terms of economy, security, legality, social cohesion and health).	Empirical data collection from prime-time TV newscasts, articles in widely read newspapers (progressive, centrist, right-wing/ populist) in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, and from Twitter
The Emergence, Uses and Impacts of Narratives on Migration State of the Art Boswell et al. [16] **BRIDGES project**	Humanitarian narrative Victim frame Hero frame 'The good migrant' frame		Islamisation narrative Securitisation narrative Crisis narrative Threat frame	Review of academic literature
Changing the Migration Narrative: On the Power of Discourse, Propaganda and Truth Distortion. Hein de Haas [14] International Migration Institute	The victim narrative The migration celebration narrative		The mass migration narrative The migration threat narrative	Not indicated
How We Talk about Migration. The Link between Migration Narratives, Policy, and Power Banulescu-Bogdan, Malka & Culbertson [1] Migration Policy Institute	National pride: migration as part of a nation's history and strength	Pragmatism	Economic resource insecurity Threats to physical security Threats to national identity Tipping point or loss of control Existential threat	Literature review of existing studies of migration sentiment and narratives and of recently published academic literature focused on each of these five countries: Colombia, Lebanon, Morocco, Sweden and the United States

disinformation campaigns, migration narratives usually orient towards certain values. To better map these values, researchers often use Schwarz' ten basic human values as a conceptual basis.

Studies [17] [18] [19] have shown that certain value orientations can predict whether a person is more open or closed to immigration. Persons who strongly value universalism tend to be more open to out-groups, such as immigrants. A strong preference for power, on the other hand, has the opposite effect. Valuing power and security have also been associated with greater prejudice against ethnic minorities [18].

Concentrating on political messaging, a study by Dennison [17] sheds light on how messages are framed to align with audiences' values in both pro- and anti-immigrant campaigns. The study suggests that audiences who are already open to immigration are also more likely to positively respond to migration messages mobilising values of self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence) or openness to change (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism). Audiences who are opposed to immigration will be more accepting of messages mobilising conservation (security, tradition or conformity) or self-enhancement (power and achievement) [17]. Dennison's study shows that anti-immigrant campaigns have been able to formulate messages that appeal to values across the spectrum, including self-direction, universalism, stimulation and benevolence.

Based on these findings, it can be argued that the solidarity and victim narrative frames appeal to audiences' empathy and sense of justice. The threat and crisis frames mobilise values of conservation (security, tradition or conformity) and self-enhancement (power and achievement). These frames portray immigration as something that upsets or even threatens the world as audiences know it.

Narratives centred on the concept of **fairness** provoke noticeable reactions.[9] Anti-immigration messaging makes use of pre-existing perceptions of unfairness pertaining to resource distribution (e.g. housing, social welfare benefits) and to the suspected abuse of asylum systems designed to protect the most vulnerable. Because people feel strongly about fairness, messages that aim to stir notions of unfair treatment at the individual level or perceived unfair treatment of one's home country at the international or European level, provoke disappointment and feelings of anger. Such feelings can also lead to distrust in the political leaders and in the institutions governing migration.

9 For a more detailed discussion, cf. section 5.3

2.3 WHAT MAKES NARRATIVES CONVINCING?

An alignment with personal values makes narratives more likely to be accepted, but the following conditions make certain depictions of reality more convincing than others:

- **Cognitive consonance and plausibility**: When a narrative aligns with pre-existing beliefs and ideologies, that narrative is more easily accepted and appears more convincing. This links to plausibility. A narrative's plausibility is determined by its congruence, i.e. to what extent it is considered to make sense and to what extent it aligns with available information about the world [3].

- **Issue salience**: Issues or events can be considered salient if they are new, severe or if they touch on core values that the public holds dear [20]. If an issue is new, complex, and if there is little information available but the issue involves risk and uncertainty, narratives which aim to make sense of this issue will gain popularity. Of course, several narratives can emerge simultaneously and compete with one another (e.g. 'fortress Europe' vs. 'migration is out of control').

Migration narratives are, by their very nature, a simplified and biased take on reality. They are used to persuade, garner political support, funding or attract voters.

BOX 2 Schwartz' 10 personal values

Value category	Values and motivational goals
Openness to Change	**Self-direction** – Independent thought and action—choosing, creating and exploring.
	Stimulation – Excitement, novelty and challenge in life (a varied life, an exciting life, daring).
Self-Enhancement	**Hedonism** – Pleasure or sensuous gratification for oneself.
	Achievement – Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards.
	Power – Attainment of preservation of a dominant position within the more general social system.
Conservation	**Security** – Safety, harmony and stability of society, relationships and of self.
	Conformity – Restraint of actions, inclinations and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms.
	Tradition – Respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion impose on the individual.
Self-Transcendence	**Benevolence** – Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact.
	Universalism – Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature.

Source: Dennison, James. 'What policy communication works for migration? Using values to depolarise', ICMPD EUROMED MIGRATION Report, 2019, p.13

- **Emotion**: Emotion provoked by stories can increase *narrative transportation*, meaning that these stories lead audiences to immerse themselves into a narrative to the extent of suspending their disbelief. This appeal relies on the identification with the story protagonist as well as on negative emotions (i.e. anger and anxiety). Negative emotions can be provoked when personal values are threatened or disturbed. This is because people hold their values dearly. Emotions are thus another important component to consider in the relationship between narratives, values, beliefs and eventually behaviour.

Emotions, in particular negative emotions, not only increase narrative transportation, but they also affect decision making and behaviour. A study[10] on the role of emotions in policy views on immigration found that the more intense the emotional reaction to certain information was, the more people resisted changing their policy views on immigration. Once negative emotions

10 See reference [21]. The study tested the effect of news reports about crime committed by immigrants in conjunct with statistical information. The study found that the effect depended on the severity of the reported crimes. Reports of the rape of a young woman significantly increased the demand for anti-immigration policies, but news on petty crime had no impact. Factual information (immigration statistics), the study found, could change policy views when presented in isolation, but together with the rape news, there was no such effect.

> *Once negative emotions were triggered, factual knowledge could no longer change policy views on immigration.*

were triggered, factual knowledge could no longer change policy views on immigration [21].

This finding is relevant as it sheds light on the effects on policy preferences of continued negative and crisis-focused news reporting in mainstream media on the one hand, and the emotional manipulation inherent in certain narratives, on the other. 'Rage farming', a manipulation tactic that aims to provoke outrage from audiences, is frequently used by social media influencers who seek profits via attention-grabbing content, engagement and views . Some populists do the same to push their political agenda by emphasising messages of grievance.[11]

2.4 ENGAGING WITH THE MEDIA TO PROMOTE MORE BALANCED MEDIA NARRATIVES

The media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion on migration. The media landscape is often dominated by a limited number of voices and perspectives. It often focuses on sensational or dramatic stories about migration, rather than highlighting the everyday experiences and contributions of migrants. This contributes to perpetuating negative stereotypes and biases about migrants, which can fuel xenophobia and prejudice. One of the reasons behind this could be that journalists may not always have access to accurate and up-to-date information on migration issues or the context.

EU institutions can promote more balanced media narratives through:

1. **Partnerships which media organisations**: By engaging with the media, EU institutions can encourage responsible reporting on migration issues and promote a more ethical and balanced approach to journalism. Building relationships with journalists and media outlets can help to establish trust, promote media diversity and ensure that a wider range of voices and perspectives are represented in the public discourse on migration.

2. **Proactively engaging with wider audiences:** Trained media experts can help explain data, trends, patterns and correlations that may not be easy to understand for non-experts. They can also provide historical, cultural and social context to migration issues, helping to present the complexities of migration in a more nuanced manner. Interviews on the television, radio and print media can help reach wider audiences. Such media experts could be trained specifically for the role of actively providing this type of commentary in audio-visual media in different EU languages, representing the EU's positions and initiatives in local contexts.

3. **Offering training to journalists**: Journalist training on migration issues can help journalists to produce more accurate and balanced reporting on migration, avoiding stereotypes and biases. It can help journalists gain a deeper understanding of the complex issues surrounding migration. Training can also help journalists to use data and research effectively in their reporting, including how to interpret and analyse migration data and how to explain trends and patterns.

11 Cf. "How Companies Should Combat Rage Farming Attempts" by Alan Jagolinzer and Sander van der Linden, February 6 2024, https://www.promarket.org/2024/02/06/how-companies-should-combat-rage-farming-attempts/ , last access 29.11.2024

Case Study 1

Narratives on 'climate migration'

Christoph Deuster

In recent decades, several common narratives on climate migration emerged. First and foremost, climate change induced migration has regularly been described as a crisis [22] [23] [24]. According to this alarmist narrative, climate change will trigger mass migration from less to more developed countries. Early studies claimed that the adverse consequences of climate change could force some 200 million people to migrate by 2050 [25] [26]. While this number was prominently and frequently cited in debates, later apocalyptic alarmist narratives suggested that as many as one billion people could be displaced in the future by climatic factors [27]. Similarly, the World Bank's famous Groundswell report argued that by 2050, up to 216 million climate migrants could have to move internally in six major world regions [28].

Building on the alarmist narrative on climate migration, the securitisation narrative portrays mass migration as a threat to the security of more developed countries [22] [29]. According to this narrative, the mass migration of people appears as an unmanageable influx and poses severe risks for destination countries in Europe or North America. Often taken up by the media or political interest groups, the hypothesis of an impending mass exodus of climate migrants led to calls for more restrictive border controls, increased security measures or may have contributed to rising anti-immigrant sentiments in destination countries [30].

In addition, closely related to the alarmist and securitisation narratives, the problem narrative characterises migration as inherently problematic. It interprets migration as a process that is generally undesirable and should ideally be prevented [14]. According to the problem narrative, human mobility could be understood as a maladaptation to the various adverse consequences of climate change.

As somewhat of an inverse concept to the above narratives, the migration-as-adaptation narrative relies exclusively on the argument of individual adaptation [31]. It displays migration simply as a proactive and often desirable process of adaptation and emphasises individual capacity and empowerment to respond to adverse climatic factors. Notably, major international organisations and actors, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), tend to see the phenomenon of environmental migration as a key personal strategy to adapt and to address vulnerability [32].

Furthermore, particularly early projections of the number of future climate migrants suffered from a degree of simplicity in assumptions and elementary postulations. According to such a simplicity narrative, it is often somewhat trivial to establish causal relationships between the effects of climate change and human mobility. For example, the popular estimate of 200 million climate migrants referred to above relied on simple extrapolations of demographic and environmental impacts based on macro-level forecasts [23] [25] [26]. Similar simplistic approaches tended to postulate linear relationships between climatic factors and migration, did not account for geographical detail to capture context-specific effects, neglected important interrelationships between different dimensions of mobility and immobility [32] and ignored additional effects, primarily related to adaptation [33].

The lack of focus on adaptation measures specifically characterises the inhabitability narrative [34], according to which certain areas will inevitably become uninhabitable. Low-lying areas, such as atolls in the Pacific or river deltas in South Asia, threatened by the effects of inescapable sea-level rise, are often at the centre of this narrative. It frequently disregards the capacity of affected populations to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change, and consequently tends to overlook the self-determination of affected communities and individuals.

Finally, the geographic-misconception narrative understands the issue of climate change induced migration as predominantly a phenomenon of less developed countries [35]. It hypothesises that climate migration and displacement occur almost exclusively in the Global South, where people tend to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. In contrast,

Popular narratives on climate migration are inaccurate and misleading.

the Global North is mostly confined to the role of a host and supporting actor for climate change induced migrants.

What does the evidence base on climate migration disclose?

Alongside the emergence of the various narratives on climate migration, a growing number of empirical studies attempted to expand the evidence base on climate change induced migration in recent years [36] [37] [38]. In essence, this expanding evidence base reveals that whether the adverse impacts of climate change increase or decrease migration flows is ultimately context-specific. Establishing causal relationships between climatic variables and human mobility is complex and challenging, as there are generally a variety of often intertwined factors that shape individual migration decisions [39]. Disentangling the numerous migration drivers is difficult if not impossible [40]. In addition, objective knowledge about when a place becomes uninhabitable may not even exist, but is in many contexts rather defined relationally based on local customs and cultures [34].

Evidence from global survey data exemplifies this complexity. An illustrative example can be provided by using data from the Gallup World Poll. This global survey is conducted regularly in a large number of countries worldwide and is one of the most comprehensive sources of nationally representative data on individual perceptions and attitudes. In contrast to many other surveys, the Gallup World Poll presents the unique advantage of including a dedicated survey question on environmental mobility. More precisely, survey respondents in 112 countries were asked in 2010 whether they thought they would need to move in the next five years because of severe environmental problems.[12]

For the world and the five continental regions, figure 1 shows the proportion of survey respondents who expected a necessity to move. While at the global level around 12 % of people thought they would have to move in the next five years because of environmental issues, this share was markedly higher in Africa (17%), America (14%) and Asia (13%). By contrast, only around 4% of survey respondents in Europe and Oceania[13] expected a necessity to move.

In addition, the same individuals who responded to the question on the necessity to move were asked about their desire to migrate internationally.[14] Those who expressed a wish to migrate were then subsequently asked if they had any plans for international migration.[15] Figure 2 depicts the share of respondents who wanted to migrate internationally among those who thought they would need to move because of severe environmental problems. At the global level, a minority of around 35 % of those that expected a necessity to move also indicated a desire to migrate to another country. Even though this share was slightly higher in Africa (44%) and Asia (41%), this suggests that individually anticipated environmental displacement does not automatically trigger international migration.

Instead, these results may support the relatively consensus finding that most mobility caused by environmental factors manifests itself in the form of short-distance movements, often within national borders [41]. Furthermore, exposure to extreme climatic events, such as droughts that trigger food shortages, can lead to temporary migratory movements [42] and do not necessarily result in people permanently abandoning their homes.

Moreover, among those that expected a necessity to move and desired to migrate internationally, only 18 % were making plans for the move to another country. This raises the question of why individuals, that anticipate a need to move due to serious environmental problems and that have a desire to migrate to another country, do not make plans to move, which in turn may point to the phenomenon of involuntary immobility and populations trapped in situations of environmental vulnerability without any means to adapt or migrate [43]. At the same time, the lack of desire and plans for international migration in the face of environmental stress could also potentially be an indication of self-determination, voluntary immobility and individual insistence on adaptation.

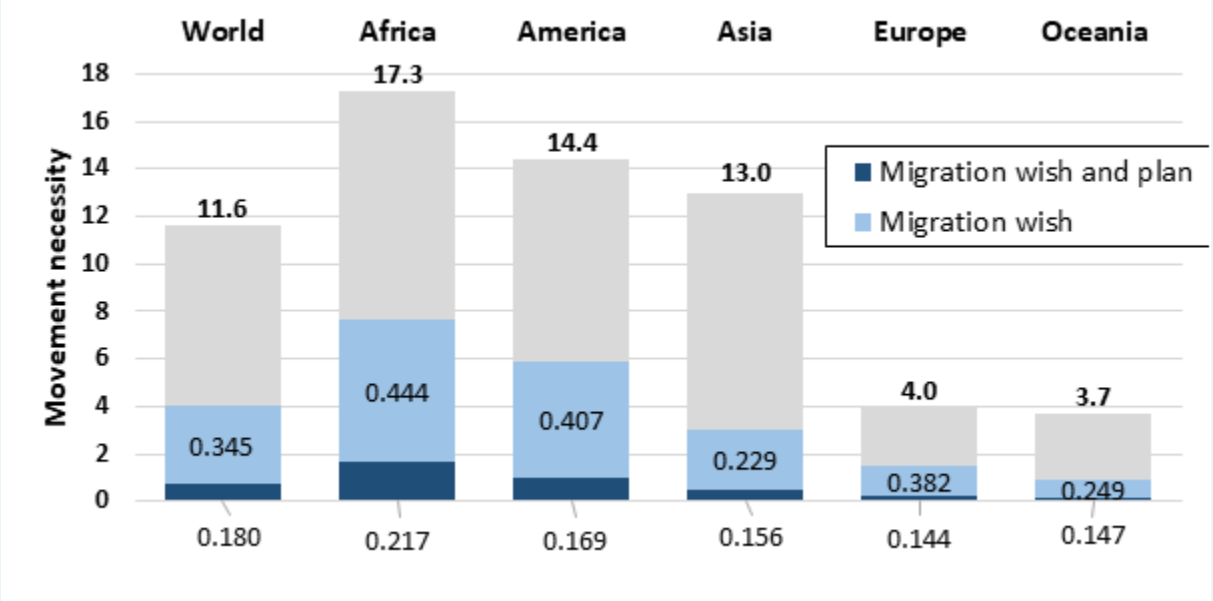
12 The question in the Gallup World Poll reads: 'In the next five years, do you think you will need to move because of severe environmental problems?' It is important to note that the wording used in this survey question (i.e. 'need to move') may capture different dimensions of movement, including migration within or across country borders.

13 Oceania does not include the Pacific Small Island Developing States and only consists of Australia and New Zealand in the sample analysed here.

14 The question in the Gallup World Poll reads: 'Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?'

15 The question in the Gallup World Poll reads: 'Are you planning to move permanently to another country in the next 12 months, or not?' (asked only of those who would like to move to another country)

FIGURE 2. Expected environmental displacement and international migration



Source: Own elaboration based on Gallup World Poll.
Note: This figure depicts for the world and five continental regions the percentage share of respondents to the Gallup World Poll that think will need to move because of severe environmental problems (Movement necessity). Among those respondents that expect a necessity to move, the figure shows the shares of respondents that would like to move permanently to another country in the next 12 months (Migration wish). Among this latter sub-group, the figure also indicates the share of those who plan to move permanently to another country (Migration wish and plan).

Turning to the preferred destination choice of potential climate change induced migrants, the above narratives regularly point to the most developed countries as the recipients of a mass influx of climate migrants. However, existing databases on observed numbers of international migrants, refugees and asylum seekers show that most movements occur within the same global regions. For instance, in 2020, 63% of all international migrants from sub-Saharan Africa were residing in another sub-Saharan African country [44]. Similarly, in 2023, 69% of refugees and other persons in need of international protection were hosted by a country neighbouring their countries of origin [45]. The Gallup World Poll data indicates a comparable trend for those respondents who expect a necessity to move due to severe environmental problems and at the same time want to move permanently to another country. The survey asked respondents about their preferred destination country.[16] An analysis of these destination choices reveals that only a minority of 22% of respondents expecting environmental mobility and willing to move internationally chose one of the 27 EU Member States as their preferred destination, while 32% selected either the USA or Canada. This suggests that even among those who might be induced to relocate to another country due to climatic effects, a significant proportion would not choose a destination in the Global North.

Finally, the Gallup World Poll included a question on the individual exposure to severe environmental problems.[17] While 35% of respondents worldwide indicated they had experienced severe environmental problems in their city or area over the past year, one in two respondents in Africa reported such exposure. In addition, exposure to severe environmental problems did not spare respondents in the more developed countries of Europe (22%), North America (25%)and Oceania (31%). Combined with the data showing that disasters triggered about two and four hundred thousand internal displacements in Europe and North America respectively in 2023 alone [46], this strongly suggests that climate migration and displacement are also significantly affecting richer countries in the Global North [47].

16 The question in the Gallup World Poll reads: 'To which country would you like to move?' (asked only of those who would like to move to another country)
17 The question in the Gallup World Poll reads: 'In the past 12 months, have there been any severe environmental problems in your city or area, or not? For example, pollution, floods, droughts, or long periods of extreme heat or cold?'

In summary, the example of the evidence derived from the Gallup World Poll reveals how the narratives on climate migration described above are inaccurate and misleading. Rather than supporting the causal attribution of millions of potentially dangerous international migrants from the Global South to specific climate variables, the evidence points to complex and context-specific links between environmental factors and human mobility as well as potential voluntary and involuntary immobility in all regions of the world.

What is the way forward for science and policymaking?

Calls for more evidence and better data appear to be among the standard elements of recent policy frameworks for international migration, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum.[18] Nevertheless, the above analysis demonstrates that in the context of climate migration, simply attempting to project the number of future climate migrants is challenging and inherently subject to high levels of uncertainty. As a result, such figures appear to have been subject to misuse and misinterpretation in the past and may have distracted attention from persons in need. As such, a purely macro-level quantification of the number of climate migrants may not be the desired and effective outcome of research and policies addressing climate change induced migration.

Knowledge production and policymaking should include a focus on the various forms of environmental mobility as well as immobility and attempt to address holistically the links between exposure, vulnerability, environmental migration and involuntary immobility [48]. Compared to existing studies, this would demand a shift to a new research agenda on environmental mobility that avoids the pitfalls of simplistic approaches and elementary assumptions [22]. In particular, as the dominant alarmist narratives on climate migrants divert attention away from real needs, the focus should shift from the threat of a possible mass influx of climate migrants to those who are unable to adapt. This also requires engagement with local knowledge, greater collaboration between stakeholders and self-defined narratives of affected communities and people. Moreover, if habitability emerges as a relative and relational concept [34], the focus on voluntary immobility and the inclusion of the rights and views of affected populations become pivotal. Changing priorities along these lines could help to better align policies with real needs, namely improving adaptation, mitigation and the protection of those who are unable to migrate.

Furthermore, a high level of sensitivity and attention to the usage and potential exploitation of language is undoubtedly of crucial importance in the context of climate change induced migration [35]. Eliminating alarmist terms such as 'climate refugees', 'climate exodus' or 'climate crisis' from the standard vocabulary may contribute to less emotional, more objective and better informed debates on the issues. In addition, mindful communication measures include acknowledging that habitability is dynamic as well as relational, and that disentangling the drivers of migration is a difficult and, in most contexts, an impossible task. Finally, the recognition that environmental displacement is also a phenomenon affecting richer countries may support the development of a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the issues of climate change induced migration.

As the dominant alarmist narratives on climate migrants divert attention away from real needs, the focus should shift from the threat of a possible mass influx of climate migrants to those who are unable to adapt.

18 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: https://www.iom.int/resources/global-compact-safe-orderly-and-regular-migration/res/73/195 ; Pact on Migration and Asylum: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

BOX 3 Migration and climate change – why terminology matters

The negative effects of climate change and other environmental factors play a direct and indirect role in driving various forms of mobility, be it forced or voluntary, within countries or across borders. As a result, several terms have emerged to describe forms of mobility where climate change plays a role, as well as circumstances when environmental and climate factors limit people's movements (immobility). To date there is no legal or internationally accepted definition. Within the EU, different institutions have used different terms at different moments in time and in different policy areas.

The choice of language to describe mobility and immobility in the context of climate change has important implications for policy responses, protection responsibilities and public discourse. Terms like 'environmental migration', 'climate migration' and 'environmental/climate refugees' may suggest simplistic causal relations between environmental factors, climate change and people's decision to move. If not used appropriately, these terms risk overlooking the role of other social, political and economic drivers that intersect with environmental and climate factors, blurring distinct forms of mobility and ignoring the aspect of immobility. Other terms, like 'disaster displacement' and 'trapped populations', point directly to protection needs of affected populations, but reflect only a portion of the phenomenon that links climate change to mobility.

Finally, general definitions like 'human mobility in the context of climate change' comprise a broad spectrum of population movements and forms of immobility, but may not provide a clear call to action for policy makers.

Ultimately, the choice of terminology will depend on the context and purpose of the communication. Using correct terminology in each specific context of a communication is important, because each term has a specific connotation and different terms are more or less relevant in different contexts. For instance, in a humanitarian response context, "disaster displacement" may be more accurate than "climate migration", as it emphasises the urgent need for assistance and protection. In a development policy context, "human mobility in the context of climate change" might be more suitable, as it acknowledges the complexity of the issue and the need for comprehensive solutions. Concepts such as 'individuals affected by climate-related stressors' or 'communities vulnerable to environmental degradation', could be used to discuss the impact of climate change on people without focusing exclusively on the migration aspect.[19]

19 For a more detailed analysis on the role of terminology in population movements in the context of climate change, see Migration and climate change - Does terminology matter? [287]

3. Divisive migration narratives

Fiona Seiger and Karelis Olivo Rumpf

Populism is characterised by a divisive and simplified view of the world, whereby political elites are perceived as betraying the 'ordinary people'. Populist narratives are appealing because they rely on the audience's identification with story protagonists and on the elicitation of strong, negative emotions. Crises, or events that can be framed as such, provide populists with the opportunity to highlight leadership failure and to inject emotional pathos into stories.

3.1 HOW POPULISTS NARRATE MIGRATION

An analysis of the migration narratives promoted by populist leaders can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors driving populist sentiment, and help develop effective strategies to promote a more inclusive, empathetic and evidence-based public discourse on migration.

The research team at the JRC aimed at systematically identifying migration narratives of Europe's populist[20] leaders. For this purpose, we collected and analysed a total of 893 tweets posted on the platform X (formerly Twitter) between October 2021 and December 2023. The analysed tweets were messages posted by ten randomly selected public figures in European politics known for anti-immigration views. Our analysis resulted in the identification of 11 super-narratives and 52 narratives (see Table 3 in the Annex). While this analysis enabled us to better grasp what broader migration narratives are used, the analysis of tweets has some important limitations: it merely captures the political communication of a select few, on only one of the many channels they employ and it is limited to a set time period.

The most widely used narrative is the one we labelled 'us vs. them (the establishment)' (see Figure 4), a narrative portraying the messenger as the rightful representative of the 'ordinary people,' pitting themselves, their party and their supporters against a perceived political elite. The narrative portrays the establishment as out-of-touch, ineffective and failing to act in the interest of its citizens, while positioning the messenger and their allies as the voice of the people. Not only national political rivals are condemned in this narrative but the European Commission and the Union as a whole are identified as political rivals whose trustworthiness is undermined. For instance, Marine Le Pen's Eurosceptic tweets have accused the EU of orchestrating immigration on the one hand and of failing to manage it on the other. Fashioning herself as the rightful representative of the people, the leader of the French National Rally party promoted the idea of holding a nation-wide referendum on immigration in France, also calling it the referendum to stop immigration and end the principle of jus soli, seemingly deciding on the outcome of the referendum before its launch.

The issue of migration is exploited for power and control. This narrative moreover encompasses commentary on values, wherein the messengers often reject or ridicule those who prioritise liberal values and policies. This narrative relies on messages that discredit political rivals and that rally support for anti-establishment agendas (which can take various forms). The 'us vs. them' narrative mirrors the ideational core of populism [49], which centres on anti-elite discourses and polarisation. Nearly 31% of all social media messages analysed fell under this category.

About 16% of all published tweets are aimed at 'demonstrating competence'. Where messages were meant to instil confidence in populist parties and leaders, we counted them towards this narrative. The 'demonstrating competence' narrative involves promoting specific policy initiatives and ideas related to immigration and presenting them as solutions to address perceived challenges and restore order. Additionally, this narrative involves applauding political allies who share similar views on migration by portraying them as competent and reliable partners in achieving common goals. By

20 Scholar Cas Mudde defines populism as a 'thin-centred ideology', which sees society as separated into two antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and argues that politics should be an expression of the will of the people [288]. Populism exists on both sides of the political spectrum.

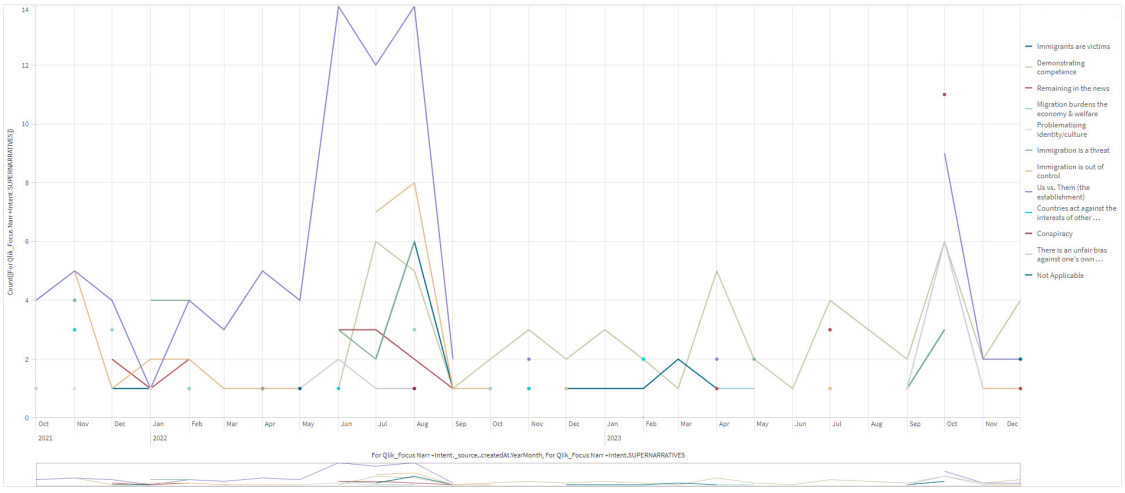
BOX 4 From opposition party to governing party – a change reflected in political narratives in Italy

An analysis conducted by researchers of the BRIDGES project [50] looked in more detail at the political discourse employed by Giorgia Meloni, leading up to the Italian national elections of September 2022. The researchers found that Meloni overall softened her sovereigntist tone on numerous issues so as to appeal to more moderate voters, except on migration. Meloni maintained an electoral migration narrative centred on the claim that hundreds of thousands of non-western migrants misused the asylum system to enter Italy as cheap labour migrants and that this was tolerated by the political left who allegedly wanted to play favourites towards economic elites, at the expense of native workers [50].

An analysis conducted by the JRC research team has come to similar conclusions. The analysis looked at tweets about migration published by Giorgia Meloni and by Matteo Salvini between October 2021 and December 2023. It shows that their narrative on migration, as communicated through social media, has evolved since the election, with a shift from a strongly sovereigntist and anti-migration stance to a more pragmatic approach [50]. The 'us vs them' super-narrative used to discredit political rivals and critique elites was frequently used during the period leading up to the Italian elections. Once Giorgia Meloni took office, this super-narrative was no longer deployed, with the exception of a few tweets posted by Matteo Salvini, discrediting 'the political left' in Italy and European decision makers in Brussels.

The sudden change in rhetoric identified in the tweets demonstrates the strategic nature of polarising, anti-elitist narratives. For a party in opposition, the use of the 'us vs. them' super-narrative serves as a strategic tool to gain electoral momentum and provoke a shift in power by discrediting those in government and their perceived allies. However, once they assume power, former opposition parties must adapt their approach, as they now occupy the position of the establishment, forcing a re-evaluation of their tactics to maintain legitimacy.[21]

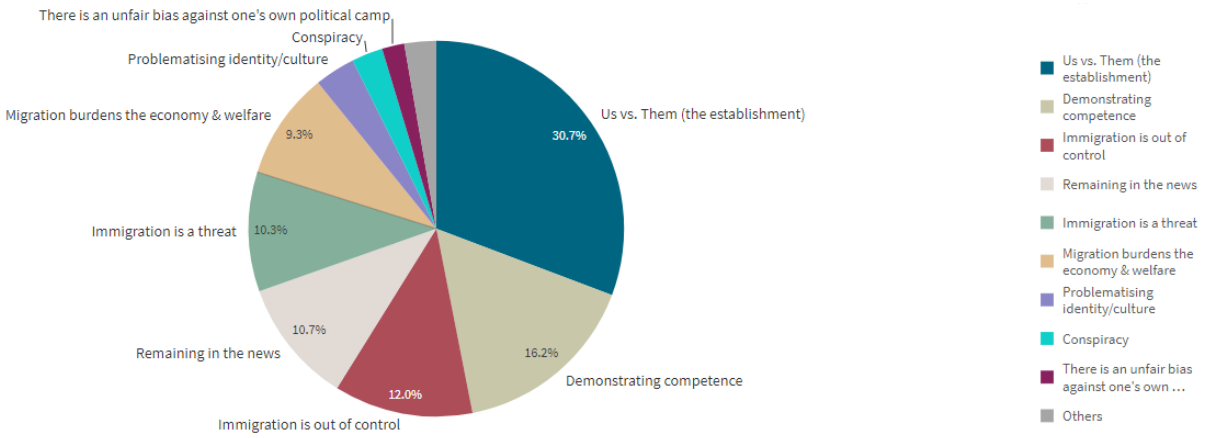
FIGURE 3. Super-narratives used in messages published on X accounts associated with G. Meloni and M. Salvini (Oct 2021- Dec 2023)



emphasising that they stand for the people and their interests, populist parties and leaders look to position themselves as competent and capable agents of change who will bring stability and security to the immigration landscape. This narrative is aimed at building trust between the messengers, those on behalf they speak and their audiences.

21 Cf. reference [277]. Note that Schwörer looked at populist parties in coalition governments.

FIGURE 4. Share of tweets deploying one or more super-narratives



These two most common narratives are discursive tools meant to polarise, to erode trust in those currently in government, and to allow the messengers to position themselves as viable alternatives. In our dataset these narratives usually appear in combination with a specific migration narrative. Yet, only the third most frequent narrative we identified is a commentary on the issue of migration per se, claiming that 'immigration is out of control,' used in 12% of all tweets. This narrative is centred on instilling a sense of crisis and urgency by portraying immigration as a phenomenon spiralling beyond manageable bounds. It emphasises the overwhelming influx of immigrants and highlights perceived weaknesses in border management and control, alleging that borders are either strained or inadequately regulated to cope with the influx. By framing immigration this way, the narrative fuels fear and anxiety among the population, painting a picture of a nation under siege by an uncontrollable arrival of migrants. This portrayal aims to justify calls for stricter immigration policies, increased border security measures and heightened vigilance against perceived threats posed by unchecked migration.

Other important narratives include 'immigration is a threat' (used in ca. 10% of all tweets), 'migration burdens the economy and our welfare' (used in ca. 9% of all tweets), as well as 'problematising identity or culture', 'migration is part of a conspiracy' and claims about there being an unfair bias against one's own political camp (all used in less than 4% of all tweets; for a detailed description cf. Table 3 in the Annex). Similar frames are employed in disinformation about migration (see Chapter 4), which illustrates that the spread of disinformation benefits from frames that are already in use in populist storytelling.

Furthermore, we found that about 11% of all tweets included in our analysis served the purpose of remaining in the news. No commentary related to immigration was communicated, but migration was simply mentioned, often in the hashtags, reminding audiences of the political priorities of the messenger.

Our findings align with those of the team behind the research project NODES, who analysed dominant narratives in online news media and social media around three salient political issues, one of which is migration. The project focused the analysis on Facebook posts issued by pages domiciled in five European countries: Spain, France, Ireland, Poland and the United Kingdom.[22] The researchers identified seven migration narratives listed, next to the narratives that we identified in our analysis. The two sets of narratives show some level of similarity (see Table 2).

The NODES project findings show that there is variation in how often the different migration narratives are used in each of the five European countries included in their

22 Their analysis relied on 500 texts in four languages including articles from mainstream media, texts published on organisation and activist websites, scientific communication websites, and texts collected from online websites classified as misinformation. These texts served to identify and map narratives. Subsequently, the NODES research team used the map to annotate 19 000 Facebook posts from selected sources in five countries (PL, ES, FR, GB, and IE). These posts had been published between 01.02.2020 and 31.07.2023.

TABLE 2. Comparing narratives in Facebook posts and populist tweets

Narratives identified in analysis of posts of select Facebook pages (NODES project)	Narratives identified in an analysis of tweets posted by select European populist figures (JRC NARRATIM project)
Migration is good for the economy	-
Solidarity	-
Tragedy	Immigrants are victims
Crisis and regulation	Immigration is out of control
Migrants do not integrate	Problematising identity and/or culture
Migrants are stealing what's ours	Migration burdens the economy and our welfare
We are under siege	Immigration is out of control; immigration is part of a conspiracy; Immigration is a threat

analysis.[23] Moreover, favourable narratives were found to be used slightly more often than negative ones in all five countries, except in the UK.

Factoring into this more frequent occurrence of narratives favourable towards migrants could be the use of the victim narrative on Facebook pages classified as right-leaning and extreme right.[24] This narrative, which is generally considered to be sympathetic towards certain migrant groups and their plight, focuses on the hardships entailed by immigration and deploys both tragedy and solidarity frames. Given that the policy objective in line with right-wing ideology is to severely curb or entirely stop immigration, one must assume that messages highlighting the tragedy and suffering of migrants are primarily used to support these objectives and to serve a securitisation narrative.

We observed the use of a similar rhetoric in our tweets analysis. The 'immigrants are victims' narrative is a rare but interesting occurrence in the context of messaging by right-wing populist leaders. The victim narrative is mobilised to argue against immigration and for more thoroughly controlled borders, presumably in the interest of migrants who are driven by false hope and misleading promises. This narrative often implies that human traffickers or humanitarian NGOs are responsible for migrants' suffering.

The deployment of this humanitarian anti-immigration narrative serves to rhetorically balance out the otherwise xenophobic anti-immigration narratives used by far-right parties and leaders, making their stances more palatable to a wider audience. This also shows that messengers on the political right are more flexible in adapting migration narratives for their purposes, even if they are typically used by messengers on the opposite side of the political spectrum. However, the same cannot be said about messages posted on Facebook pages counted as left-leaning or far-left. The use of narratives painting migrants as a threat, a narrative typical for the political right, is uncommon for the political left [15].

Finally, migration narratives link to narratives about other issues of societal and political importance, especially when narratives are used to persuade in the context of political campaigns. In the media, migration is debated alongside several other issues that gain and loose relevance over time. For instance, in the past year, headlines about immigration and asylum have appeared alongside stories about the Green Deal, farmer's protests, the EU support for Ukraine and continued efforts to push for cleaner energy, to name a few. These issues simultaneously become subject of political debate and inform political messaging. Commentary on current affairs feeds into overarching narratives about the social and political world and transcends specific topics.

23 For example, the narrative 'We are under siege' accounts for merely 10% of all identified narratives deployed in Ireland, 11% in Spain and 12% in France, but accounts for 23% in Poland and 30% in the UK. Moreover, narratives framing migration in terms of solidarity accounted for well over 30% of all narratives used in Ireland, Poland, and Spain, but for merely 20% in the UK. In France, the solidarity frame was found to be used in about 27% of all Facebook posts. The least frequently used narratives were "Migrants are good for the economy" with 3% or less of all Facebook posts across all five countries, followed by "Migrants are taking what's ours" which accounted for 3% or less in Spain, France and Poland, 9% in Ireland and 7% of all analysed Facebook posts attributed to sources in the UK.

24 The NODES report includes a graphical representation (p.83) which shows that Facebook pages leaning towards the political right, around 40% of the posts deploy either the solidarity or tragedy frames. On far-right pages, ca. 20% do so. Conversely, Facebook pages categorised as left-leaning and far-left are much less likely to deploy the negative narrative frames typically employed by the political right.

3.2 LEVERAGING ON DIFFERENT ISSUES TO DEEPEN A SENSE OF CRISIS

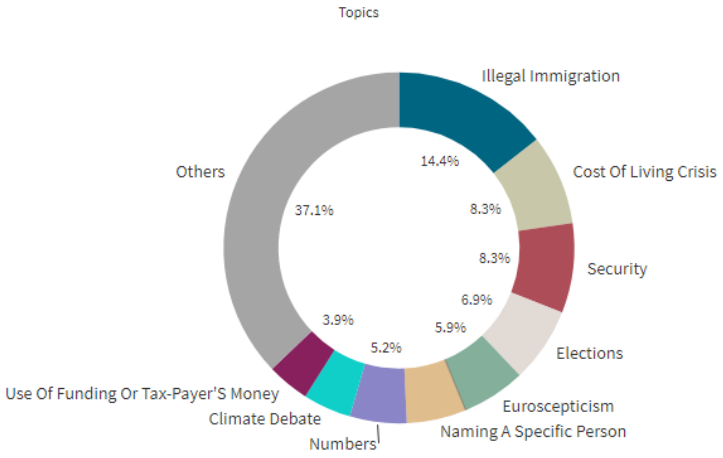
In our analysis of tweets, we noted that messages about migration often also contained references to one or more politically salient issues, even if they had no clear link to migration. These were the cost-of-living crisis (10% of all tweets), security (10% of all tweets), upcoming elections (ca. 9% of all tweets), Euroscepticism expressed by the messenger (7% of all tweets), critique targeting a specific person mentioned by name (i.e. ad hominem attacks, ca.7% of all tweets), and the climate debate (appearing in about 5% of all tweets).

The concern with some issues over others may be due to their (national) contextual relevance or because certain parties have made these issues central to their political campaigns in view of upcoming elections. The frequency at which a certain topic is mentioned in conjunct with migration indeed depends on the messenger. For instance, half of the tweets by Thierry Baudet included in our analysis either referenced the climate debate, the cost-of-living crisis, the housing crisis in the Netherlands or the war in Ukraine. Tweets collected from Santiago Abascal's account on X show a great concern with illegal migration, elections and of the high numbers of immigrants in Spain. Victor Orbán, whose tweets are written in English, concentrates on Euroscepticism, illegal migration and border security. Marine Le Pen connects her commentary on migration predominantly with security concerns, the French elections in April 2022, the cost-of-living crisis and illegal immigration. Giorgia Meloni's tweets about migration focus on illegal immigration and on security concerns, whereas Alice Weidel's migration messaging is linked to the cost-of-living crisis and criticism of the current government.

The creation of associations across topics of political and societal importance can increase the number of supporters by rallying them around several issues. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, was used by populist right-wing parties in Europe to mobilise friction between 'the ordinary people', elites and 'others'.[25] The pandemic also allowed these parties to further support their nativist politics [51]. In France, Marine Le Pen made a direct link between the pandemic, issues of security and immigration. In Germany, the AfD framed the pandemic as an imported phenomenon, critiqued open borders and political elites while promoting different experts with alternative opinions. In Spain, the populists in opposition resorted to nativism. In all three countries, populist party leaders in opposition fiercely criticised the government and stoked fear and anger over supposed governmental overreach [51].

Commentary on several issues simultaneously supports the creation of an overarching narrative about the social and political world. This was one of the conclusions resulting from the NODES project which, alongside migration narratives, investigated narratives about climate change and COVID-19. The NODES project's analysis of narratives about these issues revealed five overarching narrative frames (cf. box 3). One of these frames, the 'freedom/control' frame, focuses on events and policies as governmental impositions, on censored dissent and government conspiracy against 'the people'.

FIGURE 5. Share of tweets containing a reference to topics of societal and political relevance



25 Cf. reference [257]. Note that in our dataset, which is limited to tweets posted between October 2021 and December 2023 that contain the term migration or keywords linked to that term, mentions of the COVID-19 pandemic were rare.

BOX 5 Five overarching narrative frames, NODES project analysis

The NODES analysis [15] of narratives around three different topics (climate change, COVID-19, and migration) allowed the researchers to identify five cross-topic narratives.

The 'freedom/control' frame claims that the government imposed undesired policies, censored dissent and conspired against the people.

The 'bottom-up solidarity' frame, emphasises the importance of working together, of mobilising and not waiting for the government. This frame also heavily relies on the same pictorial symbolism across all three topics: heroes, hands and hearts.

The 'technosolutionism' frame focuses on regulation and the use of new technologies to address problems.

The 'apocalypse' frame centres on human suffering, people dying and depicts the world at the brink **of a catastrophe**.

The 'reasonable calculation' frame focuses on economic arguments in debates about pros and cons of certain policy choices.

This framing echoes the narratives we identified as 'us vs. them (the establishment)' and 'immigration is part of a conspiracy'. At the centre of these narratives lies distrust in leadership, in political institutions, as well as distrust in science and research. This is unsurprising as populism decreases trust in these institutions and thereby acts as segue to conspiracy beliefs [49].[26]

3.3 WHAT MAKES POPULIST NARRATIVES APPEALING

A populist narrative is a political narrative characterised by people-centrism, anti-elitism and the use of a crisis rhetoric [52]. Furthermore, the ideational core of populism simplifies the world by painting it black and white and removing any nuance (also referred to as a Manichean vision of society) [49]. People-centrism depicts 'ordinary people' as righteous, praising their traits and actions. Anti-elitism focuses on the idea of elites being corrupt, selfish and generally harmful. In populist narratives, elites do not represent the people but are depicted as damaging groups that have only their own interests at heart. On top of invoking a sense of 'we, the people' against 'them, the elite', populist narratives sometimes pit the people against a threatening other, an out-group [53]. The 'ordinary people' and the elites (or the threatening other) are presented as two homogeneous social entities. Story protagonists in such narratives are assigned to either a positive in-group or a negative out-group. Also, such stories spur the urge to pick sides and offer a strong sense of belonging when the positive in-group is picked.

The role of values

On the one hand, populist narratives are appealing for the same reasons as other narratives, e.g. they are more likely to be accepted if they appeal to personal values. On the other hand, there seems to be a connection between holding on strongly to certain personal values and one's receptiveness to populism. Baro[27] finds that people who scored high in self-enhancement and conservation values are more likely to vote for populist parties (left- or right-wing), whereas supporters of self-transcendence values were less likely to vote for populist parties. Marcos-Marne [54] finds that people giving less importance to universalism (a sub-set of self-transcendence values) and more to security (a sub-set of conservation values) are more likely to vote for right-wing populist parties. Both these findings mirror what we know about values and attitudes towards migrants: persons scoring high on self-transcendence are more open towards migrants whereas persons scoring higher

26 Also see Cargnino [64] who found that populist attitudes positively relate to conspiracy beliefs.

27 Baro (57) uses data from the European Social Survey Round 9 (second release, 2018–2020) and the PopuList dataset, Version 2.0.

on conservation values tend to oppose migration. This may be explained by value driven attitudes towards out-groups more generally:

'Populist voters are less likely to give priority to inclusiveness and tolerance or to be concerned for the welfare and interests of outgroups. On the other hand, they are more likely to give higher priority to the ingroup protection-oriented values that express the need to avoid or control anxiety and threat, to protect the self and stability of society' [55].

Populist narratives appeal to notions of relative deprivation, meaning the experienced or perceived change in income and economic, social or political status, by feeding notions of preferential treatment of a relevant out-group. Moreover, populism relies on conservation-oriented ideas: a vision of an idealised past as a reaction to cultural, economic and societal changes, offering a sense of security against the perceived loss of identity. Populist narratives appeal to people who feel anxious and aim to control against threats to protect themselves and the stability of society.

But for values to result in action (e.g. voting behaviour) and for populists to push forward their political agendas, these values must be activated. Political or societal crises present an opportunity to do so via commentary on such events. To better understand what personal values are activated by populist messengers on X (formerly Twitter), the research team at the JRC associated one or more of Schwarz 10 personal values with each super-narrative and narrative identified in our previously described tweets analysis. The team relied on existing research outlining what values are typically used in value-based communication about migration [56] and on research exploring the relationship between personal values and attitudes towards migration and migration policy [57] [58]. The association of values was done in a two-step process whereby an initial association was reviewed and modified where needed. To ensure the association of values and narratives remained consistent when looking at the individual messages, randomly selected individual tweets were included in the process of analysis.

The values most appealed to are those of conservation (security, tradition or conformity) and self-enhancement (power and achievement). Typically, the 'us. vs. them', 'we are competent' and the 'immigration burdens the economy and welfare' narratives mobilise concerns over power, whereas security concerns are more likely to be activated with narratives claiming that immigration is a threat, out of control or that immigrants' identity and/or culture is problematic. However, self-transcendence values are activated too, for instance is universalism activated in narratives claiming unfair biases against the messengers' political camp and benevolence in narratives claiming that immigration burdens the economy and welfare of host societies (see Table 3 in the Annex).

The importance of societal and political crises

The violation of personal values commonly evokes an emotional response. The performance of crises by populists has that very aim; indeed, crisis is not only a precondition to populism, but populists actively perpetuate the perception of a sense of crisis [59] [60] [61]. Crisis rhetoric injects emotional pathos into a story and is expressed through corresponding poignant language. It is therefore very effective in achieving narrative transportation i.e. the audience's immersion in a narrative to the extent of suspending disbelief. Aside from relying on strong emotions, usually anger and anxiety, the appeal of such narratives also relies on the audiences' identification with the in-group protagonist.

Crises tend to benefit populists because citizens get disaffected with the political leadership. The populist performance of a crisis is a political blame game. Yet, the extent to which populists can leverage on events framed as crises depends on two issue characteristics: salience and the event's proximity to the public, meaning the extent to which an event has tangible and immediate influence on people's lives [62]. People generally can better assess distortions and exaggerations in proximate events as they rely less on the media and other sources to make sense of it, as it is the case with more distant events [20].

For example, the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers in 2015/2016 in Europe received significant media coverage, yet one that remained relatively distant as it did not tangibly affect the lives of most of the public. Hinterleitner et al. (2023) analysed the crisis performance of the German Alternative for Germany (AfD) and found that the party effectively created a coherent crisis narrative around the event. The AfD linked the crisis to various issues, even if only remotely related, and accused the government of betrayal and failure. This narrative appealed to audiences by simplifying complex issues and providing a clear direction for those concerned with the situation. It also played on people's fears and insecurities, particularly those who felt threatened by the arrival of refugees.

Aside from the elements and strategies that make populist narratives appealing, other factors have facilitated their success. Increasingly mediatised politics and

public debates centred on political personalities and the communication conditions set by social media platforms have facilitated the spread of simplistic populist messages at the detriment of civil debate. Moreover, mainstream media stories that stir emotions and stoke fear pave the way for populist narratives. A review study of research on media coverage, focused on how European media reported on immigration and on the effects of that coverage [63], found that repeated exposure to negative, conflict-centred messages led to stereotypical perceptions of migrant groups, influenced policy preferences and impacted voting behaviour. The salience of immigration-related issues and actors in the news influenced public opinion and could lead to the success of anti-immigrant parties.

Indeed, sensationalist and problem-focused mainstream media narratives feed into the sense of crisis that propels populists to the fore. Populist narratives are especially threatening, as they aim at eroding trust in political leadership, political institutions, as well as other institution with any definition power over the 'truth' (e.g. science and research). The espousal of populist narratives is a strong predictor for conspiracy beliefs [64] [49]. Moreover, the belief in one conspiracy theory, even if relatively harmless, makes people more receptive of other conspiracy theories [49]. Finally, sensationalist media narratives and populist narratives emphasizing insecurity, crisis and threat are '...the subsoil in which disinformation thrives or withers. All the troll farms, deep fakes, and propaganda would never be effective if they did not work in harmony with the narratives that exist in society.' [15]

Populist narratives are therefore highly problematic. However, populist narratives also provide an indication of the concerns and grievances of the public. This offers policy communicators an indication of what issues need to be addressed; populist narratives about migration cannot be answered with silence but should be met with counter-narratives that depolarise and (re-)build trust.

3.4 TOWARDS A MORE OPEN CONVERSATION ABOUT MIGRATION

The rise of populism is making more moderate politicians wary of appearing weak and losing the support of a public believed to be intolerant. As a result, many politicians feel compelled to choose between capitalising on the same fears that populists are exploiting, or advocating for rational, technocratic solutions, which contribute to a mixed narrative. Within this narrative, migrants are recognised as victims, but there is a persistent emphasis on keeping them away [5]. The latter approach may appear 'elitist' – formulated by experts who are disconnected from the day-to-day realities of ordinary people – and fails to address the emotional aspects that are integral to public opinion and the lived experiences of individuals. It also feeds into an underlying 'migrants are unwanted' narrative. Populist narratives may also provide an indication of the concerns and grievances of the public. This offers policy communicators direction in terms of what issues need to be addressed.

Winning the battle against extremism is a multifaceted challenge that demands a strategic, concerted effort from institutions and moderate political actors across the EU. It requires politicians to exercise leadership and moral courage by standing for what they believe to be right, even if it may not be immediately popular. Taking a long-term view, educating the public on the opportunities and challenges of migration, and providing a more appealing alternative that aligns with democratic principles and addresses the needs and aspirations of the broader population may help slowly shift the public opinion. Based on what we have described in this chapter, the following strategies can help achieve this:

1. **Offer a compelling alternative**: Articulate a clear, pragmatic and compelling vision, which shows how migration can benefit society in the long run and which addresses citizens' concerns, without resorting to the victim narrative. This vision should be grounded on shared values (e.g. fairness, importance of balanced and dynamic society, rule of law, equality of opportunity) that can serve as common ground for dialogue and cooperation between people who hold different values. Such forward-looking approach can also inspire confidence and reduce fears about short-term challenges.

2. **Engage in effective communication**: The absence of moderate voices in the public debate can create a vacuum that is easily filled by extremist or populist messages. Therefore, it is important to ensure a steady stream of precise and insightful information regarding:

    - Migratory patterns and trends in the EU, including irregular movement.

    - The legal structures governing migration within the EU, the distinct roles and obligations of EU institutions and Member States and how the EU is supporting Member States.

- Long-term costs and benefits of migration.
- Successful policies, especially those that have delivered concrete results.

3. **Address legitimate concerns**: Having honest conversations about migration is critical for democratic societies. This can foster greater understanding, better policies and communities that are more cohesive. It is important to acknowledge and address the legitimate concerns of citizens, such as those linked to economic insecurity, employment opportunities or safety issues. Practical solutions to these issues can reduce the appeal of extremist narratives that exploit these anxieties. Without clear communication on these issues, public trust in political institutions and leaders can erode and citizens may feel that their concerns are not being heard or addressed, leading to disillusionment with political leaders and institutions.

4. **Counter disinformation**: Proactively combat disinformation by pre-bunking and debunking myths, especially on social media where extremist content often thrives. Support education initiatives that encourage critical thinking, media literacy, including skills in verifying claims using open-source intelligence, a better understanding how algorithms work to curate content, as well as the ability to spot emotional manipulation and strategies such as 'rage farming' to increase the spread of polarising content. An informed and critically minded electorate is less susceptible to populist propaganda. More detailed information on countering disinformation can be found in chapter 4.

5. **Foster inclusive dialogue**: Create easily accessible platforms for inclusive dialogue that bring together diverse voices, including those who feel left behind by globalisation or demographic changes. Listening and responding to these concerns can help mitigate the appeal of populist rhetoric.

Case Study 2

Populist narratives around immigrant invasion and the threat of replacement

Nina Kajander

Migration has been a defining political issue in the EU over the past decade, fuelling fierce debates and shaping electoral outcomes. European right-wing populist movements have framed migration as a crisis spiralling out of control. The emotionally charged narrative of uncontrolled immigration has constituted a key political weapon, which has framed public debates around immigration policy in many EU countries.

Right-wing populist movements argue that the EU has lost control of its borders, allowing migrants to flood into Europe unchecked. The characterisation of the EU's external borders as being inadequately secured – or even 'wide open' – evoke feelings of fear and insecurity, which can be powerful motivators for political engagement and support.

Construction of immigration as an 'invasion' is central to the 'Great Replacement theory', which has become one of the most influential narratives propagated by right-wing populists. This narrative gained significant traction particularly after millions of people fled to Europe in 2015 and the subsequent years, leading parts of the population to feel a perceived loss of control. The theory frames immigration as a deliberate intent by so-called 'elites' to replace original populations with non-Western, primarily Muslim immigrants. This framing suggests a conspiracy orchestrated by these elites to destroy Western culture, fuelling fears and shaping perceptions towards migrants.

Populist narratives often draw from a combination of real developments as well as exaggerations, misinformation, oversimplification of complex issues or a selective presentation of facts, creating a potent mix that can resonate deeply with the public, and contributing to a skewed understanding of the issue. They aim to instil a sense of crisis and urgency by portraying immigration as

a phenomenon spiralling beyond manageable bounds and tap into people's deep-seated fears and anxieties about demographic change and cultural identity. Often, the main aim of populist leaders is to portray political opponents as ineffective or negligent and position themselves as champions of 'the people' and as better protectors of national security and the nation's identity. This case study explores the rise and impact of populist narratives concerning immigration, focusing on the 'Great Replacement' theory. We also discuss strategies for approaching a conversation about increasing migration levels in the EU.

The origins of the "Great Replacement" narrative

The Great Replacement theory emerged in the context of falling birth rates and rising immigration from North Africa to Europe, during the 1970s. This period marked the beginning of the 'second demographic transition' in Europe, characterised by sub-replacement fertility levels that could not maintain existing population levels. High levels of immigration were perceived as compensating for this demographic shortfall. This demographic change triggered narratives suggesting a planned replacement of original populations by non-Western immigrants, primarily Muslim [65].

The French historian Pierre Chaunu was one of the earliest scholars to raise the issue of sub-replacement fertility and its societal impacts. In 1976, he warned of a demographic catastrophe comparable to the Black Death in his book *La Peste blanche: comment éviter le suicide de l'occident* (The White Death: How to avoid the suicide of the West) and repeated this warning in 1979 in his book *Un future sans avenir: histoire et population* (A future with no tomorrow: history and population). Although Chaunu's primary concern was low birth rates, which he attributed to contraception, abortion and sterilisation, describing them as 'crimes against nature', he briefly mentioned migration as a consequence of this fertility issue, predicting increased migratory flows from the developing world to the developed world [65].

In 1985, American scholars Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter contextualised the demographic transition, noting in their book titled The Fear of Population Decline that immigration could counteract population decline but might lead to rapid cultural and ethnic changes, which could provoke widespread opposition. In 1996, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington expanded on these ideas in his book titled The Clash of Civilizations by framing demographic changes as part of a larger clash between civilisations, suggesting potential conflict between native populations and immigrants [65].

French novelist Renaud Camus popularised the term 'Great Replacement' with his book *Le Grand Remplacement* in 2010, in which he argued that mass immigration is undermining European civilisation [66]. In his 2018 book *You Will Not Replace Us!* Camus argues that French and Western societies, which he describes as having been predominantly white and Christian for about fifteen centuries, are now being destabilised by immigration. Although this ignores France's colonial past and the fact that French people of Asian and African backgrounds had been living in France for generations, this imagined 'white past' helps Camus justify his claim that immigrants are now destroying this 'stability'. He compares current 'bad' migrants with past 'good' ones, referring to Marie Curie and Emile Zola, who he believes integrated well into French culture. He claims that current migrants, mainly African and often Muslim, show no interest in integrating into French society. He provides no evidence on their alleged unwillingness to integrate but relies on his reputation in French intellectual circles to lend authority to his claims [67].

In a book titled *The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream*, American Demographer Richard Alba challenges the majority-minority narrative, which suggests that demographic change would create a society where the current ethno-racial minorities in the US (African Americans, Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans) will become a majority. He argues that this narrative, which presumes that ethnic groups are a cohesive bloc, paints an overly rigid picture of ethnic identities, which is at odds with US immigration history. It overlooks the fact that the increasing number of young Americans from mixed ethno-racial backgrounds is significantly impacting the future demographic landscape of the United States, characterised by the emergence of a new multiracial mainstream and hybrid identities that blend aspects of different races [68].

Mainstreaming of the great replacement narrative in political discourse

Often framed as a conspiracy, the Great Replacement narrative has increasingly infiltrated mainstream, conservative and right- wing political discourse [65] [69] [70]. Originally circulated among far-right extremists,

elements of the Great Replacement theory have been embraced by populist parties and leaders in Europe, including Pia Kjærsgaard, the former leader of the Danish People's Party, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, Róbert Fico, the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Matteo Salvini, the former Italian Interior Minister, and Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's far-right Rassemblement National [69] [71].

Since the 2015 migratory events, aspects of the ethnic replacement narrative have bolstered various far-right political narratives across Europe. Statements highlighting failed integration, often supported by claims that immigrant and European cultures are fundamentally incompatible and advocating for homogeneous European identities, have fuelled the notion of an ongoing 'replacement.' [69] Viktor Orbán, who has led anti-immigration and nationalist rhetoric within the EU by portraying immigration as an existential threat, echoed the replacement conspiracy during the 2019 Budapest demography summit. In his speech, he stated that 'if Europe is not populated by Europeans in the future, it implies a population exchange, replacing Europeans with others, and claimed that some political groups in Europe aim for such a replacement for ideological or other reasons' [71].

In 2020, the European Conservatives and Reformists party (ERC Group) commissioned a study titled 'Europe's Demographic Winter', which explores the demographic challenges facing Europe, particularly focusing on the implications of low birth rates and an ageing population. The study suggests that ongoing immigration and differential fertility rates among immigrant populations may lead to what is described as "permanent ethnic transformation." The study indicates that the increasing ethnic diversity within European countries could potentially lead to the replacement of the original population by new ones if current low fertility rates persist. The study offers data and evidence to support the arguments on demographic change, but does not provide a historical context that recognises the ongoing nature of demographic and ethnic changes throughout history [72].

In April 2024, the Center for Renewing America, founded in 2021 by Russ Vought who served in President Trump's Cabinet as Director of the Office of Management and Budget, published a Policy Brief on the Great Replacement Theory, seeking to provide a 'legitimate examination of its validity'. The Policy Brief states that the US is facing an illegal immigration crisis, and that this invasion 'poses an existential threat to both the security and sovereignty of the republic, as millions of people from all over the world pour into this country' and that 'the federal government is actively engaged in a large-scale population importation effort, against the interests of the citizens it is supposed to represent.' The Brief cites various sources, including the novelist Renaud Camus, to theorise about on-going demographic replacement orchestrated by the Democrats. It does not provide any data on US demographics, apart from mentioning that since January 2021, over 7.1 million illegal immigrants had been apprehended at the Southern border, and that in September 2023, there were roughly 305 000 births in the US, against 341 000 illegal immigrants countered at the US border [73]. On this basis, the Policy Brief concludes that Demographic replacement is not a theory, but a reality, and that America's citizens are being replaced by immigrants.

Often framed as a conspiracy, the Great Replacement narrative has increasingly infiltrated mainstream, conservative and right- wing political discourse.

The populist narratives rely on their ability to generate fear within the population. They also employ emotional communication strategies, such as visual threats, hostility towards outsiders and victimisation among insider groups to tap into the emotions of European citizens. These tactics are built on well-known populist methods like provocation, sensationalism, appealing to popular opinion, calculated ambiguity and fearmongering, which foster racial and ethnic tensions [71].

The Great Replacement narrative serves as a versatile political tool that can be tactically employed by both far-right and mainstream populist figures. Its various

Conspiracy theories are seen as a way to compensate for feelings of powerlessness among those who feel disenfranchised. They offer a sense of understanding, allowing individuals to feel informed and to make sense of a complex world.

components can be used strategically by far-right actors to instil fear among native populations by exploiting social and economic insecurities and by promoting ideas of ethnic or cultural purity. However, mainstream populist figures can also adopt more moderated versions of similar arguments. Evidence indicates that demographic changes and immigration are negatively politicised using pseudo-scientific claims, historical narratives of ethnic purity, threat narratives, visual fear tactics and other elements that contribute to the broader conspiracy of an ongoing 'replacement' of native populations [71].

From the quest for heightened awareness into the trap of conspiracy thinking

The Great Replacement narrative often hinges on the assumption that a group of conspirators (e.g. the 'elites', typically depicted as malevolent) acts with deliberate intent. The supposed victims are usually ordinary people, kept unaware of the conspiracy [71]. The concept of 'red-pilling', derived from the film *The Matrix*, describes an individual's choice to awaken to a more 'real' world. This choice is believed to transform one's societal status from oppressed to powerful by granting access to the 'ultimate truth'. Within this discourse, taking the red pill leads to three key changes: first, gaining awareness of a new reality; second, beginning to live in a world of perceived truth; and third, understanding that this choice is urgent and singular. This urgency feeds the existential crisis that far-right extremists exploit [67].

Conspiracy theories are seen as a way to compensate for feelings of powerlessness among those who feel disenfranchised. They offer a sense of understanding, allowing individuals to feel informed and to make sense of a complex world. This perceived knowledge provides comfort, as people believe they are not as easily fooled as the rest of the population [65].

However, this perceived awakening often results in vulnerability to manipulation, leading people to accept unfounded claims. The Great Replacement narrative is today accepted by alarming numbers of ordinary Europeans. A 2017 poll found that 48% of French voters thought that a population replacement either would or might happen in France, and a 2021 poll found that 61% believed this [65]. In the United States, a poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted in 2022 showed that 1 in 3 U.S. adults believes an effort is underway to replace native-born Americans with immigrants for electoral gains.[28] The claim that Democrats were helping migrants enter the country illegally in hopes that they will vote for the Democratic candidate was peddled again during the 2024 electoral campaign, gaining wide support on social media platforms such as X.

Language of invasion

The framing of immigration as an 'invasion' is central to the Great Replacement theory. In the right-wing rhetoric, migrants – especially migrants from Africa and Latin America – are described as 'invaders'. The language of invasion is rooted in the writings of Renaud Camus, who used terms like 'invasion' and 'swamping' to suggest that the influx of migrants is undermining national and cultural identities in Europe. Camus also argued that this demographic change resembles a form of 'colonisation',

28 1 in 3 fears immigrants influence US elections: AP-NORC poll, https://apnews.com/article/immigration-2022-midterm-elections-covid-health-media-2ebbd3849ca35ec76f0f91120639d9d4

claiming that African colonisation of Europe is much worse than European colonisation of Africa, because it involves 'massive transfers of population' whose aim is to settle in permanently and destroy the local, indigenous communities [67].

The idea of 'invasion' became central to the discourse of President Trump during his mid-term campaign in 2018. During the campaign, President Trump and his allies deployed an inflammatory rhetoric about a migrant 'caravan' that was on its way to the United States, bringing crime and danger [67] [74]. In reaction to the news coverage about the 'caravan', President Trump ended up sending troops to the US border, as a classic example of 'politics of insecurity'. The concept of 'politics of insecurity' refer to the ways in which some political actors frame perceived threats, claiming to provide protection against perceived or even fabricated threats [74].

The theme of migrant invasion was a central element of President Trump's electoral campaign also in the content of the 2024 Presidential elections. During the campaign, President Trump and his allies frequently claimed that the U.S. borders, particularly the southern border with Mexico, are 'wide open.' He argued that the Biden administration's open border policy has led to illegal immigrants invading the US, contributing to higher crime rates and other security concerns.

The open border and uncontrolled immigration narrative is also present in European political discourse promoted by right-wing leaders. Among others, Marine Le Pen has been vocal about the perceived dangers of migration. Between March and November 2023, Marine Le Pen published 221 tweets linked to migration, claiming that 'uncontrolled immigration is out of control' and that 'Europe is the target of a migratory flood organised and encouraged by the European Union'. Words like 'massive immigration', 'anarchic and massive migration', 'chaotic and massive migration' and 'unregulated migration' were used in over 20 tweets (cf. analysis described in previous chapter). In 36 tweets, Marine Le Pen promised that as soon as she is elected, she would hold a referendum to stop immigration.

Populist narratives often exploit the confusion over migration terminology and people's scarce understanding of asylum procedures. For instance, by portraying all asylum seekers and refugees as illegal immigrants, the invasion narratives contribute to the perception that the EU is overwhelmed with illegal immigration. This portrayal can create misunderstandings about the legal rights of asylum seekers, who have the right to apply for protection, and refugees who are protected under international law. Mislabelling them as illegal immigrants can lead to negative stereotypes and misconceptions about the scale of illegal immigration in the EU.

Populist narratives often exploit the confusion over migration terminology and people's scarce understanding of asylum procedures.

Great replacement as justification for violence

The perception of an impending racial demographic change can lead to negative attitudes towards minority groups. Majority group members may interpret demographic shifts as a loss of power and status, viewing these changes as threats to their socioeconomic and cultural position. This can lead to narratives portraying minorities, such as Muslims, as existential threats to national identity and culture, increasing perceptions of cultural incompatibility and symbolic threats among the majority population [69].

White supremacist narratives often use anti-immigration rhetoric to justify violence, by portraying immigrants as inherent threats. Renaud Camus frames the everyday lives of immigrants of colour as dangerous to the white French population, suggesting their mere existence poses risks to French society and culture [67]. Depicting immigrants as an existential threat to the native population's way of life and identity leverages symbolic threats, which can serve to justify violence as a necessary response to these perceived threats [71].

Several violent attacks committed by White supremacists around the world invoke rhetoric around a deliberate attempt to make Whites extinct and replace them with non-Western immigrants [69]. Brenton Tarrant, the

Trivialising the Great Replacement narratives just as a conspiracy theory, or simply dismissing or denying the claims without addressing the underlying emotions and concerns can be perceived as dismissive of people's genuine fears, which can further entrench their beliefs and alienate them from more balanced perspectives.

perpetrator of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand, published a manifesto online titled 'The Great Replacement'. The manifesto was heavily influenced by far-right extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories. It promoted the idea that while populations in Western countries were being systematically replaced by non-white immigrants, particularly Muslims. Similar rhetoric was invoked by perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Utøya (Norway, 2011) and El Paso (USA, 2019). The US Capitol attack on 6 January 2021 was also linked to white supremacist theories and ideas around the great replacement [69]. While not all rioters were motivated by white supremacist ideology, many of the participating groups (e.g. the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers) were motivated by conspiracy-driven ideologies and fears of demographic change. The subsequent public calls for the release of the imprisoned rioters indicate that supremacist values have become more mainstream in the United States, contributing to sympathy for events like the 6 January insurrection. These events illustrate how conspiracy myths about immigration resonate with certain segments of the population, ultimately undermining social peace and challenging democracies globally.

How to approach a conversation about increasing migration levels

Narratives around migration and population replacement gain a lot of traction because they tap into people's deep-seated fears about the loss of cultural, ethnic and national identity. For many, the idea of being 'replaced' by migrants threatens their sense of belonging and security, triggering a defensive reaction.
These narratives are often nothing but people's attempts to explain the ultimate causes of the significant social and political events and circumstances that they are experiencing. They can be seen as a way for people who feel powerless or dispossessed to make sense of their circumstances. They gain power by exploiting human psychology, social dynamics and political contexts, making them challenging to counteract.

However, trivialising the Great Replacement narratives just as a conspiracy theory, or simply dismissing or denying the claims without addressing the underlying emotions and concerns can be perceived as dismissive of people's genuine fears, which can further entrench their beliefs and alienate them from more balanced perspectives.

Addressing these concerns constructively can help maintain social cohesion and prevent the rise of xenophobia and populism. Responding to people's fears about increasing migration into the EU requires a multifaceted approach that focuses on acknowledging concerns, providing reliable information and spelling out an alternative future vision.

This starts by recognising that concerns about migration are valid and can stem from various sources, including economic uncertainty. These changes in demographics can create a sense of uncertainty about their impact on people's daily lives and future prospects. Engaging in open discussions about migration, acknowledging both the challenges and the benefits, can help dispel myths and build trust. Acknowledging the fact that the EU is facing an increasing migratory pressure and that this brings some challenges is a crucial step in fostering informed and constructive dialogues about migration and its implications for the EU.

At the same time, it is important to offer a more nuanced understanding of demographic shifts and their implications for society. Framing demographic and cultural changes as an ongoing, adaptive process and emphasising the historical continuity of migration and cultural exchange in Europe can help demonstrate that cultural evolution is a natural and ongoing process rather than a sudden disruption or a threat to established cultural norms. Contextualising numbers and putting figures and statistics into perspective helps audiences grasp the bigger picture and understand the circumstances surrounding the numbers, reducing the likelihood of them being taken out of context or sensationalised.

In parallel, providing a constant source of reliable information on demographics and migration trends, clarifying complex concepts (e.g. irregular vs. illegal migration) and terminology (e.g. refugee, asylum seeker, migrant) and explaining what happens at different stages of the asylum procedure, can help clear misunderstandings and address widespread mis- and disinformation on these topics.

Finally, spelling out a vision for migration and demographic change in the EU and providing a roadmap for addressing current challenges and seizing opportunities can reduce uncertainly around the topic of migration, help alleviate fears and promote a more informed perspective on migration. A well-articulated vision can build public confidence by transparently communicating the EU's goals and strategies. It can help address public concerns and foster support for migration policies by explaining their benefits and necessity.

Case Study 3

Migration and the Dutch housing crisis

Marina Tzvetkova and Lieke Bakker

'Of all the homes that will be added in the coming years, no fewer than 75% are intended for migrants. That's complete madness. It is simply impossible to build against the open borders policy and the enormous population growth!' – Excerpt of the PVV party programme 2023. [75]

The Netherlands is experiencing an ongoing housing crisis. Each year, the number of new houses constructed fails to meet government targets. In 2025, the expected housing shortage is around 418 000 homes, compared to 390 000 in 2023 (shortage of 4.8% and 5.1%, respectively) [76] [77]. The Netherlands needs over 900 000 new homes by 2030 to meet demand [78]. The lack of affordable housing also remains a very significant problem in the Netherlands. In 2021, the Ministry of Internal Affairs concluded that more than 400 000 low-income households lived in rental housing, where the rent was taking up a large share of their income [79]. Dutch far-right parties have blamed the national housing crisis on foreign migrants and asylum seekers. Populist leader Geert Wilders of the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) has argued that priority social housing in the Netherlands is given to immigrants over native Dutch citizens, which stokes resentment among parts of the population who feel they are unfairly disadvantaged. These narratives can gain traction among voters who are struggling to find affordable housing. By framing immigrants as the cause of these housing issues, populists can mobilise support for their political agenda, which typically includes stricter immigration controls. Interviews with voters after the election indicated that the narrative around migrants causing the housing shortages had indeed motivated the vote of those backing right-wing parties [80].

In what follows we look at the origins and multifaceted causes of the Dutch housing crisis as well as the role that immigration plays in it.

The Dutch social housing sector

In the Netherlands, the social rental sector was established in the reconstruction period after the Second World War [81]. Following that, the Dutch social housing segment remained sizable. Until the 1990s, the Netherlands

managed to maintain a large share of social housing, when in most other European countries the provision of subsidised homes dwindled. The Netherlands still has the highest rate of social housing in Europe, with 4 million people living in 2.3 million social housing units, amounting to around one-third of all residential dwellings [82]. The social housing sector provided homes mostly for low-income households, but accommodated also middle-income families [83].

In the 1990s and 2000s, political priorities gradually shifted from supporting the social housing sector to promoting home ownership. Investment in social housing by the government was reduced and the waiting lists for subsidised housing became very long. To cut costs, social housing associations were given freedom to take ownership of the real estate they managed, turning them from organisations dependent on state subsidies into self-sufficient enterprises for profit. Simultaneously, the Dutch government actively funded gentrification projects. Homes previously used for social housing were sold to private owners or demolished to make room for new upscale housing projects. The aim was to transform impoverished areas by attracting more people from higher-income groups.

The global financial crisis and liberalisation of the housing market

The 2008 global financial crisis led to a devaluation of real estate. Between 2009 and 2013 fewer new residences were built. Even after the financial crisis, the construction of homes did not go back to the pre-crisis. Calls for austerity led the Dutch government to push for further reforms of housing policies. A landlord levy was established, which targeted any organisation that owned more than 50 rental homes. In 2010, the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM), was disbanded. Its tasks were divided among the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations [84]. Responsibilities concerning spatial design were allocated to provincial and municipality governments.

In the meantime, some of the housing agencies failed to keep their finances stable due to mismanagement, speculation and excessive wages. A key example of this was the housing corporation Vestia, which in 2011 was on the brink of bankruptcy due to unsuccessfully speculating on derivatives. Since its downfall threatened to endanger many other social housing agencies, the Dutch government bailed out Vestia for more than two billion euros. Subsequently, investors bought some properties used for social housing to rent out

for profit-25% of the housing on the market in the largest four cities [85]- and the private rental sector grew, especially in the large Dutch cities.

The Housing Act

In 2015, the Housing Act (de Woningwet) came into force. Van Gent and Hochstenbach [83] argue that the policy changes introduced by the Act should be viewed within the broader process of housing market liberalisation in the Netherlands. The Act set stricter income limits for those eligible to rent social housing. This measure was intended to ensure that social housing was directed to the people who needed it most, yet excluded many in need of affordable housing. The Act also required housing associations to separate their social housing activities from their commercial ones, creating clear financial boundaries between the two. This prevented cross-subsidisation, ensuring that government subsidies were used only for social housing purposes. The Authority for Housing Associations (Autoriteit Woningcorporaties) was established to oversee spending and compliance with regulations.

The Act was also partially influenced by a 2009 European Commission ruling concerning the perceived unfair advantages that social housing agencies had over private investors and the improper use of state aid. Before 2015, housing associations had expanded their activities beyond their core mandate, investing in commercial real estate and other non-housing projects. In addition, social housing agencies were encouraged to sell much of their property.

In 2016, the Dutch Government also introduced temporary rental contracts to encourage owners to rent out vacant homes. Such contracts included little protection for tenants.

The housing crisis

Between 2011 and 2015, 90% of the social housing rentals were only available for low-income households [83]. Tenants with higher incomes had to pay yearly rent increases capped at a much higher limit than those with lower incomes. Due to strict planning regulations, a shortage of available land and lengthy approval processes, the rate of new housing construction in the Netherlands was slow and lagged behind the demand for new housing. In addition, a shortage of skilled labour and rising material costs further delayed the supply of housing. While the total amount of houses had increased by 600 000 between 2007 and 2017, the amount of social housing decreased by 23 500 [83]. The demolition of social housing in certain areas affected a number of people, many of them from vulnerable groups. Demolition of houses led to involuntary relocation, decreased social cohesion, and created a 'lasting sense of deep loss and helplessness'.

Moreover, the building sector shifted its focus to building expensive housing, which resulted in higher buying prices of newly built residences. Buying a house became unaffordable for many. As a result, middle-income households became dependent on the private rental sector, which, unlike social housing corporations, had no restrictions imposed on rental prices. Middle-income groups had no access to subsidised housing, yet 30% were not able to afford anything else. Moreover, an ongoing demographic shift, wherein households became increasingly smaller, resulted in more small households in need of a home. The global financial crisis also affected people's income and financial security. The number of people in the lowest income group grew, as did the need for social housing. As these changes were incorporated, affordable housing became scarcer for several income groups. The UN rapporteur on adequate housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal [82], stated that the Dutch housing crisis is: 'as much a crisis of the low number of housing stock available as it is a crisis of unaffordability of housing'. Persistence in social housing of tenants who no longer meet the qualifying criteria but remain due to a lack of affordable housing (scheefhuurders) adds to the social housing shortage [85].

The Dutch government is struggling to meet the goal of constructing 90 000 houses annually and the homes that

> *The discrepancy between the supply of housing in general and the supply of affordable housing in particular led to a housing crisis in the Netherlands.*

are being built continue to be targeted at high-income households and thus unaffordable for middle- and lower-income households. Moreover, in the Netherlands, the difference between what homeowners and tenants pay for accommodation relative to their earnings is considerable. The median Dutch homeowner pays less than 5% of their disposable income on living costs (due to a generous mortgage rate tax deduction) while the median tenant (especially in the liberalised market) pays more than 40% of their disposable income on accommodation. Approximately 30% of the population in the Netherlands rent their home [86].

Migration and housing

Migration contributes to population growth in the Netherlands. The number of migrants in the Netherlands has steadily increased, but the country is not among the EU Members States with the highest relative or absolute share of non-EU migrants, according to Eurostat. In 2024, the largest shares of non-EU migrants were observed in Czechia, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovenia. In absolute numbers, the most popular countries of destination for immigrants from outside the EU were Germany (1.6 million people or 31% of all immigrants who came to the EU from non-EU countries) and Spain (860 000 or 17%), followed by Italy (334 000 or 7%) and Czechia (331 000 or 6%) [87].

On average, half of all migrants coming to the Netherlands are from EU countries and only around 11% of the migrants are asylum seekers. Most migrants originating from an EU/EFTA country migrate to the Netherlands for work, whereas those from outside EU/EFTA most frequently indicate 'family as the reason to migrate [88] [89].

The influx of migrants has contributed to the demand for rental properties in big cities. However, rather than causing it, migrants themselves experienced the consequences of the housing crisis. Few of them would be eligible for social housing. According to Rajagopal, low skilled migrant workers in the Netherlands, mainly from countries in the European Union (Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, etc.) are often housed in 'sub-standard accommodations', rented out by private individuals, or disused buildings, barns and caravans. Few of these could be considered adequate long-term housing solutions. Asylum seekers are hosted in reception centres. Those who obtain refugee status are placed on waiting lists for social housing, but many remain living in reception centres long after obtaining refugee status, as alternative housing is not available. In 2022, 7 percent of all vacant social housing units were allocated to households that included one or more asylum seekers granted residency in the Netherlands [90]. Other accommodation solutions for migrants have included converting prisons into housing, accommodating migrants and students together in institutional accommodations and using holiday homes, recreational parks and containers. Overall, the majority of migrants end up in housing, which few Dutch citizens would consider adequate.

It is possible to suggest that the causes of the Dutch housing crisis are multifaceted, and that the discrepancy between the supply of housing in general and the supply of affordable housing in particular led to a housing crisis in the Netherlands. The United Nations' special rapporteur on adequate housing concluded that the housing crisis in the Netherlands was caused by the lack of adequate land for new affordable housing, lack of regulation of the social housing providers, introduction of income limits for eligibility, lack of rent caps or their enforcement in the private rental sector, insufficient attention to the role of speculation and large investors in the real estate market, and insufficient protection of renters' rights. Affordability remains one of the major problems of the Dutch housing market. The housing crisis in the Netherlands can be described as a 'failure to recognise and protect housing as a human right'. While it is true that the provision of social housing to immigrants could have had some impact on the availability of such housing, most analyses conclude that the overall effect is relatively small, compared to the larger structural issues at play.

4. Disinformation narratives on migration

Alberto Horst-Neidhart

The spread of disinformation and misinformation about migration is a significant challenge in Europe, with false and misleading information often being used to fuel anti-migrant sentiment and undermine social cohesion. Disinformation can take many forms, including false stories, manipulated statistics and conspiracy theories, and can be spread through various channels, including social media and online news outlets. Disinformation can undermine trust in institutions and can create a sense of confusion and uncertainty among the public. To address the challenge of disinformation on migration, a whole-of-society approach is needed, involving collaboration among policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations, journalists and tech companies.

4.1 THE CHALLENGE OF MIGRATION DISINFORMATION

On a daily basis, vast amount of disinformation is promoted on social media and on the internet. The infamous 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory – which suggests that immigration is being promoted by elites in an effort to replace native European populations – is just one notable illustration of this challenge. And yet, migration-related disinformation also comes in less conspicuous iterations that end up reproducing similar fears and divisive emotions.

Disinformation, alongside misinformation, is often present in media reports on migration and thus plays a significant role in shaping public discourse on this topic [91]. The rapid spread of false and misleading information has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges in liberal democracies, particularly concerning sensitive and complex issues like migration that have come to dominate the political discourse.

The rapid spread of false and misleading information has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges in liberal democracies, particularly concerning sensitive and complex issues like migration that have come to dominate the political discourse.

Awareness of the harmful effects of disinformation and misinformation is growing, and many Europeans are increasingly concerned about receiving false or misleading information, particularly regarding migration [92]. Despite growing attention to the dangers it poses,

migration-related disinformation continues to circulate widely, in the EU and beyond.[29] Whether European countries, including those forming part of the European Union (EU), will be able to address this challenge or not carries serious implications for the strength of democratic institutions, for public trust and social cohesion.

Based on an extensive literature review [93], this chapter provides an overview of the landscape of migration-related disinformation and misinformation in Europe, focusing on dominant narratives, key actors and the real-world consequences of disinformation and misinformation targeting migrants and refugees. It also formulates actionable recommendations for EU and national institutions responsible for migration policy and migration policy communication.

4.2 DEFINITIONS: CAN THEY CAPTURE THE CHANGING DISINFORMATION ENVIRONMENT?

The concepts of disinformation and misinformation have been extensively discussed across various disciplines and from different policy perspectives, with definitions that vary slightly but generally converge around specific aspects, such as motives and intentionality. Disinformation is therefore generally understood as involving false or misleading information spread intentionally to cause harm or for economic gain [94]. The EU accordingly defines disinformation as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information [...] promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit." [95]. This should not be confused with misinformation, which refers to "misleading or inaccurate information shared by people who do not recognise it as such." [95].

While some have criticised the existing definitions for being too broad or subjective, specialists have also highlighted the difficulty of fully capturing the complexity of disinformation in today's fast-evolving media environment [96]. For example, it is not uncommon for an article to contain both accurate information and false claims or half-truths [97]. Even truthful information can be used to mislead, through selective emphasis or out-of-context reporting – tactics often seen in migration-related stories. Scholars have also pointed out that misleading information can take the form of outdated, poorly presented or incomplete data [98]. Additionally, opinion pieces are sometimes presented as news, or content that cannot be verified is shared as fact.

Even truthful information can be used to mislead, through selective emphasis or out-of-context reporting – tactics often seen in migration-related stories.

The distinction between disinformation and other forms of inaccurate information has also grown increasingly important. However, it can be challenging to classify all promotion of false content as strictly disinformation. Intentionality may be hard to prove, or the goal may not be to cause harm or gain profit but rather to sow confusion. 'Information gaslighting', for example, is a strategy designed to flood the information space with a mix of accurate and misleading content, creating uncertainty [99]. The ultimate goal is to undermine the public's ability to distinguish truth from lies, leading to 'cognitive overload' or 'cognitive exhaustion'. In such conditions, people become more susceptible to disinformation, as they stop critically evaluating the messages they receive.

Another approach or reason, 'adaptive disinformation' is common in viral migration-related stories. This refers to misleading or inaccurate information spread by those who may not intend to cause harm or make a profit but are instead seeking to gain followers or influence. Certain news outlets, for example, may promote sensationalised or misleading content about migration not to deceive, but to attract larger audiences, thereby increasing their visibility and engagement [96].

Disinformation actors also take advantage of technological advancements to circumvent debunking or regulatory initiatives. The disinformation environment is constantly

29 For a recent account of disinformation on migration ahead of the Presidential Elections in the US, see reference [279].

The ultimate goal is to undermine the public's ability to distinguish truth from lies, leading to 'cognitive overload' or 'cognitive exhaustion'. In such conditions, people become more susceptible to disinformation, as they stop critically evaluating the messages they receive.

evolving, blending more seamlessly with half-truths and genuine content [100]. This makes identifying and countering disinformation more challenging, as it becomes harder to distinguish it from other types of misleading content, and between malicious actors and those who unintentionally spread false information. Both state and non-state, foreign and domestic actors will continue to exploit these grey areas, using a range of tactics to try to deepen societal divisions and erode trust in democratic institutions. Meanwhile, individuals exposed to disinformation – especially those with legitimate concerns about implications of migration for European societies – may find it harder to distinguish truth from falsehood, facts from opinion, misleading content spread by like-minded persons unintentionally from lies promoted to cause public harm or gain profit, or sow confusion.

4.3 DOMINANT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES: MIGRANTS AS A THREAT TO EUROPEANS' HEALTH, WEALTH AND IDENTITY

Migration is a prime topic for those promoting lies and half-truths. It is a complex phenomenon, with the differences between groups of people on the move being easily misunderstood. People migrate for various reasons, due to lack of educational or employment opportunities in their home countries, or to escape conflict or persecution. The responsibility for governing migration is also distributed across local, national and supranational authorities, and the facts surrounding migration are often difficult to ascertain or explain. The lack of inter-group contact between locals and migrants combined with the spatial and socio-economic segregation in many European cities also makes it easier for disinformation actors to scapegoat the latter for a whole range of social and economic issues [101].

Various taxonomies have been proposed to categorise the types of migration-related disinformation and misinformation in this context, such as clickbait, misleading connections, fabricated content, conspiracy theories, or rumours [102]. This study takes a different approach. It focuses on identifying the overarching frames and narratives that drive migration-related disinformation and misinformation, noting that these are frequently linked to issues of deep symbolic meaning – such as religion and identity – or sensitive topics like jobs and security.

Narratives serve as distinct and competing interpretations of reality. They function on both cognitive and emotional levels. On the one hand, they convey information in an accessible and compelling way. On the other, they allow individuals to process that information and navigate its complexity, providing structure to their thinking and shared meaning. Migration narratives often attribute specific causes or reasons to migration while suggesting corresponding ideas or policy solutions, often simplifying complexity on both ends to enhance persuasiveness.

Evidence suggests that disinformation actors, while tailoring their stories to local developments and regional contexts, follow a 'playbook' of higher-level frames, exploiting public fears and anxieties about such issues [103]. In Europe, three frames are especially dominant,

consistently presenting immigration and migrants as threats to Europeans' health, wealth and identity [104].

Health-based frame

The first frame portrays migrants as a threat to Europeans' health, their bodily and mental integrity and by extension, their security. In disinformation and misinformation stories, migrants are often falsely depicted as carriers of disease or accused of having preferential access to healthcare systems. These stories typically rely on completely fabricated claims or distortions of real events, creating the perception that the local population is being unfairly disadvantaged while undeserving immigrants are being supported by national governments or local authorities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health-related narratives were especially dominant. False stories circulated about migrants deliberately spreading the virus, ignoring social distancing measures and continuing to gather in large numbers while local populations were under quarantine.[30] Often, these narratives were linked to cultural stereotypes. Ethnic minorities, like the Roma community, were accused of irresponsibly spreading the virus [105]. Other minority groups were similarly scapegoated, such as frequent claims that Muslim migrants were gathering to pray in violation of restrictions – a common trope during the 2019-2020 period.[31]

Reports by independent organisations and researchers confirm that health - alongside security – continues to be a core theme of migration-related disinformation, even after the end of the pandemic [106]. Then and now, health-based disinformation stories often fuel a sense of 'reverse discrimination' among nationals of the host country, for example, spreading the false claim that migrants receive preferential healthcare treatment or prevent locals from accessing medical care.[32]

Narratives exploiting Europeans' fears about their wellbeing also portray migrants as prone to violence or sexual crimes, reinforcing clichés about their disrespectful behaviour. The alleged existence of 'no-go zones' controlled by migrants, where law enforcement cannot enter, is frequently promoted by disinformation stories.[33] Disinformation also amplifies feelings that European women are no longer safe due to the presence of 'migrant sexual predators'. These stories frequently contain both accurate information and false claims, exploiting cognitive biases to raise their perceived truthfulness. But claims are also accompanied by manipulated statistics to exaggerate actual social and economic problems and present immigration as synonymous, for example, with increased crime.[34]

In this context, seemingly trivial incidents are either given disproportionate attention, or are reported with factual inaccuracies, to portray migrants as ungrateful, disrespectful, or harassing, even when no criminal

30 Secolo d'Italia, 'Immigrati alla fermata dei bus a Roma. Le regole per loro non valgono?' Secolo d'Italia, 16 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.secoloditalia.it/2020/03/immigrati-alla-fermata-dei-bus-a-roma-le-regole-per-loro-non-valgono-la-denuncia-di-lollobrigida/; Gauri, Cristina, Coronavirus, gli immigrati se ne fregano anche a Bergamo. Tutti ammassati in stazione, Il Primato Nazionale, 18 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/cronaca/coronavirus-immigrati-fregano-anche-a-bergamo-ammassati-stazione-150048/; Gómez, Teresa, Motín en el CIE de Aluche: los inmigrantes se rebelan por el confinamiento del coronavirus, OK Diario, 17 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://okdiario.com/espana/motin-cie-aluche-inmigrantes-rebelan-confinamiento-coronavirus-5330973; H50, MENAS jugando al futbol en Bilbao durante el estado de alarma, H50 Digital Police Magazine, 19 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://h50.es/menas-jugando-al-futbol-bilbao-estado-alarma/.

31 See reference [104]: The citizens of Trento are forced to stay at home while immigrants are free: another instance of the one-way racism against Italians (Italy) Muslims break confinement for Ramadan (Spain) Migrants deliberately spit and sneeze at Germans and shout 'now you have coronavirus!' (Czech Republic) No quarantine for sick refugees in Greece, but for healthy German holidaymakers (Germany).

32 See further examples in reference [104].

33 E.g. Corrente, Gianluca, Da Torino a Roma immigrati creano il caos: furti, rapine, spaccio e aggressioni agli agenti, Secolo d'Italia, 21 February 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.secoloditalia.it/2020/02/da-torino-a-roma-immigrati-creano-il-caos-furti-rapine-spaccio-e-aggressioni-agli-agenti/; VoxNews, Agenti cacciati da immigrati, quartiere in mano Africana, VoxNews, 8 May 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.voxnews.info/2020/05/08/agenti-cacciati-da-immigrati-quartiere-in-mano-africana/; Moody, Jitka, V Německu už mají vedle no-go zón i absolutně-no-go zóny, Pravý Prostor, 9 June 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, https://pravyprostor.cz/v-nemecku-uz-maji-vedle-no-go-zon-i-absolutne-no-go-zony/.

34 E.g. Polígrafo, André Ventura mimetiza Passos Coelho e diz que vaga migratória está a aumentar a criminalidade na Europa. É verdade?, Polígrafo, accessed 27 October 2024, https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/fact-check/andre-ventura-mimetiza-passos-coelho-e-diz-que-vaga-migratoria-esta-a-aumentar-a-criminalidade-na-europa-e-verdade; AFP Factuel, Non, le nombre d'homicides n'a pas été 'multiplié par quatre' en 15 ans en France, AFP Factuel, accessed 27 October 2024, https://factuel.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34R38FD; Meddmo, Paraplirοforhsh sxetika me ta posonta egklhmatikothtas twn Roma gia klopes kai diarrhkseis, Meddmo, accessed 27 October 2024, https://meddmo.eu/el/paraplhroforhsh-sxetika-me-ta-pososta-egklhmatikothtas-twn-roma-gia-klopes-kai-diarrhkseis/

activity has occurred.[35] On the other hand, false reports also concern serious attacks against anti-immigration politicians,[36] as well as particularly heinous and shocking crimes such as child abduction,[37] or violence against pregnant women.[38] Claims that many migrants come to Europe with terrorist intentions, which are presented as fact, are also not uncommon.

Health-related frames are frequently mixed with other threat-based messages. It is particularly during times of large-scale arrivals that disinformation paint migrants and ethnic minorities as more likely to commit crimes than native citizens [107]. Concerns about the economy are also exploited to amplify the perception that migrants are a hostile and homogenous group that refuses to abide by societal rules, further cementing an 'us versus them' mentality. Migrants are for instance frequently depicted as 'cheating' the system, with stories of individuals lying about their age being used to inflate and exaggerate their overall numbers and their impact on welfare systems and available integration resources.[39]

False claims are often adapted to local concerns to increase their visibility and resonance. For instance, during the summer of 2024, conspiracy theories in Greece falsely accused migrants of starting wildfires [108]. Previous incidents involving migrants, asylum-seekers or refugees are exploited to harness resonance, spread confusion and normalise the assumption that violent acts are systematically perpetrated by the same group of persons. In the summer of 2024, for example, disinformation also spread widely about the background

False claims are often adapted to local concerns to increase their visibility and resonance.

of an attacker at the Israeli Consulate General in Munich, Germany, after a previous attack perpetuated by an asylum-seeker in the country.[40] Contrary to these claims, the Munich attacker was not a migrant.[41]

While false claims often build on pre-existing stereotypes and may present certain groups as particularly violent, prone to crime or socially irresponsible, the health-threat frame affects all groups of people on the move, regardless of their status, ethnicity or religious background. Illustrating this, similar threat-based narratives have targeted Ukrainians who were displaced by Russia's invasion in February 2022. False reports alleged, for example, that local children had been thrown out of oncological hospitals and replaced by Ukrainians.[42] Yet, especially common have been disinformation stories claiming that Ukrainians are violent toward locals in cities in Western, Central and Eastern Europe, reinforcing the

35 E.g. Area-C, Rivolta immigrati a Boville-'Vogliamo soldi non cibo', 07 June 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.area-c.it/rivolta-immigrati-a-boville-vogliamo-soldi-non-cibo/; Erdinger, Max, Während deutsche Rentner hungern: Flüchtlinge entsorgen Tüten voller Tafel-Lebensmittel im Müll, anonymousnews.ru, 05 July 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.anonymousnews.org/deutschland/fluechtlinge-entsorgen-tafelspende/.

36 E.g. False: Denmark's Prime Minister Was Allegedly Attacked by a Polish Citizen, Not a Muslim Asylum Seeker, Logically Facts, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.logicallyfacts.com/en/fact-check/false-denmark-s-prime-minister-was-allegedly-attacked-by-a-polish-citizen-not-a-muslim-asylum-seeker

37 E.g. The Journal, Debunked: Alleged Kidnapping Attempt in Dundalk, No Evidence, The Journal, August 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.thejournal.ie/debunked-alleged-kidnapping-attempt-dundalk-no-evidence-gardai-siochana-councillors-louth-6463720-Aug2024/; The Journal, FactCheck: Debunked Abductions of Child in Cork City and Bandon, The Journal, September 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.thejournal.ie/factcheck-debunked-abductions-child-cork-city-bandon-6493619-Sep2024/.

38 See Fact Check Cyprus, African Migrants Did Not Throw Pregnant Woman Off Bus in Paris, Fact Check Cyprus, accessed 27 October 2024, https://factcheckcyprus.org/fact-checks/parapliroforisi/african-migrants-did-not-throw-pregnant-woman-off-bus-in-paris/.

39 E.g. De Lorenzo, Giuseppe, and Marianna Di Piazza. La truffa dei migranti minori: 'Accolti, ma hanno 40 anni'. Il Giornale, 9 September 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/la-truffa-dei-migranti-minori-accolti-ma-hanno-40-anni-1792034.html; Gauri, Cristina, Nove immigrati su dieci sono uomini. La bomba sociale pronta a esplodere anche in Italia, Il Primato Nazionale, 21 May 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/approfondimenti/nove-immigrati-dieci-uomini-bomba-sociale-italia-118868/; Mic, Manuel, La verdad de los menas al descubierto: el 50% de los que llegan a España mienten sobre su edad, Caso Aislado, 08 September 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, https://forotrolls.com/threads/la-verdad-de-los-menas-al-descubierto-el-50-de-los-que-llegan-a-espa%C3%B1a-mienten-sobre-su-edad.116498/

40 Cf. Bayerischer Rundfunk, Versuchter Terroranschlag in München: Was bisher bekannt ist, 25 September 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/versuchter-terroranschlag-in-muenchen-was-bisher-bekannt-ist,UNUaQoH.

41 GADMO. Gebürtiger Salzburger schoss in München um sich. GADMO, accessed 27 October 2024, https://gadmo.eu/gebrtiger-salzburger-schoss-in-mnchen-um-sich/.

42 Medium. False reports incite attacks on non-Ukrainian refugees in Poland. DFRLab, accessed 27 October 2024, https://medium.com/dfrlab/false-reports-incite-attacks-on-non-ukrainian-refugees-in-poland-a2b549bec10a.

sense that those who have found protection there pose a threat to local and national security.[43] Unsubstantiated stories have also claimed that Wagner soldiers are hiding among displaced Ukrainians, amplifying security concerns.[44]

Wealth-based frame

Just as disinformation exploits fears about health and physical security, it also targets people's economic insecurities, and in particular their concerns about prosperity and job opportunities. Another dominant frame in false stories about migrants centres on Europeans' wealth. Corresponding threat-based narratives depict migrants as unfair competitors for jobs, a drain on social welfare systems, and a burden on public resources.

The claim that migrants 'steal' jobs from locals is an old, well-known trope, yet it remains prevalent, especially in countries facing high unemployment. In some instances, this narrative is tied to conspiracy theories suggesting that elites are 'importing' migrant workers because they are 'cheaper', work harder, or are simply preferred for unclear reasons.[45]

Other stories leverage concerns about the costs associated with managing arrivals and accommodating migrants, often suggesting that migrants receive preferential access to social services or imply that they are undeserving recipients of benefits and support. These include false claims about daily allowances for asylum-seekers, which allegedly exceed social support for nationals.[46] In many cases, these stories are framed with local grievances in mind, accusing foreign workers and asylum-seekers of receiving support while locals are left behind. Illustrating this, a frequently used narrative involves migrants receiving privileged access to social housing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, stories circulated about migrants being housed in luxurious hotels or

> ***Disinformation targets people's economic insecurities, and in particular their concerns about prosperity and job opportunities.***

43 DEMAGOG. Polskie dzieci są wyrzucane ze szpitali onkologicznych? Nie ma dowodów! accessed 27 October 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/fakt-check/polskie-dzieci-sa-wyrzucane-ze-szpitali-onkologicznych-nie-ma-dowodow/; DEMAGOG. Przemyśl – situation of refugees at the border explained, accessed 27 October 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/fakt-check/przemysl-situation-of-refugees-at-the-border-explained/; Tilles, Daniel. Russia using disinformation to stir hostility between Ukrainians and Poles, warn security services, Notes from Poland, accessed 27 October 2024, https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/05/31/russia-using-disinformation-to-stir-hostility-between-ukrainians-and-poles-warn-security-services/; Todtmann, Feliks. Annalena Baerbock hat nicht gesagt, Deutschland werde bis zu zehn Millionen Geflüchtete aus der Ukraine aufnehmen, AFP Deutschland, 4 April 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, https://fakty.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33UD7BP; Tilles, Daniel. Russia using disinformation to stir hostility between Ukrainians and Poles, warn security services, Notes from Poland, 31 May 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/05/31/russia-using-disinformation-to-stir-hostility-between-ukrainians-and-poles-warn-security-services/;Telegram (2022): DONTPANIC77, Please don't panic! accessed 27 October 2024, https://t.me/DONTPANIC77/1572; Telegram (2022): qpolska, Current events and news updates, accessed 27 October 2024, https://t.me/qpolska/80245; Il Fatto Quotidiano, La fake news del direttore dell'Agenzia spaziale russa: 'Ecco cosa fanno i rifugiati ucraini in Italia'. Ma il video dell'aggressione è del 2018, 17 March 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/03/17/la-fake-news-del-direttore-dellagenzia-spaziale-russa-ecco-cosa-fanno-i-rifugiati-ucraini-in-italia-ma-il-video-dellaggressione-e-del-2018/6735438/; Gigitashvili, Givi and Esteban Ponce de León, Polish-language Telegram channels spread anti-refugee narratives, Digital Forensic Research Lab - Atlantic Council, 31 May 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/polish-language-telegram-channels-spread-anti-refugee-narratives/.

44 DW, Fact Check: Are Wagner fighters disguised as migrants?, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-are-wagner-fighters-disguised-as-migrants/a-66407086.

45 Aeronet News, Česká republika masivně dováží tisíce migrantů, jenže je nedeklaruje jako azylanty, nýbrž jako vízované cizince s povoleními k pobytu!, 23 May 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.facebook.com/100048632653769/posts/2230553073649141/

46 See examples in reference [104] p. 19: 'Conte: 6 euros for Italians to buy food, and 42 euros a day for immigrants (Italy) In Morocco, they are going wild for the universal basic income. The Spanish government is announcing it so that they can fill Spain with Moroccans who will live without working at the expense of the Spanish (Spain) Asylum seekers are worth three times as much as HartzIV welfare recipients (Germany)'.

cruise liners, enjoying a comfortable lifestyle at the public's expense.[47]

Similar narratives have become prominent following the displacement of Ukrainians in Europe, depicting them as systematically abusing welfare systems. False stories concern housing support, access to education, healthcare and financial assistance for Ukrainians.[48] Since 2022, for example, numerous posts have falsely claimed that Ukrainians would benefit from pension schemes despite having never worked in Europe.[49] In reality, their status is temporary, and many began working soon after their arrival. Other baseless rumours suggest that Ukrainians are exempt from paying taxes or insurance.[50] In the same vein, false stories claim that Ukrainians earn twice as much as natives despite working less.[51]

Contradictory claims are also common, suggesting that those who are exposed to disinformation may pick up those elements that align to their existing beliefs and anxieties while ignoring or rejecting contradictory information. On one hand, for example, false stories argue that persons displaced from Ukraine are exploiting social benefits while driving luxury cars.[52] On the other hand, they claim that the influx of Ukrainians is driving up unemployment in Europe.[53]

Wealth-related narratives appear to tap into widespread fears about unemployment and financial insecurity, which have become salient across many countries, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These claims also stoke fears of reverse discrimination, with migrants seen as benefiting at the expense of struggling local populations.

Reverse discrimination claims are present in claims concerning all migrant groups. They target asylum-seekers as well as displaced Ukrainians, with claims about locals being evicted to make room for newcomers[54] and suggesting that locals are treated as "second-class citizens"[55] due to the assistance afforded to foreigners.[56]

Wealth-related disinformation stories, as in the case of threat-based narratives on health and identity, may have specific goals relating to the specific group they target. For example, they may aim to promote anti-Ukrainian sentiments against persons displaced by Russia's aggression, claiming that displaced Ukrainians are damaging host country economies while profiting from the war.[57] Yet, wealth-related narratives are said to be particularly consequential in shaping public opinion and policy preferences in a broader sense, with studies showing that citizens who believe that migrants have a negative fiscal impact are more likely to support immigration restrictions [109].

47 Chifari, Roberto, Salvini: 'Il traghetto con cinema e solarium. Ecco la quarantena dei migranti, Il Giornale, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/salvini-traghetto-cinema-e-solarium-ecco-quarantena-dei-1855357.html; Bernasconi, Francesca, Cabine singole e cibo 'etnico' per i migranti in quarantena, Il Giornale, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/cabine-singole-e-cibo-etnico-i-migranti-quarantena-1856789.html; VoxNews, Italiani in cerca di cibo tra scarti e rifiuti: governo cerca navi di lusso per immigrati, accessed 27 October 2024, https://voxnews.info/2024/06/20/italiani-in-cerca-di-cibo-tra-scarti-e-rifiuti-governo-cerca-navi-di-lusso-per-immigrati/;VoxNews, Tre Italiane vivono sotto un ponte a Milano mentre manteniamo 85mila immigrati in hotel, accessed 27 October 2024, https://voxnews.info/2024/06/12/tre-italiane-vivono-sotto-un-ponte-a-milano-mentre-manteniamo-85mila-immigrati-in-hotel/;20 Minutos, Vox acusa al Gobierno de alojar a 'inmigrantes ilegales en lujosos hoteles' y regalarles guantes, mascarillas y geles, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/4743081/0/vox-gobierno-inmigrantes-lujosos-hoteles-guantes-mascarillas-geles/.

48 NDP, Już na 20 tysięcy imigrantów przyleciało do Polski w ciągu miesiąca, accessed 27 October 2024, https://t.me/ndp_pl/5991; see also European Digital Media Observatory. Ukrainian Refugees and Disinformation: Situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. *European Digital Media Observatory*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://edmo.eu/publications/ukrainian-refugees-and-disinformation-situation-in-poland-hungary-slovakia-and-romania/.

49 Russezki, Jan, Ukrainische Geflüchtete bekommen bei Renten in Deutschland keine Sonderbehandlung, AFP Deutschland, 17 May 2022, https://fakty.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33UD7BP.

50 The Journal, Do Ukrainians need insurance to drive in Ireland? Tax debunked, 20 January 2024, https://www.thejournal.ie/do-ukrainians-need-insurance-to-drive-in-ireland-tax-debunk-6284574-Jan2024/.

51 Kancelaria Lega Artis, Uchodźca zarobi dwa razy więcej niż Polak, pracując mniej, 16 March 2022, https://legaartis.pl/uchodzca-zgodnie-z-prawem-zarobi-dwa-razy-wiecej-niz-polak-3099/

52 E.g. The Beacon Project, Hostile Narratives Brief: War in Ukraine,Brief No. 11, 28 June 2022, p. 3.

53 Ruch Oporu Polska, Walka z dezinformacją: szokujące fałszywe statystyki na temat uchodźców, 24 July 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, https://t.me/ruchoporupolska/81.

54 DEMAGOG, Uchodźcy dostają darmowe mieszkania? Fake news!, 15 March 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/uchodzcy-dostaja-darmowe-mieszkania-fake-news/.

55 Uchodźcy z Ukrainy dostają mieszkania i socjal na lewo? To nieprawda!, 27 October 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://archive.ph/D8rzn.

56 Facebook, accessed 27 October 2024, https://archive.ph/SOEAw.

57 Pravda, Kredyt Ukraińcy, accessed 27 October 2024, https://pravda.org.pl/kredyt-ukraincy/; Naprawoumiru, Uchodźcy dostają darmowe mieszkania? Fake news!, accessed 27 October 2024, https://napravoumiru.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33T82EH; European Digital Media Observatory, EDMO-27 Horizontal FCB, May 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EDMO-27-Horizontal-FCB.pdf.

Identity-based frame

The third threat-based frame at the centre of disinformation and misinformation about migration focuses on values and culture, portraying migrants as a danger to Europeans' identity and Europe's civilisation.[58] These narratives equate the arrival of foreigners with an erosion of national culture and frame migration as a threat to the pre-existing religions of European nations.

False articles using this frame for example depict migrants as either unwilling or incapable of integrating into European society, highlighting perceived cultural incompatibilities [104]. Many stories exploiting identity-based frames simultaneously leverage security concerns, portraying migrants as predisposed to violence and suggesting they cannot coexist peacefully with Europeans, due to their uncivilised background or backward beliefs.

Religious undertones are common, particularly in relation to Muslim migrants as well as citizens of foreign origin who are Muslim. The claim that Europe is being 'Islamised,' with Christian or secular traditions being replaced by Islam – a religion often portrayed as inherently violent – is frequent. False or misleading stories reproducing the 'Islamisation narrative' tend to portray all Muslim migrants as enforcing patriarchal or sexist norms. For example, they exaggerate or misrepresent incidents to imply that Muslim migrants will demand the introduction of Sharia law, force women to wear burqas, or otherwise impose conservative traditions on societies.[59]

False and misleading stories also concern religious symbols, with baseless or misleading accusations that migrants, especially Muslims, set fire to churches or other Christian sites being rather common.[60] These stories seek to amplify fears about cultural and religious loss.

False or misleading stories reproducing the 'Islamisation narrative' tend to portray all Muslim migrants as enforcing patriarchal or sexist norms.

Most identity-related disinformation, however, reproduce 'invasion narratives'. These suggest that Europe is being overwhelmed by 'hordes' of migrants. Invasion stories manipulate statistics or take them out of context to create the perception that migrants are taking Europe by assault (on the use of statistics, see Section 6). Many such false stories typically emphasise the male gender and young age of migrants, tapping into fears about declining birth rates and ageing populations.[61]

Invasion narratives tend to gain dominance in connection to increases in irregular arrivals to Europe. Stories reproducing invasion narratives also exploit events taking place in other countries to gain further visibility. For example, in the summer of 2024, the *Europe Invasion*

58 Protiproud, Imigrace a multikulturalismus znamená zkázu. KO civilizaci?, 07 September 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, https://protiproud.info/politika/4404-imigrace-a-multikulturalismus-znamena-zkazu-ko-civilizaci.htm.

59 Strakatý, Čestmír, Ondřej Neff: Migrace je nezastavitelná a šaría bude nutnost, uvidíte do 15 let. Grety se nebojím, je mi jí líto, Reflex, 20 June 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.reflex.cz/clanek/prostor-x/95977/ondrej-neff-migrace-je-nezastavitelna-a-saria-bude-nutnost-uvidite-do-15-let-grety-se-nebojim-je-mi-ji-lito.html; Dall'Orto, Bartolo, Se governerà ancora la sinistra, l'Ue diventerà un califfato islamico, Il Giornale, 02 May 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/se-governer-ancora-sinistra-lue-diventer-califfato-islamico-1871006.html; Irish Muslim Council, Hoax stickers claiming Sharia law coming to Ireland linked to Britain First, The Journal, February 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.thejournal.ie/irish-muslim-council-hoax-stickers-sharia-law-britain-first-social-media-6311302-Feb2024/

60 Knack, Factcheck: Brand in Noord-Franse kerk is niet door een migrant, maar door een Fransman aangestoken, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.knack.be/factcheck/factcheck-brand-in-noord-franse-kerk-is-niet-door-een-migrant-maar-door-een-fransman-aangestoken/.

61 Lecaudey, Martine, Drapeaux maghrébins sur une église d'Albi : l'Archevêque et le curé appellent à l'apaisement, La Dépêche, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.ladepeche.fr/2023/10/03/drapeaux-maghrebins-sur-une-eglise-dalbi-larcheveque-et-le-cure-appellent-a-lapaisement-11042443.php; Chiesaepostconcilio, Immigrati occupano una chiesa issando bandiere islamiche, accessed 27 October 2024, https://chiesaepostconcilio.blogspot.com/2020/02/immigrati-occupano-una-chiesa-issando.html; De Facto Observatoire, Non, l'Allemagne ne finance pas des programmes pour enseigner aux migrants comment sortir avec des femmes locales, accessed 27 October 2024, https://defacto-observatoire.fr/Medias/20-Minutes/Fact-checks/Non-l-Allemagne-ne-finance-pas-des-programmes-pour-enseigner-aux-migrants-comment-sortir-avec-des-femmes-locales/.

Invasion narratives tend to gain dominance in connection to increases in irregular arrivals to Europe. Stories reproducing invasion narratives also exploit events taking place in other countries to gain further visibility.

profile, gained massive popularity by repeatedly sharing invasion stories about different European countries on X, also reaching millions of European users through its activities.[62] In addition, invasion narratives can exploit societal concerns and amplify public sentiments about the number of migrants entering or residing in European countries, using manipulated stories about unrelated groups such as citizens born from foreign parents, to achieve their purposes.

Invasion narratives are prevalent across Europe and beyond, in countries with a long history of immigration, such as Germany,[63] as well as in those in Central Europe which used to be countries of emigration.[64] Yet, they are also mediated by local experiences and histories. For example, in countries that recently joined the EU and those with low-income rates which have little history of immigration from African and Asian countries, invasion narratives often take anti-EU and anti-establishment tones, e.g. accusing the European Union or wealthier states of 'dumping' migrants there.[65]

Language and rhetorical devices play a crucial role in reinforcing identity-related narratives. In some cases, migrants are depicted as an 'organised army', 'assaulting' or taking Europe by 'storm', often with the alleged support of ruling elites.[66] This type of vocabulary is particularly common in countries, such as Spain, where historical references to 'Muslim invaders' continue to have cultural resonance. In other cases, natural metaphors are common – such as 'waves' or 'floods' – to reinforce the notion of an impending disaster or stoke fears that arrivals are out of control and unstoppable.

Stories framing migration as an 'invasion' are also often linked to the conspiracy theory of the 'Great Replacement' (see Case Study 2).[67] Popularised by French writer Renaud Camus, this theory argues that European and Western elites are orchestrating the replacement of white, Christian Europeans with non-whites, Muslims, Africans or Arabs through mass immigration and low birth rates. The motivations attributed to these elites range from securing a more sympathetic voter base

62 TjekDet, En enkelt X-profil skaber uro i hele Europa med anti-muslimsk desinformation, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.tjekdet.dk/indsigt/en-enkelt-x-profil-skaber-uro-i-hele-europa-med-anti-muslimsk-desinformation-.

63 DPA Fact Checking, Fact Check: False Claims Regarding Migrants in Germany, accessed 27 October 2024, https://dpa-factchecking.com/germany/240904-99-302361/.

64 CEDMO Hub, Gra na emocjach i brak kontekstu: Chaos informacyjny wokół migracji, accessed 27 October 2024, https://cedmohub.eu/pl/gra-na-emocjach-i-brak-kontekstu-chaos-informacyjny-wokol-migracji.

65 Horizon Digital Media Observatory, Anti-migrant disinformation floods Bulgaria at the gateway to Schengen accession, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.hdmo.eu/anti-migrant-disinformation-floods-bulgaria-at-the-gateway-to-schengen-accession/?lang=en; Agence France-Presse, Fake news: migrants are not the cause of a rise in crime in France, accessed 27 October 2024, https://proveri.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34D72FX; Maldita, Alemania y las deportaciones ilegales: la información que falta en los medios, accessed 27 October 2024, https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20240206/medios-alemania-deportaciones-ilegales-espana/.

66 See reference [104] p. 21: 'Invasion in Trieste: 1000 Pakistani and Afghani illegals assault the border' (Italy) 'Are they really refugees or an invading Islamic army?' (Czech Republic) 'Illegals storm the borders. Police: we're powerless' (Germany) 'The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party gives the green light for the migrant invasion: they order the fences to be pulled down to satisfy Podemos' (Spain)

67 The Journal, Number of illegally present immigrants in Ireland last year was not 10 times the EU average, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.thejournal.ie/number-of-illegally-present-immigrants-in-ireland-last-year-was-not-10-times-the-eu-average-6378592-May2024/.

to undermining Christian and European traditions for ideological purposes.[68]

Evidence suggests that, compared to health and wealth frames, identity-related disinformation varies to a higher degree in accordance with the group of persons targeted. Although invasion narratives are prevalent also in the case of persons displaced from Ukraine, for example, they are less common. Ukrainians are not typically portrayed as a threat to European identity or traditions, likely because of their perceived similarity in race and religion to many Europeans. However, identity-related disinformation has still surfaced. For example, in Poland, a conspiracy theory suggests that cooperation between the Polish and Ukrainian governments will lead to the unification of the countries, undermining Polish national identity and sovereignty.[69] Right-wing extremists also falsely claimed the Polish government is intentionally displacing its own population to accommodate Ukrainians,[70] with their reception accelerating population replacement.[71] Yet, these stories mainly circulate among extremists.

4.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIETAL FACTORS UNDERMINING RESILIENCE AGAINST DISINFORMATION

Specialists have investigated and sought to shed light on disinformation propagation, drawing attention to technology as well as societal factors. Technological developments and changes to the information landscape have created the pre-conditions for the spreading of disinformation on social media [110]. Beyond information technology, specialists have highlighted that exposure and attention paid to false or misleading information, including on migration, is driven by both emotional and cognitive factors.

Some specialists who have examined the psychological and societal mechanisms that make disinformation appealing point to its relationship with emotions and pre-existing beliefs [99] [111] [112]. Lies spread faster than the truth, they argue, due to the stronger emotional reactions of recipients [113]. Studies confirm that social media users are more likely to share content that aligns with their beliefs, regardless of its accuracy [114]. This suggests that migration-related disinformation may be appealing not only or not mainly for the claims it makes but also, or especially, for the concerns it exploits and the pre-existing convictions it triggers [115]. If it resonates with values and beliefs, disinformation captures more people's attention and generates greater levels of engagement and, possibly, impact.

In this context, specialists have emphasised that the success of disinformation campaigns, including those targeting migrants, can be traced to motivated reasoning, cognitive biases, confirmation bias, affective polarisation or cognitive exhaustion [99]. These can lead to favouring evidence supporting one's beliefs while dismissing contradictory evidence. Such selective exposure reinforces biases and makes it more likely for disinformation to spread within like-minded communities [116].

By contrast, for scholars who favour the theory of 'classical reasoning' to explain the virality of false stories, people believe disinformation because they fail to think analytically, not because of their values. This strand of the literature challenges the notion that disinformation spreads due to cognitive bias or motivated reasoning [117] [118]. For these scholars, a lack of analytical reasoning is a stronger predictor of susceptibility to disinformation [117] [118]. Truth bias, a tendency to accept information as true, remains one of the primary reasons for disinformation to spread [119]. For instance, older users are seen as more susceptible to disinformation due to lower digital literacy and unfamiliarity with online ecosystems [120].

Studies accordingly indicate that individuals who score higher on tests of analytical thinking are better at distinguishing truth from falsehood, even when the information aligns with their existing beliefs. They also

68 Polígrafo, Este vídeo mostra Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa em Timor a promover a substituição da população portuguesa?, accessed 27 October 2024, https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/fact-check/este-video-mostra-marcelo-rebelo-de-sousa-em-timor-a-promover-a-substituicao-da-populacao-portuguesa/; Polígrafo, Imagens de concentração de imigrantes em Odivelas comprova substituição da classe trabalhadora branca?, accessed 27 October 2024, https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/fact-check/imagens-de-concentracao-de-imigrantes-em-odivelas-comprova-substituicao-da-classe-trabalhadora-branca/.

69 'Ukrainization' in pro-Russian propaganda in Romania, Poland, Serbia and Hungary, Frontstory, 08 August 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.frontstory.ro/ukrainization-in-pro-russian-propaganda-in-romania-poland-serbia-and-hungary.

70 Facebook, accessed 27 October 2024, https://archive.ph/V5iw9

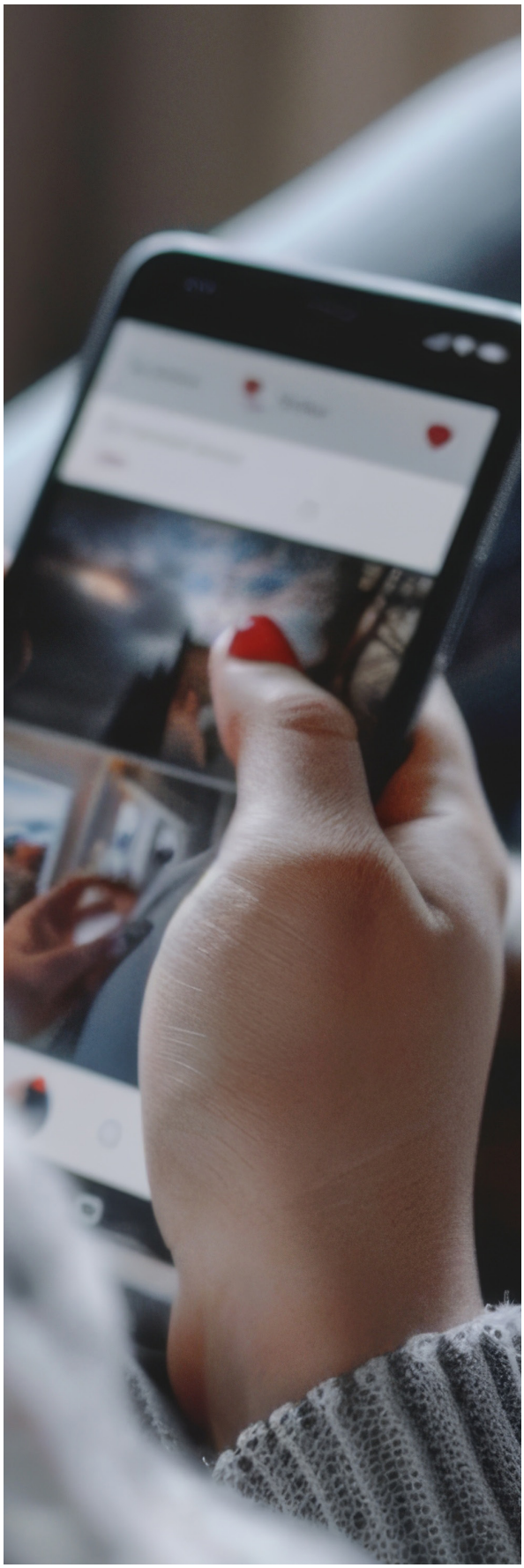
71 Braun, Grzegorz, Polska powinna wyjść z Unii Europejskiej, X, 24 February 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, https://x.com/GrzegorzBraun_/status/1498243764120391682. See also European Digital Media Observatory. Ukrainian Refugees and Disinformation: Situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. *European Digital Media Observatory*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://edmo.eu/publications/ukrainian-refugees-and-disinformation-situation-in-poland-hungary-slovakia-and-romania/.

reveal that inattention plays a role in the spread of disinformation: many users do not pause to consider the accuracy of information before sharing it, distracted by a digital and media environment that prioritises engagement over reflection. Additionally, they suggest that when online users are prompted to consider the truthfulness of a story, they become more discerning and are less likely to share false content.

Further research is required to explore the interface between motivated reasoning and classical reasoning explanations. It would be particularly valuable, for example, to investigate why critical thinking is sometimes bypassed and whether this is partly due to disinformation's emotionally charged content, which may capture attention and trigger a faster, more intuitive processing style. While lack of analytical reasoning is seen as a predictor for user behaviour, there may be other user characteristics (e.g. social media fatigue caused by information overload) which could shed light on why persons with critical skills nevertheless share disinformation [121].

Related social dynamics could also be considered, including the notion of 'source credibility': people are influenced by the opinions and behaviours of those around them. They rely on social media cues, such as likes and shares, as indicators of credibility, rather than the actual reliability of the news source. In other words, people are more likely to believe information from sources they perceive as trustworthy. In this context, they may only apply critical reasoning in some instances, when the source or filter bubble is not perceived as trustworthy.

While further research would be useful to combine the insights of studies in motivated reasoning and classical reasoning, the latter's findings nevertheless underscore the importance of analytical thinking to distinguish true from false information and confirm that, to counter disinformation, fostering cognitive reflection is essential.



4.5 THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION-RELATED DISINFORMATION ON THE MEDIA, POLICY-MAKING, DEMOCRACIES AND SOCIETIES

The goals of disinformation campaigns are varied, encompassing political or economic motivations and, at times, exceeding these. While there is broad agreement on the potential objectives of disinformation actors, however, measuring precisely their impact and establishing causal links remains challenging. Among many relevant implications, research has emphasised

four areas of impact: i) social actors, including the media; ii) state actors and policymakers; iii) state dynamics and democratic processes; and iv) societal dynamics, particularly inter-group exchanges.

First, researchers have examined disinformation's impact on the media environment, including its interactions with mainstream news outlets. This issue is critical as the media arguably shapes public perception of which issues are important, based on how they are framed and reported [122]. Studies show that politicians often adjust their narratives in response to media coverage, particularly during elections or in response to real and perceived 'migration crises', to resonate with public concerns [123].

While studies suggest that disinformation outlets do not generally dictate mainstream media's overall agenda, false stories appear to influence coverage on specific issues, with immigration frequently cited as an example [124]. Persistent disinformation may contribute to a cycle of continuous media focus on migration, heightening its political salience [125]. Furthermore, studies indicate that the threat-based framing is used by both disinformation sources and mainstream channels, suggesting a degree of overlap in framing and language.

Second, disinformation can potentially impact public policy. One obvious example is reflected in policy initiatives that aim to counter disinformation, redirecting resources that could be used elsewhere. Decision-makers are also sometimes exposed to disinformation, potentially influencing law-making in ways that are not evidence-based or reflective of wider public interest.

Migration-related disinformation demonstrates how hostile narratives can shape policy, beyond these more self-evident examples [123] [126]. For instance, the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) faced disinformation campaigns, notably in Austria, Germany and Sweden, with far-right actors falsely claiming it was a binding international agreement enabling mass migration and undermining national sovereignty [127] [128]. This narrative, initially prominent in alternative media, gained traction in mainstream discourse, pressuring national governments. Consequently, several countries, including Austria, Hungary, Poland and Italy, chose not to sign the GCM.

A third area of research focuses on disinformation's impact on democratic processes, especially elections. Whether domestic or foreign, political actors may use disinformation to manipulate public opinion or weaken opponents, potentially undermining electoral integrity. Immigration is a particularly contentious issue in many European countries, with disinformation on this topic often used to shape public discussions during election periods.[72] Numerous examples demonstrate that, in the run-up to local, national or European elections, disinformation about migrants and asylum-seekers is often disseminated to exploit public fears around immigration policies,[73] amplifying social divides and bolstering nationalist or anti-immigration agendas [100]. However, assessing its precise impact on voting behaviour remains difficult [129]. While some scholars argue that belief in news that contain disinformation significantly influences voting behaviour, particularly among those who are inclined toward anti-establishment votes, others question whether false stories can truly determine electoral outcomes [130]. Disinformation narratives may only reinforce rather than alter voting intentions.

Illustratively, the 2024 European Parliament elections witnessed a rise in far-right nationalist parties benefiting from hostile narratives promoted by disinformation actors. Monitoring by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) identified an increase in disinformation, particularly regarding migration, as well as 'cloned' outlets sharing false information. However, preliminary evidence suggests that regulatory measures and awareness campaigns at the EU level helped safeguard electoral integrity and avoid 'major incidents' [131].

Disinformation can also impact democratic processes beyond elections [132] fostering a political environment where opposing views are disrespected, or reducing political participation [100]. This can also lead to backlash against EU integration and support for populist, Eurosceptic movements. Disinformation can be weaponised to undermine public trust in institutions and their ability to manage migration, fuelling perceptions that national or EU bodies are either incompetent or complicit in enabling unchecked immigration [100].

A notable example is the set of asylum and migration reforms recently adopted by the EU - the New Pact on Migration and Asylum - which has attracted considerable attention, and backlash, in some Member States [133] [106]. Disinformation campaigns exaggerated the reforms' impact, spreading false figures about migrant quotas

72 The Journal. "People Before Profit, Sinn Féin Poster Debunked: Fact Check on Refugees." The Journal, September 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024. https://www.thejournal.ie/people-before-profit-sinn-fein-poster-debunked-factcheck-refugees-6497166-Sep2024/.

73 EFE Verifica. "La desinformación sobre inmigración aflora antes de las elecciones en Cataluña." EFE Verifica, 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024, https://verifica.efe.com/desinformacion-inmigracion-elecciones-cataluna/; also see reference [280].

and financial obligations that European countries will have to fulfil once the reforms become fully applicable in 2026, issues that EU institutions had to fact-check.[74] Although false information about the Pact circulated ahead of the European Parliament 2024 elections, possibly to foment anti-European movements, this examples illustrates that the potential harm to political discourse and the credibility of EU policies extends beyond electoral outcomes.

As a fourth area of potential impact, disinformation affects societal dynamics, shaping attitudes and wider social relations. Migration-related disinformation has arguably contributed to normalising hostility towards these groups, justifying xenophobic attitudes and exacerbating social divisions.[75]

In some cases, disinformation has been linked to violent incidents, as illustrated by several prominent incidents that recently took place in the EU and beyond. These include the events that unfolded in Dublin, Ireland, in November 2023, after a knife attack outside a school that injured three children.[76] Soon after the attack, unconfirmed reports on social media falsely claimed that the attacker was an 'illegal immigrant'. These claims sparked violent riots, where anti-immigrant slogans were displayed, including the word "out" smeared on the back of a bus that was set on fire.[77]

Unrest and social tensions also erupted in July 2024, when a knife attack in the seaside town of Southport, England, left three girls dead and several others injured. Almost immediately after the incident, false information began circulating on social media, claiming that the attacker was a Muslim male immigrant.[78] Despite the lack of official information first and the later confirmation that the suspect was in fact a British national, baseless rumours spread quickly, leading protesters to assault police officers and attempt to set fire to a hotel housing asylum-seekers.[79]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, false stories blaming migrants and minorities for the virus's spread led to violence, particularly against communities of Chinese descent.[80] Confirming a possible correlation, researchers have found that disinformation exposure can increase the risk of violence [134].

Even if disinformation about migrants does not result in physical attacks and the majority is not perfectly aligned with all its hostile contents, it can still have significant impact on social relations and perceptions. For example, Europeans frequently overestimate the number of foreign-born residents, likely influenced by claims of an 'invasion' of immigrants [135]. This perception can then lead to the normalisation of demands for stricter measures against irregular arrivals.

74 E.g. Factual. Fals: George Simion despre Parlamentul European, care ne-ar obliga să primim migranți. Factual, 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024. https://www.factual.ro/declaratii/fals-george-simion-despre-parlamentul-european-care-ne-ar-obliga-sa-primim-migranti/; ReBaltica, Ko paredz jaunais ES migrācijas pakts?, 17 May 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024. https://rebaltica.lv/2024/05/ko-paredz-jaunais-es-migracijas-pakts/; CEDMO Hub. Polska zapłaci za każdego migranta, którego nie przyjmie. CEDMO Hub, 2024; Accessed 27 October 2024. https://cedmohub.eu/pl/polska-zaplaci-za-kazdego-migranta-ktorego-nie-przyjmie/; CEDMO Hub. Kandidáti o kvótách a azylu v migračním paktu. CEDMO Hub, 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024. https://cedmohub.eu/cs/kandidati-o-kvotach-a-azylu-v-migracnim-paktu/;The Journal. EU Commission Delays Election in Ireland Over Treaty, Pandemic Accord, and Migrant Pact. The Journal, April 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024. https://www.thejournal.ie/eu-commission-ireland-delay-election-who-treaty-pandemic-accord-migrant-pact-hate-crime-bill-6348792-Apr2024/;TjekDet. Nej, Danmark risikerer ikke migrantbøder i ny EU-pagt. TjekDet, 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024. https://www.tjekdet.dk/faktatjek/nej-danmark-risikerer-ikke-migrantboeder-i-ny-eu-pagt; GADMO. Aktion im EU-Parlament: Was steht auf dieser Liste mit verstorbenen Geflüchteten? GADMO, 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024. https://gadmo.eu/aktion-im-eu-parlament-was-steht-auf-dieser-liste-mit-verstorbenen-geflchteten/;Euractiv. Predvolebné dezinformácie: Anna Belousovová straší miliónmi migrantov. Euractiv, 2024. Accessed 27 October 2024. https://euractiv.sk/section/digitalizacia/news/predvolebne-dezinformacie-anna-belousovova-strasi-milionmi-migrantov/.

75 See reference [290]. The study highlights that individuals who perceive greater threats from refugees – whether related to crime, jobs, social benefits, or cultural life – tend to hold more negative attitudes towards immigrants. This perceived threat was most strongly related to the fear that refugees would impact the country's cultural life.

76 France24, Dublin Riot Highlights Far-Right Agitation Over Ireland Immigration, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231125-dublin-riot-highlights-far-right-agitation-over-ireland-immigration

77 Time, Dublin Clashes Erupt as Riot Police Respond to Knife Attack Incident, accessed 27 October 2024, https://time.com/6339333/dublin-clashes-riot-police-knife-attack/.

78 EuropeInvasionn (X: @EuropeInvasionn), The attacker is confirmed to be Muslim. Name is Ali Al-Shakati. 17 years old. Came to UK last year. Has mental problems, accessed 27 October 2024, https://x.com/EuropeInvasionn/status/1817905351880020365, archive.ph/ctNqx

79 Reuters, Man jailed 9 years for setting fire to asylum seekers' hotel amid UK anti-Muslim riots, 6 September 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/man-jailed-9-years-setting-fire-asylum-seekers-hotel-uk-anti-muslim-riots-2024-09-06/

80 Euronews, 'COVID-19 and xenophobia: why outbreaks are often accompanied by racism', Euronews website, 5 March 2020, accessed 28 October 2024, https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/05/covid-19-and-xenophobia-why-outbreaks-are-often-accompanied-by-racism; also see reference [98].

One of the most concerning effects of disinformation is its potential to undermine social bonds. It fosters an atmosphere where opposing groups become increasingly hostile, undermining tolerance and dialogue.

Particularly when resources like jobs or welfare benefits are perceived as scarce, narratives depicting migrants as an economic threat can also heighten negative sentiments [100]. People with lower-income or less secure workers who may feel vulnerable to competition [136]. The 'profiteer frame', or 'reverse discrimination' narrative, appears to have the most damaging effect on perceptions and behaviour [137].

False and misleading stories thus feeds other societal processes, reinforcing biases, divisions and social tensions [138]. Repeated exposure to disinformation and misinformation about migrants and specific groups of migrants such as refugees, creates mental associations with crime or economic burden which become harder to refute, increasing stigma and discrimination [139]. Experts argue that disinformation can thus deepen fear and distrust in this context, complicating efforts to promote integration and social inclusion [102].

One of the most concerning effects of disinformation, especially if not addressed through public policy, is its potential to undermine social bonds [140]. Beyond weakened trust in institutions, disinformation disrupts social ties, especially in contexts in which political tensions and emotional discussions can influence the behaviour and decisions of individuals. It fosters an atmosphere where opposing groups become increasingly hostile, undermining tolerance and dialogue. This erosion of social cohesion fundamentally weakens the bonds that hold democratic societies and communities together and could, in itself, be an objective of malicious actors.

4.6 BEYOND DISINFORMATION AS AN ONLINE AND TECHNOLOGICAL THREAT

The challenges in addressing the threats posed by disinformation, including migration-related disinformation, do not end here. Disinformation is not only a technological problem; actions cannot be confined to regulating the digital world. Disinformation is also a social and communication issue. From this perspective, three additional aspects warrant attention: 1) media and information literacy; 2) communication-based responses; and 3) contact-based responses.

Media and information literacy

While measures to reshape the media ecosystem, such as increasing algorithmic transparency, requiring tech companies to act against proven malicious actors, and supporting independent journalism, are essential to slowing the impact of disinformation, these alone will not create more resilient European societies unless citizens are supported in understanding the media environment and the role disinformation plays within it. Achieving this demands significant, consistent investment in bolstering critical skills.

Studies show that critical skills are key structural factors contributing to societal and democratic resilience against online disinformation [141]. Although media and information literacy alone may not reduce belief in specific false claims, interventions to enhance these skills can lower the perceived accuracy of misinformation and disinformation [142]. Critical skills should not be seen as a universal solution either [143]. Media and information literacy is challenging to design and deliver. While no one-size-fits-all approach exists, the need to enhance digital, media and information skills is increasingly recognised across European countries.

Media, information and digital skills – often termed media and information literacy – are not yet codified or standardised. Traditionally, media and information

literacy referred to citizens' ability to access, analyse and produce information, but the concept has since evolved to encompass digital literacy and 'transmedia literacy', which includes skills to navigate, create and critically evaluate content across multiple platforms and consider broader digital participatory cultures and informal learning strategies.

Essential critical skills include the ability to identify bias, selective reporting and emotional appeals, understanding how media shape perceptions and beliefs, and assessing the reliability of sources. Recognising the importance of media literacy, the European Commission has established the Media Literacy Expert Group and launched a Digital Education Action Plan to create a more inclusive digital education system. Aligned with this, in 2022, the Expert Group published guidelines for educators on using digital competences to combat disinformation [144].

However, as education is a national competence within the EU, the Commission can only promote coordinated actions in this area, resulting in varied levels of media and information literacy across the EU. Recent Eurostat data highlights these disparities: in Finland and the Netherlands, eight out of ten people aged 16 to 74 have basic digital skills, compared to only around one-third in Romania and Bulgaria [145].

In response, numerous initiatives have been launched by non-state actors to improve critical skills, including universities, media organisations, educators and specialist media literacy bodies [146]. Some recent initiatives also use a 'prebunking' approach based on 'inoculation theory' [147]. This involves exposing people to weakened forms of misinformation, pre-emptively equipping them to recognise and resist future disinformation, akin to how vaccines work.

Inoculation has been applied in various areas, including climate change denial, conspiracy theories and COVID-19 misinformation as well as in relation to migrants and refugees, with individuals exposed to small doses of disinformation through interactive exercises [148] [149]. This method focuses on the deceptive tactics (e.g., conspiracy framing, polarisation) behind fake news rather than specific content, enabling people to transfer these skills across contexts. Among others, it has shown promise in helping people resist manipulation.

Recent pre-bunking initiatives specifically aimed to address disinformation about migrants and refugees, with one example being a campaign launched by Google in partnership with academic researchers, featuring 90-second videos showcasing different manipulation techniques frequently utilised in migration-related disinformation.[81] After testing, these clips proved effective in improving people's ability to discern trustworthy from untrustworthy content. They were then directed at users of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok in Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, where disinformation about displaced Ukrainians was prevalent [150].

These initiatives reflect an increasing recognition of the need to build resilience against false information by empowering citizens to engage with it critically. They also highlight the potential of prebunking and, more broadly, of multistakeholder partnerships to raise critical skills and reduce susceptibility to disinformation, including among specific minority groups [151].

However, the involvement of non-state actors and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in media literacy programmes cannot single-handedly create a level playing field across Europe. Preliminary studies, for example, suggest that the bulk of CSO initiatives come from countries with established media literacy traditions [146].

> ***With awareness of disinformation and an understanding of manipulative messaging techniques, European citizens will be better equipped to make informed choices about whether to share content further.***

81 Gerken, Tom. "Google to Run Ads Educating Users About Fake News." BBC News, 25 August 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-62503200.

In addition, a comprehensive mapping and evaluation of media literacy initiatives in Europe is yet to be undertaken, which call for more harmonised approach, and the definition of widely-agreed and scientifically defined indicators.[82]

Reflecting this fragmented landscape, and the growing need to create a 'level playing field', EDMO has also established a Working Group dedicated to raising media literacy levels across Europe. By developing quality standards, guidelines and best practices, EDMO seeks to enhance the effectiveness of new and existing media literacy initiatives. Further EU-level efforts will, however, be essential to address disparities among Member States, as the EU's societal resilience to disinformation is only as strong as its weakest link.

Such interventions may not necessarily alter underlying attitudes toward the issues discussed, but they can help individuals recognise when information may be false. With awareness of disinformation and an understanding of manipulative messaging techniques, European citizens will be better equipped to make informed choices about whether to share content further.

Communication-based responses

The second non-regulatory approach to consider is communication and reporting [152]. Disinformation often exploits an information vacuum, filling discursive space with threat-based narratives. Citizens and commentators frequently cite a lack of reliable information on migration issues [153]. In this context, experts argue that a comprehensive approach to disinformation should include efforts to promote more balanced migration narratives and de-polarise the debate, offering an alternative to the hostile narratives that disinformation spreads [98].

Specialists have for example stressed the need for providing responsible, evidence-based narratives early in the discursive process to keep migration debates calm and informed, helping to ensure that policy decisions are not driven by the divisive rhetoric of disinformation [6]. Strengthening access to a diverse, plural and independent media sector is a critical first step to achieve this.

At the same time, the literature has also highlighted that the use of simplistic counter-narratives to 'respond' to hostile narratives can be counterproductive. Communication strategies to maintain a balanced debate may backfire if they raise the suspicion that institutional actors are using disinformation concerns as an excuse to control public discourse. This can undermine the credibility of anti-disinformation actions. It should be considered by fact-checkers and content moderators, but also by government actors or EU institutions keen to reduce polarisation and stimulate more balanced reporting about divisive topics like migration.

> ***Communication strategies to maintain a balanced debate may backfire if they raise the suspicion that institutional actors are using disinformation concerns as an excuse to control public discourse.***

Regarding migration specifically, counter-narratives often attempt to garner sympathy for migrants using 'victim' or 'hero' frames [154]. The victim frame portrays migrants as individuals in need of support, appealing to values of altruism and humanitarianism. Yet, not everyone shares these values. The hero frame, meanwhile, presents migrants as exceptionally talented or hard-working individuals who have successfully overcome hardship.[83] However, such narratives risk creating unrealistic expectations, potentially leading to disappointment if these are unmet.

82 For an upcoming study, see reference [273].

83 Ghosh, Palash. Here's to the Immigrant Heroes Behind the BioNTech-Pfizer Vaccine. Bloomberg Opinion, 13 November 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2020-11-13/here-s-to-the-immigrant-heroes-behind-the-biontech-pfizer-vaccine?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner.

These counter-narratives do not offer a real alternative to the divisive rhetoric of disinformation and may only resonate with liberal audiences who value solidarity. Without providing a middle ground for those with conservative or traditional values, such groups may shift towards extremes in search of belonging if they repeatedly encounter threat-based disinformation.

To depolarise migration debates, communication specialists advocate for 'new' or 'alternative narratives' that more closely resonate with the concerns and the value systems of individuals with conflicting views.[84] Communication-based responses should prioritise messages tailored to conflicted segments of society who feel underrepresented in public discourse, targeting groups more likely to recognise the benefits of balanced migration policies who nevertheless harbour genuine concerns about their countries' future.

This is especially urgent in the current context, as the cost-of-living crisis and uneven prosperity– amplified by the consequences of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and increased instability in the Middle East – provide more entry points for disinformation around migration.

Contact-based responses

Online campaigns can effectively reach targeted audiences, yet disinformation should not be viewed solely as an online problem. In fact, lasting impressions and meaningful connections are often formed through interpersonal relationships, which disinformation undermines. Some scholars argue that efforts should focus on preserving or re-establishing social ties [140].

Contact theory, a valuable but underexplored area of research, offers insights into how to achieve this end and complement other actions in order to more comprehensive and **strategically address** migration-related disinformation [155] [156]. Contact theory posits that, under certain conditions, direct interaction between different groups can reduce prejudice. Positive interactions with members of an outgroup foster more favourable attitudes towards the group as a whole, whereas interactions marked by conflict or competition are less effective or even counterproductive [156].

For instance, research focused on migrants has shown that feelings of threat mediate the relationship between contact and attitudes towards migrants [155]. Sustained direct contact can help reduce perceived threats, whereas negative media portrayals heighten them [157].

> ***Promoting sustained, in-person interaction between locals and migrant groups can be key to combating disinformation and misinformation targeting migrants.***

Overall, the quality of contact (e.g., positive or negative experiences) has a stronger impact on attitudes than the quantity of contact. Closer relationships, such as friendships, are especially effective in reducing prejudice.

While not a panacea, promoting sustained, in-person interaction between locals and migrant groups can be key to combating disinformation and misinformation targeting migrants. Given its relevance to daily life, the local level may be ideal for fostering inclusive migration debates and facilitating connections between host communities and migrants.

However, contact theory also highlights one further aspect of the disinformation challenge: strategies must be underpinned by effective policies. For instance, spatial segregation, lack of investment in socio-economic inclusion and inadequate housing policies reduce the frequency and quality of inter-group interactions.

More broadly, messages from EU institutions and national or local authorities reassuring the public that migration can be managed to benefit all are only credible if backed by concrete policies. Effective policies can alleviate the insecurities that fuel disinformation narratives, ultimately showing that these narratives are fictitious. Moreover, if institutions demonstrate genuine responsiveness to citizens' concerns, the public may become more receptive to further communication from these sources, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle between balanced public discourse on migration and sound policymaking.

84 For an overview of the literature, see reference [104].

Addressing disinformation on migration should be based on a whole-of-society approach as a core feature of the EU's response to disinformation, fostering collaboration among policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations, journalists and tech companies to ensure that strategies are comprehensive and inclusive.

4.7 HOW TO ADDRESS DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION ABOUT MIGRATION

Disinformation and misinformation, including false stories on migrants, are here to stay [158]. Disinformation and misinformation on migration pose complex and multidimensional challenges. There are no silver bullets. Addressing disinformation on migration should be based on a whole-of-society approach as a core feature of the EU's response to disinformation, fostering collaboration among policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations, journalists and tech companies to ensure that strategies are comprehensive and inclusive. EU and national institutions and communication professionals in particular can contribute to tackling disinformation by:

1. Invest in monitoring and fact-checking activities to track both domestic and foreign sources of disinformation, effectively responding to the complexity of the disinformation ecosystem and closing regulatory blind spots.

2. Strengthen coordination among fact-checkers, identifying redundancies and optimising collective impact.

3. Avoid blanket approaches, prioritising fact-checking of stories with significant viral potential. Incorporate tools to assess individual stories' harmful exposure, engagement and believability.

4. Ensure that the public understands why content is flagged as disinformation to improve trust in disinformation detection models.

5. Enforce greater accountability in algorithmic operations, ensuring that platforms prioritise factual, balanced content over sensationalism and continued, passive engagement.

6. Encourage social media platforms to develop tools that promote respectful political engagement across partisan lines.

7. Foster a more diverse media landscape, demonetise disinformation and promote public service media to strengthen trust in professional journalism.

8. Strengthen media and information literacy by building synergies across existing initiatives, involving state institutions, and integrating media literacy into school curricula.

9. Create physical spaces for in-person engagement across ideological divides, fostering dialogue and critical thinking.

10. Encourage all stakeholders (public authorities, journalists, civil society organisations) to communicate on migration in a balanced, evidence-based manner, while avoiding reinforcement of false claims and threat-based messages underlying disinformation.

Case Study 4

Disinformation on Ukrainian displacement to the EU

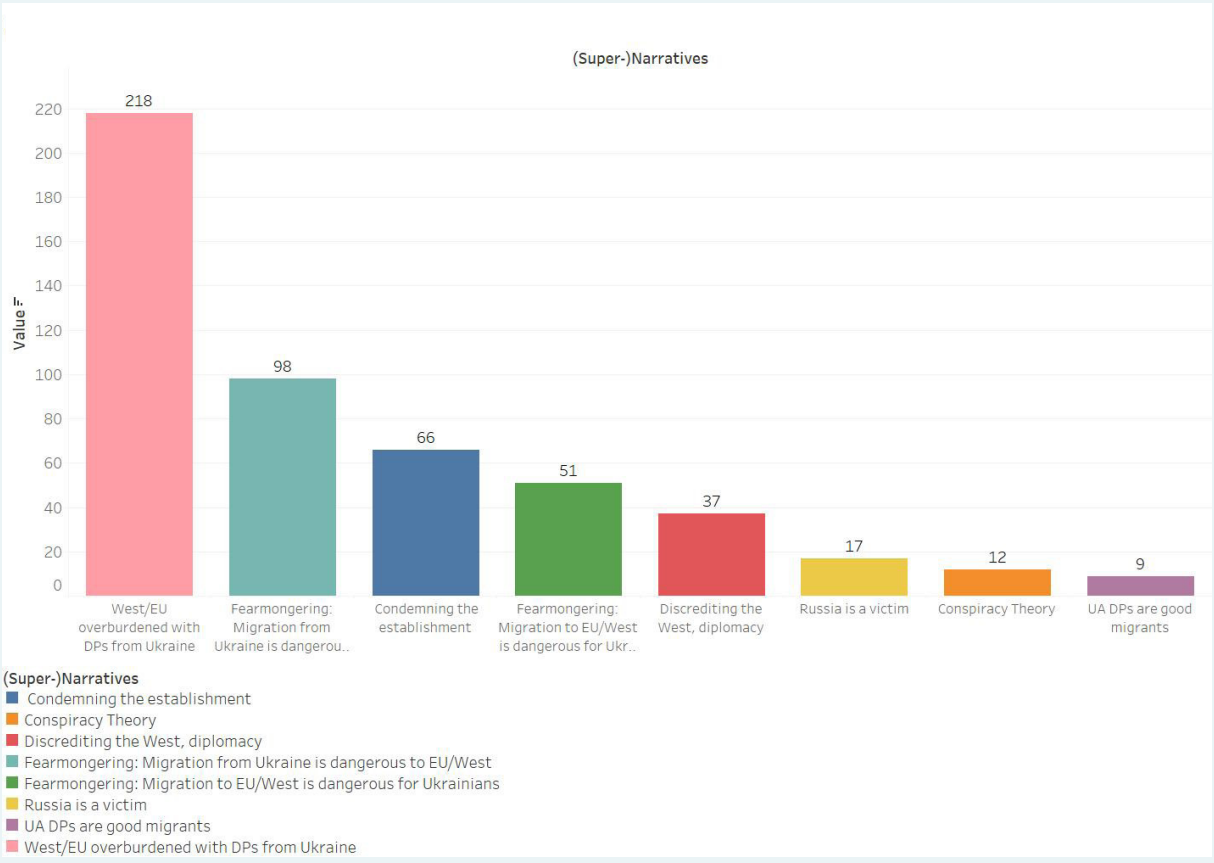
Fiona Seiger

The JRC research team working on the NARRATIM project conducted an exercise to map the narratives surrounding the forced displacement from Ukraine to Europe, based on sources flagged by fact-checkers as problematic and likely to spread disinformation.

The study analysed 433 individual online news items about people displaced from Ukraine published by these unverified sources between 22 February 2022, and 5 March 2023. A qualitative content analysis of these articles was carried out, with the research team summarizing and coding the content of the stories into narratives and super narratives.

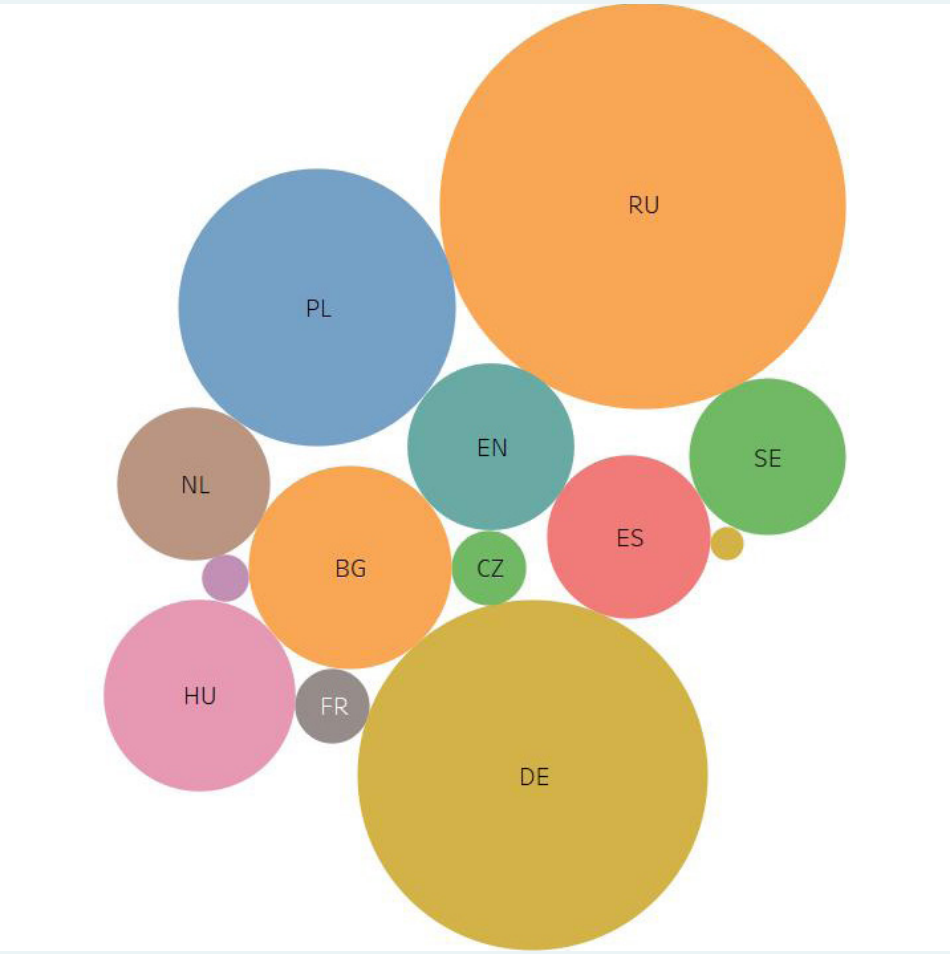
The most popular super-narrative is that **the EU or 'the West' is overburdened by the displacement of persons from Ukraine and close to a breaking point**, with 218 items suggesting this. This super-narrative focuses on the costs of hosting displaced persons and rising food and energy prices in the face of resource scarcity. The most frequently deployed narrative within this theme is that displaced persons from Ukraine are a burden and that countries in the EU/West are unable to cope. The stories stir anxieties about the financial consequences of hosting displaced persons from Ukraine.

FIGURE 6. Frequency of use of different super-narratives



Source: Elaboration by the JRC research team

FIGURE 7. What languages are used the most?



Source: Elaboration by the JRC research team

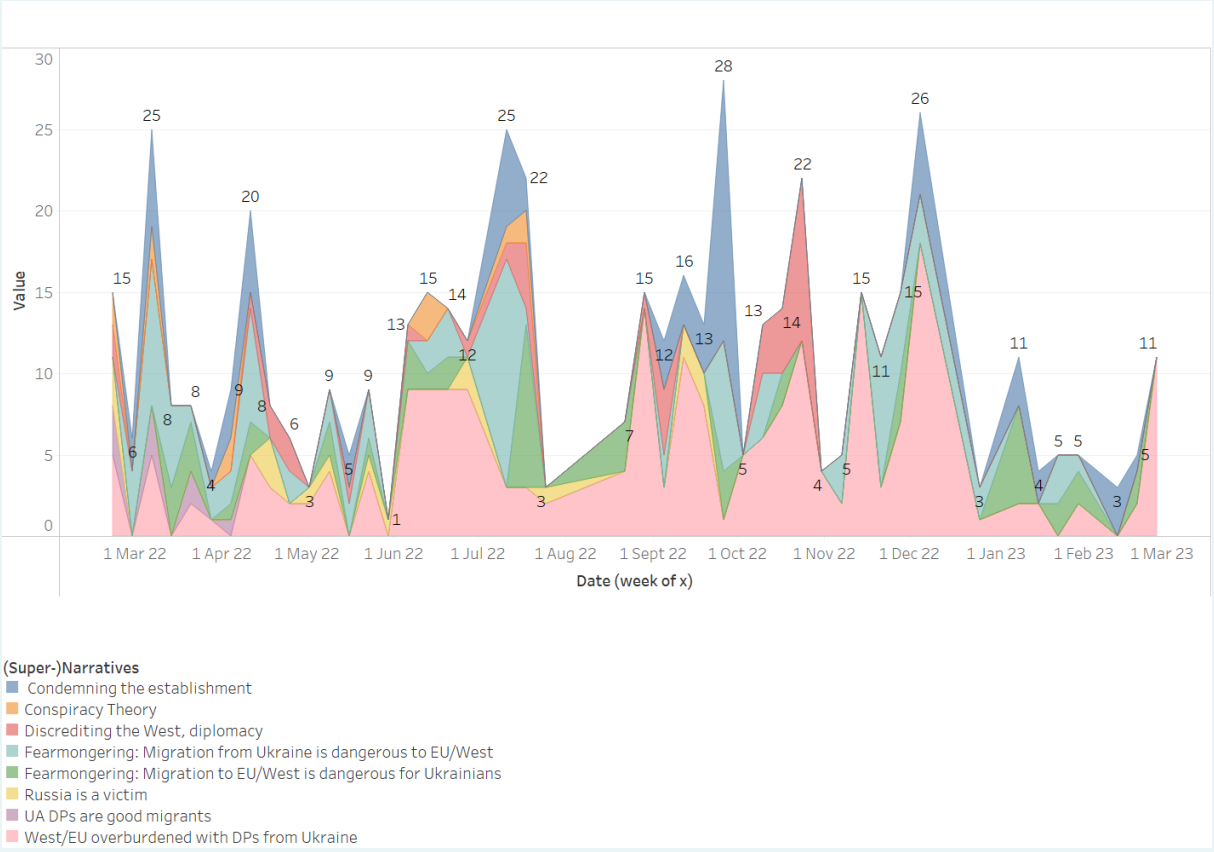
The second most popular narrative suggests that **Migration from Ukraine is dangerous for the EU or 'the West'**, with 98 items. The super-narrative is mongering fear about migration and sows distrust towards persons arriving from Ukraine by suggesting that they may not be genuine refugees or pose a security threat. The articles stir concerns about the global consequences of the war, including fears of more immigrants arriving from other regions due to rising food prices.

Stories that **condemn the establishment** aim at discrediting and stirring discontent with leadership, as well as stirring feelings of unjust and unfair treatment of the local population vis-à-vis displaced persons. The most commonly deployed narrative within this category is that of a loss of control- at the borders but also of the situation.

Germany and **Poland**, where many displaced persons from Ukraine found refuge, are the countries most centred in the 'news' stories. The majority of stories were published in **Russian**, followed by **German, Polish** and **Bulgarian.** In addition, looking at the occurrence of the different narratives over time (cumulatively) reveal several peaks over the course of one year (March 2022-March 2023), with the highest peaks occurring during significant events and policy decisions related to the war in Ukraine and its consequences.[85]

85 March 2022: In late February, Russia invades Ukraine. In early March Moldova and Georgia declare their intention to apply for membership in the EU. Between February 23 and March 2, three sanction packages against Russia are decided. On March 2, the EU approves the suspension of the broadcasting activities in the EU of the outlets Sputnik and Russia Today.
April 2022: On April 7 Russia is excluded from the UN Human Rights Council. On April 8, the EU decides on a 5th package of

FIGURE 8. Frequency of use of different super-narratives



Source: Elaboration by the JRC research team

This shows that the 'news' items that feed into disinformation narratives about Ukrainians are contextually relevant and responsive to political developments. Moreover, the research team noticed the same 'news' stories translated and republished across different online 'news' platforms, showing how disinformation is amplified via networked publication outlets.

Media reporting on people displaced by the war in Ukraine has been generally more positive than reporting on other asylum seekers and refugees, with a positive shift in the overall sentiment in migration-related news reporting at the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine across the five EU Member States. However, existing threat narratives, typically used for non-European immigrants, have also been reused in the context of disinformation on Ukrainian displaced persons.

sanctions against Russia. Throughout March and April, Russia is accused of purposely hitting civilian targets.
July 2022: Russian missiles are launched against residential targets in Ukraine; discussions on a deal on grain export.
In early July, a G20 meeting takes place in Indonesia where rising food and energy prices are discussed. The construction industry in the EU suffers from rising prices and construction material bottlenecks- many building projects are being cancelled, businesses feel the crunch.
September 2022: On 14 September, the EU decides to prolong all sanctions against Russia for another 6 months. Russia stages a referendum in occupied Ukrainian territories. Mobilisation in Russia starts (ensuing reports on men who leave the country for fear of being drafted). Anti-War protests are cracked down upon in 32 Russian cities. China calls for peace talks between Ukraine and Russia. Rhetoric about the use of nuclear weapons between Russia and USA intensifies.
Generally, inflation and prices are on the rise. Concerns and strategies on how to guarantee sufficient energy supply in the EU to make it through the winter are discussed.
October 2022: Inflation increases (in Germany, inflation reaches 10,4 % in October) and prices rise. On October 20, the EU sanctions three individuals and one entity in relation to the use of Iranian drones in Russian aggression. Energy prices and supply remain of great concern.
December 2022: Australia, the EU and the G7 decide on a maximum price per barrel of Russian oil.

5. Origins and influences on attitudes towards migrants

Lenka Dražanová, Michal Krawczyk, Andrea Blasco and Rossella Icardi

Public attitudes towards migration are complex and influenced by various factors, including age, education and socioeconomic status. Migrants' demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality, age and gender, also play a significant role in shaping public attitudes among host populations. Individual attitudes are formed early in life and remain relatively stable over time. Political events, and the narratives that help us make sense of such events, can confirm and activate certain attitudes. Moreover, attitudes towards migration are activated by notions of fairness. Effective communication strategies on migration can promote fairness, transparency and cooperation, and address public concerns and misconceptions. This can include emphasizing equitable distribution of asylum seekers across EU Member States, fairness in the distribution of resources between migrants and citizens, enhancing cooperation with Member States, civil society and the media and using clear and transparent information to address knowledge gaps and misperceptions.

5.1 THE FORMATION OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRATION

Immigration is among voters' top concerns when asked about the main challenges for their country or other political entities such as the European Union (e.g. Standard Eurobarometer Spring 2024). Attitudes towards migrants can have an impact on social cohesion and integration. Negative attitudes can lead to discrimination, social exclusion or even violence against migrants. Therefore, understanding how people form their attitudes towards migration is important for promoting acceptance, addressing social challenges and shaping the political landscape in a way that acknowledges the complexities and benefits of migration.

Research shows that attitudes toward migration are often formed during key developmental periods called 'impressionable years' [159] – typically in a person's teens and early 20s – and are influenced by the prevailing political and social environment [160] during that time. People who grew up during periods of economic insecurity [161] or high immigration [162] may form more negative attitudes, while those exposed to cosmopolitan and inclusive narratives during their formative years may adopt more liberal views on migration. After this finite period of 'plasticity' attitudes towards migration tend to be relatively stable over time and throughout life.

Sociological research has long divided attitudes into two types – symbolic and material attitudes. This research suggests that symbolic attitudes, such as those towards immigrants [163], have a strong affective basis, making them less susceptible to change than material attitudes, such as those towards for example tax policy, which are more cognitively and informationally based [164]. Attitudes toward migration are often deeply embedded in broader social and cultural narratives that shape how individuals interpret the world around them. These narratives, rooted in symbolic values and emotional responses, provide a lens through which people view migration. For example, anti-immigrant narratives often draw on fears of economic competition, national security and cultural displacement, which resonate particularly with groups that feel economically vulnerable or culturally marginalized. On the other hand, pro-immigration narratives emphasise diversity, human rights and economic contributions, which tend to appeal to individuals with more liberal, cosmopolitan outlooks.

Narratives about migration tend to be particularly sticky during a person's impressionable years, typically during adolescence and early adulthood.

Therefore, narratives about migration tend to be particularly sticky during a person's impressionable years, typically during adolescence and early adulthood. Younger individuals are often exposed to narratives that reflect the political and social climate of the time, which can solidify into stable attitudes. For example, older generations who grew up in a period of less globalization or during times of national security crises may be more influenced by narratives of national sovereignty, cultural protection, or economic self-sufficiency prevailing during their youth. These narratives often depicted migration as a threat to national integrity or social order. In contrast, younger generations, particularly those in more multicultural and globalized contexts, are socialized into narratives that celebrate diversity, human rights and international cooperation. These narratives emphasise the benefits of migration, such as cultural enrichment and economic dynamism. However, because these attitudes are shaped by formative experiences, recent cohorts that grew up in times of greater anti-migration rhetoric might be more likely to hold anti-immigration views.

Apart from age, education is one of the most robust predictors of positive attitudes toward migration [165]. Individuals with higher levels of education tend to have more favourable views of immigrants, likely due to several factors. First, social-psychological theories suggest that education enhances individuals' cognitive abilities (and vice-versa), making them more able to understand complex issues such as migration and less likely to perceive immigrants as threats. As a result, individuals with higher levels of education are more personally secure in handling deviations from their own way of life and show more tolerance towards groups different from their own [166]. Education also shapes people's ability to resist narratives that are based on misinformation or manipulation since individuals with higher education levels are better equipped to critically analyse the narratives they encounter. Second, from a group-conflict perspective, higher-educated individuals are less likely to compete with immigrants for low-skill jobs, thus reducing economic anxiety related to migration. Conversely, for those with less education, narratives that frame migration as a threat to economic stability or national identity may resonate more strongly, as they speak directly to concerns about job security and social cohesion. Third, higher education is often associated with more liberal, inclusive values, as educational institutions in democratic societies typically socialise individuals into these norms [167]. Values promoted by democratic societies and often reinforced by higher education systems emphasise tolerance, global interconnectedness and the benefits of diversity. Nevertheless, many cohorts, for example in post-communist Member States of the EU, have not been educated under these narratives in the past.

While individual attitudes towards migration are generally stable in adulthood, they can evolve, particularly in response to significant societal changes or events. The salience, or political relevance, of immigration plays a critical role in affecting how attitudes to immigration might be manifested, for example by voting for anti-immigration parties in elections [125]. When migration is a highly salient issue, often due to media coverage or political discourse, it tends to polarise public opinion, with parties using it to mobilize support. As a result, even individuals who previously held moderate views may develop stronger opinions based on the salience of the issue. Issue salience amplifies the impact of underlying predispositions, such as symbolic values and partisan identification. Research suggests that while salience increases the intensity of opinions, it does not necessarily change the direction of these opinions. Thus, it is not that people suddenly become anti-immigrant, but it is more likely that their 'latent', underlying and already established attitudes emerge. Moreover, it has been shown that those with anti-immigration attitudes care more about the topic compared to their pro-immigration counterparts [168].

Events such as the 2015 so-called 'migration crisis' and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine significantly increase the salience of migration in the public discourse. During 2015 the sudden influx of refugees heightened narratives about national security, cultural integration and economic strain, which led to a perceived increase in anti-immigrant sentiment in many European countries. Conversely, the war in Ukraine has led to a somewhat

While individual attitudes towards migration are generally stable in adulthood, they can evolve, particularly in response to significant societal changes or events.

more compassionate response towards Ukrainian refugees, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe [169], where shared cultural and historical ties have fostered more favourable attitudes towards these migrants. These examples illustrate how the context in which migration occurs can shape the direction of the migration narrative in public discourse. While events can momentarily disrupt established narratives, long-term change requires a more sustained shift in how migration is framed at a societal level. Narratives that are deeply ingrained are particularly resistant to change.

In countries experiencing political instability or economic hardship, negative narratives about migrants are more likely to gain traction appealing to individuals who feel left behind by globalisation or marginalised in their own societies. Narratives that frame migration as a threat—whether to the economy, culture, or national security—remain pervasive, and in certain regions, these narratives have become even more entrenched due to the rise of populism and nationalist movements. However, the overall trend in Western Europe has been towards more positive attitudes towards migration [170]. Ultimately, shifting the narrative requires not just changing the content of what is said, but altering the broader societal conditions that make certain narratives resonate more deeply.

Shifting immigration narratives is challenging because they are not simply based on facts or rational arguments, but are tied to identity, emotions and perceived group interests. People are more likely to embrace narratives that reinforce their existing beliefs and are resistant to those that challenge them. This is why even when new information is provided, such as evidence that immigrants contribute positively to the economy, it may not change minds. The emotional and symbolic power of narratives - whether they emphasise fear, pride or compassion - makes them highly resilient. As a result, changing attitudes requires more than presenting facts; it involves shifting the underlying narrative framework that gives those facts meaning. Therefore, while deeply ingrained attitudes may not change easily, strategic interventions, such as fostering positive social interactions or reframing narratives around migration, can influence public perceptions in some contexts.

5.2 THE ROLE OF MIGRANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS IN PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES

Research has consistently shown that the attitudes of host country populations towards migrants are influenced by some of the migrant characteristics, including their ethnicity, nationality, age and gender. These factors can have a significant impact on the perception and treatment of refugees and other migrants by the local population. Locals may be less welcoming towards certain groups because they associate them with undesirable behaviours, such as criminal activity or violence. However, these preconceived notions about how migrants behave are often inaccurate, and based on prejudice and misinformation.

A large body of research shows that people's views on migrants are biased. For example, people routinely overestimate the share of migrants involved in terrorism [171]. This is partly because of heated political debates around migration, which pave the way for misleading or outright false claims. Mitigating this risk requires a better understanding of public beliefs and preferences in this domain. In this context, some accused European citizens and politicians of applying double standards by welcoming displaced people from Ukraine but not refugees from other ethnicities, such as Syrians or Afghans. These commentators were often quick to point to Islamophobia or racism as the underlying reasons. It is important to understand the complex dynamics of how (inaccurately) migrants' demographic characteristics are perceived, if and how these perceptions could be corrected and how they shape affective attitudes and policy preferences. This holistic approach is crucial for developing effective immigration and integration measures.

Gender has been identified as significant factor in shaping preferences in numerous studies. Male migrants are typically less preferred, other things being equal. Studies by Hainmueller and Hopkins [172] and Denney and Green [173] for example, found that female refugees were preferred over male refugees. The difference in gender distribution between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees may partly explain the varying public sentiment, as evidenced by Krawczyk et al. [174].

Explaining the general pattern of gender preference is difficult and several possible reasons have been proposed. For instance, a fear of more crime and violence, which are more associated with men rather than women, is one plausible explanation. In nearly all societies it is the men, especially young men, who are more likely to commit crimes, especially violent crimes. As among the migrant population many are young and male, this association appears natural, although studies comparing migrants' and non-migrants' crime rates yield highly mixed results, some studies [175] finding much higher incarceration rates of non-migrants.

The public perceives young male migrants as disproportionately prone to causing disruptions. Conversely, displaced women may be seen as deserving more support. This is particularly so in the context of humanitarian crises, due to their perceived vulnerability and need for protection.

In a recent study conducted by the JRC [176], the issues of misperception of migrants' characteristics and the impact of their gender on the host populations' willingness to welcome them were addressed jointly. We found that the share of women among forcibly displaced Ukrainians was underestimated. In line with earlier findings mentioned before, we also observed that, other things being equal, a future hypothetical group of forcibly displaced individuals was more likely to receive support (via the Temporary Protection Directive mechanism) if a greater share of the displaced population was female [174]. In a behavioural insights experiment, we assigned some participants to a belief correction treatment: they were provided with information on the actual share of women among (adult) displaced Ukrainians. Because of the prevailing underestimation of the share of women and more positive attitudes toward women, we hypothesised that this intervention would improve perceptions of displaced Ukrainians and lead to greater acceptance of policies supporting them. While we were able to effectively change declared beliefs about the share of women as such, other perceptions and policy preferences were not changed. This finding indicates that while perceptions of demographics are correlated with affective attitudes and policy preferences, the former do not necessarily causally affect the latter.

The migrants' age can also significantly affect attitudes, especially if migrants are children or older persons. The relationship between age and attitudes has been less thoroughly investigated, yielding mixed results. One consistent finding is that refugee children are more readily accepted, likely due to their perceived vulnerability and the notion that they do not pose a threat. For example, a study by Alrababa'h et al. [177] found that among Syrian refugees in Jordan those with children were viewed more positively. We saw similar effects among large samples representative of six EU Member States [174]. However, further research is needed to fully understand the impact of age on local attitudes towards migrants, particularly economic migrants.

The impact of migrants' origin and religious beliefs on locals' attitudes has been widely researched, with studies showing that migrants from certain countries or with specific religious backgrounds foster more negative attitudes. Compared to migrants from predominantly

> ***In countries experiencing political instability or economic hardship, negative narratives about migrants are more likely to gain traction appealing to individuals who feel left behind by globalisation or marginalised in their own societies***

Christian countries, those from countries with a Muslim majority are less easily accepted in the US and the EU. A study by Adida et al. [178] found that while several factors affected Americans' responses (e.g. high-skilled refugees fluent in English were most preferred), religion was the single most important determinant in negative attitudes towards Muslims, prevailing in all demographic subgroups. Similarly, a study by Bansak et al. [179] found robust anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe, with these preferences remaining stable across countries and participants' individual characteristics. Our recent JRC study [174] confirmed that respondents were less likely to support allowing predominantly Muslim refugee groups to benefit from the Temporary Protection Directive.

Anti-Muslim attitudes have been thought to be driven by various forms of perceived cultural or physical threat, regardless of whether these fears are justified. However, the empirical evidence is mixed, leaving the question concerning the mechanism of the preference against Muslim migrants largely open. Preferences for migrants based on their religion are not a uniquely European or 'Western' phenomenon. While most studies are conducted in the US or Europe, research by Alrababa'h et al. [177] found that (predominantly Sunni Muslim) Jordanian participants gave lower ratings to Christian and Alawite Muslim profiles compared to the Sunni Muslim benchmark.

To summarise, research on attitudes towards migrants shows that gender-based stereotypes are common. A more nuanced understanding of the experiences of male and female migrants could be promoted. Attitudes toward migrants are often shaped by actual or imagined differences in culture and habits. Addressing discrimination, disinformation and hateful attitudes is a long-term endeavour that requires the commitment of individuals, communities and governments. By creating environments that value diversity and promote respect for all, societies can work towards eliminating discrimination and fostering harmonious relations among different cultural and religious groups. A multifaceted approach, including education, policy, community engagement and law enforcement, is necessary to address these issues.

5.3 THE ROLE OF FAIRNESS IN SHAPING PUBLIC ATTITUDES

Fairness is a fundamental concept that plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes as it is a fundamental aspect of human interaction and social order [180]. It refers to the principle of treating everyone equally and impartially, without favouritism or prejudice. It is a complex and multifaceted idea that encompasses not only the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities but also the protection of individual rights and the acknowledgement of diverse perspectives [181].

Fairness is a key factor in shaping public attitudes toward refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. These attitudes are driven by tangible concerns linked to economic, social and cultural issues.

The perceptions of fairness often influence how individuals and communities relate to one another, as well as their attitudes towards policies, institutions and societal norms. When people perceive a situation as fair, they are more likely to trust and cooperate with others, which can promote stability [182]. Conversely, when fairness is perceived to be lacking, it can lead to conflict and social division [183]. When people perceive fairness in decision-making processes, distribution of resources and treatment, they are more likely to trust and support the institutions or individuals involved [184].

This chapter examines the role of fairness in shaping public attitudes, perceptions, and support for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

Research consistently shows that fairness is a key factor in shaping public attitudes toward refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Existing studies highlight that these attitudes are driven by tangible concerns linked to economic, social and cultural issues. Additionally, evidence suggests that, beyond these concerns, attitudes are driven by a wide range of emotions and values

BOX 6 Public perceptions of fairness in asylum decision-making

A study conducted by Dražanová and Ruhs in 2024 [195], examines public perceptions of fairness in asylum decision-making in Italy and Germany. Asylum policies have become increasingly prominent in political debates, with public opinion playing a crucial role in shaping how these policies are implemented and sustained. By focusing on perceptions of fairness, this study explores how procedural fairness for asylum seekers and distributive fairness for host country populations influence public views on asylum decision-making.

The study builds on the distinction between two key forms of fairness: *procedural fairness and distributive fairness*. Procedural fairness refers to how decisions are made, emphasizing transparency, impartiality and equal treatment. In the context of asylum decision-making, this includes for example the right to appeal asylum decisions and access to legal advice. Distributive fairness, on the other hand, concerns the outcomes of decision-making processes and their impact on the host country's population. In the context of asylum, this includes considerations such as whether there should be limits on the number of asylum seekers a country accepts and whether there are mechanisms for distributing asylum seekers across EU Member States.

The researchers conducted a conjoint survey experiment with representative samples of the adult population in Italy and Germany, two countries that have experienced significant inflows of asylum seekers in recent years. The experiment presented participants with different asylum decision-making processes that varied in their levels of procedural and distributive fairness. For instance, participants were asked to evaluate processes where asylum seekers had or did not have the right to appeal negative decisions, and where countries could or could not impose limits on the number of asylum applications they processed each year.

The key findings of this study can be summarised as follows:

1. Fairness perceptions are multidimensional: public values both procedural and distributive fairness
One of the central findings of the study is that the public in both Italy and Germany values both procedural and distributive fairness in asylum decision-making. While procedural fairness towards asylum seekers, such as providing legal representation and the right to appeal, is important, distributive fairness—ensuring that the impact on the host country is considered—is also significant. Both countries' populations showed support for policies that include limits on the number of asylum applications and responsibility-sharing mechanisms across the EU to distribute asylum seekers more equitably.

2. The identity of asylum seekers does not affect fairness perceptions
Contrary to expectations based on prior research, the study found that public perceptions of fairness in asylum decision-making did not vary significantly based on the asylum seekers' national origin. Whether participants were primed to think about Syrian or Sudanese asylum seekers, or simply about asylum seekers in general, their evaluations of fairness remained consistent.

3. Fairness perceptions are distinct from policy preferences
The study also finds that perceptions of fairness are related to, but distinct from, individuals' policy preferences. While those who are more supportive of admitting refugees tend to place greater importance on procedural fairness, and those who are more restrictive favour distributive fairness, the two groups are not entirely polarised. Even individuals with pro-refugee policy preferences valued distributive fairness in some cases, suggesting that fairness perceptions are not solely driven by one's stance on asylum policies.

[185]. The public's values exhibit a broad spectrum, with some individuals holding positive views—providing fertile ground for the advancement of pro-immigration sentiments.

When people perceive that migrants are treated fairly, they tend to hold more positive views towards migrants and refugees [186] and they are more likely to support policies that provide assistance to these groups [187]. Studies also reveal that emphasising fairness and justice in communications about refugees and migrants increases public acceptance and encourages supportive actions [188].

In particular, public support for policies assisting vulnerable groups is significantly influenced by perceptions of fairness in resource distribution [189]. Individuals are more supportive of fair and non-discriminatory immigration policies, with procedural fairness being a key predictor of immigration policy preferences [190]. Perceptions of fairness in the asylum process greatly impact public support for refugees; negative perceptions can decrease this support [191]. Negative attitudes towards asylum seekers may arise from the perception of economic migrants misusing the refugee system [192].

The concept of fairness is linked with a desire for migrants to contribute to the host country. This was evident in the UK, where a study underlined how Conservative voters prioritise competence and contribution in immigration systems [193]. Conversely, Europeans prefer a proportional allocation system for asylum seekers based on factors such as GDP, population size, unemployment and past asylum applications [194].

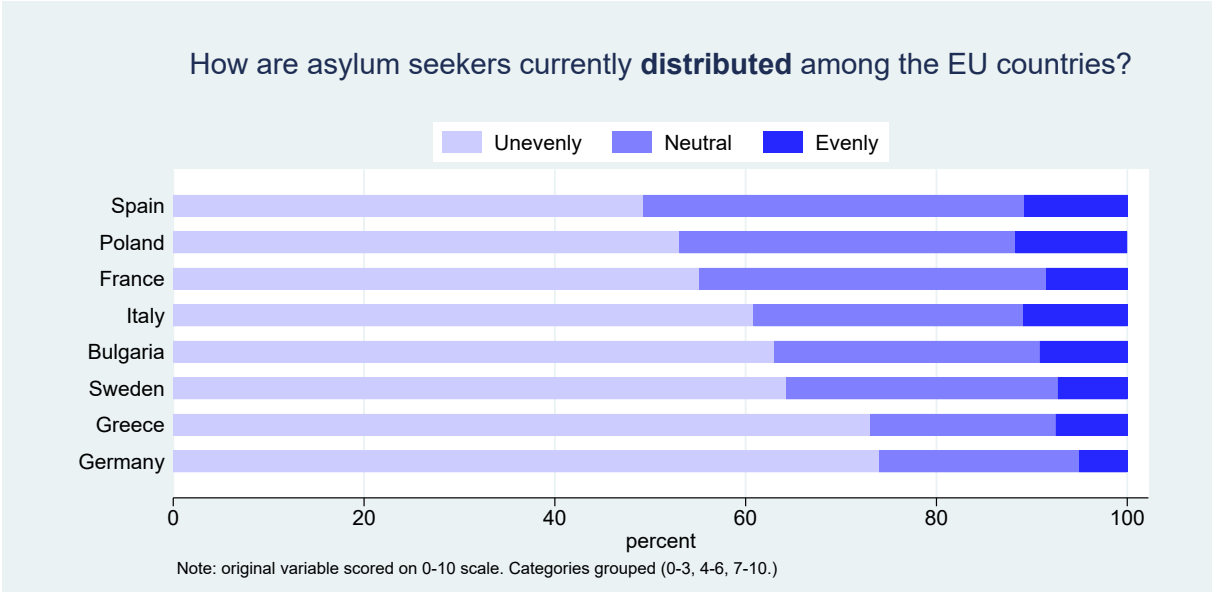
Importance of perceived fairness in EU migration management

The results of a survey conducted at the JRC aimed at investigating people's perceptions of fairness of the EU migration and asylum system [196] suggest that European citizens find it important that migration in the EU is managed in a fair way, that each country bears its fair share of the responsibility, and that resources and opportunities are fairly distributed between citizens and asylum seekers and refugees.

The survey was run in eight European countries. The responses highlight that in all eight countries the majority of respondents believe that refugees are currently unevenly distributed across the EU (Figure 9) and that the share hosted by their own country of residence was too high (Figure 10). This perception of an "overburden" may contribute to concerns about the fairness of the current system and influence public opinion on migration policies.

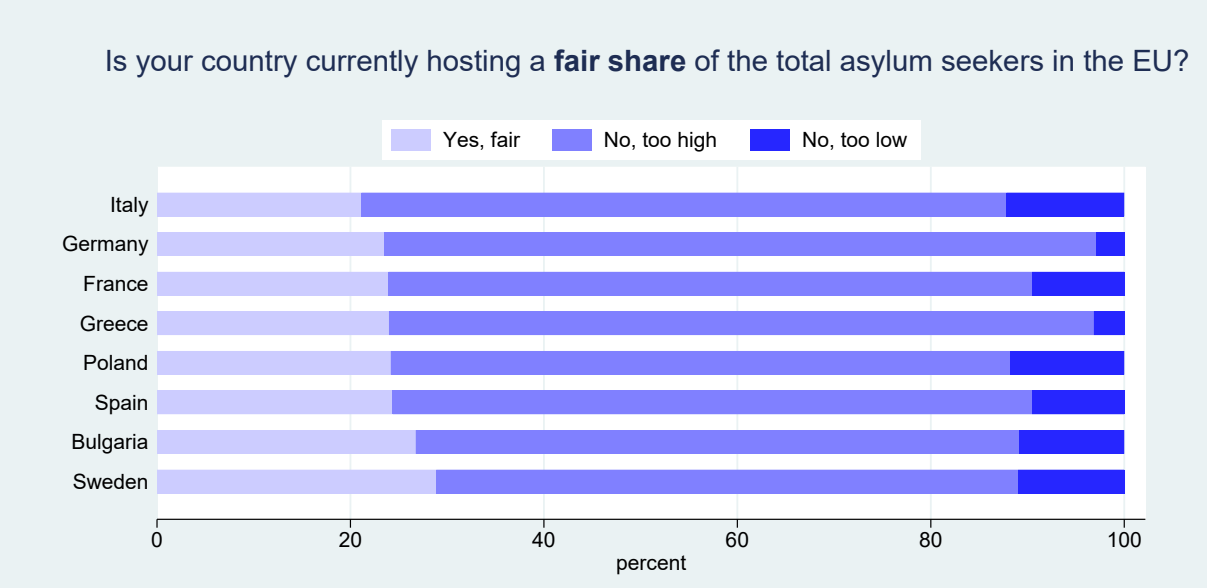
Figures 11 and 12 show that a large majority of the respondents consider it very important that the cost

FIGURE 9. Perceptions of fairness of current system: distribution of asylum seekers across the EU (% of respondents, by country)



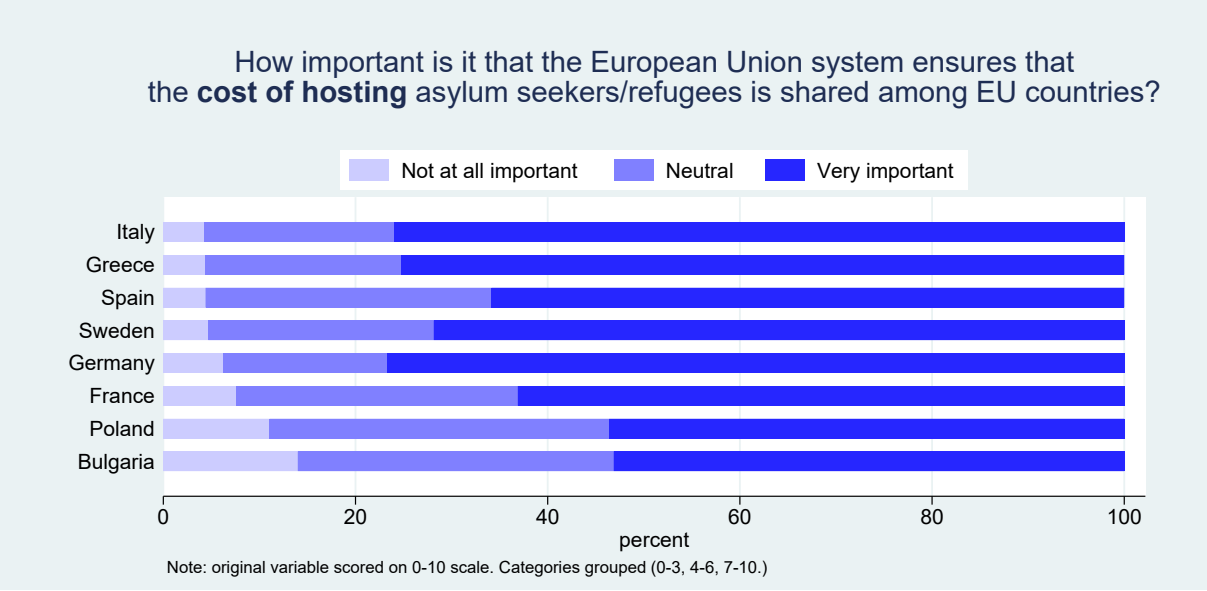
Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

FIGURE 10. Perceptions of fairness of current system: hosting asylum seekers (% of respondents, by country)



Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

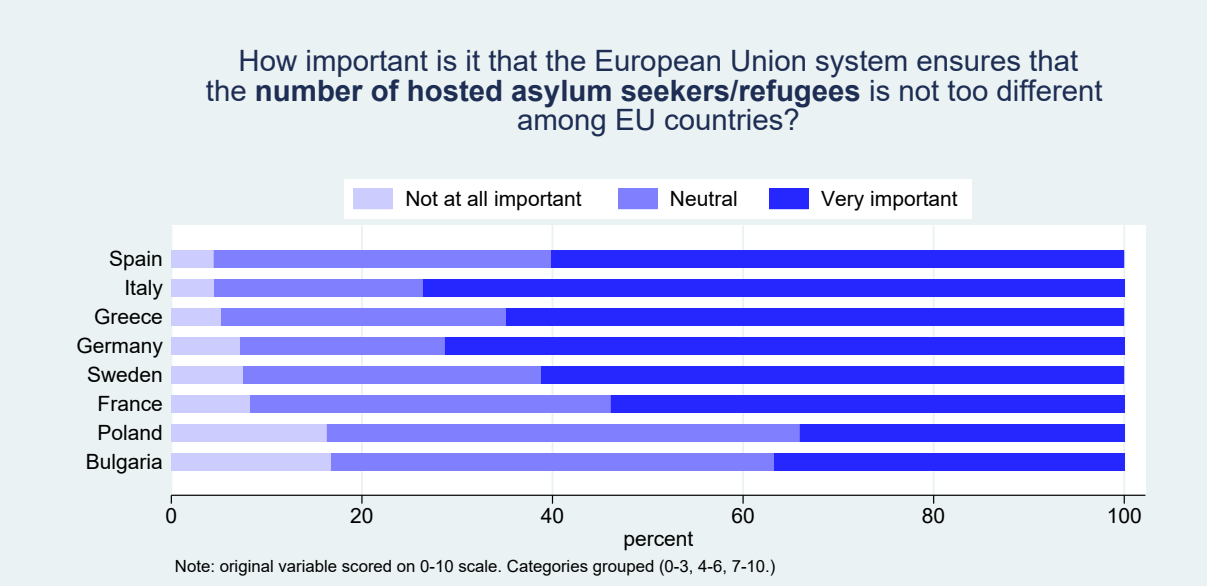
FIGURE 11. Preference for sharing of costs associated with hosting asylum seekers and refugees between EU MS (% of respondents, by country)



Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

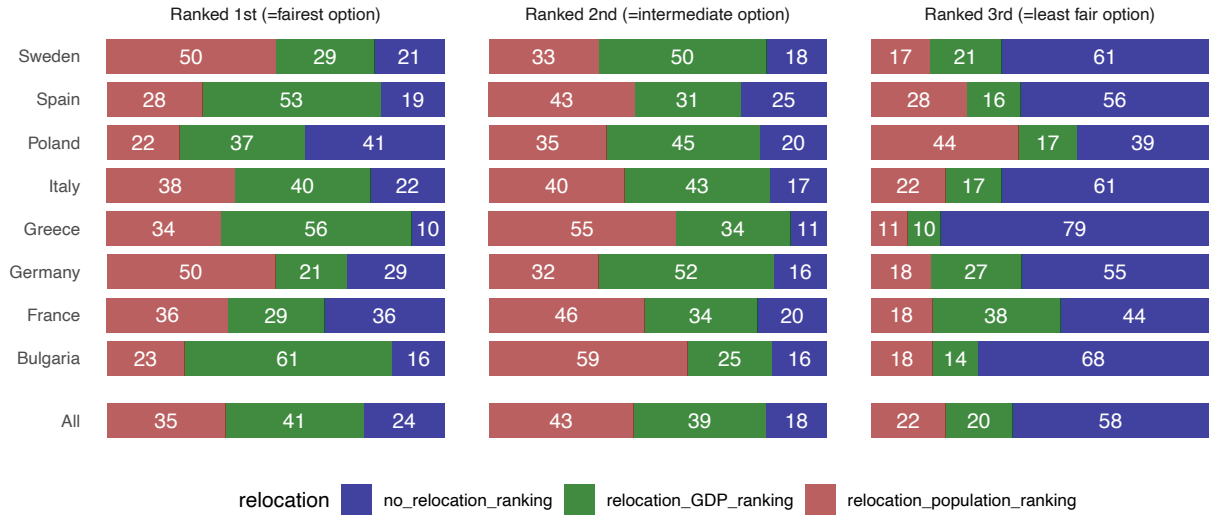
of hosting asylum seekers and refugees is shared between EU countries, and that the number of asylum seekers/refugees hosted by the different Member States is not very different. A survey experiment included in the survey further indicates that the vast majority of the respondents would prefer some type of solidarity system were refugees are relocated within the EU, either based on GDP or population, sharing the responsibility between Member States (see Figure 13).

FIGURE 12. Preference for fair distribution of asylum seekers and refugees across EU MS (% of respondents, by country)



Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

FIGURE 13. Preferences for principles guiding relocations of asylum seekers and refugees (% of respondents, by country)

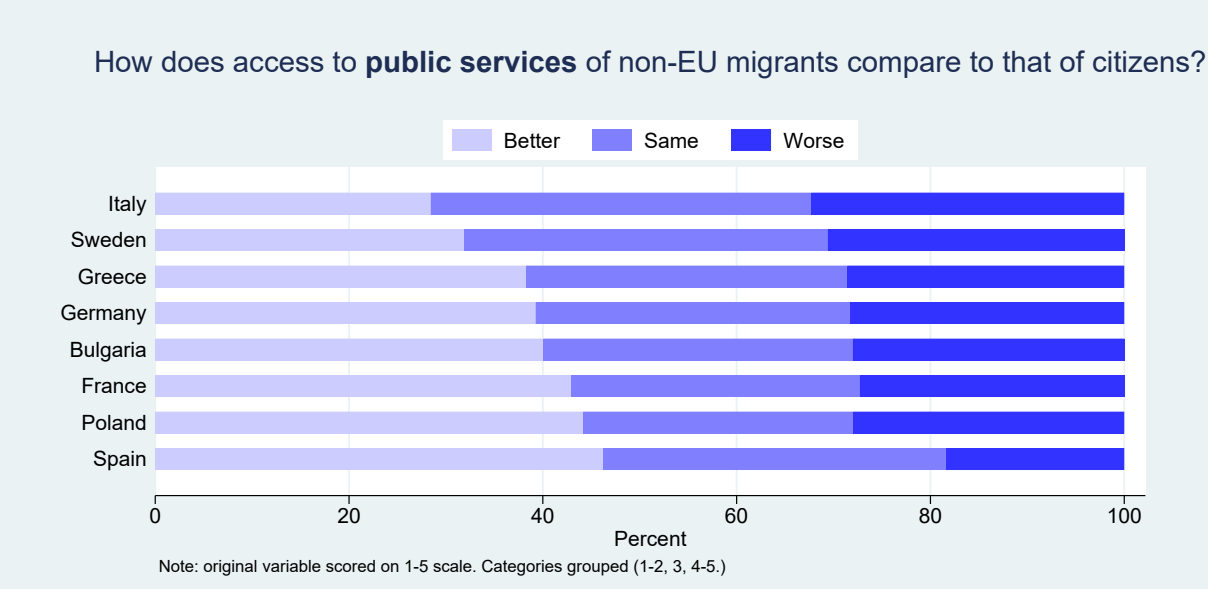


Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

Non-EU migrants and their treatment compared to the local population

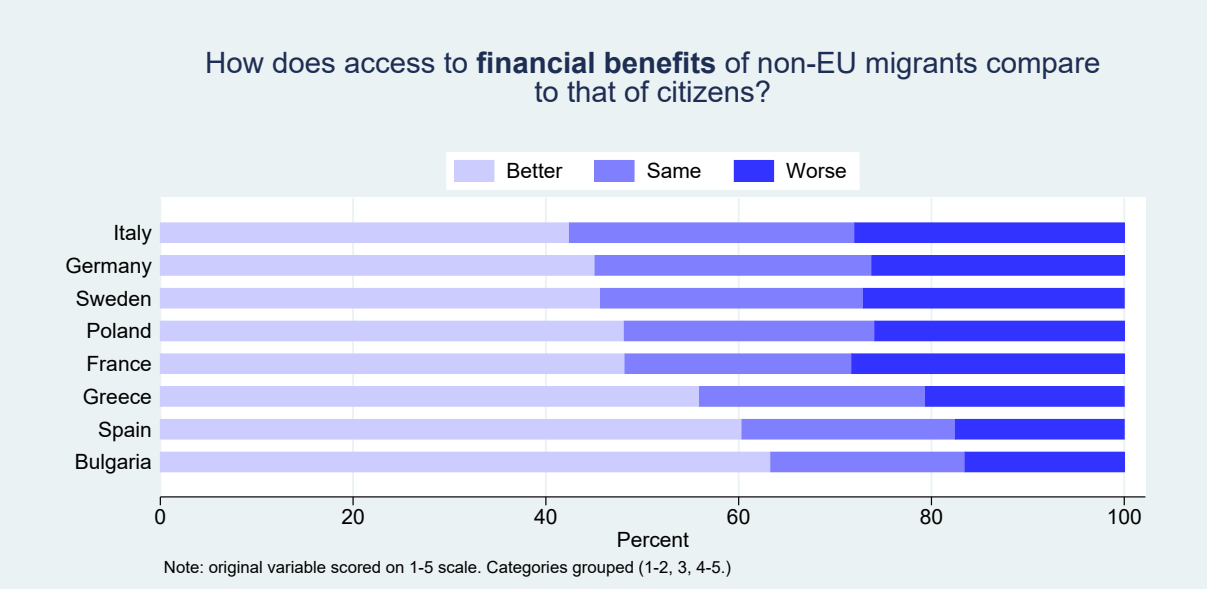
The survey findings show that a large share of the respondents believe that refugees who are hosted in their own country have more entitlements or rights than those in other EU countries. The share of respondents who believe this is particularly high in Germany, France and Sweden, where more than half of the respondents believe this, but it remains significant also in Bulgaria (23%), Greece (32%), Italy (34%) and Spain (46%).

FIGURE 14. Migrant's access to public services compared to citizens (% of respondents, by country)



Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

FIGURE 15. Migrants' access to financial benefits compared to that of citizens (% of respondents, by country)

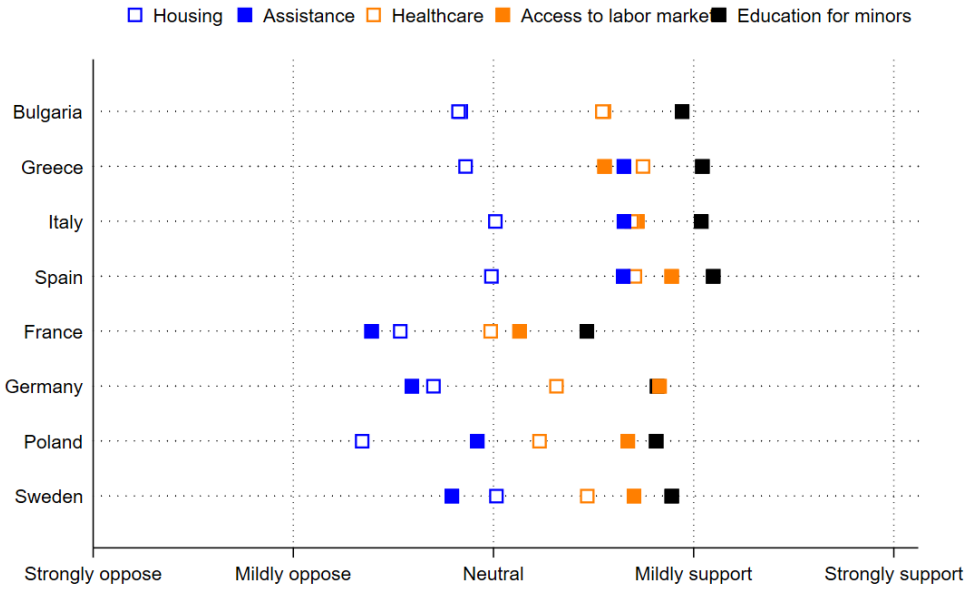


Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

The survey findings also reveal that a large share of respondents believe that non-EU migrants have a better access to public services than EU citizens. In Spain, Poland and France, over 40% of the respondents believe this (Figure 14). Similarly, half of all respondents across all countries believe that non-EU migrants have better access to financial benefits compared to the citizens in their respective countries. This share is the largest in Bulgaria, where over 60% of respondents believe this to be the case (Figure 15).

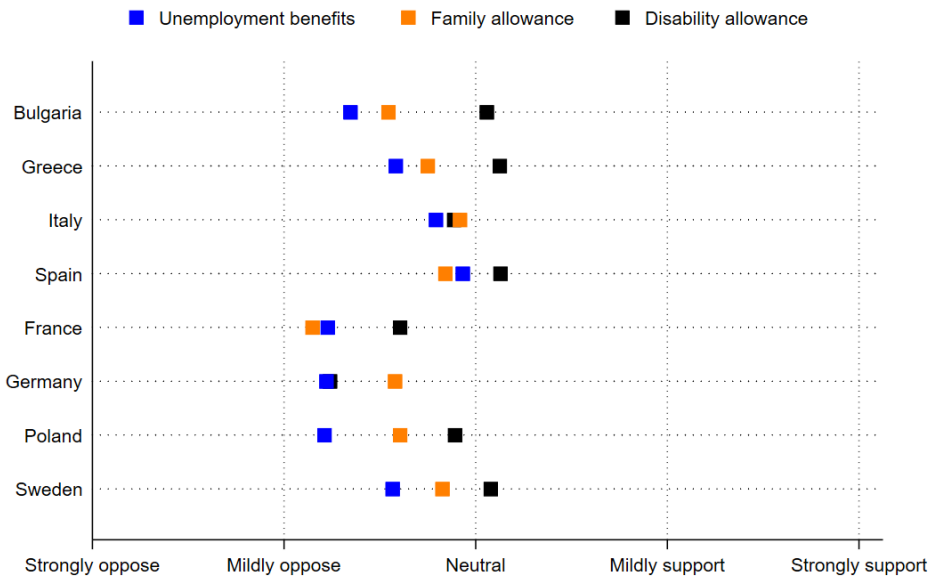
This said, most respondents mildly support the idea that non-EU migrants should have access to the labour market, as well as to public services, in particular

FIGURE 16. Support for access to public services (level of support)



Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

FIGURE 17. Support for access to financial benefits (level of support).



Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

to education, employment and healthcare. Support is lower for access to public services, in particular in Bulgaria, France, Germany, Poland and Sweden (Figure 16). Support is also generally lower for access to financial benefits (disability allowances, family allowances and unemployment benefits). It should be noted, however, that of these benefits, support for disability allowances is the highest in all countries except for Italy and Germany (Figure 17). This may indicate that respondents are sympathetic towards individuals who are perceived as vulnerable or in need of assistance due to circumstances beyond their control (e.g. disability).

FIGURE 18. Availability of services and concerns of citizens (% of respondents, by country).

Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

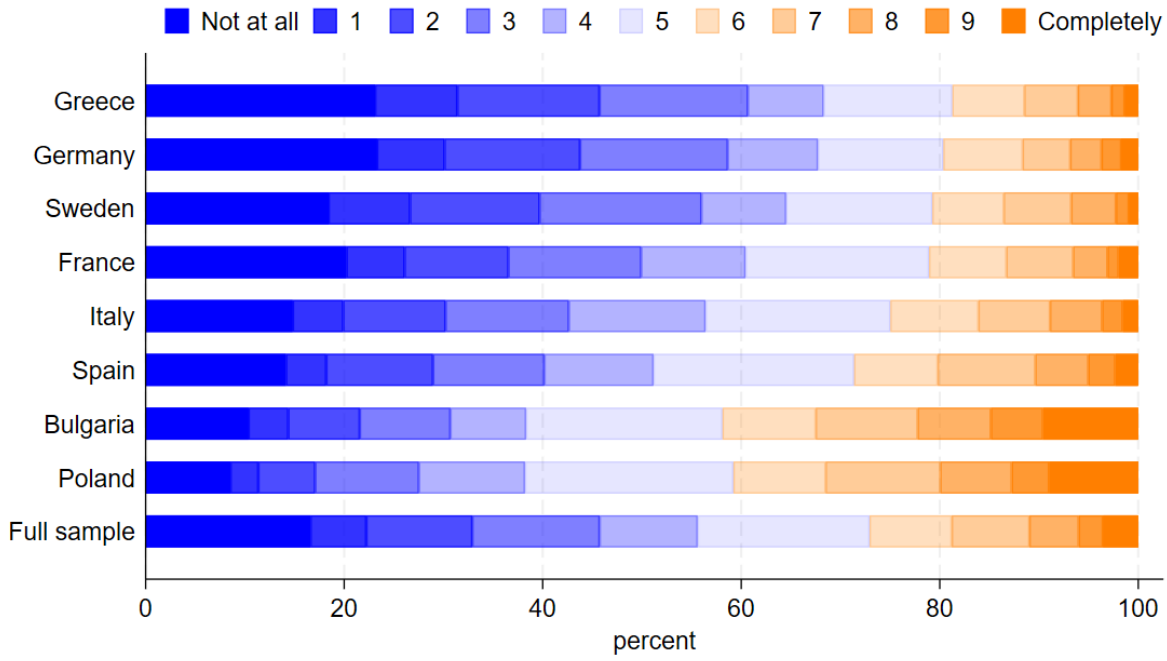
Furthermore, the survey indicates that European citizens have concerns about the potential impact of the benefits provided to asylum seekers and refugees on their own entitlements. Findings displayed in Figure 18 indicate that a large majority of respondents across all 8 countries worry that migrants' access to financial benefits and public services may reduce their own access to these services. In Sweden, where the share of respondents that expresses such concerns is the lowest, it reaches nearly 60%.

Trust in the system

In many countries, survey participants express limited confidence in the system's ability to differentiate between genuine applications and applications containing false or misleading information (Figure 19). This lack of confidence in the system may be linked to the level of trust they have in the institutions responsible for managing these processes. At the same time, a large share of the respondents do not seem to understand how asylum applications are handled in the EU, with 40% of the respondents believing that the EU is responsible for processing them, and 28% declaring that they do not know who is in charge. An important share of respondents also believes that seeking employment or welfare are common reasons to apply for asylum, albeit these are not valid justifications in the current asylum system. This may also be due to their perception that some applicants exploit the asylum system to gain access to the labour market or the welfare system of a given host country.

For further information and results of the JRC survey on fairness perceptions, see the JRC Technical Report on Public perceptions of fairness in the EU migration and asylum system [196].

FIGURE 19. Suppose that some asylum applications submitted in your country contain false or misleading information. How confident are you in the ability of your country's asylum system to identify these asylum applications? (% of respondents by country)



Source: Fairness survey, own calculations

5.4 HOW TO REINFORCE PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

As described in this chapter, fairness plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes, perceptions and support for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. For this reason, it is important to alleviate public concerns about fairness in communications about migration. Communications about EU support to migrants should convey the underlying message that supporting migrants does not impact the opportunities available to EU citizens, and that the EU is committed to creating a balanced approach that benefits everyone. This can be done by:

1. **Emphasising equitable distribution**: Highlight the fairness in distributing resources and responsibilities among EU Member States. Communication should focus on how policies ensure that no single country bears an excessive burden. Furthermore, messages should underscore both procedural fairness (ensuring transparent, impartial and equal treatment in decision-making) and distributive fairness (e.g. consider the impact on the host country's population).
2. **Addressing misunderstandings and knowledge gaps by providing clear and transparent information**: Provide clear, factual information about how asylum and migration systems operate, including on EU-wide rules, the conditions under which international protection is granted, minimum requirements for reception conditions. Provide information on support provided to asylum seekers and refugees, and explain how that compares with support to host populations. Provide contextual and comparative information that enables citizens to better gauge the costs of hosting and integrating non-EU migrants against other costs. Audio-visual formats documenting the day-to-day work of asylum authorities could help explain who is responsible for processing of asylum applications, what the process is like and how the system protects itself against fraudulent claims.

6. Trustworthy public communication on migration

Mario Scharfbillig

As a highly emotional and divisive topic, migration requires a thoughtful and evidence-based approach to communication. Building trust with citizens is crucial and public communicators must prioritise providing accurate and trustworthy information over persuasion. However, this is complicated by the presence of motivated reasoning, disinformation and affective polarisation, which can lead to entrenched attitudes and the spread of misinformation. To overcome these challenges, public communicators must adopt a nuanced and multi-faceted approach. This includes investing in effective listening techniques, tailoring communication to diverse audiences and goals, and acknowledging public concerns pre-emptively. Ultimately, effective communication about migration requires a deep understanding of the complexities of the issue, as well as the social and emotional dynamics that shape public perceptions and attitudes. By prioritising trust, evidence and nuance, public communicators can play a critical role in promoting a more informed and inclusive public debate about migration.

Migration is currently one of the most, if not the most, polarised political topic in many countries, which makes any communication very challenging [197] [198] [199] [200]. As explained elsewhere in this report, it seems unlikely that purely evidence-based answers exist on the question how much migration citizens should be willing to accept. However, many countries already have large and visible migrant populations and therefore the topic is likely to remain salient and likely polarising for many years to come. People's perspectives on migration are deeply entrenched, eliciting highly emotional responses on all sides, which makes trusted communication both extremely important but also very challenging.

This chapter is based on a recent report on trustworthy communication [201], which provides 10 key recommendations on how public communicators can be a positive force for democracy. The report advances the idea that before all else, public communication should serve citizens by providing them trustworthy information so that they can take their own decisions based upon the best available evidence, their values, needs, experiences and realities. This chapter will follow the 10 key recommendations to public communicators and applies them to the topic of migration.

6.1 MAKE BUILDING TRUST THE PRIMARY GOAL

Recommendation 1: Public communicators' utmost priority needs to lie in building and retaining public trust in their administration through being trustworthy at all times.

One of the biggest challenges in migration communication is motivated reasoning. People are known to seek, believe and remember information in line with what they already believe, especially when they care deeply about a topic, irrespective of intelligence or political sophistication [202] [203] [204]. This means that all information communicated, be it by researchers, politicians, news media and journalists or even friends and family, will be read through the lens of pre-existing perspectives. For example, one recent study [205] shows that moderate individuals polarise into positive and negative extreme views towards migrants when faced with extensive media exposure. They polarise along their already existing prejudices, rather than being persuaded by new information. Perspectives on migration seem to be both deeply divided and important to people, such that motivated reasoning transforms all debates into a seemingly inseparable mix of normative and factual debates.

On top of the division and emotionality comes the enormous prevalence of disinformation around migration, which stifles any meaningful debate around the topic. This is true not only because people frequently hold factually untrue beliefs about migration (e.g. people often overestimate the size of the migrant population) or about the impact of migration on labour markets, crime or cultural change. Adding to this pernicious context are social media algorithms of the most used platforms that curate information in ways that align with pre-existing views and beliefs, reinforcing the latter two [206]. This makes establishing common ground in debates upon which meaningful decisions can be taken so much more difficult. Consequently, narratives of either evil or stupid (or both) opposite sides prevail, contributing to further polarisation rather than to finding common ground.

Further, communication and information provided by public institutions is often even less trusted than other sources of information [152]. This makes factual communication for European institutions or national governments even more challenging, creating a vacuum of information that can be filled by political actors. These sometimes called "political entrepreneurs" can activate previously experienced collective grievances towards migrants to create new waves of xenophobia [207].

In contrast to common perception, attitudes toward migration have not been changing significantly in recent years [208]. What has changed is the salience of the topic coupled with an increased importance people give to the topic in their voting behaviour (at the cost of other topics such as economic policies) [209] [210]. Thus, while parties that have placed migration at the centre of their political campaigning have significantly gained in elections in recent years, this does not necessarily reflect a fundamental shift in societal attitudes. This sets the context for much of the communication activities in general and needs to be taken into account when deciding on the goals of public communication on migration.

In setting these goals, public communicators need to know that correcting misbeliefs can change the factual understanding of migration but does not seem to change attitudes and may even backfire when increased issue salience impacts people's behaviour [211] [212]. Thus, while it is true that a lot of mis- and disinformation on migration circulates and that the debate would likely benefit from correcting those, purely factual corrections will have a hard time shifting views in the direction desired, at least in the short-run. For example, providing people with information about the commonly overestimated size of the migration populations does lead to updated factual knowledge, but does not change attitudes. Only when adding more information about migration characteristics do attitudes change [213].

Given that attitudes towards migration change very slowly even if its salience does not, the concept of being trustworthy on communication at all times is even more important. It means that there are no significant gains to be made in attitudes simply by applying better, or more persuasive messaging especially when compromising on the transparency and the completeness of information. Additionally, it means that every communication on migration is likely to increase the topic's salience [214]. Thus, active messaging needs to be carefully thought through. Sometimes it may be better not to start new communication campaigns, especially when the issue is currently not debated and communicating would likely only mean increased salience of the topic. However, there is still a need for information to be made available such

> ***The primary goal for public communicators should be to establish and maintain their institution as a trusted and evidence-based source of information that will allow them to be a go-to source when more and more synthetic or artificial information floods the public sphere.***

The main goal of communications should not be to change people's minds but rather to empower citizens to make their own decisions based on factual information.

that if an issue becomes salient, people can find high quality and accurate information about it immediately.

Motivated reasoning also explains part of the appeal of disinformation in this space and may provide frustrated public communicators with a better understanding of their audience. Rather than believing that citizens just fall for all outrageous false claims made, the urge to fight fire with fire should be suppressed with the knowledge that people's reasons for sharing that information (often produced by malicious actors abroad or at home) is only partially based on the fact that people actually believe it [215]. Many other motivations for sharing and engaging exist, e.g. people may be sharing content primarily because it confirms their perspective and because they want to further their side, or they simply share it for entertainment value [216]. In this case, seeing does not mean believing and so public communicators should not fall into the trap of wanting to use the same tactics [217] [218] [219].

The primary goal for public communicators should therefore be to establish and maintain their institution as a **trusted and evidence-based source of information** that will allow them to be a go-to source when more and more synthetic or artificial information floods the public sphere.

When building trust is the main goal of the communication approach, this means not starting with the perspective that changing people's minds is the most important thing to accomplish. Rather, this entails supporting citizens to make up their own mind in an informed way, accomplish their own goals, within the values of democracy and fundamental human rights, up to their own preferences and priorities.

The goals of citizens may vary greatly and so can the communication approach. Four broad categories may help structure the communication approach, acknowledging though that people vary greatly in their personal experience around migration:

1. Citizens supportive of (more) migration: This group feels compassion for migrants and may support their causes in principle. Via your communication, support them in finding ways to help others. These people are often motivated to help others and making it easy for them, e.g. to donate time, help, goods or volunteering in various ways, will in-crease their trust.

2. Citizens on the fence: Many citizens are neither outright migration opponents nor fer-vent supporters and they are likely to respond to news, stories and information. They are less likely to be affected by the above-mentioned concerns, but the topic is still sensitive and often emotional. Support them in making informed decisions by providing information in a digestible, value-free and findable way that respects peoples' individu-al rights and enables them to engage in helping behaviour, where possible.

3. Citizens sceptic of (more) migration: Sceptics/ Opponents may more strongly question the impact of migration on society and express concerns about economic, cultural or security issues, or actively resist migrant support.[86] Public communication needs to make sure that these views are based on the best available information to truly make informed political choices, but it is not about persuading them to start with. Local in-formation should be gathered to demonstrate care and concern about their situation. Public communication also needs to make sure that this group does not engage in be-haviour that would violate democratic values and fundamental rights, while not making them feel judged.

86 However, see for example Bansak et al. [179] showing that when it comes to views of Europeans towards refugee characteristics, an important subgroup of migrants, view were strongly aligned. Refugee applicants who can be seen as contributing to the recipient country's economy, who have suffered severe physical or mental distress rather than economic hardship, and who are Christian rather than Muslim are preferred across the political spectrum and along other voters' characteristics (like age, education, income).

4. Migrants themselves: While often forgotten in these debates, it is important to see mi-grants as active participants in society with agency. Providing them with the right in-formation to take part in social life, enabling them to integration and to understand lo-cal social norms, values, identities and traditions is important for the long-term [220].

Overall, a democracy works well when people have sceptical or critical trust, which means trust that is both verified and earned. Trust can be understood as a marker of predictability and reliability of outcomes or of good will and benevolence in relation to character or intent [221]. Demanding blind trust is not compatible with democracy, while public institutions also need to demonstrate trustworthiness to earn trust in the right way. In order to ensure trustworthiness as a communicator, we propose the TARES (Truthfulness of the message), Authenticity (of the persuader), Respect (for the person who is being persuaded), Equity (of the persuasive appeal) and Social Responsibility (for the common good) test [222]. The communicator is asked to verify his or her message based on these principles by means of self-check based on a number of questions, which should be asked especially in the context of larger campaigns:

Truthfulness of the message

Public communicators are encouraged to ask them-selves the following questions when crafting messages in relation to truthfulness:

1. Has the message de-emphasised information that audiences might consider important?
2. Does the message represent the whole, complete truth?
    - Was information or uncertainty left out in order to make it more persuasive, or even manipulate the audience?
3. Would I feel the information was complete if given to me in the provided context?
    - Would people with strong negative opinions on the topic think important information has been left out?
    - Would I want more information?
4. Is any withheld information important in allowing the audience to make an informed decision?
5. Does the message deceive people either explicitly or implicitly?

Authenticity of the communicator

1. Do I think the goal of this communication is what the audience would expect and want it to be?
2. Do I personally believe the audience will benefit from this information?
3. In participating in this action is my integrity being called into question?
4. Am I happy to take responsibility for this message?

Respect for the audience

1. Does this message allow the audience to act autonomously and with consent?
2. Does this message pander to or exploit its audience?
3. Have I taken the rights and wellbeing of others into account with the creation of this message?
4. Will the audience benefit if they engage in the action the message conveys?
    - What might the downsides be?
    - Is that trade-off explicit?
    - How might different people consider that trade-off?
5. Does the information give the audience all the information they might consider important when making a decision?
6. Is the message unfair or to the detriment of any subgroup of the audience in any way?

Equity of the persuasive appeal

1. Will all potential audience members understand that they are being persuaded and not informed, and the degree to which they are being persuaded?
2. Have I targeted a specific subgroup of the audience or vulnerable population?

- Why have I chosen them?
- How would I justify this if asked by that audience?
- Could additional support be given to this particular group?

3. Would I feel this message was equitable if presented to me or someone I love?
4. Does the message take into account the special needs or interests of the target population?
5. How can I make this message more equitable?
6. Am I using an appeal to emotions responsibly?

Social responsibility and ethical decision-making

1. Does this message help or hinder public trust?
2. Am I a trustworthy source to be communicating this message?
3. Does this message allow for consideration of legitimate opposing views?
4. Does this message create the opportunity for public engagement and dialogue?
5. Will having or not having this information harm individuals or groups?
6. Have the potential negative impacts of the message been taken into account?
7. Does this message unfairly depict groups, individuals, ideas or behaviours?

6.2 LISTENING TO PEOPLE INCREASES TRUST

Recommendation 2: Public communicators should invest more in effective ways of listening to citizens to increase trust in their public administration and democracy

Citizens increasingly disagree with being broadcast at but prefer to be engaged with, which is especially true for the issue of migration. Given the polarisation of opinion, it is especially important to listen to citizens and their concerns. Blanket statements that migration is needed, or crime is not increasing may well be factual, but do not demonstrate that public institutions are listening and caring. An important reason for listening is that there is outcome legitimacy and process legitimacy to all policies. Focusing too much on the perfect migration policy (the outcome) may be futile as the potential for win-win solutions seems to be exhausted. Rather the focus must lie on showing that perspectives on all sides are heard, acknowledged and incorporated into policymaking (the process).

What is needed is a better infrastructure enabling public institutions to listen to citizens' concerns in a representative and trusted environment.

By saying that we should listen more, we do not mean to using comments and likes on social media as the main means of listening. Many social media platforms push engagement through emotional content, outrage and out-group defamation in alignment with already held positions [223] [224] [206]. There is even evidence that more accessibility to mobile internet, which increases the connection with social media, led to a more wide-spread in-group orientation that discriminates against out-groups [209]. At the same time, social media access may improve democracies in less established democracies. What is needed is a better infrastructure enabling public institutions to listen to citizens' concerns in a representative and trusted environment.

Examples for modern citizen engagements are panels, assemblies and platforms, e.g. the Conference on the

Future of Europe with the panel on migration[87] and the Bürgerdialog in East Belgium on Integration.[88] Both the OECD and the European Commission have recently published guidance on how such engagements should be held to make the most out of them and to show citizens that their considerations are taken into account.[89] Importantly, these initiatives cannot be token gestures or opportunities for photoshoots, instead they must be credible routes to gather input for policy implementation.

6.3 MAKE YOUR COMMUNICATION GOALS CLEAR

Recommendation 3: Public communication goals, ranging from informing to behavioural change, should be decided up front and communicated transparently

Once institutions are established as trusted sources that actively listen to citizens, individual communication activities can be planned or envisaged with a more concrete goal in mind. The starting point for individual initiatives should again be thought through to understand what success would look like. Different goals are more easily achieved with different modes of communication, but entail more or less heavy ethical considerations, see Figure 20.

The first question for the public communicators should then be "What are legitimate goals in this context?" Because many people feel so passionately about the topic, a first instinct might be to wanting to persuade others to see the issue the same way they do, but this should be avoided in migration communication (on both sides). The most trustworthy approach in a polarised context is evidence communication, which has the goal of supporting individuals to make informed autonomous decisions based on available evidence and their own preferences and values, rather than persuasion or even coercive measures.

Evidence communication has been defined along five goals [225]

1. **Setting out to inform, rather than persuade**: Set out to inform citizens to form their own opinion. Due to the prevalence of politically motivated inaccurate information, this may result in contradicting some prominent political figures. However, the goal should not be to oppose those parties or figures, but rather to start from a balanced infor-mation perspective. Portraying information without a direct frame of harmful or benefi-cial and offering contextual information that allows clearer interpretation can help.

2. **Giving the pros and cons in an honestly balanced way (not giving false balance)**: While this approach calls for balanced information, it does not mean giving each per-spective equal weighting. Evidence should not be cherry-picked in an effort to influence the balance. Most information will come out on this topic, selective portrayal of infor-mation will likely damage trust in the long-run and do little to help in the short-run.

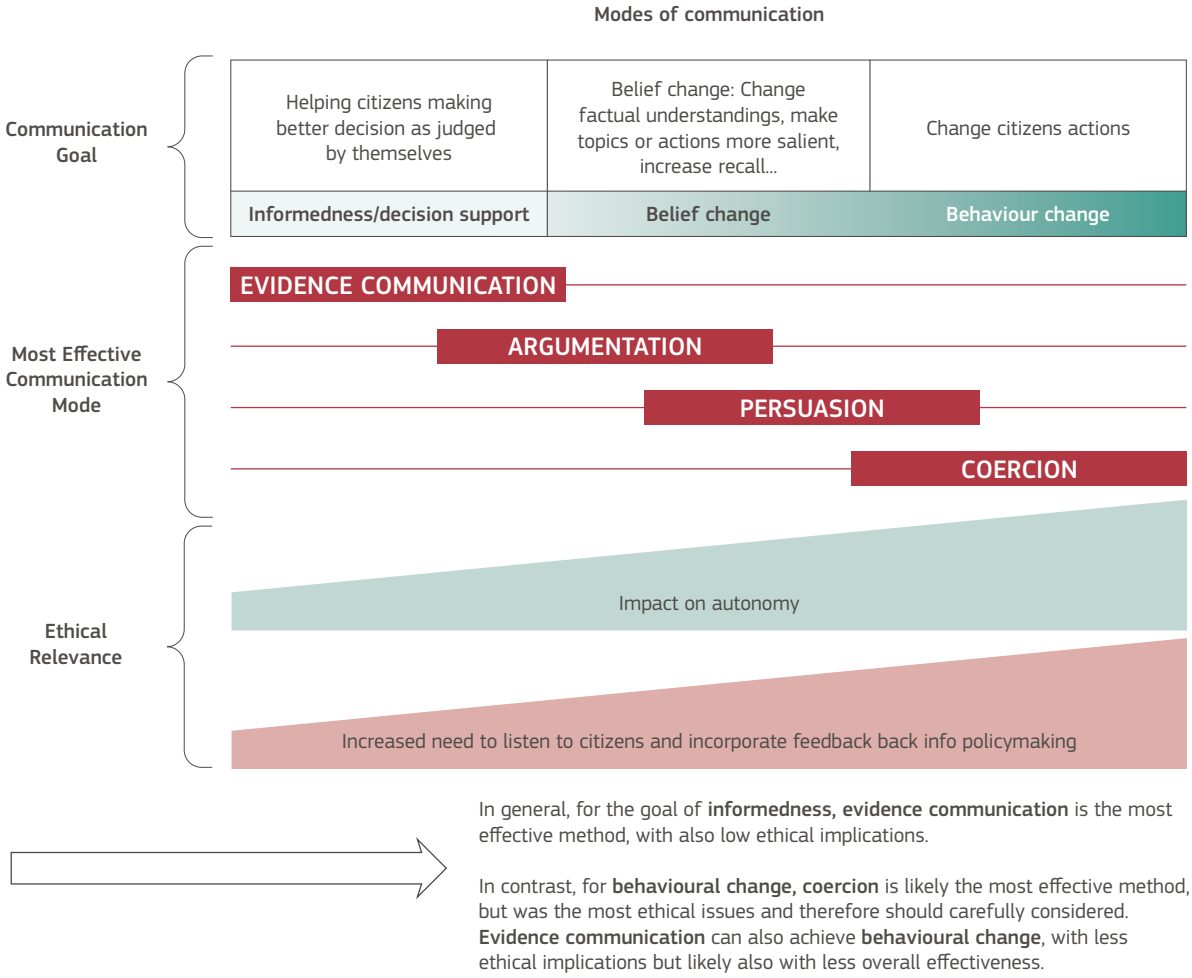
3. **Being open about challenges, uncertainties and unknowns, as well as disagreements**: While the information environment around migration is full of half-truths and skewed presentation of information, it is important to be honest about uncertainties in-stead of glossing over them. Research shows that presenting information without acknowledging unknowns that are later contradicted, damages trust. However, acknowledging what we do not know does not lead to trust loss [226].

4. **Giving an idea of the quality of the underlying evidence**: Conclusions about migration are often questioned by means of casting doubt on the source of information. Establishing a clear habit of always citing the source of information and making sure that this source is independent and trustworthy, will help set the tone of what audiences should expect from arguments in this area.

5. **Pre-empting misunderstandings as well as mis- and disinformation:** This is one of the toughest parts of communication when it comes to migration. Pre-bunking and de-bunking are essential, but will only

87 https://epthinktank.eu/2021/08/02/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-migration/
88 https://www.buergerdialog.be/buergerversammlung/buergerversammlung-5-zum-thema-integration
89 https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7260-2024-INIT/en/pdf&ved=2ahUKEwjZ8Ym_hKuFAxWB7rsIHTwFAKsQFnoECBoQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2J4WucI2jydFdS4O8vC0i6_and https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions_339306da-en

FIGURE 20. Modes of communication



Source: Smillie and Scharfbillig [201]

reduce the spread of and belief in this information to a limited degree. Public administrations and governments need to use the infor-mation available to them as anticipatorily as possible, so as to not let information voids proliferate that can be filled by mis- and disinformation.

Finally, there are some behavioural changes that are legitimate in this perspective, namely the need to ensure the safety of migrants and refugees as well as the safety of citizens. Behavioural change to this effect can be aimed for via the use of the appropriate communication modes, such as argumentation [227] or persuasion [228]. Even more so than in less polarised issues, it is however even more important to be fully transparent and respect agency of citizens in the migration debate [229]. Uses of boosts [230] and Nudge Plus may be considered [229].

6.4 USE BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE STRATEGICALLY

Recommendation 4: If behavioural change is the communication goal, behavioural sciences should guide the selection of the most appropriate tools

Following the discussion under the previous point, behavioural change should be the goal of public communication only in a few cases. If such change is required, there is a number of appropriate tools to use beyond the commonly used nudging approach [231].

Getting information is overwhelmingly seen as acceptable by citizens, but getting persuaded had much lower approval.

Approaches that go beyond include Nudge Plus and boosts. These aim to change behaviour not only by taking into account non-cognitive influences on decision-making, but also to be transparent about the goals and ideally build competences in the audience that can be applied in other situations as well [229] [232] [233].

In a survey, the JRC research team asked a representative sample of participants from four EU countries how acceptable they would find various actions by governments. When asking in the abstract, 'getting information' was overwhelmingly seen as acceptable by citizens, but 'getting persuaded' had much lower approval. However, when asking more precisely about getting information and persuasion with regards to different policy topics, acceptability was significantly lower for migration, compared to climate change or economic topics. This shows that some people prefer to avoid information on the subject all-together, even compared to other subjects that are seemingly polarised in the population.

6.5 IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS, ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Recommendation 5: Public Communication should not be 'one size fits all', instead be formal, layered and acknowledge emotions and uncertainty.

Few people find their information by actively searching for it on websites or by reading academic research. Rather, people and especially young people get their information through algorithmically curated social media platforms [234]. Nevertheless, given the fact that many citizens have direct contact with migrants and have at least partially made up their mind on how they see the topic, overly simple and glossy messages on the topic are bound to fail.

The key message here is that a 'no one size fits all' approach should be taken toward most communication. This also applies to migration; some people care deeply about the topic and are indeed searching for information. For those individuals, it is important to make sure they have access to high quality information, which is often absent online. For example, one recent study finds that when asking citizens to fact check false news headlines themselves, on average they end up believing more in disinformation than at the beginning. The study authors attribute this to the low-quality results people find when searching for information [235]. This is likely to be true when it comes to migration as well, where top hits on search engines often result in low quality hits that may deepen misunderstandings rather than help people find reliable information. Public communication should in this case take a more comprehensive approach and not think only in terms of individual messaging. Instead, the strategy should include populating the online world with trustworthy, evidence-based information that can be found easily.

Another important aspect relates to emotions. While those in favour of (more) migration often decry views against migration as overly emotional while believing themselves to be more 'rational', research shows that the distinction between emotional and factual decision-making and information processing is an illusion [236]. Playing on this idea, many pro- and anti-migration institutions propose to use 'real-life examples to trigger

It is important to make sure citizens have access to high quality information, which is often absent online.

emotions' since 'triggering emotions can have a lasting impact' [237].

These appeals to emotions start usually with a persuasive objective which, as discussed above, is probably not the right frame to start with, but nevertheless can provide some guidance on how to trigger emotion and which emotions would be helpful in this context. Our report [201] gives some guidance on the usage of emotions, based on a recent taxonomy of emotion to behavioural reactions [238]. Here it is important to point out that much of societal polarisation, which is driven by the salience of migration is affective polarisation, which means emotionally charged polarisation. Notably, this type of polarisation seems to make people willing to violate democratic norms, irrespective of where they stand politically, in order to win against political opponents [239]. It is indisputable that opponents of migration use highly charged emotional language, but whether this helps to win over the wider public is highly questionable. Instead, such strategies are more likely to activate those people already holding such views and motivating them to act (like voting for a specific party). Countering this with the same strategy, the use of emotional language, might end up further polarising societies.

6.6 TAILOR AUDIENCE RESEARCH TO YOUR GOALS BUT BE CAREFUL ABOUT TARGETING

Recommendation 6: Public communicators should tailor audience research techniques to different public communication goals

Recommendation 7: Individual profiles should not be used to target public communication; one alternative is segmentation based on personal values, providing messages that resonate with all parts of society

Before designing any meaningful communication, it is essential to know one's audience. Other chapters in this report provide further understanding of the attitudes towards migration. This recommendation also goes hand in hand with recommendations 2 and 3 and is helpful when determining the level of impact desired by communicators. Having argued above that behavioural change is less likely the goal, what is needed here is more research on beliefs and attitudes.

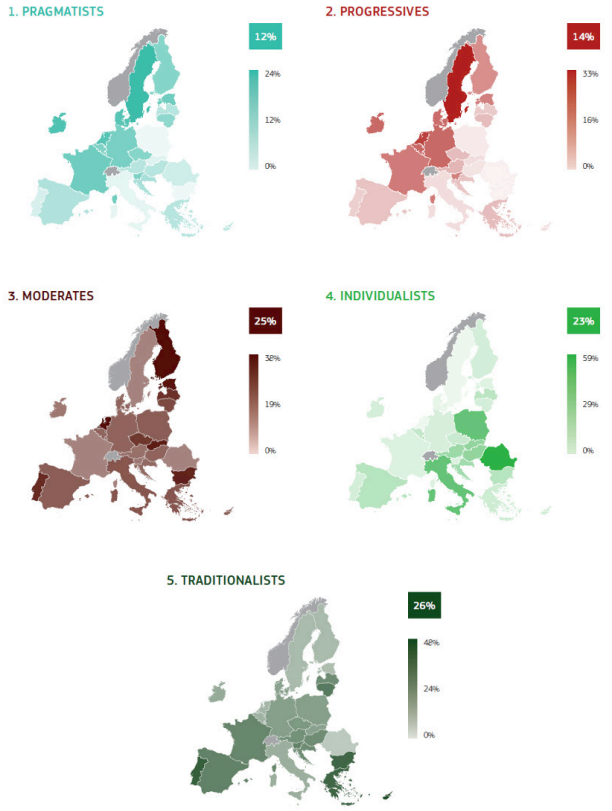
> *It is important to create messages that resonate with multiple audiences and appeal to people who hold diverse values.*

Beliefs and attitudes, which can still shift from time to time, are strongly related to people's more stable values [240]. These values also correlate strongly with views specifically towards migration [57] [58] [17]. Based on a Eurobarometer on values and identities, we found that citizens in the EU cluster into five cohesive groups, see Figure 21. Those clusters can serve as a guide to understanding the foundational motivations that people care about in life and which groups they orient themselves towards the most. The use of these clusters allows communicators to develop messages that resonate with what people care about most, which can be an effective messaging strategy [241].

The usual approach, when one has a better understanding of the public, is to tailor messaging to the audience. However, it is extremely important going forward to understand that individual targeting for political messaging and by political institutions may not be possible. According to new EU rules on political advertising (EU 2024/900), online targeting of audiences for political advertising will only be allowed under explicit consent. Also, certain data revealing racial or ethnic origin or political opinion cannot be used for profiling. This makes it more important to create messages adapted to different communication channels and to create powerful messages that can resonate with multiple audiences.

To design powerful messages, it is important to

FIGURE 21. Values and identities cluster in the EU



1. **Pragmatists** (12% of the EU population): Pragmatists are family-centred in values and identities. They care about their close ones, about security and are generally in favour of the EU.
2. **Progressives** (14%): Progressives tend to be young and highly educated citizens who care about equality, nature, and politics and are strong supporters of the EU.
3. **Moderates** (25%): Moderates are citizens with balanced values profiles, who identify strongly with their occupation, education but also political beliefs and being European.
4. **Individualists** (23%): Individualists value wealth and power but do not exhibit any strong social identification. They are the most sceptical about the EU but also of their national democracy.
5. **Traditionalists** (26%): Traditionalists endorse conservation values of security, conformity and tradition and identify strongly with their nation, religion/beliefs, ethnicity/race, age and gender.

understand that matching some dimensions of the audience requires more effort in designing successful messages. When tailoring messages to some audience characteristic, e.g. messages to young people using language used by the youth, the strength of the argument itself is more important. Many studies find that when matching the audience but using weak arguments in the matching have less impact than when the message was not tailored [242] [243] [244] [245] [246] [247]. Thus, the more specific targeted messages will be, the more effort needs to go into designing meaningful and trustworthy messages.

How to put this into practice:

1. Understand the policy/event through various values lenses[90]
2. Determine key information needs per value
3. Gather information filling info needs
4. Develop strong messages for each values lens
5. Combine messages
6. Pre-test messages (quantitative and qualitative) to avoid backfire effects
7. Broadcast & Listen, feed into step 1 for new issues

> *Anticipating information demands is a better strategy to counter disinformation pre-emptively.*

90 For example, use this values-self assessment to understand your own values biases: https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/Personal_Values_Assessment10

6.7 ADDRESS CITIZENS' CONCERNS TO HELP COMBAT DISINFORMATION

Recommendation 8: Public communicators should acknowledge public concerns pre-emptively, before policy solutions have been developed; this includes strategies to combat mis- and disinformation.

Migratory pressures are unlikely to end soon due to several factors, including ongoing conflicts and political instability in regions such as the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, economic disparities and high population growth in certain regions, which contributes to migratory pressures. Therefore, concerns of citizens are unlikely to abate, as long as the impacts of migration continue to be felt in society. When an issue becomes salient in society, citizens pay attention to information and news about it. At such times, it is crucial for public communicators to provide information or already having created an information environment that allows people to find reliable information when searching for it. As mentioned above however, people still find a lot of low-quality information when trying to discern true from fake news stories.

Additionally, when addressing mis- and disinformation, communicators need to understand that even the best techniques like pre- and debunking are rarely fully effective in reversing false information [248]. Thus, better strategies are needed to counter disinformation on such divisive policy topics. This starts with anticipating information demands by citizens regarding new policies. While some events are non-predictable, other concerns, such as housing shortages, labour market issues and education demands are largely predictable, at least in the medium term.

Another challenge is understanding who is susceptible to disinformation and how to best react to disinformation [249]. We propose a number of more in-depth considerations, which shall be summarised here. Regarding susceptibility, there are cognitive (e.g. number of repetition), social (e.g. shared world view) and affective (e.g. mood) factors that can be used to predict disinformation success and the need for response. A decision tree, developed by Lewandowsky & Cook [249], visualises when and how to react to disinformation, see Figure 22.

6.8 EVALUATE TO INCREASE IMPACT AND DEVELOP SKILLS, COMPETENCES, EXPERTISE

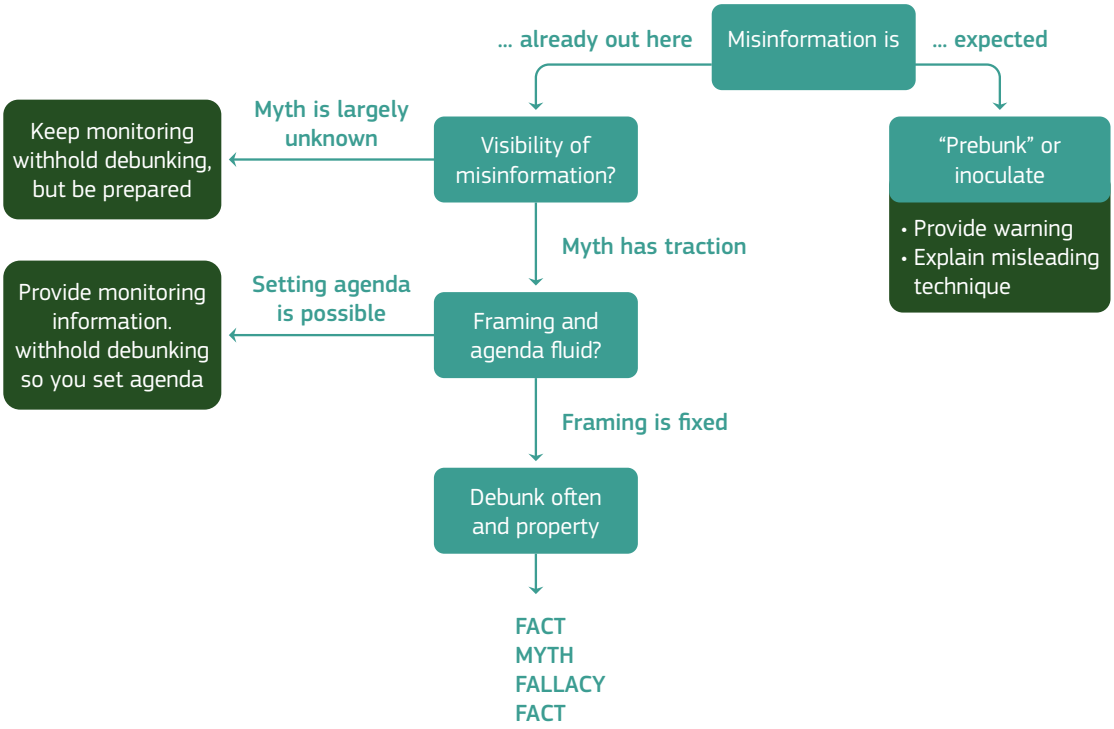
Recommendation 9: Public communicators should invest in evaluation to increase the impact of their communications.

Before launching a communication campaign, set your objectives clearly and define indicators that can be used to evaluate the success of your communication campaign.

Recommendation 10: New challenges require new skills, competences and expertise to support public communication professionals.

Taking recommendation 9 and 10 together, and seeing that polarisation of society is at a very high level in many countries, it is important to develop the skills to communicate in a trusted way as public communicators. This entails more evaluations and more investments into expertise and support. The rules of communication have significantly changed in recent years [249] and public communicators are expected to keep up with those changes. Today's world is more and more governed by new rules designed by private companies and their powerful algorithms pursuing goals that do not align with an informed and democratic public. Therefore, public institutions need to invest more in understanding the game and in responding in ways that are effective and ethical, enabling a democratic society where individuals can take informed decision and achieve their goals in a self-determined way.

FIGURE 22. Countering misinformation decision tree



Source: Lewandowsky et al. [249]

Case Study 5

Successful migration communication actions

Nina Kajander and Fiona Seiger

This case study explores successful communication actions around migration, examining initiatives, campaigns and social media activities that have helped to promote a more inclusive and welcoming environment for migrants. We look at the factors that have contributed to the success of these actions, with the aim to provide insights for the implementation of future EU communication campaigns on migration.

Celebrating long-term care workers in Finland

In an exploratory analysis, we looked at Facebook posts featuring images and videos of individuals with a migration background working in the Finnish long-term care sector suggests that an implicit messaging approach may resonate with audiences. The posts were published by Finnish long-term care providers and associations between 2020 and 2025 to celebrate the Finnish national long-term care worker day on 27 January. They were not part of an organised communication campaign about migration. Yet, they manage to convey a positive and inclusive message about migrant workers, as indicated by the reactions to these posts.

This exploratory analysis is not meant to be exhaustive. The data collection process relied on a single search keyword ('lähihoitajapäivä' – long-term care worker day), which may not have captured all relevant posts,

Credit: Seniorikeskus Helsinki (Kinapori) (Facebook page)

Credit: Seniorikeskus Helsinki (Kinapori) (Facebook page)

and the limited number of posts analysed may not be representative of broader trends and patterns. Additionally, we identified Facebook posts that appeared to feature migrant workers based on visual cues, such as the physical appearance or names of the individuals in the posts. While these visual cues may not accurately reflect the nationality of the individuals in the picture, the message conveyed is one of ethnic and national diversity in the long-term care sector in Finland.

The posts feature individuals who appear to be of migrant origin sharing their experiences in working in the long-term care sector in Finland. The messages themselves do not explicitly mention migrant workers or diversity. Instead, they focus on celebrating the contributions and dedication of all long-term care workers. It is likely that the presence of migrant workers in these posts is simply a reflection of the changing demographics of the long-term care workforce in Finland.

For example, a video published by TampereMissio features three migrant workers employed in different long-term care services in Finland. The video shows each of the workers answering questions about their job and their experiences in Finland. All three workers speak Finnish with heavy foreign accents. When asked about what they like about their job, the workers mention the positive relationships they have with their colleagues and the persons they are caring for. Additionally, they highlight the opportunity to learn Finnish as a significant benefit of their employment. One of the workers noted that their job had enabled them to 'get on in life' and improve their overall well-being.

A post published by nursing home Esperi promotes a photo exhibition titled 'On ilo kohdata sinut' (It's a pleasure to meet you), organised in celebration of the national long-term care worker day in 2023. The exhibition, held at the main railway station in Helsinki, aimed to put a face to the long-term care work sector in Finland,

Credit: Esperi (Facebook page)

highlighting the important and often underappreciated work of long-term care workers. The exhibition featured 18 poignant photos and personal stories that showcased their daily work, providing a glimpse into the challenges and rewards of this vital profession. By sharing the stories and faces of these workers, the exhibition sought to humanise the long-term care sector and raise awareness about the important role that these workers play in supporting vulnerable members of society. In 2024, the individual photos and stories from the photo exhibition were shared on Esperi's Facebook and Instagram accounts. Nursing home Esperi has also been actively showcasing the learning experiences of its migrant workers on social media. This includes videos of the migrants speaking in Finnish about their efforts to learn the language, as well as testimonials from the migrants themselves, detailing their journeys towards becoming long-term care workers in Finland

We observed that the reactions to these posts are uniformly appreciative, with many users expressing gratitude for the important work that these individuals are doing, or explicitly welcoming them to Finland. We did not identify a single negative comment or reaction to these posts. This is a rarity on social media, where online discussions can often be polarised and contentious.

Several factors may have contributed to the effectiveness of this approach. For instance, the posts feature migrant workers in a routine context, normalising their presence in the Finnish labour force. They focus on positive aspects of the migrant workers' experiences, such as their appreciation for working in Finland and their dedication to their jobs. Their ability to speak Finnish, even if not perfectly, suggests that they are making an effort to adapt to their new environment. Also, situating the messages within a specific context (National Long-Term Care Workers' Day) helps to underscore the value of the migrant workers' for this sector.

The absence of negative responses suggests that the approach taken by the creators of these posts has been effective in resonating with the audience. This may be because the posts avoid triggering potential negative reactions or stereotypes as they do not anchor their message in migration or diversity issues.

It is worth noting that the social media accounts in question are not large or influential accounts. However, this exploratory analysis suggests that smaller, organic voices can promote positive messaging among specific target groups, highlighting the importance of grassroots communication in shaping public discourse and promoting positive attitudes towards individuals with a migration background.

'We are Upper Austria' communication campaign

In a study on value-based communication on the topic of migration [17] the author James Dennison highlights the 'Wir sind Oberösterreich' (We are Upper Austria) campaign as a good example of pro-immigration communication. The campaign promoted diversity and solidarity by highlighting the significant contributions of migrants to society, the labour market and their successful integration.

The campaign features a series of posters, each introducing a duo consisting of an individual appearing to be Austrian, alongside another person perceived as a migrant, as indicated by the names listed beneath the campaign's slogan. The pairs are depicted in a friendly, collaborative stance, dressed in professional uniforms.

Dennison highlights this campaign as an effective example of persuasive messaging, because the posters appeal

to values beyond universalism and benevolence. The uniforms convey a sense of 'conformity'. The firefighter, medic and nurse - professions concerned with health and safety – point to the value of 'security'. Two of the posters show a pair of workers with a clear generational gap, implying a mentorship or apprenticeship, which may appeal to the value of 'tradition'. Dennison notes that each of these examples is rooted in a value-based framework that incorporates at least one of the values commonly associated with anti-immigration sentiment.

Based on his analysis of 135 migration communication campaigns, Dennison noted that few pro-migration campaigns contained value-based messaging, and when they did, very few contained values beyond 'benevolence' and 'universalism'. Conversely, all anti-immigration campaigns contained value-based messaging and included values associated with both pro- and anti-immigration attitudes. The study suggest that messaging is most likely to elicit sympathy when it appeals to a variety of values. Specifically, for pro-immigration messaging, it recommends also considering values such as conformity, tradition, security and power, typically held by individuals who are more sceptical of migration.

My Great Story and Dari Dapur – UN narrative change campaigns in Australia and Malaysia

A report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [250] describes the steps and methodology behind the development of two successful migration narrative change campaigns in Australia and Malaysia. The campaigns were developed as part of a UN Human Rights initiative under the umbrella of its global #StandUp4Migrants campaign to contextualise values-based narratives on migration. Australia and Malaysia were chosen for this project because at the time of the research they had strong anti-migration sentiments and hostile public discussions, which sometimes resulted in policies that harmed migrant groups.

The #MyGreat Story campaign was launched in Australia in September 2022. The campaign featured a series of four videos, released over six weeks, where well-known Australians from various fields shared personal stories and experiences while preparing and enjoying meals together. The campaign's slogan, 'we are all made of the same ingredients', was created to convey the idea that despite our differences, 'we have more in common with migrants than what divides us'. The videos, showing stories focused on sharing food, were promoted through the UN Human Rights Asia social media channels, including Instagram, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), as well as through the personal social media accounts of the influencers who appeared in the videos.

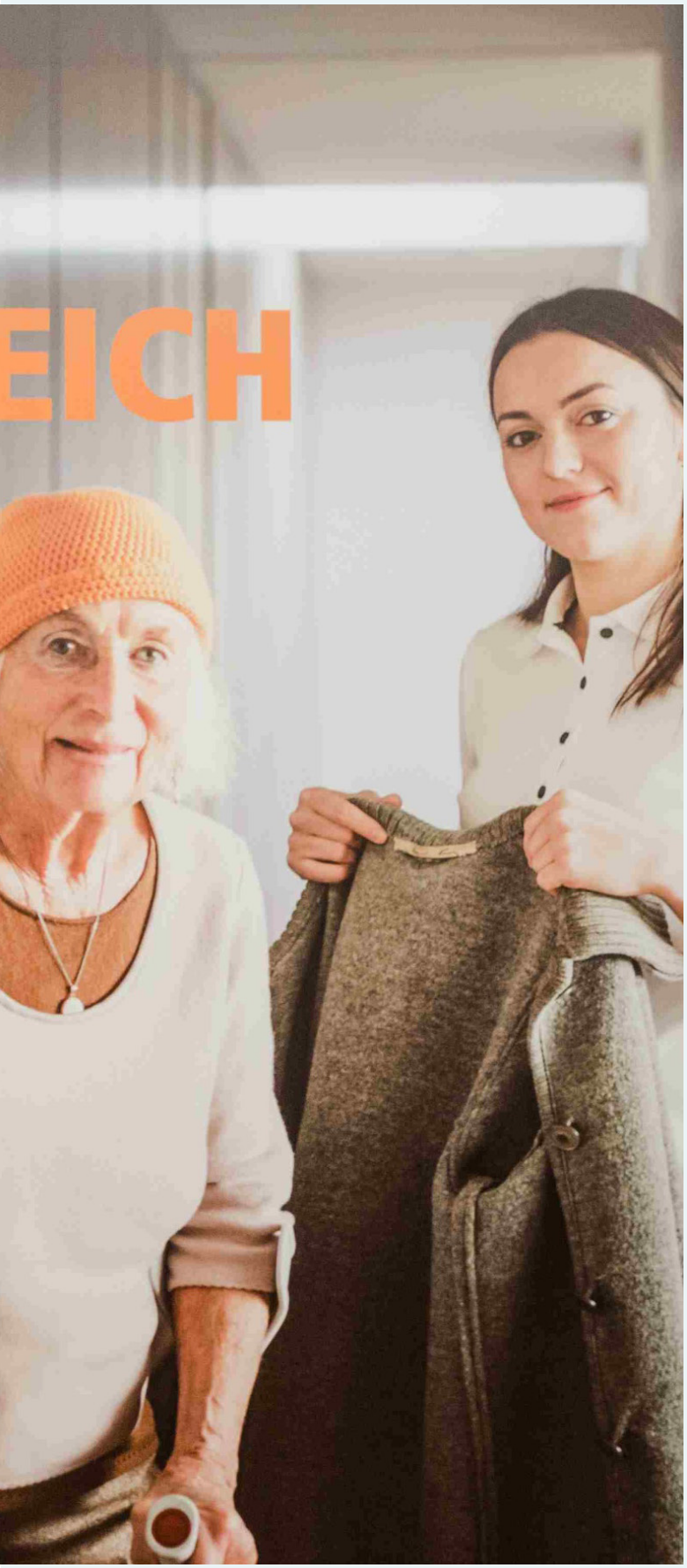
The Dari Dapur campaign was launched in Malaysia in February 2023. The campaign consisted of seven short videos, released over two months, which featured migrants and refugees from six countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Syria and Sri Lanka) engaging in conversations with well-known Malaysian figures, highlighting their stories and experiences. The Dari Dapur campaign had its own dedicated social media presence on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube, where the videos and other content were promoted. This online presence was further supported by Malaysian civil society groups, including the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), which helped amplify the campaign's reach and impact.

The campaigns were designed based on rigorous research, behavioural science and conceptual work, following eight steps: 1) undertaking contextual research, 2) understanding public social sentiment, 3) identifying the target audience, 4) developing key messages, 5) testing the messages, 6) choosing the messengers, 7) designing and delivering the campaign, and 8) measuring impact.

As part of Step 2, the team conducted a survey among 1200 respondents in Australia and 1200 respondents in Malaysia to obtain baseline information on the values which were likely to be important to their audience. The survey in Australia revealed that 43% of the respondents were undecided as to whether they supported or opposed government immigration policies (28% were in favour and 29% against). This suggested that there was a substantial target audience in Australia with undecided attitudes towards migration. In Malaysia, 42% were uncertain whether immigration had contributed positively to Malaysia's culture and society and 45% were undecided on whether they supported the government's immigration policies. 40% believed that migrants took the jobs of citizens. At the same time, 63% agreed that Malaysian communities are stronger when everyone is supported and 52% felt that people from other countries contribute positively to Malaysia's economy and society.

As part of Step 5, the team used a quantitative online survey among 1000 respondents in Australia, and a qualitative focus group in Malaysia to test which messages resonated most strongly with the target audiences. These findings were incorporated into the campaign design in later steps.

Credit: Wir sind Oberösterreich“ campaign poster, Land Oberoesterreich, 2019. https://www.land-oberoesterreich.gv.at/220414.htm



In step 6, the team analysed media consumption, included questions on the profile of messengers throughout the research process and worked with local partners to seek out relevant influencers, politicians, media personalities and celebrities. The report emphasises that having a range of messengers who can speak persuasively about the different aspects of migration can be key to getting your message across. It also recommends empowering trusted local messengers to deliver the message.

In Australia, the videos reached a substantial audience of nearly 800 000 people, garnering 385 000 views and sparking meaningful interaction with 46 902 people reacting and commenting on the content across various platforms over the six-week campaign period. The campaign team used an online quantitative survey to gather evaluations of the campaign once it had ended. A notable 56% of survey respondents reported an increase in their support for migrants and migration after interacting with the campaign's content, indicating a positive shift in attitudes and opinions. 72% of respondents reported feeling more confident in discussing migration-related topics with their friends and family after watching the campaign videos.

In Malaysia, the Dari Dapur campaign reached almost 1 million people on social media within just four months of its launch. The campaign evaluation included an analysis of the profile of individuals who followed Dari Dapur on social media and a focus group-based discussion, during which the participants viewed the Dari Dapur episodes. The report mentions that prior to seeing the episode, participants had expressed concern that Malaysians needed to be helped before people from other countries. However, after the viewing of the Dari Dapur episode, participants gained a deeper appreciation of the complexities of the migrant experience and also developed a more nuanced perspective on their own relationships and connections with migrants.

The report notes that driving lasting change is a complex and time-intensive process, as behaviours and attitudes typically evolve gradually over time, requiring sustained effort and patience to achieve meaningful and enduring impact. It highlights that by leveraging evidence-based insights of human behaviour, decision-making and response to messaging, it is possible to create effective narrative change initiatives. The full report provides detailed advice and guidelines for each step of the campaign development process used in these successful initiatives.

7. Towards an evidence-based understanding of migration: priorities for EU public communications

Nina Kajander

This report offers a comprehensive examination of migration narratives, spanning from dominant media narratives to divisive populist rhetoric and disinformation. By synthesising insights from a broad range of sources, including scientific literature, Horizon 2020 projects, expert studies and our own media and data analysis, we have compiled in this report the latest scientific evidence on migration narratives. Each chapter delves into specific aspects of migration narratives, offering tailored recommendations for addressing the various challenges, including divisive rhetoric and disinformation. The chapters also provide guidance for a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to migration communication. In this concluding chapter, we summarise the implications of our findings for the EU institutions, proposing three more general priorities aimed at fostering a more evidence-based information and communication environment surrounding migration.

Addressing divisive rhetoric and disinformation on migration is particularly pressing in a context where politicians have increasingly used misleading claims and divisive narratives on migration to mobilise support. Recent elections in the US and the EU have shown that the instrumental use of migration narratives can ultimately impact the health of our democracies. In the 2016 US presidential election, migration was a key issue, with then-candidate Donald Trump campaigning on a platform of building a border wall and restricting immigration. The issue continued to be a major theme in the 2020 US presidential election, with debates surrounding border security, asylum policies and the treatment of migrants at the US-Mexico border. During the 2024 elections, Donald Trump adopted a harder stance, portraying migration as a crisis and linking it to national security concerns. He proposed several aggressive policies, including the implementation of mass deportations. The messaging on immigration used inflammatory rhetoric, describing migrants as criminals, suggesting that foreign governments were intentionally sending criminals to the United States and accusing President Biden of failing to secure the US border.

Polls conducted in the US indicated that immigration was a major vulnerability for Biden, with low approval ratings on this issue, especially among Republican voters. A February 2024 Gallup poll showed that an increasing number of American adults (28% of all Americans; 10% of Democrats and 57% of Republicans) named immigration as the most important problem the United States were facing.[91] A separate poll conducted by Quinnipiac University in February 2024 found that immigration was the third most important problem for the US among registered voters, with 17% saying it was the most urgent issue, behind preserving democracy (21%) and the economy (20%).[92] A June 2024 poll

91 Gallup poll February 2024: https://news.gallup.com/poll/611135/immigration-surges-top-important-problem-list.aspx
92 Quinnipiac University Poll February 2024: https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3890

conducted by The Economist and YouGov showed that 84% of the respondents considered immigration to be an important issue for them, and 54% thought it was very important. The same poll suggested that only 29% of Americans approved of Joe Biden's handling of immigration, while 62% disapproved. Out of those who disapproved, 97% indicated that they intended to vote Donald Trump.[93]

An analysis of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), originally published in 2023, indicated that the Biden administration had been the most active administration on immigration, undertaking 534 immigration--related executive actions during the first three years and thus outpacing the 472 actions taken by Donald Trump during his four-year term.[94] An updated analysis by the MPI published in December 2024 indicated that the Biden administration had undertaken a record level of 605 immigration-related executive actions during the four-year term. These included a new border process seeking to discourage irregular arrivals, significant efforts to rebuild the US refugee resettlement programme and the naturalisation of nearly 3.5 million people. The two analyses suggest that the progress made by the Biden administration was overshadowed by a border crisis narrative and a public perception that the border was uncontrolled.[95]

As Kamala Harris entered the US presidential race in July 2024, Donald Trump had made immigration a central part of his campaign, promising mass deportations and stricter border policies. The Harris campaign seemed to downplay the immigration issue, and consequently immigration was not a central theme of Kamala Harris's campaign. When Harris did speak about migration, it was mostly to defend the Biden administration's policies, to highlight her law enforcement background or to blame Donald Trump for blocking a bipartisan Senate immigration bill that would have toughened asylum standards and increased border security funding. These messages fell flat against Donald Trump's relentless portrayals of migrants crossing the southern border as an invading force. This and claims that the Democrats where 'importing illegal immigrants' in hopes that they would vote for the Democratic candidate overwhelmed the efforts by the Harris campaign to normalise the discourse around immigration.[96]

In a webinar organised by the Policy Institute of King's College London in January 2025, Frank Sharry, Immigration Adviser to Kamala Harris's Campaign and Founder and Former Executive Director of America's Voice, stated that one of the problems with the Harris presidential campaign had been that the **Biden administration had not been effective in communicating about the many policy initiatives it had taken to address irregular migration**. He concluded that 'doing it is one thing, but getting credit for it is another thing' (paraphrased).[97]

Concerns linked to migration have played a central role in shaping voter sentiment also in several European elections. Right-wing and far-right parties have successfully exploited immigration as a wedge issue to appeal to disillusioned voters, particularly those concerned about economic instability and cultural change. Immigration played a major role in the 2023 Dutch elections won by the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders. His campaign focused on anti-immigration rhetoric, pushing the narrative that migrants were to blame for the Dutch housing crisis. This resonated with many voters who were frustrated by rising housing shortages and costs. Some of the PVV supporters explicitly linked their support for PVV to the housing crisis (see Case study 3).

The 2024 European Parliament elections saw the rise of right-wing and far-right parties across several EU countries. While mainstream pro-EU parties like the European People's Party (EPP), Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Renew Europe retained a majority, the elections reflected increasing voter support for nationalist and populist movements that campaigned heavily on anti-immigration rhetoric. Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) gained significant ground, securing 16% of the German representation in the European Parliament, making it the second largest party from Germany. Marine Le Pen's National Rally (NR) performed exceptionally well, winning around 40% of the vote in France. The party's campaign focused heavily on limiting

93 The Economist/YouGov Poll June 9 - 11, 2024 - 1595 U.S. Adult Citizens, retrieved in March 2025 at: https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/econTabReport_maqVHQt.pdf

94 Biden at the Three-Year Mark: The Most Active Immigration Presidency Yet Is Mired in Border Crisis Narrative: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/biden-three-immigration-record

95 Biden's Mixed Immigration Legacy: Border Challenges Overshadowed Modernization Advances: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/biden-immigration-legacy

96 New York Times, How Harris's Effort to Neutralize Immigration as a Campaign Issue Failed https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/15/us/politics/kamala-harris-immigration-campaign-issue.html

97 See also: Lessons from America under Trump: How to challenge populism and hold the centre ground on immigration: https://www.britishfuture.org/lessons-from-america-under-trump-how-to-challenge-populism-and-hold-the-centre-ground-on-immigration/

immigration, withdrawing from certain EU policies and defending national sovereignty. Marine Le Pen framed the European Parliament elections as a 'referendum' on immigration, something she had promised also during the 2022 French presidential election campaign. Through this narrative, RN sought to bolster its support, with RN leaders like Jordan Bardella explicitly declaring that the EP elections were a chance to reject the influx of migrants.[98]

In the 2025 German federal elections, the far-right AfD party made significant gains, becoming the second largest party in the Bundestag. The party campaigned heavily on an anti-immigration platform, emphasising concerns over irregular migration and multiculturalism, calling for stricter border controls and criticising the government's handling of migration.

These narratives often resonate with voters because they frame complex challenges and manageable problems, offering clear answers in the form of anti-immigration and nationalist policies. This can make voters feel understood and validated, even if the policies they support might not offer realistic solutions. The ultimate problem for voters is that while anti-immigration policies might provide short-term emotional comfort, they distract us from problems that are more systematic, provide oversimplified solutions and fail to address the deeper structural challenges like housing shortages, wage stagnation, regional disparities or economic inequalities.

Many centre-right parties have responded to the rise of far-right parties by adopting stricter immigration policies, for example the tightening of rules regarding family reunification for refugees[99] and advocating for the rejection of asylum seekers directly at the border.[100] While this shift may convey the message that they are responding to people's concerns, it risks legitimising the populist narratives by creating a political climate where immigration is treated as a problem requiring immediate action – and where immigration is the root cause of various problems. To avoid further legitimising right-wing narratives, European institutions and political parties with a moderate stance on migration should promote a more nuanced, evidence-based and holistic understanding of migration, without resorting to extreme, inhumane or overly restrictive policies.

Even though communication on migration is often driven by political developments and the EU's political agenda, EU institutions have a critical role in consistently providing factual, neutral information about migration trends at all times. Based on existing scientific literature, our own analysis and discussions with experts, we propose three priorities for communications by EU institutions, which aim to support the creation of a more evidence-based information environment surrounding migration.

1. Become a trusted source of migration-related information in the EU

Migration is a complex and multifaceted issue. Finding straightforward information on migration trends, procedures, roles and responsibilities within the EU is not always easy. Information is scattered across various websites, and data is hard to find or understand for non-experts. Misinformation about migration is rampant, leading to widespread misconceptions among EU citizens. **A survey conducted by the JRC suggests a general lack of public awareness of the asylum system, including of the role played by the EU and the Member States in managing migration.** A significant share of respondents also believed that people seek asylum primarily to obtain employment or social welfare benefits, instead of escaping war or persecution (for further information see chapter 5.3).

The lack of effective and balanced communication about migration creates a power vacuum that populist figures can exploit, allowing them to perpetuate the narrative that migration is spiralling out of control, that citizens are not being adequately represented by government 'elites', or even that they are actively working against citizens' interests. In such environments, disinformation flourishes, fuelled by polarisation and distrust in institutions. This can create a perception that the EU is not taking migration-related concerns and issues seriously. Ultimately, it can undermine the EU's efforts to develop and implement effective migration policies and erode trust in the EU's ability to manage migration in a fair and sustainable way.

98 French far-right: EU elections 'referendum' against migrants, Brussels authoritarianism https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/french-far-right-eu-elections-referendum/

99 In April 2025, the Austrian parliament voted for a legal change that enables the government to put a pause on processing applications for family reunification cf. https://www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/pk/jahr_2025/pk0297

100 In February 2025, the leader of the Cristian Democratic union Party in Germany, Friedrich Merz, reiterated his call for strict border controls to turn away asylum seekers at the borders, cf. https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/63050/germany-merz-pushes-for-tougher-border-policies-after-election-win and https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-interior-minister-alexander-dobrindt-signals-migration-pivot/

The lack of effective and balanced communication about migration creates a power vacuum that populist figures can exploit.

To empower citizens to form opinions based on facts, and to counter distorted narratives, **the EU institutions should position themselves as trusted sources of information on migration**. This starts with adopting a consistent and sustained communication approach, characterised by the **provision of continuous, clear, factual and transparent information** about migration trends and dynamics in the EU.[101] This includes clarifying complex concepts and terminology, shedding light on asylum procedures, and explaining different types of migration and support for integration.

Tools such as the JRC's Atlas of Migration[102] could be leveraged to provide easily understandable figures and graphs that could be used by communication professionals to illustrate trends. To maximise its potential, the Atlas could be further developed to provide this support. The EU Academy[103] can also be useful to foster and improve the quality of knowledge about migration in a simple, smart and inspirational way. Additionally, a publicly accessible fact-checking website on migration could help debunk myths, support communication professionals and provide accurate information to the public. Using social media platforms strategically can also facilitate the dissemination of coherent and consistent flows of factual data, thereby helping to counter the spread of disinformation and promote a more informed public discourse on migration.

It is also important to provide comprehensive information on the EU's achievements, on-going activities and future objectives in the realm of migration. The EU has adopted a myriad of measures linked to migration, ranging from financial assistance to Member States to the establishment of reception centres and partnerships with third countries to reduce irregular migration, and invested significant amounts of money in migration management. However, these achievements often go unrecognised. While institutional communications, such as press releases, are important, they are not enough to foster a deeper understanding of migration and its management in the EU. **Promoting a broader awareness of these issues requires more in-depth public discussions about the specifics of migration policies, including their challenges and successes.**

An evaluation of the BBC's reporting on migration, which included audience research, indicates that **audiences are indeed interested in more in-depth coverage of migration issues, but often receive superficial treatment.** The evaluation revealed that the most significant issue was the superficial treatment of migration stories, despite strong audience interest in more in-depth coverage. The study found that BBC reporting on migration often failed to adequately scrutinise political claims, instead relying on a superficial 'balance' of opposing viewpoints through soundbites. However, audiences craved more context and nuanced explanations to help them understand complex issues, such as the inner workings of migration policies, the historical context of current events and the scale and uniqueness of migration trends in the UK. Furthermore, the BBC's reporting often failed to distinguish between different types of migration, leading to misconceptions among audiences, such as the assumption that most migration to the UK occurs via small boats. This lack of clarity and depth in reporting hindered audiences' ability to gain a comprehensive understanding of migration issues, highlighting the need for more thoughtful and informative coverage [251].

2. Develop balanced messages

In response to anti-migrant rhetoric, many organisations have focused on sharing positive stories and showcasing the contributions of migrants to society and economy. While this can help challenge negative stereotypes, it is likely to have a limited impact, or even prove

101 Reliable data sources already exists, for instance the JRC Atlas of Migration, the Eurostat migration database, the EUAA asylum trends reports and the Frontex irregular border crossings reports.

102 Maintained by the JRC, the Atlas of Migration provides migration-related indicators for the 27 EU Member States and 171 non-EU countries and territories. https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/atlas-migration_en

103 The EU Academy is an EU-owned online hub containing first-hand knowledge, high quality educational resources and valuable insights, directly produced by the EU institutions. https://academy.europa.eu/

counterproductive, among individuals who hold pre-existing prejudices or concerns about migration. When the messaging does not resonate with people's concerns, it can create a sense of disconnect between the messenger and the audience. By not addressing the underlying fears and anxieties that drive the scepticism, people may feel like their concerns are being dismissed or ignored. This can lead to feelings of frustration and alienation. Therefore, **effective communications about migration should be based on balanced messages, which resonate with all part of society, address people's legitimate concerns, acknowledge challenges and explain the measures being taken to address them.** This involves acknowledging concerns linked to job competition, the use of public resources and security. Communication actions of EU institutions should also consider addressing the values and concerns of supporters of populist parties.

It is important to **develop messages that resonate with individuals across the political spectrum and acknowledge the wide array of public opinions and concerns**. Building confidence in the ability of governments and the EU to manage migration effectively also involves being transparent about the difficulties that may arise from migration, including possible integration challenges or pressures on local infrastructure, and providing clear information about the steps being taken to mitigate these challenges.

Communicating about EU financial support or other initiatives supporting migrants can be challenging, especially during times of economic uncertainty and rising living costs. To minimise backlash, especially on social media, messages should reinforce perceptions of fairness and emphasise how the initiatives also benefit the local community, for instance through filling labour gaps in key sectors and stimulating economic growth. Messaging should also anticipate common concerns or misconceptions about migration, e.g. those linked to job competition, distribution of resources and migrant contribution to social welfare systems.

Migration is often artificially linked to various other societal issues, such as housing, security or crime. **It is essential to address these concerns in a way that does not perpetuate the misconception that migrants are the primary cause of these problems**. Instead, communications should focus on explaining how these issues are being addressed and what policies and initiatives are in place to mitigate such challenges. For example, if housing is a concern, public communications should highlight the efforts being made to increase the supply of affordable housing.

3. Create an EU-wide network of communicators

Effective communication of EU migration policies requires a concerted effort extending beyond the European Commission. A joint effort between EU institutions and agencies can help convey the benefits and value of EU policies to the public and demonstrate that they stem from a coordinated effort between the various EU institutions and Member States.

Additionally, **building a network of effective spokespeople composed of knowledgeable and articulate individuals who are willing to share their expertise with a broad audience can facilitate engagement with various audience segments.** It could also help provide context-specific information and tailor messages to the unique concerns, needs and experiences of local audiences. Such network could comprise politicians, journalists, influencers and other key figures to offer a range of different perspectives.

A multi-channel approach to communications enables to engage with diverse audience segments and tailor messages to specific target groups. Citizen engagement and citizen dialogues could be used to understand people's concerns. Television remains one of the most widely consumed media platforms. It enables to reach a large and diverse audience, including those who may not be active online. **Having a diverse pool of spokespeople who can effectively communicate about migration on television can bring credibility and authority to the discussion, helping to build trust with the public**. Television news programmes, talk shows and documentaries can also help provide more in-depth insights, educate the audience and promote a more nuanced understanding of migration. Television appearances can be amplified through social media, online news outlets and other digital channels, creating a multiplier effect and extending the reach of the message. The EU should also leverage media partnerships, encouraging media outlets to produce high-quality content that provides factual information about migration in the EU.

How science can inform migration communication

Science and research can inform the efforts to communicate about migration and support the preparation of migration communication campaigns by providing accurate data on migration trends, impacts and benefits. This can enable communicators to develop evidence-based messages that resonate with diverse audiences.

Surveys and social science research help identify common misconceptions about migration, allowing communicators to address these myths and develop targeted messages that counter misinformation.

Behavioural science helps to understand sentiments, attitudes and perceptions prior to the launch of communication campaigns, enabling communicators to anticipate and address potential concerns, and develop messages that resonate with their target audience.

Finally, research can inform the design and testing of messages that appeal to people with diverse values, ensuring that communication campaigns appeal to wider audiences and maximise their impact.

We encourage communication teams within the EU institutions to use the full range of scientific support services at their disposal, including the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and its Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography (KCMD), to inform the preparation of migration communication campaigns.

Shifting the narrative requires a sustained, long-term effort

To conclude, it is essential to acknowledge that shifting the narrative on migration to a more evidence-based direction will not happen overnight. It will require a sustained effort, patience and a willingness to learn from both successes and setbacks. It is important to be prepared for the eventuality that not all responses to migration-related messages - especially on social media - will be positive, and that some messages will continue to be met with criticism.

This should not deter the efforts to strive for a more informed and balanced public discourse on migration. Communication is a process, not a one-time event. Communicating about migration requires continuous effort, adaptation and improvement. Creating this foundation for more effective communication on migration grounded in evidence is necessary to promote a more inclusive, informed and resilient public debate on migration.

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List of abbreviations and definitions

Abbreviations	Definition
AfD	Alternative for Germany
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DG	Directorate-General
EDMO	European Digital Media Observatory
EMM	European Media Monitor
EP	European Parliament
EPC	European Policy Centre
EPP	European People's Party
ERC	European Conservatives and Reformists
EU	European Union
EUI	European University Institute
GCM	Global Compact for Migration
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HOME	Migration and Home Affairs
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JRC	Joint Research Centre
KCMD	Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography
MPC	Migration Policy Centre
MPI	Migration Policy Institute
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NODES	Narratives Observatory combatting Disinformation in Eu-rope Systemically
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom)
RTD	Research and Technological Development
S&D	Socialists and Democrats
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VROM	Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment)

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Annexes

ANNEX 1. FACT-CHECKING DATABASES CONSULTED (SELECTION)

EU-wide/International

- EDMO:
  - https://edmo.eu/resources/repositories/repository-of-fact-checking-articles/ and https://edmo.eu/areas-of-activities/fact-checking/best-of-fact-checking-map/
- EU vs. Disinfo
  - https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/
- AFP:
  - https://factcheck.afp.com/list/regions/Europe
- Database of Known Fakes Home About (DBKF) https://dbkf.ontotext.com/

National databases (selection):

- Belgium: https://factcheck.vlaanderen/
- Bosnia: https://istinomjer.ba/
- Croatia: https://faktograf.hr/;
- Czechia: https://demagog.cz/; https://www.fakticke.info/ ; https://manipulatori.cz/
- Germany: https://correctiv.org/
- Ireland: https://www.thejournal.ie/factcheck/news/; https://www.logicallyfacts.com/en
- Italy: https://www.bufale.net/ ; https://www.butac.it/ ; https://pagellapolitica.it/
- Montenegro: https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/
- Poland: https://demagog.org.pl/ ; https://pravda.org.pl/
- Serbia: https://fakenews.rs/; https://www.istinomer.rs/ ; https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/
- Spain: Maldita.es and https://maldita.es/migracion/
- United Kingdom: https://factcheckni.org/ ; https://theferret.scot/ferret-fact-service/ ; https://fullfact.org/
- Ukraine: https://www.stopfake.org/ru/glavnaya-2/; https://voxukraine.org/en/voxcheck

TABLE 3. Super-narratives and narratives identified in populist tweets

Super-narratives	Narratives	Values each narrative frequently appeals to
It is Us vs. Them (the establishment)		Power, tradition, face, security
This narrative pits the populist parties/leaders and their supporters against the perceived political elite, framing the migration discourse as a battleground for power and control. It portrays the establishment as out-of-touch, incompetent, and not acting in the interest of the national citizens, while positioning the populist movement as the voice of the people fighting against those who prioritise -among others- liberal values and policies. This narrative seeks to polarize the population, discredit political opponents, and rally support for anti-establishment agendas (which can take various forms). Common justification are the protection of national sovereignty and interests.		
	Discrediting liberal values	Power, tradition
	EU is harmful for our nation	Power
	Let's overthrow the establishment	Power
	Our sovereignty is under threat	Security, power
	Discrediting political rivals (e.g. ridicule, accusation)	Security, face
	Political rivals' policy failed/ is failing/ will fail	Security
	Political rivals act against the interests of the people	Security
	Vindication	Security, face
	Anti-Elitism	Security, power
Immigrants' identity and/or culture is problematic		Security
This narrative amplifies fears and insecurities surrounding cultural and social identity, particularly focusing on the perceived symbolic threats posed by immigration, usually of Arabs and Muslims, to the European way of life. This narrative exploits concerns about cultural homogeneity and societal cohesion, painting immigrants as outsiders whose presence challenges the established norms and values of European societies. This narrative of cultural threat often essentialises national identities and cultures, creating rigid boundaries that make it seemingly impossible for immigrants to truly belong or integrate into European societies. By claiming that European identity and culture are under siege, this narrative seeks to stoke anxieties and existential fears. It also portrays migrants as incompatible with European values and traditions.		
	Immigration is a threat to the European way of life / identity	Security, tradition
	Arabs and/or Muslims are a cultural/social threat	Security, tradition
	Certain immigrants are unwilling/incapable to integrate	Security, conformity
Immigration is a threat		Security
This narrative taps into fears within the population by portraying immigrants as sources of danger and instability. It paints a picture of immigrants as potential risks to individual safety and national security as well as criminals and terrorists. By amplifying concerns about the perceived lack of control over immigration, this narrative seeks to instil fear and apprehension. It frames immigration as a pressing threat that must be addressed urgently to safeguard the well-being and security of both national citizens and the nation as a whole. This narrative also exploits gender dynamics: It perpetuates stereotypes of immigrant men as particularly dangerous, fuelling increased fears of crimes of a sexual nature.		
	Immigration is a threat to individual safety	Security
	Immigration is a threat to national security	Security
	Immigrants are prone to committing crimes (violent, non-violent, or organised)	Security
	Immigrants are prone to committing crimes of a sexual nature	Security
	Many immigrants are terrorists	Security
	Immigrants spread diseases	Security

Immigration is out of control		Security, power
This narrative emphasises the supposed overwhelming influx of immigrants and highlights perceived weaknesses in border management and control. Borders are allegedly strained and inadequately regulated to cope with this influx. By framing immigration in this way, the narrative seeks to fuel fear and anxiety, painting a picture of a nation under siege by an uncontrollable "mass of migrants". This portrayal fuels xenophobia, aims for stricter immigration policies, increased border security measures, and heightened vigilance against perceived threats posed by unchecked migration.		
	There are too many immigrants coming	Security
	Our borders are strained and/or insufficiently controlled	Security, power
Immigration burdens the economy & welfare narrative		Power, benevolence, conformity, security
This narrative highlights perceived injustices in the distribution of economic resources and welfare benefits, framing migration as a drain on the economy and a source of unfair competition for native citizens. It emphasises notions of loss and disadvantage, portraying natives as losing out to immigrants in terms of job opportunities, access to welfare benefits, and overall economic prosperity. The narrative also fuels nativist sentiments, prioritizing the needs and interests of native-born individuals over those of migrants. This narrative also portrays migrants as exploiting the asylum system, manipulating it to gain access to economic resources and welfare benefits, further exacerbating perceptions of unfairness and inequity among native citizens. By painting migrants as recipients of preferential treatment and superior benefits, it fosters a sense of resentment and injustice among the native population.		
	Immigrants do not contribute to the economy	Power
	Immigrants take our jobs	Power
	Many asylum seekers are actually economic migrants	Conformity
	Natives loose to immigrants / Immigrants receive better benefits than nationals	Power
	Immigrants abuse the welfare system	Conformity, power
	Immigrants are a strain on our health-care system	Power, security
	Immigrants are a strain on the housing market	Benevolence, power
	Natives first	Benevolence, power
	Immigration reduces the attractiveness of location and lowers overall life quality	Security, benevolence
	Receiving immigrants is too expensive/ immigration burdens tax payers	Benevolence, power
Narrative strategy to remain in the news		Face, power, achievement
This narrative in the migration discourse focuses on the strategic manipulation of media attention to ensure that immigration remains a prominent and ongoing issue in public discourse. It involves consistently reminding the public about the significance and relevance of immigration as a pressing concern. Furthermore, this narrative links immigration to unrelated issues, exploiting societal concerns and diverting attention from pressing matters to perpetuate a sense of urgency and crisis around immigration policies. This narrative also encompasses elements of self-promotion, wherein populist parties and leaders actively seek to keep themselves and their agendas at the forefront of public attention by leveraging discussions and debates surrounding immigration.		
	Reminder that immigration is an issue	Face
	Self-promotion	Face, power, achievement
There is an unfair bias against our political camp		Face, universalism
This narrative centres on sowing seeds of distrust by portraying one's own political group as victims of systemic prejudice and manipulation. It alleges that there is a deliberate effort to silence the voices and grievances of one's own political group, with the judicial system supposedly favouring the political rivals and obstructing the agenda of one's own group or faction. The narrative also accuses the system of operating on double standards and being corrupt, implying that there is a systematic bias against one's own ideologies. By framing a political group or faction as marginalized and unfairly treated, this narrative seeks to rally support among their followers by fostering a sense of grievance and victimhood, while simultaneously undermining confidence in institutions and authorities that are perceived to be aligned with opposing political ideologies.		
	We are being silenced	Face, universalism, stimulation
	Mainstream media are biased	Face, universalism
	The judicial system favours political rivals and/or obstructs own political camp	Face, universalism
	There are double-standards/ the system is corrupt	Face, universalism

We are competent		Face, power, security
This narrative is aimed at instilling confidence in populist parties and leaders by showcasing their ability to address immigration issues effectively. This narrative involves promoting specific policy initiatives or ideas related to immigration, presenting them as solutions that will address perceived challenges and restore order. Additionally, it involves applauding political allies who share similar stances on migration and portraying them as competent and reliable partners in achieving common goals. By emphasizing that they represent the people and their interest, populist parties and leaders seek to position themselves as competent and capable agents of change and common sense who will bring stability and security to the immigration landscape.		
	Promoting policy initiatives or ideas	Face, power, conformity
	Applauding political allies	Face, power
	We represent the people	Face, power
	We stand for common sense	Face, power
	We will reinstate order	Power, security
Immigrants are victims		Universalism, power, benevolence
This narrative is used across the political spectrum and underscores the notion that immigrants are victims of various injustices. By portraying immigrants as victims of circumstances beyond their control, this narrative seeks to elicit compassion from the public and draw attention to the challenges and hardships faced by migrants during their journey or upon arrival in new territories. However, the blame for the situation is pinned onto different actors/factors, depending on who deploys the narrative. The political right mobilises the victim narrative to argue against immigration and for more thoroughly controlled borders, presumably in the interest of migrants who are driven by false hope and misleading promises (by traffickers, but also by humanitarian NGOs). The deployment of this humanitarian anti-migration narrative serves to rhetorically balance out the otherwise xenophobic anti-immigration narratives used by right wing populist parties/leaders. On the political left, populists mobilises the victim narrative mostly to critique the EU and MS governments, their migration management, policies, and border control procedures. The latter are depicted as discriminatory and violent against asylum seekers and other migrants. Populist/divisive narratives portray Europe as a "fortress", where immigrants fall victims to human traffickers, suffer from labour exploitation, and continuously have their rights infringed. Relying on exaggeration, this narrative aims to create outrage about the way in which the EU and individual MS seemingly mistreat various groups of disenfranchised immigrants.		
	Immigrants are victims of false hope	Universalism
	Immigrants are victims of human traffickers.	Universalism
	EU/MS do not have the means to properly take care of immigrants, therefore it is better for them not to come here.	Power, benevolence, universalism
	Certain immigrants /asylum seekers are discriminated against	Universalism
	MS or EU are in breach of international law (e.g. inadequate reception facilities, refoulement at the borders, prolonged asylum procedures)	Universalism
	Immigrants suffer from labour exploitation	Universalism
Immigration is part of a conspiracy		Security
This narratives revolves around the propagation of distrust and suspicion by promoting various conspiracy theories related to migration such as the concept of the "Great Replacement," and blaming global elites for orchestrating migration flows. Furthermore, many of these conspiracy narratives harbour racist over- and undertones, often perpetuating fears of a supposed "white genocide" or the replacement of white populations by people of colour. This narrative aims to sow seeds of doubt and foster a sense of paranoia among the population regarding the true mechanics and motives behind immigration policies and trends.		
	Other conspiracy theory	Security
	Great replacement	Security
	Blaming global elites	Security
Pragmatic approaches to immigration		
	Immigration helps tackle social & economic issues (e.g. skills and labour shortages)	Achievement , security
Geopolitical narratives: Countries are acting against the interest of other countries		Achievement , security
	Immigration is abused as a political tool	Power, conformity
	Our country is doing more than other countries to deal with immigration issues	Power

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