

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.



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.

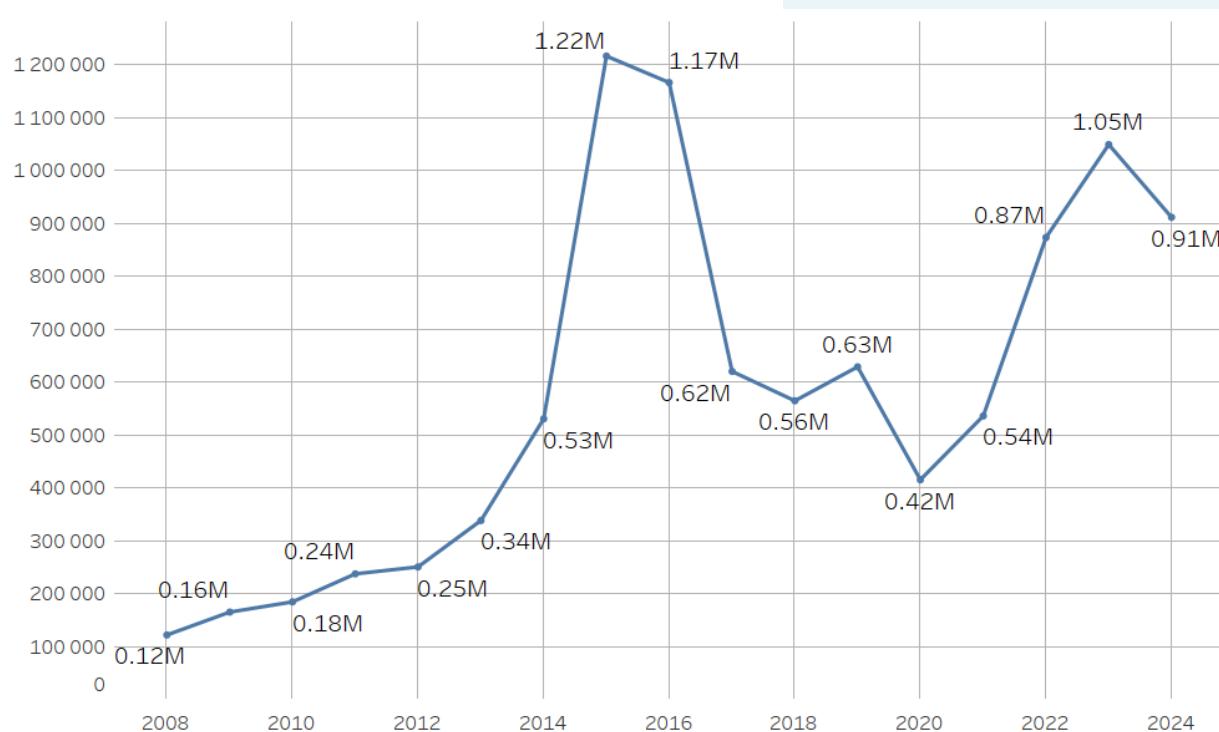
The overall number of foreign nationals in the EU has also increased over the past years. The number of non-EU citizens in EU-27 has increased from just over 17 million on 1 January 2014,² representing 3.9% of

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 Directive⁴ 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].

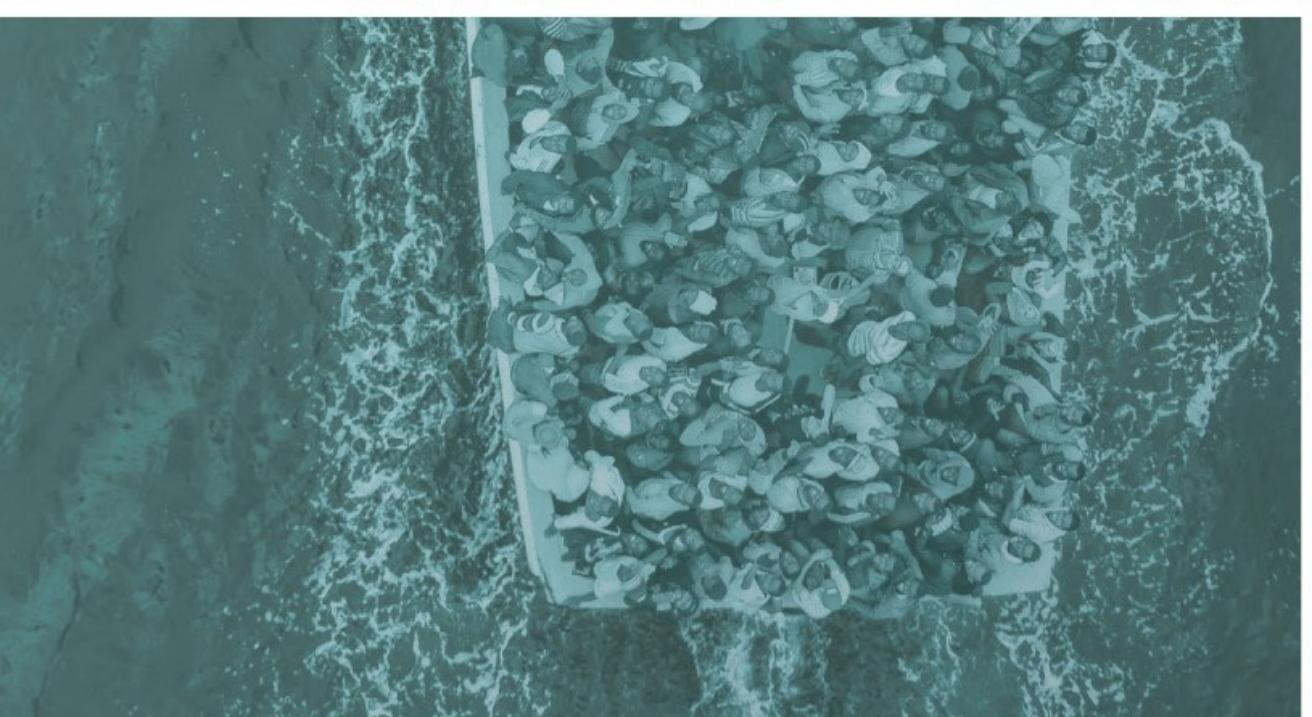
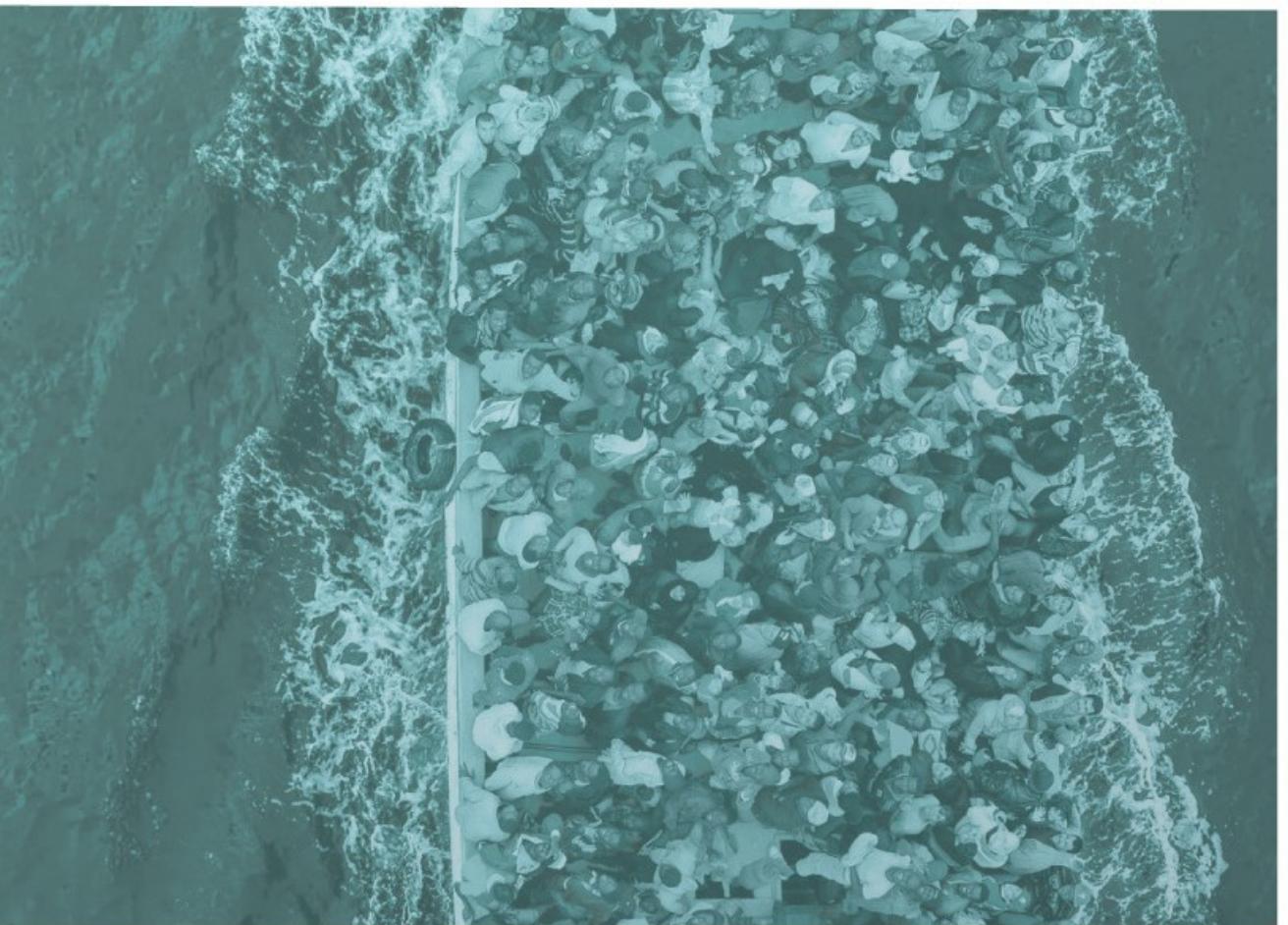
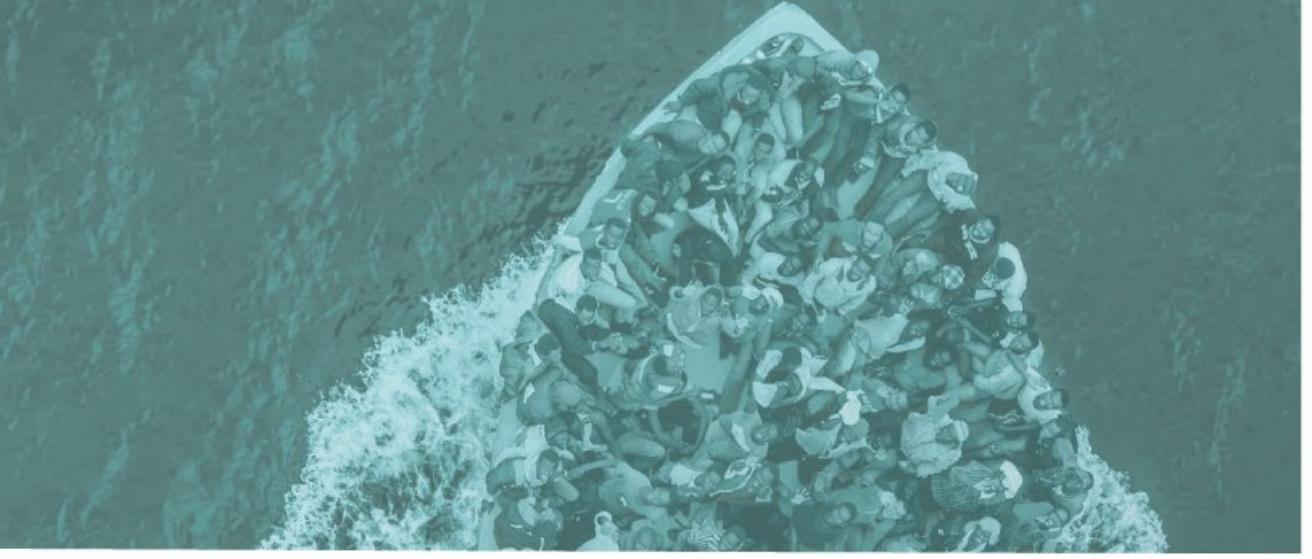
For example: Threat or Crisis are narrative frames.

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.



Dominant media

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
<i>Migration to the EU. A Review of Narratives and Approaches.</i> <i>Bayerl et al. [13]</i>	Solidarity narrative Victim narrative		Xenophobic narrative Crisis narrative	Systematic literature review of academic research on migration narratives in the mainstream media
PERCEPTIONS project				
<i>The Narratives that shape our world. Narrative Analysis Report.</i> Nowak et al. [15]	Migration is good for the economy Solidarity (re: migrants in 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
NODES project	Tragedy (re: migrants outside the EU)			
<i>Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives: BRIDGES key findings.</i> Berta Güell & Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas (coord.) [5]	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
BRIDGES project				
<i>The Emergence, Uses and Impacts of Narratives on Migration State of the Art</i> Boswell et al. [16]	Humanitarian narrative Victim frame		Islamisation narrative Securitisation narrative	Review of academic literature
BRIDGES project	Hero frame 'The good migrant' frame		Crisis narrative Threat frame	
<i>Changing the Migration Narrative: On the Power of Discourse, Propaganda and Truth Distortion.</i> Hein de Haas [14]	The victim narrative The migration celebration narrative		The mass migration narrative The migration threat narrative	Not indicated
International Migration Institute				
<i>How We Talk about Migration. The Link between Migration Narratives, Policy, and Power</i> Banulescu-Bogdan, Malka & Culbertson [1]	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
Migration Policy Institute				

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.

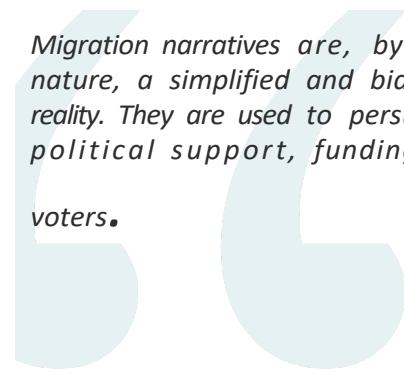
Based on these findings, it can be argued that the solidarity and victim narrative frames appeal to audiences' empathy and sense of justice. The threat and crisis frames mobilise values of conservation (security, tradition or conformity) and self-enhancement (power and achievement). These frames portray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

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.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion, cf. section 5.3

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 study¹⁰ 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

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 Oceania¹³ 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.

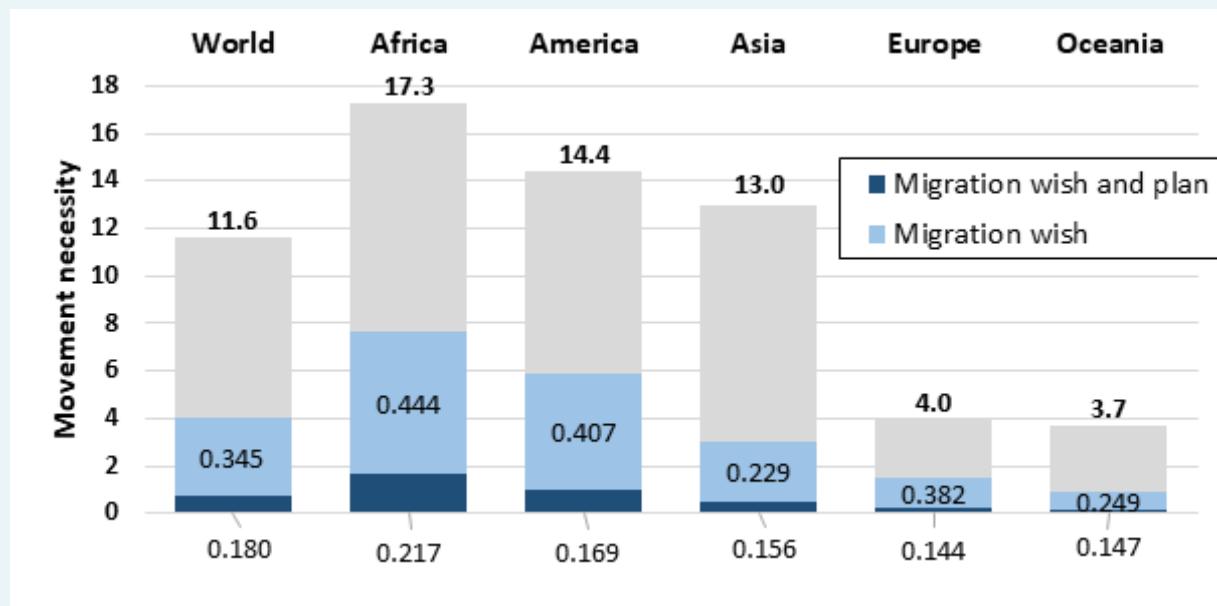
Moreover, among those that expected a necessity to move and desired to migrate internationally, only 18 % were making plans for the move to another country. This raises the question of why individuals, that anticipate a need to move due to serious environmental problems and that have a desire to migrate 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? \[287\]](#)