



RESHAPING
NARRATIVES



European Policy
DIALOGUE FORUM

Reshaping narratives on migration through intercultural and interreligious dialogue

Executive summary

The “migration debate” in Europe has become increasingly polarised and heated. Rhetoric surrounding refugees and migrants is often influenced by fears and suspicion and is easily instrumentalised for political agendas. Although there have been many highly creditable efforts in various European states to contribute to a more balanced narrative about refugees and migrants, the increasing polarisation of the debate makes dialogue difficult.

These public frames and narratives have very real implications: refugees and migrants find themselves the targets of increasing discrimination, marginalisation, hate speech, and even incitement to violence as a result of narratives framing them as threats and drains on shared resources.¹ Policy and government are not immune from the influence of narrative, and false narratives can have negative impacts on the support that refugees and migrants, and their host communities, can access. This ultimately negatively impacts social cohesion in European societies.

The Network for Dialogue

POLICY BRIEF #3

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The Network for Dialogue

Empowering Interreligious and Intercultural
Action for the Social Inclusion of Refugees
and Migrants.



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¹ World Association for Christian Communication– Europe Region (WACC Europe) and the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME). Changing the Narrative: Media Representation of Refugees and Migrants in Europe. (November 2017). Available at: https://www.refugeesreporting.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Changing_the_Narrative_Media_Representation_of_Refugees_and_Migrants_in_Europe.pdf

Key recommendations

- 1 **Facilitate ease of access**, through media fellowships and other methods of support, for refugees and migrants to create independent media platforms and advocacy associations
- 2 **Ensure the active participation and mandatory representation** in an advisory capacity of refugees and migrants in city councils to have their voices heard at all stages
- 3 **Meet refugees and migrants in diverse and inclusive spaces** and strive to **hold regular consultations** with a wide range of concerned stakeholders, including faith-based actors
- 4 **Support capacity-building** and training modules for policy actors, grassroots organizations and media representatives **on the use of interreligious and intercultural dialogue**
- 5 **Include more refugee and migrant voices** in public events and conferences that deal with the social cohesion of European societies, encourage active sharing and listening
- 6 **Recognise and build on the role of religious institutions** in changing narratives about migration and refugees
- 7 **Disseminate the use of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in narrative change** throughout educational systems in Europe

Who are the authors of this policy brief?

This policy brief is based on the discussions of the 2nd European Policy Dialogue Forum on Refugees and Migrants held online on 3-4 November 2020, organized by the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) and the Network for Dialogue, and supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Commission Representation in Germany. The three tracks at the Forum discussed how intercultural and interreligious dialogue are means to further social inclusion of refugees and migrants in Europe in the areas of inclusive education, trustbuilding and changing the, often negative, narrative on migration. Additional working group meetings with selected experts and members of the Network for Dialogue further fed into the development of this brief and its recommendations.

Who is the intended audience of this brief?

The brief is intended for policymakers at local, national and European levels across the continent who are seeking ways to foster social cohesion in local communities through dialogue.

The Network for Dialogue, a pan-European network of faith-based and secular organizations, religious leaders, and scholars working in the field of migration and religious studies, suggests that applying interreligious and intercultural dialogue in narrative building may contribute to the solutions to these challenges. The role of religion in the construction of these negative narratives has been the subject of much discussion, but the role of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in reshaping narratives has not been studied as thoroughly. Dialogue can be used to build trust, promote agency, raise understanding of the Other and ultimately create new, shared narratives that are jointly “constructed” by refugees, migrants and host communities.

Introduction

Increasingly, populist rhetoric and alarmist narratives such as the perceived threat of a cultural invasion, resource scarcity, and loss of control are influencing the migration agenda. Speculation and sensationalism often drive the public debate while the voices of refugees and migrants themselves are not heard or do not reach a wider public.

Refugees and so-called “illegal” migrants have occupied a large – and some would say disproportionate – share of the public imagination in recent years, both in public and political discourse. People, societies

and communities use narratives to describe complex, emotionally powerful events to explain, and sometimes to retroactively justify, their responses to those events.

Narratives provide structures and patterns that attempt to put human behaviour, historical events, or scientific processes into context. Separate events are combined and contextualised to reflect one cohesive story. They are an essential part of human interaction and create social realities that allow us to mutually negotiate sociocultural identities and contribute to the collective imagination. Narratives affect our perceptions, but they also impact political processes in the following ways:

1. Narratives, and the shared cultural, emotional and political language that they evoke, **are part of the building blocks of societies and communities** and form part of the processes through which they are constructed and strengthened.
2. Narratives “explain” how individuals and groups **understand the social and political reality in which they live.**
3. Changing narratives can **influence, construct and change political and social realities.**

Narratives around migration and refugees in Europe are constantly changing and are being influenced by a wide range of stakeholders and actors: media (mainstream and social media), politicians, researchers, and refugees and migrants themselves. Through a process of action, reaction, conversation and conflict, these stakeholders interact with themselves and each other, shaping and developing narratives in the process. Quite often narratives featuring refugees and migrants create a one-dimensional picture which is predominantly negative. Although many narratives around refugees and migrants exist, the following can be identified as dominant narratives:

- **The “crisis” of migration:** Narratives around migration have become synonymous with **“crisis.”** The so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 has dominated the popular imagination and public discourse. Despite the fact that, as has been argued repeatedly in the years

since, the crisis in 2015 came not from the refugees, but rather the lack of political and structural preparedness exhibited by most European countries in their response to the number of people attempting to reach Europe through irregular channels.

- **Polarisation:** In response to the “crisis,” some European countries made a notable effort to influence the narrative from one of “crisis” to one of **“welcome culture.”** These two contradictory and opposing narratives ultimately polarise European societies and negatively impact overall social cohesion. Polarising narratives persuade the public that a minority out-group poses a threat.
- **“Waves” of migrants and refugees:** Despite the dramatic reduction in the number of first-time asylum applications, the narrative of a **“wave”** or **“onslaught”** of unwanted refugees and migrants has taken hold in many European countries. The focus continues to be on the number of refugees entering Europe through “illegal” means while other aspects of the crisis are excluded, such as: people seeking refuge drowning mid-passage across the Mediterranean, the conditions at reception centres in Greece, Italy and Spain, and other border embarkation points.
- **Migrants and refugees as threats:** As a threat narrative takes hold, its impact on public opinion has started to become apparent in European public opinion data. Numerous studies have shown how news media (re)produce constructions of migrants and refugees as “enemies at the gate” or the “illegal migrant.”² Refugees and migrants are described as a burden to European societies, their statuses connected with illegality and terrorism. In a cultural or religious sense, migrants and refugees are described as those who intend to impose their values, beliefs, customs and rituals.

Religion as a narrative lens

In analysing the narratives around migration to Europe after 2015, the role of religion cannot be underestimated. Religion has become one of the key identity

² Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries Report prepared for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. (December 2015). pp. 8. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.pdf>



Successful inclusion of refugees and migrants relies on the propagation of balanced narratives which are developed and disseminated in a dialogical, multi-stakeholder manner, taking into account the need for self-representation by refugees and migrants at every stage of the process.”

markers for migrants and refugees to be categorised and “understood”, especially in the context of Islam. Since the majority of migrants and refugees, at least from 2015 to 2016, came from Muslim-majority countries, the prevailing narrative has been that most, if not all, of the migrants and refugees are Muslims. Eventually, such framing can lead to several effects:

- **Overgeneralising** or “lumping together” all Muslims, ignoring diversity in ritual, practice and faith within the religion
- Projecting the **conflation of violent extremism with Islam** narrative onto refugees and migrants, resulting in further stigmatisation based on religious identity
- Disregarding the fact that **Muslim and non-Muslim refugees** fled persecution in their own countries

False and discriminatory narratives, therefore, tend to have significant real-world impacts on migrants and refugees and their host communities. Addressing these and providing counter- or alternative narratives is a priority for policymakers at the local, national and EU levels, as well as for civil society organizations, media and religious communities. Successful inclusion of refugees and migrants relies on the propagation of balanced narratives which are developed and disseminated in a dialogical, multi-stakeholder manner, taking into account the need

for self-representation by refugees and migrants at every stage of the process.

Connecting to these narratives, discrimination, racism, violence and hate speech against ethnic and religious minorities have been on the rise in many European countries. For example, a 2016 Chatham House survey of 10,000 people in 10 European states found that 55% agreed with the statement that “all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped,” with particularly strong support for this sentiment in Austria, Poland, Hungary, France and Belgium.³ A recent EU survey (EU-MIDIS II) shows that 39% of Muslim respondents feel discriminated against in their everyday lives because of their faith, ethnic origin or skin colour. However, only 25% have reported cases of discrimination to the authorities, their employers or the trade unions that represent them.⁴ Countries around the world have grown less accepting of migrants, with several European countries appearing at the bottom of the list.⁵

At the same time, there has been an effort to suggest that the rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic attacks are linked to an increase in the numbers of “bad” refugees or Muslims in Europe. However, research from a number of European countries suggests that anti-Semitic rhetoric tends to originate from platforms which are also anti-refugee and Islamophobic, rather than from refugees themselves.⁶

³ Goodwin, M., Raines, T., & Cutts, D. (2017). What Do Europeans Think About Muslim Immigration?

Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/02/what-do-europeans-think-about-muslim-immigration>

⁴ FRA (2017). Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey: Muslims – Selected findings.

Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-eu-minorities-survey-muslims-selected-findings_en.pdf

⁵ Esipova, N., Ray, J., & Pugliese, A. (2020). World Grows Less Accepting of Migrants. Gallup Migrant Acceptance Index.

Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/320678/world-grows-less-accepting-migrants.aspx>

⁶ Druetz, E. & Mayer, N. (2018). Antisemitism and Immigration in Western Europe Today Is there a connection? The case of France.

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Challenging narratives about refugees and migrants

Changing the narrative depends on a diverse range of actors, motivations, power dynamics and perspectives. Policymakers, policy and institutional actors, citizens, religious and civil society networks, advocacy groups, citizen groups, academics, and refugees and migrants must collaborate to make narrative change possible and results visible. Although narratives on migration cannot be generalised, the following challenges are relevant to most European countries and communities:

- 1 There has been a consistent and, since 2015, dramatic rise in the **negative perception and populist right-wing rhetoric** about refugees and migrants which has significantly contributed to their marginalisation, the rise of hate speech and social divisions. The impact of this discrimination is felt to a great extent by women who wear a hijab or headscarf, who often bear a double burden of discrimination: both from their migration background and their visible religious affiliation.

Fear-driven discourse, hate speech and discriminatory practices as they relate to refugees are on the rise, in spite of existing statistical evidence that social inclusion efforts are improving in many countries across Europe. In particular, the actors propagating these narratives seek to convey a dominant message of economic burden and scarcity, implying that refugees and migrants are taking “more than their fair share” of resources. The opposite is statistically often the case, with refugees and migrants contributing more than they consume, but this fact is usually lost.

- 2 Narratives about migration tend to be characterised by **threat frames**, i.e., migration is discussed on the basis of how it may influence threats and fears of host populations (security, law and order, wealth and health being some of the threat frames at play).

The assertion that refugees and migrants pose a security threat, or a risk to law and order, is not based in fact. Due in part to the emotionally charged nature of the issues at hand, migration debates have become targets for disinformation actors who seek to spread deliberately misleading or biased information or propaganda with the objective of manipulating public opinion for political ends. In fact, the migration issue in Europe has been tied to the development of a movement of “transnational populism” (as a successor to the more traditional populist nationalism). It is characterised by similar anti-refugee, anti-minority, exclusionary arguments, trends and rhetoric, which transcend national borders, and can be manipulated for specific political objectives. This phenomenon is most apparent on social media, where sock puppet accounts and troll farms seek to sow divisive rhetoric relating to immigration and refugees. These actors often operate across national boundaries, employing similar tactics to manipulate public opinion with the sole aim of destabilising societies and communities.

- 3 **Religion and religious affiliation are often oversimplified and manipulated** into these disinformation narratives and often become signifiers of “outsider status” and flashpoints for exclusion and marginalisation.

The complex role of religion in predominant narratives on refugees and migrants in the past years has been instrumental in the narrative building of both those who sought to foster a more welcoming culture towards migrants and refugees, and those who took it upon themselves to “save” Europe from migrants and refugees. In the immediate aftermath of the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, churches and religious communities were at the forefront of the efforts to welcome refugees. Across the continent, churches and religious relief organizations opened their doors, both metaphorically and literally, to denote the values of hospitality, welcoming the Other, and providing support to the needy. At the same time, far-right movements in many European countries have claimed that the Christian identity of the continent must be “protected” from the wave of “Islamisation” that threatens to overwhelm it. This appeal to religious identity found many willing takers and strengthened the narrative that claims “all refugees and migrants are Muslims.”

- 4 **Refugees and migrants** tend to be the topic, but **are not given a voice of their own**. They are neither allowed to be the narrators or storytellers of their own stories and narratives, nor are they presented as individuals with their own agency, motivation and history.

According to the World Association for Christian Communication - Europe Region and the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe, only 21% of news items on asylum and migration reference a refugee or migrant. Women and young people tend to be even more underrepresented, with only 6% of all people mentioned in the articles being refugee women. Of the 21% of the news items that reference migrants or refugees, less than half (40%) of the articles quote them directly, and most references to refugees and migrants referred only to their experience of displacement.⁷ In the traditional media as well, editorial decisions tend to be made by senior executives within media organizations, where representations of refugees and migrants tend to be lacking. Journalists often lack access to refugees and migrants who can speak to their experience as individuals.



Making it work: participatory and inclusive narratives

While there has been widespread recognition of the role of narrative change in policymaking, not enough attention has been paid to this process, especially to the ways in which narratives can be reshaped using dialogical frameworks and methods. Much of the discussion around reframing narratives around migration revolves around finding more effective arguments and facts to counter the prevalent views on refugees and migrants within the conflict, threat or scarcity frames.

However, research indicates that more success may be achieved through an inclusive, dialogical process to influence the so-called “movable middle,” a term taken from marketing studies to reflect the vast majority of individuals who may be neutrally, somewhat positively or somewhat negatively disposed towards refugees or migration, but whose views on the issue are filtered through their view on how it impacts other threats or

⁷ Changing the Narrative: Media Representation of Refugees and Migrants in Europe. (November 2017).

issues in their lives. Dialogical approaches, such as those listed below, can influence narrative change within this group, also sometimes identified as the peaceful majority or the silent majority.

- 1 **Moving from a rights-based to a values-based approach:** Those seeking to counter false narratives often rely on facts to make their case. For example, the narrative that refugees and migrants lead to crime in societies is directly contradicted by statistics, which indicate that crime rates among refugee and migrant populations tend to be lower than the native population. The scarcity debate is countered by research that indicates that migrants and refugees tend to contribute more to societies than they consume. However, facts often fail to make the case alone. When narratives are reframed, appeals to shared values and disseminating values-based messages on migration tend to work better. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations are in a good position to further strengthen such a shift, combining religious and secular values to reach their communities. This includes a shift from a legalistic or rights-based approach to the protection of refugees and migrants, to an approach that is based on theological narratives, such as inherent human dignity and human fraternity, which may resonate with a far higher number of people. Faith-based groups and religious actors have played a critical role in upholding the dignity of each individual refugee or asylum seeker, enabling host communities to listen to them and recognise their value, and helping policymakers see refugees and migrants as more than a “problem to be solved.”
- 2 **Raising awareness through the use of inclusive language:** Narratives are created through shared language, thus the words we choose are narrative shapers. Developing joint reflective language for actors working in migration/inclusion and encouraging the use of inclusive and sympathetic language by policymakers, journalists and other narrative-builders is important. Countering existing narratives towards refugees and migrants should include emotional communication, to acknowledge that language communicates at both emotional and intellectual levels and is an evolving process. Skills in critical thinking and narrative analysis are an essential part of the citizens’ toolkit. Through the inclusion of religious actors from different backgrounds in such a process, commonalities can be emphasised and curiosity about the Other can be strengthened.
- 3 **Recognising that narrative building is a participatory process and encouraging self-representation by refugees and migrants:** Strengthening networks and contacts between different sectors of society such as journalists, policymakers, civil society, and refugees and migrants. Wherever possible, migrant and refugee stories should be told by refugees and migrants themselves, rather than being “spoken for” by “expert voices.” Including refugee- and migrant-led networks and organizations in consultative bodies and advisory groups enables the active participation of refugees and migrants in host societies. Providing space in media or through social media platforms can contribute to better visibility and the possibility to express challenges and insider perspectives. Listening to religious leaders in this process can further help to better understand the cultural and religious influences that are part of many refugees’ and migrants’ identities.
- 4 **Building trust with audiences through shared mediums, trusted interlocutors and shared spaces:** Hostile or distrustful audiences should be approached where they are, via channels which they trust, rely on, and identify with. We may broaden the narrative of refugees and migrants from statistics to individuals, from “them” to “us,” by “relocating” the refugee experience from reception camps, transit routes, capsized boats and refugee centres to include homes, workplaces, cultural institutions, public spaces, conferences, and policy discussions, and widening the spaces available for representation. Religious leaders, community organizers and other voices of credibility and influence can be powerful interlocutors for narrative change and reconsidering the prevailing language used in public discourse. Moving away from narratives that include crises and security-based language to those of opportunities and support, understanding and trust is key. Finally, avoiding an overemphasis on portraying refugees and migrants as victims and shifting the focus to empathy can allow for better understanding and an emphasis on the human being.



SUCCESS STORY

#BeTheKey campaign against Islamophobia

#BeTheKey was created with the goal of changing the narrative of Islamophobia and raising awareness among the local population. The campaign was launched by a group of students at the Blanquerna Observatory on Media, Religion and Culture (Ramon Llull University) in Barcelona, after the terrorist attack the city suffered in August 2017. The #BeTheKey campaign has its roots precisely in that moment because the city witnessed an increase in Islamophobic narratives. This affected refugees and migrants in general and Muslims in particular, who were facing the challenge of countering the Islamophobic narrative with narratives of peace.

#BeTheKey aims to eliminate the Islamophobic hate speech that exists online and offline by empowering citizens to fight against it. The initiative emphasises that everyone, especially youth, can be the key for change, from preventing prejudices to improving understanding and knowledge about various cultures. Digital technology, art, media and education are the tools of the different trainings, exhibitions and contests that the campaign has organised to achieve its goal.

SUCCESS STORY

Staze, a monthly newspaper in Croatia by refugees

Staze (*Paths* in English) is a monthly newspaper created by and for asylum seekers and refugees living in Croatia, initiated by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). The publication's first issue, published in Zagreb in December 2016, covers a large range of intercultural issues, such as the importance of learning the Croatian language or the situation of women in Iran. The newspaper includes articles in Arabic, Croatian, Farsi and English.

The goal of this initiative is to provide a platform for people who are seeking asylum or have received international protection in Croatia to express their opinions and share their integration experiences. Former director of JRS South-East Europe Croatia, Tvrtko Barun, explains that, through this project, JRS "wants to encourage the encounter between cultures: among refugees themselves, but also between them and citizens of the host country."

The Staze project is supported by several other international organizations, including Red Cross, Médecins du Monde and the International Organization for Migration.

Recommendations

There is no one way to change narratives on migration in Europe. The situation calls for structural, social and cultural change at several levels, and joint efforts and partnerships across sectors and institutions to transform the process of narrative building into a dialogical one. The Network for Dialogue recommends that local, national and European policymakers consider the following actions:



- 1 **Facilitate ease of access, through media fellowships and other methods of support, for refugees and migrants to create independent media platforms and advocacy associations** which are cooperatively owned and to create content and programmes which directly answer their specific needs. The representation of refugees and migrants in public and shared spaces, as well as their religious experiences and identities in media organizations, should be supported.



- 2 **Ensure active participation and mandatory representation** in an advisory capacity of refugees and migrants in city councils to have their voices heard at all stages: attending, informing and evaluating. Political representation is necessary to overcome the very low representation of refugees and migrants. Seats should be allotted based on population and demographics and should ensure gender, age and other diversity components as applicable.



- 3 **Make the effort to meet refugees and migrants in diverse and inclusive spaces. Strive to hold regular consultations** with a wide range of concerned stakeholders, including faith-based actors, to ensure a more people-centred integration process based on dialogue and a bottom-up approach that addresses the broader trends of marginalisation. For example, meetings and consultations should be organised in refugee- and migrant-owned venues as well as venues owned by governmental and other civic authorities.



- 4 **Support capacity-building and training modules for policy actors, grassroots organizations and media representatives on the use of interreligious and intercultural dialogue**, as well as inclusive language, by collaborating with dialogue experts, religious leaders and interfaith organizations.



- 5 **Include more refugee and migrant voices** in public events and conferences that deal with the social inclusion of European societies, so that they can actively share and have their perspectives heard. Important religious and cultural events should be included in the calendars of local authorities and should provide a platform for open and visible intercultural and interreligious encounters.



- 6 **Recognise and build on the role of religious institutions** in changing narratives about migration and refugees by providing safe spaces and protection for refugees and migrants, and by influencing public opinion on the welcoming and treatment of refugees and migrants.



- 7 **Disseminate the use of interreligious and intercultural dialogue** in narrative change throughout educational systems in Europe, via support and training to teachers (see Network for Dialogue Policy Brief #1).



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