



COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: A CASE FOR COMMUNICATING HONESTLY

ABSTRACT

Migration is commonly framed in policy and media debates as a crisis (or crises) to be solved. In recent years public concerns shaped by this crisis framing have increasingly driven European voters toward populist political parties who offer ostensibly "simple" answers such as numerical limitations on migration, migrant push-backs or mass deportations.

These policies are harder to implement than to promise, and as a result will tend to disappoint voters. They are unlikely to end public concerns about migration, nor resolve the migration challenges facing the states who put them into effect.

On the other side, advocates for more liberal policymaking commonly propose their own simplistic solutions such as the expansion of safe and legal routes to reduce dangerous or irregular migration flows, despite little evidence that these approaches would be effective.

These approaches on both sides fuel polarisation, understate the complexity of migration, overstate the likely efficacy of the policy tools available to manage migration and ignore potentially difficult consequences. This paper explores the implications of this for policy debates and considers how to reduce polarisation and work toward honest and realistic migration policymaking.



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Front page photo: Shutterstock.com/ ganjalex

Copy editing: Alex James

Layout and typesetting: Matt Swann

KBR deposit number: D/2023/15396./31

KEY POINTS:

1. Most migration into and around Europe is legal, mundane and uncontroversial, but media and policy debates about the issue tend to focus on irregular migration, asylum and other elements that are commonly seen as problematic: this feeds an unjustified perception that migration is in “perpetual crisis”.
2. Migration is not a single process and needs to be understood as a suite of phenomena ranging from the mobility of high-income elites and international mobility of labour all the way to asylum seeking and irregular migration.
3. Many proposed migration management policies are “symbolic” – designed to appeal to a political base rather than to achieve realistic outcomes.
4. Where policymakers make unrealistic promises about what they can achieve, they undermine trust in democratic institutions.
5. Appealing to public (and especially conservative) expectations of honesty and accountability in public servants may help to reframe migration debates away from the crisis frame and unrealistic restrictionist objectives. Moving away from liberal assertions that simplistic solutions (such as increased safe and legal routes) can quickly solve problems may also help reduce polarisation.

Introduction

In recent years studies have found that trust in policymakers, the media and core democratic institutions, is stagnating or falling throughout Europe and other high-income regions of the world.¹ This declining public trust has coincided with a rise in populist politics built on polarisation, slogans and gesture politics in which migration is often key. Soundbites such as “take back control”,² “stop the boats”³ or “protecting our European way of life”⁴ are wielded by politicians in migration debates, with the rhetoric of mainstream politicians and the far right starting to blur together with descriptions of “invasions”⁵ and “floods”⁶ of migrants.

This has had the effect of increasing the salience of migration with a media and policy framing that

*immigration is in perpetual crisis.*⁷ This increased salience benefits far-right parties,⁸ which in turn appear to pull mainstream policymakers closer to far-right positions on migration:

“When they [far-right parties] are provided with a favourable political opportunity structure, they will increase attention to their agenda and seem to move their competitors to do so, too.” (Gessler and Hunger 2022).⁹

But while parties across Europe are promising ever more radical solutions to the flows of asylum seekers – from Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s promise of a “naval blockade” (see Annex 2) to the UK’s Rwanda policy and Illegal Migration Act – few have succeeded in achieving any significant reductions in the flows. It’s a situation described as a “populist gap”.¹⁰

Responses from NGOs and progressive organisations have commonly attempted to challenge the restrictive policy proposals of right-wing parties with other – often similarly simplistic – counters. Dominant among these is the argument that by expanding “safe and legal” routes irregular migration and dangerous journeys by asylum seekers would be radically reduced. While there are many positive arguments for the expansion of safe and legal routes, there is little evidence that they would reduce irregular migration or dangerous journeys – and there are some arguments that such an approach may actually encourage more movement¹¹ (See Annex 2).

What this adds up to is that the disconnect between the pressure to “fix” the problem and the reality of achieving that goal is often very large. Radical positions from either the political left or right are often little more than symbolic gestures aimed more at consolidating a political base than at seriously affecting migration flows.¹²

For the rest of this paper we explore how it might be possible to move beyond the idea of migration as a “crisis” and to reduce demand for symbolic policies to “fix” it by contextualising migration to Europe more honestly and moving both conservative and liberal actors in the debate away from their polarised positions and closer to consensus.

What would an honest media and policy debate about migration in Europe look like?

The migration debate in Europe needs to move beyond the asylum debate. Migration has been a major component of European societies for millennia. International trade, marriage, colonisation, labour mobility, conquest and settlement, religious persecution and exploration have made the continent what is today, and it is inevitable that migration will shape the continent of tomorrow. The vast majority of migration

is both legal and uncontentious; our societies are ageing; our public services and industries are often understaffed; and we are competing in ever more global markets. Migration doesn't offer a panacea for these challenges, but it is an inevitable element in addressing them.

But in many European countries, journalists reporting on migration debates have focused primarily on refugees, asylum and irregular migration issues in recent years¹³ which misrepresents the actual structure of migration flows to the EU.

Data from Eurostat shows that in 2021, 2.93 million first residence permits were issued in the EU of which 45% were for work, 24% for family members, 12% for education and only 9% for asylum (see Annex 1).

Migration, then, needs to be understood not as a “problem to solve”, but rather a complex series of phenomena. Policymakers may not always be able to control these phenomena, but they can help to manage them effectively to help our societies cope and thrive. But any honest discussion of the issue needs to acknowledge that different types of migration have different impacts on host societies.

“ The vast majority of migration is both legal and uncontentious (...). But in many European countries, journalists reporting on migration debates have focused primarily on refugees, asylum and irregular migration issues in recent years which misrepresents the actual structure of migration flows to the EU. ”

Free movement of EU citizens between member states, for example, is one of the most common forms of migration affecting European countries. Research shows that immigration of EU citizens generally creates fiscal benefits¹⁴ for

the receiving states and in most cases, it is not particularly politically contentious (Brexit is an obvious exception). In many European countries there is significant demand for both highly skilled migrant workers and low–medium skilled workers – whether from within or outside the EU – to fill labour and skills gaps in areas such as haulage and logistics,¹⁵ agricultural work¹⁶ and in health and care sectors.¹⁷

Scholars have raised concerns about Europe's ageing population and low fertility rates, suggesting that EU welfare systems will struggle to cope without an input of young and healthy workers – some scholars have gone as far as to suggest that this threatens the EU's survival and the maintenance of living standards.¹⁸

On the other side of the coin, evidence suggests that – at least in the short to medium term – **the fiscal impact of refugees moving to European states can be negative, though there is also evidence that this can start to change after refugees have spent some time in the labour market.**¹⁹

Nevertheless, in most European countries, refugees and asylum seekers make up a very small share of the population. Even in countries where there have been large inflows of asylum seekers and refugees in recent years the per capita impact of this is small: in the 13 years from 2008–2021, for every 10,000 people in its population Sweden provided protection to an average of 22 people per year; Germany an average of 11 people per year; France three people; and the UK two people.²⁰

What should policymakers do about it? Responsibility lies on both sides.

By continuing to participate in debates that frame migration as a crisis, and that call for "solutions", policymakers tacitly endorse, validate and amplify this framing of the issue – even when they take an opposing position. This increases the salience

of migration which increases support for right-wing parties (see "Communicating on Migration: The impacts of communicating better vs. talking less"). Effectively this means that all participants in debates that frame the issue as a crisis are playing a game with dice that are loaded in favour of more restrictive migration policies. Those who want to avoid feeding this sort of policymaking, then, would do well to avoid fuelling these sorts of debates by ceasing (or dramatically reducing) participation, where possible.

“ Reframing the terms of migration debates away from the crisis frame requires a strategy that engages and convinces one key group in particular – people with “a conservative value orientation”. This group is critically highly motivated by concerns about migration. ”

Reframing the terms of migration debates away from the crisis frame requires a strategy that engages and convinces one key group in particular – people with “a conservative value orientation”. This group is currently highly motivated by concerns about migration.²¹

So, what does a revised migration narrative for Europe look like that can appeal to those with a conservative value orientation? In this context, we should be clear that conservative values should not be confused with far-right values. Conservative values, like liberal values, are not set in stone and will differ person to person. This paper cannot possibly consider all potential ways of appealing to conservative values, but as a thought exercise we consider appealing to one reasonable “conservative” expectation: that policymakers should uphold basic standards of honesty and respect for the rule of law. This approach is exemplified in protocols such as the “Nolan Principles”,²² set out by the Conservative government of the UK in the 1990s, which expects

public servants to demonstrate Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership.

In the context of migration debates, appealing to the conservative expectation of honesty from policymakers should cover truthfulness about what they do or do not have the power to achieve. This requirement for honesty, integrity and accountability would call into question unrealistic promises – such as Italian Prime Minister Meloni's promise to prevent migrants arriving in Italy through a "Naval blockade" or repeated promises by the British government to "stop the boats" through deterrent policies.

Similarly, it seems reasonable to expect that many holding conservative values will consider that European states should exemplify good practice in global leadership. This should include upholding international laws, opposing despotism, and tackling terrorism and criminality. This raises serious questions about whether European conservatives would tolerate some of the more extreme elements of recent efforts to stop Mediterranean crossing – such as EU funding of Libyan militia groups accused by the UN of war crimes including rape, murder and kidnapping.²³

But the requirement to exemplify good practice and shift to realistic and less polarising positions does not lie solely with those holding conservative values.

Honesty also means certain organisations not utilise the term "safe and legal routes" as a proxy for "open borders" and acknowledging that public support for asylum systems is dependent on these programmes appearing to be effective in removing people who are found not to have a valid claim for asylum, as well as providing sanctuary to those who do.²⁴ So campaigning for well-organised, well-funded, efficient and robust asylum systems that the public know

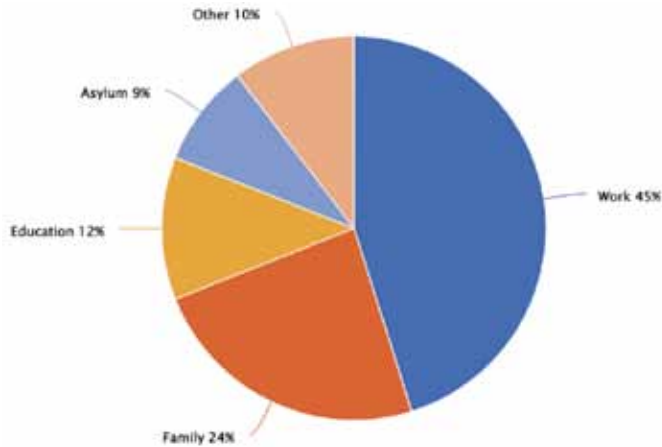
they can trust, and that swiftly process asylum claims and remove people who do not have a valid claim for asylum may be a powerful tool to achieve the progressive goal of increased public support for hosting refugees.

Conclusions

The migration debate in countries across Europe is beset by political dishonesty in the form of promises of simplistic and unrealistic solutions. Promising easy "wins" on either side of the debate is naïve, polarising and misleading, and tends to fail, with the effect of degrading public faith in our political systems. This paper argues that a more honest debate about migration requires participants on both sides to move away from unevidenced and symbolic policies. It argues that progressive actors stand to achieve more by appealing to the better nature of those with conservative values – such as expectations that policymakers should be held to account for the honesty and integrity of their promises – than by dismissing these communities' concerns. It also argues that where progressive actors are willing to reflect on their own approaches and assumptions, and find common ground with their political opponents, that they may be able to help steer the concept of migration to be considered less as a "crisis". This reframing of the debate away from a crisis narrative appears to be key to reducing the potential for the issue to be captured by the far-right in media and policy debates.

ANNEX 1 – Data

First residence permits issued in the EU in 2021²⁵



Source: Eurostat; "other" includes permits issued for the reason of residence only, permits issued to victims of trafficking of human beings and unaccompanied minors, as well as permits issued for all other reasons for which residence permits may be issued and which are not covered by the other categories.

ANNEX 2 – Promises and over-reach in migration policymaking

Promises by politicians to solve problems through simplistic policy tools often fail, and thus exacerbate lack of trust and concerns about migration systems in "crisis".

The UK:

- In the early 2000s, the UK's Labour Home Secretary David Blunkett tried to stop asylum seekers arriving in the UK by negotiating the closure of the Sangatte refugee camp outside Calais, which was close to the entrance to the Eurostar tunnel. The placement of the camp was framed in the British media as responsible for these people attempting the reach to the UK rather than remaining in France,²⁶ so the closure – and additional security around the tunnel entrance – was put forward as a straightforward means of deterring irregular arrivals.²⁷ However, the Sangatte camp was a symptom, rather than the cause, of asylum seekers hoping to reach the UK, so the closure did not stop irregular flows – it simply left asylum

seekers with nowhere to sleep – which led to many sleeping rough. The resulting mess became known as the Calais "Jungle". While the increased security may have prevented journeys on the Eurostar, asylum seekers simply used different routes, commonly hiding in the backs of lorries or cars. To counter this, and prevent irregular arrivals, another simple solution was proposed: a huge investment in increased security at the Port of Calais, making it increasingly difficult to enter the UK this way. But again, this led to a new innovation by those wishing to enter the UK in early 2018: the use of small boats. This mode of travel, which bypassed security checks on the French coast completely, proved highly effective and in 2022 more than 40,000 asylum seekers arrived in the UK by this mode of transport.

- In the early 2010s UK Conservative Opposition Leader David Cameron put forward a technocratic approach to migration management based on an arbitrary upper limit to net migration of 100,000. The policy was hugely popular, and promises to achieve it helped Cameron become Prime Minister in 2010. But in office, and despite significant new restrictions on migrants from outside the EU, it became clear almost immediately²⁸ that hitting the target was simply not achievable with the policy levers the government had. But this practical impossibility was ignored and promises to hit the target continued even as net migration rose toward 300,000. By the 2015 election, failures to hit the target were blamed on EU membership and perceptions that migration was "out of control" contributed significantly to the UK's decision to leave the EU the following year. Leaving the EU did not bring net migration down either – the most recent net migration figures for the UK place it at more than 600,000 per year.

Italy:

- Like the UK, Italy's new right-wing government led by Giorgia Meloni of Fratelli d'Italia promised simplistic solutions to stop all migrant boats – including a naval blockade "*blocco navale*" – irrespective of who was on them. Similarly to the UK, these promises have proved to be undeliverable: between 1 January and 13 July 2023 irregular

arrivals by sea in Italy are reported to have reached 73,414 compared to 31,333 in the same period the previous year.²⁹ Meloni's sweeping promises were unrealistic and appear likely to disappoint voters who swept her to power on the back of narratives of crisis and "invasions".³⁰

The EU:

- In late 2015, EU policymakers developed a programme of development aid based on the premise that this would reduce the "root causes" of migration in developing countries and help reduce flows into Europe. Research has consistently concluded that development aid does not reduce migration, and a recent study³¹ has found that policymakers knew this.

Globally:

- Similarly, calls for "safe and legal routes" for asylum seekers to reach their destinations as a means of preventing people from making unsafe journeys³² commonly presume that the people who would be eligible for these safe and legal routes are the same people who make the dangerous journeys. This will not always be the case, so arguing that this policy approach

will stop people making dangerous journeys is likely to be over-reach. This point is made eloquently by Jeff Crisp, the former head of policy development and evaluation for UNHCR: "Given the growing demand for migration opportunities in poorer regions of the world, coupled with the general reluctance of the industrialised states to facilitate the large-scale admission of people who want to move there, it is difficult to see how this square can be circled. The most likely scenario is that the supply of opportunities for regular migration will be unable to meet the demand, meaning that aspirant migrants who are not selected for regular entry will still have a strong incentive to move in an irregular manner. Indeed, it can also be argued that the establishment of safe and legal routes intensifies the social networks linking countries of origin and destination, enabling those migrants who move in a regular manner to inform the compatriots they have left behind of the opportunities that exist in the countries to which they have moved and to send remittances to people at home that can be used to pay the costs of a clandestine journey to the same location. In this respect, instead of reducing levels of irregular migration, the establishment of safe and legal routes might actually contribute to their growth".

Endnotes

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COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

ABSTRACT

Media policy and public debates about migration in European countries, and around the world, are often confused and complex, contributing to distorted or selective migration policies.

Where organizations are keen to shift the agenda, they communicate work to insert themselves and their own positive messages more firmly into public debates on migration. This paper discusses whether the proactive engagement to issue either live or shifting public debates that the communication strategy of attempting to lower the volume of the debate through best participation. We consider three options by examining the question through the lenses of framing and agenda setting theories.



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COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: A CASE FOR COMMUNICATING CLEARLY

ABSTRACT

The article seeks to discuss any clear line of thinking on how an understanding of this is particularly that of migration debates, where the terms we use can be influential. It argues – involving generational impressions of “who people are” that media entities increasingly lead to policy decisions that may be misguided, affect the rights and responsibilities of individuals as well as place them at risk.

This paper argues that terminology matters in the public sphere, and that accuracy and clarity are vitally important. It sets out suggested questions for policymakers and media dealing with the issue of migration.



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TOWARDS A HUMANE REFUGEE POLICY FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION



Coedited by
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POLICY BRIEF
December 2022

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WAR IN UKRAINE, REFUGEES, INCLUSION AND HUMAN MOBILITY

THE CHALLENGES FOR A PROGRESSIVE EUROPEAN UNION POLICY

ABSTRACT

After examining the main EU documents on the reception of Ukrainian refugees, this paper discusses the challenges of migration. It explores the impact of migration on the reception and inclusion of refugees and migrants. The main focus is on the impact of migration on the reception and inclusion of refugees and migrants. The main focus is on the impact of migration on the reception and inclusion of refugees and migrants.



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THE EU ASYLUM SYSTEM AND THE UKRAINIAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

ABSTRACT

This policy brief looks at the impact of the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis on the EU asylum system. It examines the challenges of migration and the impact of migration on the reception and inclusion of refugees and migrants. The main focus is on the impact of migration on the reception and inclusion of refugees and migrants.



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Disinformation on refugees from Ukraine: Boosting Europe's resilience after Russia's invasion

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