

Hind Sharif

Communicating effectively on migration:
recommendations and policy options



ReSOMA identifies the most pressing topics and needs relating to the migration, asylum and integration debate. Building on the identification of pivotal topics and controversies in the Discussion Policy Briefs, **ReSOMA Policy Option Briefs** put forward the policy alternatives that can fill the key gaps at EU/national level and map their support among stakeholders and researchers. In addition, they spell out which evidence is used by the advocates of these various solutions to argue for their effectiveness.

Under nine different topics, ReSOMA Policy Option Briefs capture available evidences and new analysis of the policy alternatives. They take stock of existing literature of policy solutions on asylum, migration and integration. This brief has been written under the supervision of Sergio Carrera (CEPS/EUI). Based on the Policy Option Briefs, other ReSOMA briefs outline scenarios for reform paths in the asylum, migration and integration areas in line with realities on the ground, the rule of law and human rights standards. This brief focuses on various options for strategic litigation and democratic accountability venues to stop and prevent policing of humanitarianism.

Download this document and learn more about the Research Social Platform on Migration and Asylum at: www.resoma.eu

LINGUISTIC VERSION

Original: EN

Manuscript completed in December 2019

Unless otherwise indicated, the opinions expressed in this document are attributable only to the author and not to any institution with which he is associated, nor do they necessarily represent the official position of the European Commission.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the publisher is given prior notice and sent a copy.

Contact: resoma@resoma.eu



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the grant agreement 770730

Policy Option Brief

Communicating effectively on migration: recommendations and policy options

By Hind Sharif, [Migration Policy Group](#)

1. INTRODUCTION

The debate on migration in Europe continues to polarise attitudes and impact mainstream political discourses. Amidst a changing communication landscape characterised by widespread disinformation, limited space for nuanced and balanced reporting and an increasingly important role for social media, it has become critical for EU policymakers, the media and civil society to understand how to effectively communicate on migration.

Progressive communicators have traditionally countered anti-migrant rhetoric with ad-hoc communication activities that tend to focus on myth-busting approaches and the dissemination of facts. However, relevant actors in the communication field urge to shift the way communications is typically handled. In emotionally charged discussions – such as the one on migration – practitioners and researchers argue that there is a need for strategic framing and narrative change to ‘win’ the debate.

The policy recommendations gathered in this ReSOMA Policy Option Brief represent proposals with the highest consensus among a variety of stakeholders – from non-governmental actors, communications consultants, to public opinion scholars, think-tanks and communication researchers. Since literature about how to communicate effectively on migration are recent and limited, the desk research encompassed broader proposals on communicating human rights effectively. To review the effectiveness and feasibility of the proposed recommendations, a ReSOMA Transnational Feedback Meeting was conducted with relevant communications experts, academics and practitioners.

As such, the brief presents the following recommendations with the highest agreement between stakeholders:

- Develop a communications strategy and leadership (Section 2.1);
- Choose credible messengers and embrace partnerships (Section 2.2);
- Apply value-based and emotive approaches (Section 2.3);
- Lead with hope-based solutions (Section 2.4);
- Be visual (Section 2.5);
- Target a movable audience (Section 2.6);
- Support fair reporting (Section 2.7).

2. POLICY OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Develop a communications strategy and leadership

Strategic communications has become an increasingly popular tool amongst policymakers, progressive funders and practitioners. There is broad consensus amongst relevant stakeholders that communications efforts are more effective when they are planned as part of a strategy (King Baudouin Foundation 2006; Sachrajda and Baumgartner 2019; ICMPD 2019; ICPA 2018).

A communications strategy provides a roadmap to achieve a particular objective through strategic approaches based on tangible and clear goals, segmented and targeted audiences, tailored methodologies and evaluation mechanisms. As such, for EU institutions and NGOs alike, strategic communications can encourage a proactive, rather than reactive, commitment to communications activities. However, in practice, stakeholders suggest that moving from ad-hoc responses to strategic communications demands a shift in the organisational or institutional culture to make communications a strategic priority. This requires strong internal buy-in, leadership, additional resources for in-house or external communications capacity and an overall commitment to invest the same level of attention as in established approaches such as movement building and campaigning (Sachrajda and Baumgartner 2019).

Researchers from MPI note that in national and local migration ministries, policymakers are often in charge of developing communication campaigns and facing public blowback, while communication experts merely focus on dissemination and editing (Ahad and Banulescu-Bogdan 2019). It is thus vital to underline that communication teams should be in charge of directing strategic decisions on communication-related goals and campaigns, instead of policymakers. To do so, researchers recommend boosting collaborations and mainstreaming knowledge between policymakers and communications teams (Ahad and Banulescu-Bogdan 2019).

2.2 Choose credible messengers and embrace partnerships

Even if a message is well-crafted, it is unlikely to have an impact if it is not channelled via a credible figure or voice. Thus, the messenger is as important as the message. Practitioners and researchers agree that communicating strategically means carefully selecting authentic, trusted and relatable messengers that can speak to the target audience in their own words and language (Ahad and Banulescu-Bogdan 2019; FRA 2018; Dempster and Hargrave 2017; Sachrajda and Baumgartner 2019).

With the rise in public distrust of institutions, experts and organisations, it is critical to seek out alternatives to NGO representatives and politicians as messengers (FRA 2018; Dempster and Hargrave 2017). Instead, ordinary citizens, media personalities, social media influencers and those who have welcomed refugees and migrants may be more effective, depending on

the target audience. To be able to reach these groups, participants from the ReSOMA Transnational Feedback meeting emphasised the importance of partnerships with civil society, local actors, businesses and third-parties. For instance, one participant reported that the 2019 European elections saw a first example of cooperation between an EU institution, the European Parliament, and NGOs in the campaign “This Time I’m Voting”. The collaboration enabled the European Parliament to reach hard-to-access groups, resulting in the highest turnout since 1994. This successful example should inspire similar models across the EU institutions.

Further, according to scholars and the UN Refugee Agency, the inclusion of diverse voices and “making room for most affected” in communications is a fundamental starting point to go beyond negative frames and harmful stereotypes (Chouliaraki et al., 2017; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017; Trilling 2019; The Arc 2019). For instance, including refugees and migrants as contributors in campaigns, radio programmes, commentators or speakers – rather than just as subjects – can facilitate nuanced communications which shows that immigration is a multifaceted phenomenon that can mean many things. Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) additionally propose gathering and disseminating national lists of organisations which the media can contact and work with to get information and facilitate the inclusion of migrants and refugees in media coverage.

2.3 Apply value-based and emotive approaches

With the current polarisation of societies and the emotionally charged discussions on migration, stakeholders encourage moving beyond traditional approaches such as ‘myth-busting’ and investing in value-based and emotive communications (ICPA 2018; Dennison and Dražanová 2018; Banulescu-Bogdan 2018; FRA 2018; Sachrajda and Baumgartner 2019; Dempster and Hargrave 2017). Research demonstrates that attitudes towards migrants and refugees are largely driven by values, where evidence plays a smaller role (FRA 2018; Dempster and Hargrave 2017). As such, information on migration is more likely to be absorbed and impactful when it is based on values, emotions or aligns with the target audience’s life experiences.

For instance, scholars have shown that ‘fairness’ as a value could be central to alter a negative narrative on migration. A study by Banksak et al. (2017) found that a majority of Europeans said they would support a proportional allocation of asylum-seekers equivalent to a country’s capacities. Due to the concept of fairness, the majority of participants’ view persisted even when they were told that proportional allocation would increase the number of asylum seekers in their country.

Recognising that values and emotions play a bigger role than facts in attitudes on migration does not change the vitality of evidence for nuanced policy debates. Rather, it is about understanding that evidence and facts alone may not be the most effective persuasion tools. It is for these reasons why EU institutions and NGOs are encouraged to use personal

stories, anecdotes and testimonies that bring evidence into life and trigger feelings of familiarity and warmth, instead of relying on statistics alone (FRA 2018). Communications experts additionally stress that identifying common values that unite rather than divide requires deep listening and understanding the attitudes, motivations and fears of the target audience. This allows those communicating on migration to develop their own original narratives which activate progressive attitudes and combine emotions and facts together.

2.4 Lead with hope-based solutions

One of the key insights of psychological and linguistic research conveys that communicating about problems is counter-productive since it prompts feelings of helplessness about the future. In fact, communications experts argue that talking about fear and threats can activate values that make people more conservative (Coombes 2019). In contrast, solution and hope-based messaging on what we want to see (rather than what we're against) can trigger positive emotions and win over the persuadable 'middle': the undecided people who are conflicted by different arguments in the debate. Accordingly, stakeholders recommend identifying pragmatic messages and stories that evoke feelings of hope, solidarity and empathy rather than fear and threat (FRA 2018; Sachrajda and Baumgartner 2019; Coombes 2019).

Focus groups conducted across Europe by civil society and trade union groups seeking to find new narratives found similar results. The recommendations suggest that civil society actors should balance 'urgency' with hope, and to use specific examples that represent more caring and equal European societies (Europe We Want 2019). Furthermore, the "We Are a Welcoming Europe" European Citizens' Initiative found that hopeful stories of citizens being welcoming and compassionate achieved the best reach and engagement on social media (MPG forthcoming).

Meanwhile, researchers call EU institutions, policymakers and newsrooms to go beyond simplistic geopolitical frames of threats and anxieties and handling of a 'crisis'. Instead, they are encouraged to move towards communicating policy solutions that assure citizens or expose successful integration stories, common challenges and mutual aspirations to facilitate the 'normalisation' of migrants in the public sphere (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017; EuroMed and ICMPD 2017).

2.5 Be visual

Visual content plays tremendous role in shaping public attitudes and building an understanding of the experiences and needs of migrants and refugees (UNHCR 2019; FRA 2018; OHCHR 2016; Sachrajda and Baumgartner 2019). This is particularly because visuals engage the audience's emotional part of the brain and make it more likely to remember what was said and influence future decisions. For instance, a study recommends increasing the visual representation of refugees (particularly on Instagram) since it demonstrated potential to grow support for humanitarian policy interventions (Guidry 2018). As such, there is consensus

that EU institutions and civil society groups should make visuals a central part of communications.

Nonetheless, stakeholders underline that the visuals used should reflect our values, instill hope and envision the world we want to see. In other words, as Coombe (2019) suggests, “when we talk about justice, we need to show an image of justice. An image of hands gripping bars is an image of injustice”. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights additionally suggest embracing visuals that include those who are impacted by migration (such as the families, classmates, friends and neighbours of migrants ...) (OHCHR 2016).

Stakeholders also recommend carefully selecting the visuals used since some can trigger harmful frames. For example, visuals attempting to demonstrate the difficulties faced by displaced people by portraying them as victims can reinforce perceptions of an ‘unrelatable other’ (Bansak et al., 2017) and reduce complex realities to one of vulnerability (Chouliaraki 2012). On the other hand, frames which present refugees and migrants as ‘ideal’ role models are equally problematic, as they can create “unrealistic expectations of what a ‘good immigrant’ is” and dehumanise displaced people (Dempster and Hargrave 2017; Shukla, 2016; Rodriguez 2016).

2.6 Target the middle

Practitioners and progressive funders stress that the priority of policymakers and communicators should be to devise messages that target the so-called ‘movable middle’ – the 50-60% or so of the population who are neither strongly pro nor anti immigrants (More in Common 2019; ICPA 2018; FRA 2018; King Baudouin Foundation 2006).

Research finds that while some parts of the population are predominantly either hostile or welcoming, most individuals are rather conflicted. The movable middle includes sub-groups based on how their values and identities relate to immigration. Recent segmentation research in Europe, such as from More in Common (2017, 2018 and 2019), provide an opportunity to identify which groups from the movable segments are best to target based on the values to engage them on. In this sense, practitioners strongly recommend listening and understanding who the movable middle are in each region before developing campaigns that target them.

How to connect with the middle that have mixed views? Communication experts suggest speaking to them in a way that activates their positive views or values while acknowledging their legitimate concerns (ICPA 2018). For instance, researchers highlight that arguments on the benefits of diversity or a very positive standpoint on migration are unlikely to succeed in persuading the movable middle (Dennison and Dražanová 2018). Instead, an effective strategy would recognise the challenges and anxieties related to migration, encourage an open discussion and offer solutions (Dempster and Hargrave 2017). On the local level, cities could achieve this through intercultural activities, citizen dialogues or neighbourhood-level actions (ICMPD 2019).

Some consider that NGOs which work on migrant and refugee issues may not be best placed to speak about some of the wider anxieties surrounding migration, but this could be resolved with partnerships and coalitions (Dempster and Hargrave 2017).

2.7 Encourage fair reporting

To support ethical and fair reporting on migration, researchers and participants from the ReSOMA Transnational Feedback meeting recommend supporting independent medias to cover migration issues by sponsoring targeted media literacy programmes which look at migration specifically (EuroMed and ICMPD 2017). Trainings could range from the correct use of terminology; international frameworks and legal rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; how to go beyond “crisis” coverage and move into integration; and targeting editors-in-chief and media owners to show how migration can be narrated in mainstream editorial work. Further, they can provide online information packages on backgrounds of refugee and migrant groups and guidelines on where to access reliable information (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017).

In addition, researchers propose that the European Commission could support these goals by giving grants to independent journalists or non-profit media outlets that target the movable middle, whilst policymakers can develop national laws to ensure editorial independence from owners of private media (Butler 2019). Furthermore, participants from the ReSOMA Transnational Feedback meeting suggested that EU institutions could assist in creating mechanisms for building alliances at the local level between NGOs and media professionals to encourage a debate framed around values and ethics.

3. CONCLUSION

Overall, researchers and practitioners recognise that the sector can no longer afford to communicate on an ad-hoc and spontaneous basis. There is almost complete unanimity on the need to move towards strategic communications, long-term goals, clear objectives and effective targeting. Stakeholders also stress that a key element of communicating strategically involves selecting authentic and credible voices to convey the message and building partnerships with civil society, cities, businesses and third-parties.

Referencing psychology and neuroscience literature, actors additionally highlight that communication on migration is more likely to be absorbed and impactful when it is based on values and emotions. Given the role of values in shaping attitudes towards migration, stakeholders recommend moving away from myth busting approaches and towards values that unite. EU institutions and civil society are also encouraged to lead with hopeful solutions that represent the world we want to see, rather than what we're against, to instil hope rather than fear and threat. Furthermore, practitioners propose making visuals central to communications due to their power in building understanding and evoking emotions. However, stakeholders recommend staying away from visuals that victimise migrants and refugees or present them as ideal role models. A growing number of progressive communications experts also encourage moving beyond the base of supporters that reflect one side of the political spectrum while proposing strategies that target the 'anxious movable middle'. Finally, considering the role of the media in shaping the debate, researchers reiterate the necessity of sponsoring targeted media literacy programmes to ensure fair and accurate reporting on migration.

Notwithstanding the usefulness of the recommendations that have been discussed in this paper in building a foundation for strategic communications, they arguably suffer from some research gaps. As shown in the ReSOMA Policy Discussion Brief, issues such as media ownership, salience, political preferences and education are key drivers to public attitudes on migration (Huddleston and Sharif 2019). This desk research found that policy proposals for these critical issues are not yet sufficiently addressed in literature. As such, further research can examine policy options to tackle other structural factors that have considerable impacts on shaping public opinion towards migration and immigrants.

Figure 1. sums the recommendations with the highest consensus among researchers and practitioners to effectively communicate on migration.

Figure 1. Main recommendations on effectively communicating on migration



References

- Aliyyah, A. and Banulescu-Bogdan, N. (2019), "Communicating Strategically About Immigrant Integration: Policymaker Perspectives", Migration Policy Institute Europe.
- Bansak, K. et al. (2017), "Europeans support a proportional allocation of asylum seekers," *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol. 1, No. 0133, pp. 2397-3374.
- Banulescu-Bogdan, N. (2018), "When Facts Don't Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration's Costs and Benefits". Migration Policy Institute.
- Bellardi, N. et al. (2018), "Spaces of Inclusion - An explorative study on needs of refugees and migrants in the domain of media communication and on responses by community media", Council of Europe.
- Blitz, B. (2017), "Another Story: What Public Opinion Data Tell Us About Refugee and Humanitarian Policy", *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 379-400.
- Butler, I. (2019), "Countering Populist Authoritarians: a guide for funders and civil society organisations", Civil Liberties Union for Europe.
- Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. (2016), "Improving the Responses to the Migration and Refugee Crisis in Europe".
- Chouliaraki, L. (2012) "Between pity and irony – paradigms of refugee representation in humanitarian discourse" In K. Moore, B. Gross, and T. Threadgold (eds.) *Migrations and the Media*. Peter Lang. Publishing Inc., New York, NY. pp. 13–32.
- Chouliaraki, L. et al. (2019), "The European "migration crisis" and the media: a cross-European press content analysis", Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, with Wouter Oomen, Utrecht University.
- Coombes, T. (2017), "Hope, nor fear: A new model for communicating human rights", *Medium*. Available at https://medium.com/@T_Coombes/hope-not-fear-a-new-model-for-communicating-human-rights-d98c0d6bf57b.
- Dempster, H. and Hargrave, K. (2017), "Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants." Working Paper 512, London, UK: Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
- Dennison, J. (2019), "Impact of Public Attitudes to migration on the political environment in the Euro-Mediterranean Region", Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM).
- Dennison, J. and Dražanová, L. (2018), "Public attitudes on migration: rethinking how people perceive migration. An analysis of existing opinion polls in the Euro-Mediterranean region", European University Institute.
- Dennison, J. and Geddes, A. (2019), "A Rising Tide? The Salience of Immigration and the Rise of Anti-Immigration Political Parties in Western Europe" *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 90, No. 1, pp. 107-116.
- EuroMed and International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). (2017), "How do media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration? Migration media coverage in 17 countries from 2015 to 2016".
- Europe We Want: How to talk about the societies we want in Europe (2019). Available at <http://www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/other/2019/how-to-talk-about-the-societies-we-want-in-europe.pdf>

- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). (2018), "10 Keys to effectively communicating human rights", available at <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/10-keys-effectively-communicating-human-rights>.
- Georgiou, M. and Zaborowski, R. (2017), "Media coverage of the "refugee crisis": A cross-European perspective", Council of Europe.
- Guidry, J.P.D et al. (2019), "Welcome or Not: Comparing #Refugee Posts on Instagram and Pinterest," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 62, No. 4, pp. 512-531.
- International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). (2019), "Communication on Migration: An Issue of Local Governance. The benefits and challenges of promoting a realistic narrative on migration and fostering intercultural dialogue in cities".
- International Centre for Policy Advocacy (ICPA). (2018), "Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit". Available at https://www.narrativechange.org/?fbclid=IwAR3DFJK-KUWVmKazZU2lvAHvpeM8Bf78-5S_KXf8ILi-RMj0QkSK4zW-c5U8.
- King Badouin Foundation. (2006), "How to communicate: strategic communication on migration and integration".
- More in Common. (2018), Reports on Germany, France, Greece and Italy. Available at <https://www.moreincommon.com/publications>.
- Ongenaert, D. and Joye, S. (2019), "Selling displaced people? A multi- method study of the public communication strategies of international refugee organisations", *Disasters*, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 478-508.
- ReSOMA (2019) Transnational feedback meeting on effectively communicating on migration. 4 November.
- Rodriguez, N.S. (2016), "Communicating global inequalities: how LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs use social media as public relations," *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 322–332.
- Sachrajda, A. and Baumgartner, L. (2019), "More than words: How communicating our shared values and forging mutual connections can bring hope for a new tomorrow," Thomas Paine Initiative.
- Shukla, N. (2016) *The Good Immigrant*. London: Unbound.
- The Arc. (2019), "How science can improve communications about refugees and humanitarian innovation", UNHCR Innovation Service & University of Florida Center for Public Interest Communication. Available at <https://medium.com/bending-the-arc>.
- The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2016), "Shaping the public narrative on migration". Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Migration/Pages/Shapingthepublicnarrativeonmigration.aspx>.

ReSOMA

RESEARCH SOCIAL
PLATFORM ON MIGRATION
AND ASYLUM

ReSOMA - Research Social Platform on Migration and Asylum

is a project funded under the Horizon 2020 Programme that aims at creating a platform for regular collaboration and exchange between Europe's well-developed networks of migration researchers, stakeholders and practitioners to foster evidence-based policymaking. Being a Coordination and Support Action (CSA), ReSOMA is meant to communicate directly with policy makers by providing ready-to-use evidence on policy, policy perceptions and policy options on migration, asylum and integration gathered among researchers, stakeholders and practitioners.

 www.resoma.eu

 [@ReSOMA_EU](https://twitter.com/ReSOMA_EU)

 resoma@resoma.eu

