



COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: A CASE FOR COMMUNICATING CLEARLY

ABSTRACT

The words we use to discuss any issue have a bearing on how we understand it, and this is particularly true of migration debates, where the terms we use can be infuriatingly vague – creating generalised impressions of “who people are” that can be entirely misleading and lead to policy decisions that may be misguided, affect the rights and opportunities of individuals or even place lives at risk.

This paper argues that terminology matters in the policymaking process, and that nuance and clarity are vitally important. It sets out suggested guidelines for policymakers and media dealing with the issue of migration.



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KEY POINTS:

1. Simplistic and vague terms like “migrant” or “illegal immigrant” are used without clarification in migration debates, often conveying incorrect or misleading information about individuals and communities. Clarity is critical in migration debates, as ignoring nuances places people at risk.
2. Deliberate use of highly emotive language and terminology by policymakers and media can encourage fear and tension – policymakers and journalists should always use neutral language to encourage moderate public responses.
3. Acknowledging the complexity of migration and not defining people by single characteristics such as “migrant” or “refugee” may help to better reflect reality.
4. We need to work toward descriptions of migrant populations in our states that acknowledge that the vast majority of migration is mundane, successful and uncontroversial. We need to do what we can to make migration boring again.

What’s the problem?

The very term “migrant” is, in itself, somewhat meaningless.¹ There is no academic consensus on a single definition of a “migrant”. Migrants might be defined by foreign birth, by foreign citizenship, or by their movement into a new country to stay temporarily (sometimes for as little as one month) or settle for the long-term.²

Technically the term describes a vast range of very different people: a millionaire football player relocating from Borussia Dortmund to Manchester City;³ a British academic returning home from a stint in a Washington DC think-tank to take up a role at Oxford University; a student from Nigeria joining a course at a university in Ghana; a Sudanese refugee fleeing persecution and seeking asylum in Belgium, and innumerable others.

However, while the term “migrant” is nominally neutral – and as applicable to millionaire footballers as to people travelling from Sudan

to seek asylum in Belgium – the reality is that in common use in most countries it is deeply loaded with assumptions of poverty and desperation (see Annex).

Therefore, using the term “migrant” in public discourse might evoke public perceptions that tend to be based around the assumption of imagined poor, desperate and potentially undesirable additions to the state. This is likely to contribute to migration rhetoric and policymaking that is more likely to be focused on efforts to deter people’s arrival, penalise their entry and prevent their access to public resources.

Take the UK, for example: throughout 2022 and 2023 news on migration issues has been dominated by coverage about asylum seekers entering the UK on small boats, the controversial scheme to send asylum seekers to Rwanda and the large number of people fleeing Ukraine. This framing of the issue appears to affect public perceptions: recent public opinion analysis⁴ shows

that when thinking of “immigrants”, UK citizens predominantly think of “people coming to seek refugee status” (65% of respondents); this is followed by “people coming for work” (38%), and people coming to study (19%).

The reality of the structure of migration flows to the UK is somewhat different: government data⁵ shows that the largest group of migrants immigrating to the UK in 2022 was students. Those migrating for work purposes was roughly similar to the number of asylum seekers and all people entering under humanitarian or temporary protection schemes including the large number of Ukrainians fleeing the war and British National (Overseas) status holders coming from Hong Kong.

Specificity is incredibly important in migration debates. Vague or incorrect terms can place people at specific risk and undermine their legal status and rights. The term “illegal immigrant” is such a term⁶. For most people it denotes something specific and clear: a person who does not have the legal right to be in a country and therefore can (and probably should) be removed – but this perception is dangerous and problematic.

The most obvious examples here are depictions of asylum seekers as “illegal entrants” or “illegal immigrants”. Asylum seekers invariably have to enter countries without legal permission, because few countries offer visas for the purpose of seeking asylum. On this basis, it is internationally agreed, under the Geneva Refugee Convention, that asylum seekers are indeed *legally* present and should not face punishment or sanctions⁷ for their entry.

So in the context of those who claim asylum, speaking of “illegal immigrants” is misleading even when their entry has involved breaking national laws. It undermines asylum seekers’ official and legal status and provides a pretext for migration policy and rhetoric to be focused

on efforts to deter their arrival and – contrary to the Geneva Convention – penalise them for their mode of entry.

Nuance and clarity are also vitally important when it comes to cross-country communication about migration. Since the term “migrant” is a catch-all term that can apply to very different groups of people, its understanding is significantly impacted by national norms and traditions, geographies, culture and history.

A nation such as the UK – an island nation in the Atlantic Ocean with a recent and complex history as a colonial power – is likely to conceptualise and describe migration in different ways to Hungary, another former imperial power, but this time a landlocked country with a recent history of Soviet political domination, and a self-perception tied to its historical role as a buffer state between Christian Europe and the Islamic Ottoman empire.

As a case in point in the UK “commonwealth citizens” – a term largely meaningless to most EU residents – are a specific category used in government statistics. These particular migrants, while generally still subject to immigration control, have certain rights not granted to other non-citizens – including the right to vote in national elections.⁸

In Hungary, meanwhile, the very term migrant itself has become so pejorative that one journalist observed: “We prefer to use the term ‘refugee’, as the word ‘migrant’ might sound correct in English, but in Hungarian a ‘migrant’ is an enemy who will kill us. Therefore, we call them ‘refugees’. [...] We could use the term ‘migrant’, but it is a delicate one as it is widely used by pro-government propaganda”.⁹

Using specific terminology and definitions also has a crucial impact on data collection and representation of different populations within our states.¹⁰

For example, the choice to define a migrant based on country of birth compared to nationality can significantly affect the perceived size of the population or its economic impact.¹¹ Using “country of birth” as a metric will most likely result in a considerably higher number of “migrants” than using the definition of “country of citizenship” – as this will change (reduce) when foreign-born people naturalise as citizens of their country of residence.

What should policymakers do about it?

The language and terminology used in migration debates has emerged over long periods and it won't magically improve. So, if organisations want to see change, they need to define what this change should look like, and develop coherent strategies to bring it about. Any changes cannot be imposed, but will inevitably require NGOs, politicians, journalists, academics and others to work collaboratively. This means trying to agree on protocols and practices in communicating migration.

Several glossaries and codes of practice exist, including, for example, guidelines for migration reporting developed by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)¹² on behalf of the German Federal Foreign Office and a training programme developed by the University of Oxford's Migration Observatory for the UK's National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ)¹³ If European organisations working on migration can use materials such as these to agree on basic norms and work together systematically (and patiently) for a sustained period to encourage the adoption of a set of moderate principles, it is not unrealistic to expect these guidelines to become more established – just as sustained use of negative terms has shaped migration debates in recent years.¹⁴

A basic starting point for such principles is to try to move away from – or to challenge or counter – simplistic, vague and catch-all terms. As

discussed above, terminology such as “migrant” can be imprecise, often to the point of meaninglessness. This vagueness and imprecision creates space for people to fill in the gaps with their imagined versions of what these terms mean or for populist actors to exploit the lack of clarity, painting pictures of undesirable and potentially problematic individuals. Therefore, clarity and nuance are key to closing this gap and preserving the intended meaning of what we want to communicate.

A second phase requires work to ensure that policy and media debates acknowledge specific legal meanings: where debates are dealing with people who are legally refugees or asylum seekers they should not be described as “irregulars”, “illegal” or be represented by other terms that undermine their legal status.

A third phase involves working toward normalising the use of more neutral language. Since the meaning of words might differ based on the specific country context, this sort of process has to be undertaken at national levels.

Any process of this nature has to be a long-term, strategic undertaking. This sort of activity cannot be ad-hoc and needs to be based on analysing and measuring media content, understanding how language is used and developing targets for change and proactive measures to try to influence that change within national policy debates. This also needs to incorporate acknowledgement of the changing nature of the language and the meaning of words and thus a need to be responsive and flexible to accommodate changes in the loading of terms.

Efforts of this nature should acknowledge the complexity of migration flows (“mixed migration”)¹⁵ and moving away from defining people based on single characteristics such as “migrant worker” “refugee” or “family migrant”. Similarly,

where possible – while the topic under discussion may require such characteristics to be discussed – we should not dehumanise people by dealing with them in purely statistical terms.

The fact that there are individuals behind migration data should always be pushed to the foreground with case studies or examples, where possible. Acknowledging that a refugee has a name and, for example, is “a skilled metalworker from Sudan whose life was at risk after the civil war broke out” redefines that person in three dimensions: a worker, a refugee and a human with a history. Of course not all media or policy content can tell individual stories, but endeavouring to find opportunities to humanise statistics is vital in migration debates.

Finally, we need to work toward descriptions of migrant populations in our states that acknowledge that the vast majority of migration is mundane, successful and uncontroversial. We need to do what we can to make migration boring again.

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ANNEX – The one-sided framing of migration as the mobility of the poor

One of the most famous photographs of all time is Dorothea Lange's portrait of a "Migrant Mother":



Lange, D. (1936). Migrant mother, Nipomo, California. MoMA, New York
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50989>

The subject of this arresting image is a woman born and raised in the USA who had migrated *internally* (from Oklahoma to California) to find work in the Great Depression.

While this description may not correspond with most modern use of the term migrant – which tends to focus on internationally mobile people, it does share certain characteristics with much of the way the term "migrant" tends to be used in modern policy and media debates: the subject is anonymous and her history and origins vague; she is depicted as poor and potentially troubled; she appears to have economic needs, shows no immediate evidence of education or skills, and appears to exist at the fringe of society.

A BBC disclaimer on its use of the term migrant paints a similar picture: "A note on terminology: The BBC uses the term migrant to refer to all people on the move who have yet to complete the legal process of claiming asylum. This group includes people fleeing war-torn countries, who are likely to be granted refugee status, as well as people who are seeking jobs and better lives, who governments are likely to rule are economic migrants."¹⁶

Endnotes

- 1 See glossary section – Reporting Migration, ICMPD (2019) <https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/50559/file/Handbook0on0Reporting0Migration0EN.pdf>
- 2 Anderson, B. and Blinder, S. (2011). "Who counts as a migrant? Definitions and their consequences." *Briefing, The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford*.
- 3 See Manchester City profile of Erling Haaland <https://www.mancity.com/players/erling-haaland>
- 4 <https://kantar.turtl.co/story/public-attitudes-to-immigration/page/3/9> Note - respondents could select more than one option
- 5 UK Office for National Statistics – Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December (2022) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2022>
- 6 Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) – Windrush Scandal explained <https://www.jcwi.org.uk/windrush-scandal-explained> (retrieved 18 August 2023)
- 7 UNHCR the 1951 Refugee Convention – <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention#:~:text=The%20right%20not%20to%20be,17%20to%2019%20and%2024>
- 8 Electoral Commission UK – Can a Commonwealth citizen register to vote? <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/running-electoral-registration-wales/eligibility-register-vote/what-are-nationality-requirements-register-vote/can-a-commonwealth-citizen-register-vote> (retrieved 18 August 2023)
- 9 Bajomi-Lázár, P. (2021). "Migration reporting in Hungary." *The Routledge Companion to Journalism Ethics*: 269.
- 10 Anderson, B. and Blinder, S. (2011).
- 11 Nyman, P. and Ahlskog, R. (2018). "Fiscal effects of intra-EEA migration." *Reminder Project*.
- 12 Reporting Migration, ICMPD (2019)
- 13 NCTJ (2023) Reporting on Migration <https://www.nctj.com/cpd-courses/reporting-on-migration/> (retrieved 18 August 2023)
- 14 Doherty, B. (2015). "Why words matter when reporting migrants' stories." *Media Asia* 42, no. 3-4: 136-143.
- 15 The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford (2011) Policy Primer – Mixed Migration: Policy Challenges. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/primers/mixed-migration-policy-challenges/> (retrieved 18 August 2023)
- 16 BBC News Who Rescues Migrants in the Channel, 9 September 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46758600>

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ABSTRACT

Media policy and public debates about migration in European countries, and around the world, are often confused and highly polarizing. This paper discusses whether the proactive engagement of issue owners in shaping public debates that the media cover is a strategy of addressing to lower the chance 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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POLICY BRIEF
October 2023

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: A CASE FOR COMMUNICATING HONESTLY

ABSTRACT

Migration is commonly framed in polar and highly emotive as a crisis (or crisis) to be solved. In recent years public opinion seems shaped by this crisis framing from conservatively driven European union based political parties, which offer commonly "tough" answers such as numerical limitations on migration, migrant push backs or mass deportations.



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TOWARDS A HUMANE REFUGEE POLICY FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION



Caroline Schwan
with the collaboration of Helma Zeiger

POLICY BRIEF
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WAR IN UKRAINE, REFUGEES, INCLUSION AND HUMAN MOBILITY

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POLICY BRIEF
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THE EU ASYLUM SYSTEM AND THE UKRAINIAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

ABSTRACT

This policy brief looks at the broader context of an humanitarian crisis in Europe, the impact of the long-term asylum policies, after the war in Ukraine.



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