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# COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

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## ABSTRACT

Media, policy and public debates about migration in European countries, and around the world, are often polarised and negative, contributing to demand for restrictive migration policies.

Where organisations are keen to shift this paradigm they commonly work to insert themselves and their more positive messages more firmly into public debates on migration. This paper discusses whether this proactive engagement is more effective in shifting public debates than the counter-intuitive strategy of attempting to lower the volume of the debate through less participation. We consider these options by examining the question through the lenses of *framing* and *agenda-setting* theories.



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## KEY POINTS:

1. Where migration is given significant prominence in the media this is likely to increase the salience of the issue among the public (agenda setting).
2. Migration content in media tends not to involve a balanced discussion of opposing perspectives in forms designed to help audiences to critically evaluate options, but it rather involves the repeated delivery of key concepts (frames) by opposing voices.
3. Increased salience of migration issues therefore tends to benefit actors that support more restrictive migration policies.
4. Reduced salience of migration is more likely to reduce public concerns about the issue than a different framing of the issue by pro-migration actors.

## Introduction

Migration policies in any modern state will inevitably need to find a balance between security and openness for both economic and humanitarian reasons. However, in many European countries there are concerns that representations of migration and migrants in media and policy debates have become increasingly negative,<sup>1</sup> and often misleading. Some have argued that this has played a role<sup>2</sup> in shifting policy away from a focus on humanitarian concerns or the potential demographic and economic needs of European countries, and toward policies more focused on immigration enforcement, removals and deterrence.

Many organisations in civil society and politics across Europe are attempting to shift migration discourse and media coverage toward more positive frames and toward accuracy and nuance. Often these organisations will have developed theories of change<sup>3</sup> that prioritise communications strategies that push forward positive messaging about migrants and migration.

This is predicated on the assumption these positive messages will reduce the dominance of

negative stories about migration in media and therefore help achieve certain goals – for example to help generate support for policies that champion the social and economic benefits of international migration, and protection for vulnerable people who migrate.

But is this assumption correct?

This paper examines the issue through the lenses of **framing**<sup>4</sup> and **agenda-setting**<sup>5</sup> theories.

These media effects theories consider how news, political speech and other forms of public communication affect public attitudes and policy outcomes in different ways:

- Framing theory contends that the specific ways issues are discussed in media and policy debates – in particular the choices of what **content** is and is not included in stories – affects the way they are understood and responded to by the public.
- Agenda-setting theory contends that public responses to issues are conditioned by the salience of those issues, which is determined, to a large extent, by how **prominent** those issues are made in the public debate.

In short, both approaches address the role of media in shaping our responses to an issue. Agenda-setting analysis looks at **what** issues we are being told to think are important, while framing analysis looks at **how** we are told to interpret them.

Strategies to effect change, then, will differ if they target agenda-setting or framing practices.

If the starting point is an assumption that the negative *framing* of migration issues by anti-immigration actors is the key challenge that leads to negative public attitudes, then this would indicate that efforts to deliver a positive reframing would offer the best option to shift debates and public concerns.

But if the issue is not the specific details of how migration stories are told, but rather the overall public perception that “migration is a major problem” that stimulates negative responses, then a different (and more challenging) strategic approach may be necessary to alleviate public concerns. If this second reading is correct, it would suggest that “salience” – the sense that a particular issue is of particular significance – is more important in shaping public concerns than the way in which a story is framed. If this is the case then, rather than trying to shout louder than their opponents to project their preferred frame further, a primary approach might be to try to reduce the strength of *agenda-setting* processes by turning the volume down, not up.

### **Changing minds, or just shouting at each other?**

Making a decision about whether or not to engage in an argument or debate is an important strategic call in any situation. It is critical to consider the context in which actors will be participating. This may be by, for example, ensuring one has thought about what sort of

frames are commonly used (and by whom) and who sets public agendas (this will generally be a range of actors, not just one), how, and with what sort of purpose(s) in mind. It is also worth considering whether what one has to say is likely to be heard by people who will be open to considering their perspective.

Evidence suggests that in policy and media debates on migration, positions are often entrenched.<sup>6</sup> This means participants in these debates – from the speakers or politicians espousing a position, to the journalists covering the stories, to the audiences consuming the content – have often already made up their minds. In these situations, debate ceases to be debate and the benefit of participation is questionable: “The result of strategic communications and journalistic demands is an ‘immigration debate’ that is less a back-and-forth negotiation of competing ideas than a series of stand-alone statements repeated by fundamentally opposed actors. [...] immigration news [...] seemed to lack a sustained dialogue between opposing advocate viewpoints – especially those of marginal actors – offering a shouting match rather than a developing debate”.<sup>7</sup>

Where people have already made up their minds, they may be expected to engage in processes of motivated reasoning,<sup>8</sup> where they selectively choose to believe the data, concepts and frames that support their preexisting positions and ignore those that challenge them.

Media organisations can benefit from exploiting our tendencies toward motivated reasoning by bringing their audiences together as “communities of value”<sup>9</sup> held together by common ties of political identity and shared views.

“*Salience is more important in shaping public concerns than the way in which a story is framed.*”

Migration issues are commonly part of the glue that binds together these communities of value, with media organisations reinforcing these bonds with pieces designed to refine the soundness of their own audience's perspective and sometimes to stoke outrage at opposing positions (on both sides of the debate). It's a sound marketing approach: if you want people to choose your media product, you tell them that they're right, and that those who disagree with them are wrong, and then keep the audience coming back with more of the same. While this is most cartoonishly illustrated in the pugilistic partisanism of US cable news channels such as Fox News and MSNBC, it is certainly evident in European media too.

### **Is the problem about framing or agenda setting?**

Telling stories in ways that suggest that one side of an argument is right and that the other side is wrong is certainly an issue of framing.

Frames are inevitable components of news. Reporters have limited space or time to produce stories, and pragmatic choices have to be made about what to include and what to leave out, which is a process of "framing" the story.<sup>10</sup> So, whenever we read a news article, watch a video or otherwise encounter a story discussing migration we encounter a frame. Research has indicated that the framing of migration tends to be negative across countries.<sup>11</sup>

It is not only migrants and migration issues that are framed: so are campaigners. By presenting a cartoonish image of pro-migrant activists as hard-left, unpatriotic or "woke" campaigners that support more restrictive stances can prime audiences to conflate a suite of common conservative grievances with migration issues, shoring-up support among their own "community of values". In liberal debates, depictions

of those concerned about migration as hard-right or racist can be used in the same way. The outcome is both groups sliding into positions of "fundamentally opposed actors" as described by Benson and Wood above.

But the regular presence of any frames about migration within the media and policy debate is dependent on the issue being viewed by journalists and politicians as significant enough to want to discuss. This suggests that any frames (positive, negative or neutral) about migration will only be present if migration is a key issue on the public and political agenda.

So, in essence, both framing and agenda setting matter in migration debates, but the issue being high on the public agenda is what defines its salience, and it is this, rather than specific frames, that is the biggest indicator of public concern.

Some far-right groups are fully aware of the value of agenda setting in achieving their goals, and that even negative coverage of their activities serves their purposes. The Identitarian movement's 2017 analysis of their "Defend Europe" campaign to stop search and rescue in the Mediterranean makes this explicit: "Defend Europe has received an enormous amount of media coverage. While almost all were hostile, and several were lying, these articles and TV reports brought our action to the minds of millions of people. It is this media impact which allowed our political success. Only two months ago, many NGO ships were cruising near Libyan coasts like taxis waiting for their customers. Right now, the 20th of August, there's only one left".<sup>12</sup>

Agenda setting, then, presents us with a very different way of conceptualising what an appropriate response by progressive organisations might be: it suggests that vocal opposition can be counter-productive, drawing attention to

(and potentially support for) the positions being opposed. This suggests that better outcomes may come from reducing overall coverage rather than getting good coverage.

“ Migration issues are commonly part of the glue that binds together these communities of value, with media organisations reinforcing these bonds. ”

### Conclusion – the benefits of lowering the volume

It is well documented that the issue of migration is commonly of particular concern to older and more conservative sections of the public around Europe,<sup>13</sup> and that where the salience of the issue is high, parties of the right with a restrictive agenda tend to do well at the ballot box. As such, there is a clear electoral benefit for political and media actors of the restrictionist-right to use what power they have to set a public agenda in which the issue of migration is a priority.

This suggests, then, that if progressive organisations participate in stories that push migration issues up the public agenda – even with a positive framing – it may well be serving the purpose of their political opponents by maintaining or increasing the salience of migration. Likewise, providing compelling testimony that provides a human angle or counter arguments in a story that might otherwise have been a one-dimensional negative migration story may make it more interesting. This could potentially make the article a more rounded and valuable piece for a media organisation, pushing it further toward the front page or higher up the running order, and leading a wider audience to read the negative elements as well as the compelling testimony.

Since European political and media environments are not neutral spaces or level playing fields, but commonly predisposed toward negativity in the reporting of migration, communication efforts about the issue – even when positively framed – run the risk of amplifying negative frames. This would serve to reinforce agenda-setting processes that place migration in the spotlight, benefiting political and media actors who take restrictive stances.

This suggests that actors' efforts to tackle negative framing by “busting myths” or winning arguments on migration issues in some media and public spaces should be undertaken carefully, and that lowering the volume by not participating in every debate may sometimes offer a more valuable outcome than generating more migration coverage – even when the individual piece is somewhat positive.

### What can be done?

This paper has argued that efforts to add nuance and counter perspectives into polarised migration debates may well score a series of counterintuitive own-goals by serving to lend a façade of balance and thus increased legitimacy to problematic news reporting, helping to increase the volume and salience of the migration debate, which tends to privilege restrictive voices; and to provide a defined enemy – in the form of a “fundamentally opposed actor” – to instill or reinforce a sense of community among anti-migration actors.

This leaves those whose role it is to embed complexity and nuance into these migration debates at something of an impasse, where efforts to create impactful and interesting content about migration can serve to benefit opponents. So, what does a strategic solution to this look like?

While communicating about migration might backfire, this, of course, does not mean never stepping into a discussion to address problematic content or frames, but it does mean learning when to speak up and when to maintain a dignified silence.

A guiding protocol in responding to problematic content should divide problematic responses into three groups:

1. **The things you want to say.** Communications activities are necessary. Organisations need to make their voices heard in the debate and attempt to influence the public with clear points and well-reasoned positions. It is possible that organisations may eventually find new ways of discussing migration that may succeed in moving it away from the “crisis” framing that tends to benefit restrictionist organisations (See Annex, and “Communicating on Migration: The impact of honest talking”). But in the meanwhile,

this proactive approach risks the unintended consequence of increasing the salience of migration and reinforcing the crisis framing. Sometimes this is an inevitable trade-off that organisations have to accept to ensure their point is made. But interventions require careful thought, and sometimes (perhaps often) a more strategically sound option might be to not speak, and to try lower the volume instead.

2. **The things you have to say.** Responses here are so important that for actors working on migration issues failing to respond is a dereliction of duty – such as in cases where life, liberty, livelihood or safety is threatened.
3. **The things others want you to say.** These are responses to deliberate manipulation by political or ideological opponents to bait or manoeuvre progressive voices into making statements that will reinforce preconceived, polarising and sometimes cartoonish notions about the respondent's views. They should be avoided.

## ANNEX – what does the evidence show us?

Analysis supports the claim that media representations of migration and migrants themselves commonly tend toward the negative. This can heighten public concerns and feed policy narratives that demand hostile and restrictive policies. Analysis from the UK in the first decade of this century will seem all too familiar to many around Europe: *“The media contributes to a perception that immigration is in perpetual crisis, which influences policy monitoring and reform.”*<sup>14</sup>

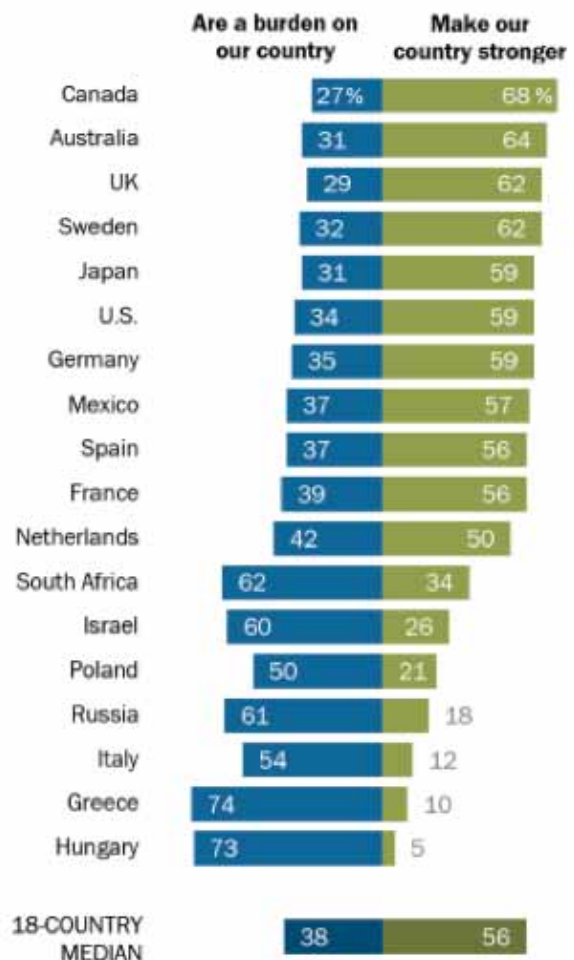
This tendency toward negative frames and depictions of crisis in reporting about migration is not limited to right-leaning discourse or media, but as outlined above, will tend to benefit those actors most. In right-leaning media these types of narrative can continue to have prominence even when they cease to benefit (or may even harm) the parties they’re aligned with, and this can play a role in pushing them to more extreme positions.

Evidence from the UK<sup>15</sup> shows this media autonomy in action: in 2010 Britain's Conservative Party pushed migration to the top of the public and media agenda, and achieved power on a platform that argued that levels of net migration should be restricted to under 100,000 – they were heavily backed by the UK's right-leaning media. But despite the introduction of an array of aggressive measures to restrict net migration and hostile policies targeting irregular migrants in the UK, the policies did not achieve the target. Right-leaning media pushed for the target to be met even at the expense of exposing the Conservative Party's failure, while left-leaning media used the failure as a stick to beat their political opponents. This fed an increase in coverage focusing on the scale of migration, and heightened concerns about the free movement of low-income EU citizens – eventually crystallising in the UK's vote to leave the EU.

But the story doesn't end there. The UK's departure from the EU led to a sharp fall in media and policy discussion of migration and a sharp fall in the salience of migration, in which a general softening of *public attitudes* began to emerge.<sup>16</sup> By 2019 research by Pew found the UK to have the most positive attitudes to the positive impacts of migrants among European nations:

### Half or more in many destination countries view immigrants as a strength

*Immigrants today make our country stronger because of their work and talents OR Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs and social benefits*



Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey, Q54a. "Around the World, More Say Immigrants Are a Strength Than a Burden"

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This positivity seemed to emerge from a general sense that migration was no longer an issue of crisis, but a relatively mundane process where useful people were attracted to move to a new country, and in doing so brought economic and social value. In the year leading up to this study the Guardian had exposed a series of injustices visited on long-term British residents by hostile policies designed to deter irregular migration. The outcome of this was that even the Daily Mail – a notable cheerleader for aggressive anti-migration policies – depicted the so-called Windrush Scandal on its front page as a “Fiasco that Shames Britain”.<sup>17</sup> Thus – a reduction in the salience of migration provided scope for political tribes to relax their dogmas and facilitated a reframing of the debate.

Conversely, increased issue salience, this suggests, facilitates stronger agenda-setting opportunities.<sup>18</sup> Recent analysis looking at the electoral success of far-right parties in the EU highlighted that “...changes in issue salience are more important for far-right parties’ electoral success than changing their issue positions.”<sup>19</sup>

This suggests AFD or Rassemblement National stand to benefit more from increased prominence of their key issues (of which migration is consistently a keystone) than from changing their focus to current leading policy topics. This analysis, it should be acknowledged, found greater benefits for the far-right in an increase in the salience of EU integration than of immigration – explained by the fact that those highly motivated by immigration were already the most likely to vote for far-right parties, while euroscepticism was more fertile ground to recruit new supporters.

Nevertheless, the study found that increased salience of immigration also provided these parties with an electoral boost, and in a world where the EU is pushing forward policies such as the New Pact on Asylum and Migration, it may be challenging to unpick where concerns end among parties such as AFD about the general issue of EU integration, and where concerns about migration issues begin – such as participation in the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism.

## Endnotes

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- 17 Daily Mail 17 April 2018 Fiasco that Shames Britain <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5622997/Amber-Rudd-faces-call-quit.html>.
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## COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: A CASE FOR COMMUNICATING HONESTLY

**ABSTRACT**

Migration is commonly framed in policy and media debates as a choice for states to be taken to recent years having been increasingly driven. European states toward positive political positions who offer accessible "simple" answers such as "nationalist" stances on migration, suggest public opinion is more uncertain.

These policies are harder to implement than to control, 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 set these policies.

In the other pole, advocates for more liberal policymaking commonly propose three sets of pragmatic solutions such as the expansion of safe and legal routes to reduce dangerous or irregular migration flows, sought little evidence that these approaches would be effective.

These approaches on both sides that polarization, undermine the complexity of migration, increase 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 reform policymaking and work toward honest and realistic migration policymaking.

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POLICY BRIEF  
October 2023

PEPS  
FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

## 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 influential. It helps – leading to general impressions of "who people are" that underpin attitudes and lead to policy decisions that may be misguided, affect the rights and responsibilities of individuals in some places like at risk.

This paper argues that terminology matters in the policymaking process, 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

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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 summarizing the main EU responses to the war in Ukraine, this paper examines the challenges to the EU's ability to grant these responses, particularly in the context of migration. It explores the challenges of migration and integration. The focus then shifts to the EU's role in providing support to refugees and asylum seekers, and the challenges of integration and employment. The paper concludes by discussing the challenges of migration and integration.

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## THE EU ASYLUM SYSTEM AND THE UKRAINIAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

**ABSTRACT**

This policy brief looks up the main findings of an expert group convened to discuss the future of the European Union asylum system, after the war in Ukraine.

The main findings are that the EU's asylum system is in a state of crisis, and that the EU's response to the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis is inadequate. The expert group recommends that the EU should reform its asylum system, and that it should provide more support to refugees and asylum seekers.

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

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