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MIGRATION COMMUNICATION AND NEW APPROACHES TO TARGET-GROUP ENGAGEMENT

by Daria Huss

In the context of increased polarisation of the migration topic among the public and policy sphere in Europe, communication on migration has gained importance: In order to reduce information gaps, build trust and gain acceptance for migration policies, innovative ways of engaging the public are needed. An initiative from Austria lends itself as a good example.

Globally, attitudes towards immigration have been rather positive than negative, as people were ‘more likely to want immigration levels in their countries to either stay at the present level or to increase, rather than decrease’, according to a study presenting data from more than 140 countries (IOM & GMDAC 2015). In Europe, the situation differs: According to the same study, the majority believed that immigration levels should decrease – bearing in mind variations across countries, with generally more positive attitudes prevailing in the North than in the South (ibid.). The same holds true after the so-called 2015/2016 migration crisis, as in most European countries, attitudes to immigration have remained relatively stable over time. However, the perceived importance of migration as a public policy issue has increased (ICMPD/OPAM 2018; MEDAM 2019).

A recent study on perception, stereotypes and knowledge gap among EU citizens about migration - covering Italy, Greece, Austria and Hungary recent study on perception, stereotypes and knowledge gap among EU citizens about migration - covering Italy, Greece, Austria and Hungary and based on 1,000 interviews per country - showed that the majority of Italians, Greeks and Hungarians perceived immigration as having a negative impact (64% in Greece, 57% in Italy and 56% in Hungary). In Austria, the perception was more divided, with 49% perceiving a negative impact of immigration, 29% neither a positive nor a negative impact and 20% a positive impact (IPSOS 2019). The attitudes towards immigration are influenced by a range of factors, whereas a young age, a higher level of education and the feeling to be heard rather than left out in the political arena had a positive impact on perceiving migration more as an opportunity and less as a problem than other groups, according to a recent analysis of the 2017 Special Eurobarometer “Integration of immigrants in the European Union” (Dražanová et al. 2020). Having difficulties to pay the bills, on the other hand, increased the likelihood of perceiving immigration as a problem. At the same time, those who overestimate

the share of immigrants have on average a higher probability to view immigration as a problem rather than an opportunity. More generally *'individuals viewing themselves as informed on migration have on average higher probability than those not informed to have positive views on immigration'* (ibid).

And indeed, a strong gap between the migration reality and the actual knowledge on the phenomenon was observed: The 2019 IPSOS study found that in all four countries covered (Italy, Greece, Austria and Hungary), citizens believed that the share of migrants among the population was much bigger than it actually was. In Hungary, for example, citizens thought that migrants constituted 20% of the population as compared to a real figure of 2%. The same was true for Italy (31% perceived compared to a real 9%), Greece (35% vs 9%) and Austria (35% vs 16%) (IPSOS 2019). These findings point out to a significant knowledge gap in the field of migration. This knowledge gap, however, can not only be observed in quantitative but also in qualitative terms: An analysis of existing opinion polls in the Euro-Mediterranean region showed that media mainly reported on people fleeing their homes rather than on other forms of migration. This focus contributed to the public perception that *'migration was "a problem" rather than a multi-faceted global phenomenon'* (ICMPD/OPAM 2018). Also, ICMPD's Migration Outlook 2020 highlights that the European debate is dominated by issues of irregular migration and protection, rather than balancing this debate with information on the success stories or opportunities of migration, such as labour migration in the context of skills shortages.

Closing the migration information gap: An example from Austria

A range of activities can contribute to closing this information gap, including the provision of information to and trainings for journalists, and migration communication activities directly targeting the population. For the latter – which are the focus of this article – a sound evidence base and thorough expertise is required not only on migration issues, but also on how to convey this information to the target group. The initiative GEMEINSAM.VIEL.BEWEGEN (MAKING A CHANGE.TOGETHER), initiated and funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, is one recent example for the combination of these elements:

- 1. A sound evidence-base:** The starting point for the initiative MAKING A CHANGE.TOGETHER was the [Report by the Migration Council for Austria](#), published in 2016. The Independent Migration Council for Austria was established in April 2014 with the mandate to elaborate substantive foundations for a national migration strategy. It took a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach, taking into account all forms of migration. This report identified - inter alia - the need to ensure the

acceptance of the population as a prerequisite for a successful national migration policy, and the need for easy to understand and fact-based information on migration.

- 2. An innovative partnership:** Based on the findings of this report, the initiative MAKING A CHANGE.TOGETHER was launched 2017 with the aim to communicate complex migration issues to the public, with a specific focus on children and youth. This initiative is based on an innovative partnership, bringing together the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development and the Pedagogical University of Lower Austria, hence involving expert bodies in the fields of migration and pedagogics. The combination of expertise on pedagogics and on migration constitutes the basis both for the development of targeted outputs and for the reach-out to the target groups of children and youth in Austria.
- 3. Interactive methods to engage with the target group:** In the design of the activities, a specific focus was placed on innovative, interactive methods for knowledge transfer, taking into account the fact that the best learning effects are achieved through active engagement. Among other activities, two theatre plays and an interactive policy simulation game have been developed, which aim at triggering reflection processes and allow the target group to take on different perspectives. The interactive policy simulation game GEMEINSAM.ÖSTERREICH REGIEREN (GOVERNING AUSTRIA.TOGETHER), which primarily targets secondary school children, is a particularly innovative example: It allows players to take on roles that have equivalents in reality, to experience the consequence of their behaviour and to reflect on the consequences of their decisions, hence corresponding to the general characteristics of policy simulation games, according to Taylor & Walford (1974). In this specific game, players have the opportunity to simulate democratic processes: They take over the roles of politicians, citizens and the media and accordingly form parties and define their political manifestos, join interest groups or represent the media. Political parties present their programmes to the citizens and discuss them with the interest groups. Elections are held and a government is formed, and a range of specific events (e.g. a terrorist attack, exodus of enterprises, lack of care workers) occur, to which the government has to react. The media report on the government's decision and citizens hold the government accountable in a next round of elections. This policy simulation game shows the interconnectivity of migration with other policy areas, as well as the pertinence of consensus building in democratic processes (Öffentliche Sicherheit. Nr. 1-2/18). Overall, this policy simulation game contributes to political experiences of students and to discussions on political agency, as confirmed by a Master's thesis on policy simulation games as a teaching method for the subject 'political education'

(Reisinger 2019). An in-depth debriefing with teachers reinforces the experiences of the policy simulation game. Dedicated background materials - developed jointly with the Pedagogical University of Lower Austria - support these debriefings.

The way forward

This three-pronged approach, which combines a sound evidence base with an innovative partnership, bringing together experts from relevant fields, and interactive methods, triggering reflection processes and allowing the target group to take on different perspectives, was well-received by the target group. Bearing in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and adaptations to national contexts and sustainable approaches are required, the initiative MAKING A CHANGE.TOGETHER lends itself for a good practice example that combines these three elements. Such initiatives, together with engagement with the media and trainings for journalists, can contribute to reducing existing misperceptions of migration and to generating a greater acceptance for migration policies in the future.

Contact Information

For more information please contact:

Policy Unit

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor
1010 Vienna, Austria

Email: Policy_Unit@icmpd.org

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