

A New Balanced Narrative on Migration

Attaining rights-based migration policy through a balanced public debate

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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in this panel together with so many distinguished colleagues and friends, and I want to sincerely thank the Maltese Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion for organising this excellent event. Today's panel is the most recent one in a series of events we had the pleasure to organise together with our Maltese colleagues, and we are very grateful for this cooperation.

When we want to talk about migration narratives in the European context, we have to be aware of a basic fact: Migration continues to be *the* major concern of the European citizens. The latest Eurobarometer survey showed that 34 % of the EU citizens think that immigration is the main concern at EU level. Issues like climate change, the economy, terrorism, public spending or unemployment clearly rank behind the migration issue. At the same time only one third of European citizens feel well-informed about migration matters. In another survey, a clear majority of European citizens stated that they did not believe that the EU did a good job on handling the refugee issue. On the other hand, the majority of respondents were in favour of taking in refugees fleeing from violence and war. These findings tell us that a majority of our citizens are not happy with the policies of the EU and their governments. But they also tell us that EU citizens are ready to support people in need and that we can reach them with a balanced narrative on migration.

Now the question is, how can we develop such a narrative? Of course, there are many answers to this question but I want to highlight three aspects that I consider important.

First of all, we have to reach out to the public in different ways than in the past. We have seen that people do not feel well-informed about migration issues. From research we also know that people feel a strong need to discuss about migration and to exchange on their beliefs and concerns. When they feel part of the debate, they are ready to listen to facts and to reconsider their views. Our political communication has to ensure an open and frank discussion with the people but also with the media as main messengers towards the public.

As ICMPD we have started a number of initiatives in this regard. We have developed a curriculum and organised trainings for journalists in the Euromed region. We have created the Migration Media Award for journalists together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malta. Together with OPAM we conducted a survey on attitudes towards migration. And we have created a Migration Media Hub on our interactive i-Map, which provides trainings for journalists.

Despite of these important initiatives, however, we have to be aware of one thing: *How* we convey a message is one side of the story, *what* kind of message we convey is the other.

And this brings me to the second aspect I would like to stress. In reality, European migration policy is much better than the discussion would suggest. Let me give you just a few examples and recent figures. In 2018, more than 330,000 people received a positive decision on their asylum application in the EU. This is a strong confirmation of the rights-based approach of the EU and the will to help people in need of the protection. In the same year, there were almost 200,000 returns of people who did not fulfil the requirements for staying in the EU. This is a confirmation of the fact that the system is willing and able to enforce its decisions. Over the last two years, about 50,000 migrants returned from Libya or were relocated. For the first time there were more people returning from Libya to their home countries than there were people departing from Libya across the Mediterranean. This is a remarkable development and confirms that EU is able to find entirely new solutions together with its partners. Those are only three examples and of course there is room for improvement in many areas but there is a lot of success as well. I think we should talk less about our failures and more about our achievements. People do not expect miracles from political decision-makers and support them when they are pragmatic and honest about what they can or cannot achieve.

Still, and that is my third point, we also have to improve migration policies. Here I see three priorities. We should invest even more in migration partnerships with countries of origin and transit. A lot has been achieved in this area since 2015 but we need to expand this important policy tool. The second priority is to engage a lot more in conflict resolution. We all know that this is an extremely challenging task but we also have to be aware that the majority of irregular migration flows is driven by conflict. Only if the international community manages to resolve the major conflicts of today, like the ones in Syria, in Afghanistan, in Iraq or in many African regions, this will create the policy space to develop better policies and more convincing narratives. And this brings me to the third priority. Although conflict is the main cause for displacement and irregular migration, there is always an economic aspect as well. We have to get better at creating opportunities for people in their home countries but also for refugees in the countries and regions where they stay. Investment, development cooperation, trade policies and public-private partnership are the main tools in this respect.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is still a long way to go before we will reach a new and more balanced narrative on migration. We have to come up against strong images and a lot of distrust in governments and institutions. But I strongly believe that we can achieve this important goal if we improve our policies, communicate smarter than in the past and show the patience and endurance that will be needed.

Thank you very much.