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## Migration narratives across three levels of governance

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**Narratives are among the most important determinants of public attitudes and behaviour – and a powerful source of (mis)perceptions. Migration narratives are shaped mainly at three levels of governance: international, national, and local. This article, introduces the concept of “governance of migration narratives”, examining three key questions: How do actors operating at the different levels craft and disseminate migration narratives?; How do these actors interact with one another?; and How does this interaction impact policymaking?**

During his recent visit to Malta, Pope Francis spoke in favour of migrants and in particular encouraged Europe’s embrace of Ukrainian refugees. Drawing a comparison with Saint Paul’s shipwreck on the island in 60 A.D., in his visit at the [Hal Far’s Peace Lab](#) the Pontiff [said](#) “... we see another kind of shipwreck taking place: the shipwreck of civilisation, which threatens not only migrants but us all. How can we save ourselves from this shipwreck which risks sinking the ship of our civilisation? By conducting ourselves with kindness and humanity. By regarding people not merely as statistics [...but] for what they really are: people, men and women, brothers and sisters, each with his or her own life story.” In this evocative address, the Pope highlighted a very important element of migration policymaking: migration narratives, communication and related storytelling.

Drawing on its depth of projects across multiple world regions, ICMPD has been carrying out ground-breaking analysis of migration narratives – their development, evolution and impact on policymaking. In particular, cooperation between the [EUROMED Migration](#) programme and the [Observatory on Public Attitudes to Migration \(OPAM\)](#) has resulted in a wealth of new knowledge on the impact that narratives have on policymaking, political systems and elections. Therefore, let me introduce the concept of the “governance of migration narratives,” which may attract a great deal more attention in the future.

## What are narratives and why do they matter?

In the world of migration policymaking, narratives are among the most important determinants of public attitudes and behaviour, and powerful shapers of (mis)perceptions. Narratives can be defined as [selective representations of reality](#) across at least two points in time that include a causal claim. They are necessary to decipher, explain and simplify complex realities. A simpler definition might be “how migrants and migration are perceived and spoken about.”

A fact that may surprise readers is that, in Europe, attitudes to immigration are not becoming more negative. Rather, they are notably stable and, in recent years, have actually become [more positive](#). The recent outpouring of support for Ukrainian refugees in Europe seems to be a clear manifestation of these more compassionate attitudes.

Narratives are complex, relational and multifaceted. They can be produced and reproduced, crafted and revised. They can include [assumptions](#) about causality, good and bad, responsibility and consequences.

But who is constructing the migration narratives that prevail? How do state and non-state actors take part in their crafting and dissemination?

## Different actors send different messages

Although often unrelated or lacking in intercommunication, three levels of governance shape migration narratives: the international, the national, the local.

### *The international level*

**International organisations** are important players in the design and implementation of migration policy. But what type of narratives do they craft? And what are the key elements of such narratives?

International organisations, operating at the intersection of nation states, tend to [reflect their vision](#) of how cross-border or internal mobility should be managed. Their approach to narratives includes diverse, intertwining elements, such as, for instance, a positive

appreciation of migration as a natural, human, historical phenomenon; reference to universal principles (namely, human rights); and an emphasis on the benefits of migration for both host societies and migrants.

In this realm, migration narratives are often strongly influenced by the “[silo effect](#)” present within international organisations (such as among directorates working on migration or development cooperation). More controversially, narratives may stem from “[communication bubbles](#)” where like-minded, international staff working in specific neighbourhoods of certain cities hosting IOs (Brussels, Geneva, Washington) create narratives that may be detached from the realities of the majority and seem unable to analyse, conceive or even acknowledge how alternative narratives develop.

In my view, there are two main reasons why the migration field is so susceptible to communication bubble distortion. Firstly, the non-attachment or temporary attachment felt by the implementers of such narratives to their host cities (frequently espousing the label “expat” rather than “migrant”); secondly, this group tends to have been given the opportunity to make the most out of migration, and therefore may underestimate [value-based communication](#) with audiences that do not share their values of universalism and benevolence and are less equipped to communicate with groups valuing tradition, conformity and security concerns.

**International non-governmental organisations** also shape migration narratives, mainly by forging stories aimed toward combating the securitisation discourse of [political actors exploiting the salience of the phenomenon](#), mostly for electoral purposes. This is why such stories, which target global civil society, somehow represent counternarratives that attempt to challenge the prevailing migration discourse. This is, for instance, the case for [SINGA](#), an international community that refuses to view migration as solely a humanitarian or security issue but rather as an opportunity to meet new people and enrich host societies while producing economic benefit and innovation.

### *The national level*

**States and national governments** are central actors in the storytelling on migration and policy implementation. Within this frame, migration in Europe is mainly depicted as a challenge – in response to which quick and practical solutions must be put forward. This dynamic has allowed a marked contrast to be observed in regard to two recent migration influxes.

A number of political leaders looked to capitalise on the emotional aspect of the migration discourse in relation to sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East to fuel anti-migrant narratives, particularly [at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). However, in speaking of Ukrainians fleeing that country, many of these actors employ a narrative that is essentially the polar opposite of their stance towards migration from other regions. As Marta Foresti and Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou from ODI point out, *“It was encouraging to see EU countries come to unprecedented agreement to lift visa restrictions for Ukrainian refugees and for once act as one, and swiftly, in this crisis. And it is disheartening to see that despite public opinion and condemnation by the international community, the [hostile environment in the UK](#) is still alive and kicking, [even with inevitable U-turns](#) in sight, that we’ve all gotten so used to in recent times.”*

The increased [salience of migration](#) in political discussions is contributing to such emotional activation. And this is why [state narratives tend to be securitarian](#), which has of course a very specific impact on policy. Security narratives tend to be shaped by irregular (uncontrolled) migration, not by migration as such. The more distorted and polarised the narrative, the deeper policymakers back themselves into a cul-de-sac, where they no longer dictate how the narrative frames their policies, but rather it becomes the narrative that is driving them and dictating their policies.

Faced with a gloomy demographic future, continuously presenting migration as an existential threat creates a context wherein reversing such an approach (and attracting migrants) with each day becomes more complicated, and the sheer scale of the task a deterrent in itself – posing as it does short-term risks that are too high, long-term political benefits that are too distant, etc.

### *The local level*

What is the role of **cities** in forging migration narratives? Is it possible to scale-up local narratives by giving them prominence at the international level?

Local authorities can actively contribute to reducing the gap between perceptions and reality. Cities, due to their proximity to citizens, are in a unique position to foster [a pragmatic, evidence- and rights-based debate on migration](#) – imperative not only to raising local awareness but also to adopting effective inclusion policies. Local initiatives can successfully resonate at the international level, and the expertise of cities can bring added value for all.

An interesting example of local-level engagement is the [#ItTakesACommunity](#) campaign, launched in 2020 by the Global Forum on Migration & Development. The campaign brings together national governments, cities, businesses, civil society and international organisations to promote balanced narratives on all forms of human mobility by sharing stories about social cohesion and the positive impact that migration and diversity can have on communities. Launched in response to the inaccurate and damaging stories about migrants that have proliferated around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, the campaign raises awareness on local initiatives by showcasing them at the international level. And this is precisely how the local level can inspire and inform the international level.

[ANVITA](#), a French association gathering local authorities and elected representatives, stands as another good example of how local initiatives can transcend borders. The objective of the initiative is to help inform national policies, mainly by jointly promoting a discourse at the national level while showcasing the added value of in-the-field experiences of cities.

## Speaking with one voice

A multitude of issues impact migration narratives on policymaking, one central issue being the problematic cleavage between the international, national and local levels of governance, making for a fragmented and multifaceted discourse where stakeholders talk past each other. This is why specific attention should be paid to this matter, fostering fruitful discussions among the different actors involved in telling the migration story.

How can this be done? Firstly, **spur investment in thematic research** specifically focused on how different levels of governance craft migration narratives and interact. Secondly, **promote fora** with the aim of enhancing common understanding among the actors involved while improving multi-level governance, mainly through designing common strategic plans. Thirdly, **monitor, evaluate and revise joint efforts** according to current events.

The ongoing [Ukrainian refugee crisis](#) has triggered an unprecedented outpouring of support among European policymakers and citizens alike. Indeed, the palette of attitudes and tones used in relation to Ukrainians fleeing the war appears to be somewhat aligned across the international, national and local levels. Even mainstream media coverage seems to have adopted a different nuance than that employed when reporting on other recent refugee crises. However, this does not mean that [positive attitudes](#) are guaranteed to prevail, since

[European hospitality may wear out over time](#), and tensions may arise. This is all the more reason why promoting solid understanding among the actors involved in migration storytelling, as well as developing a common knowledge framework on the diverse implications and effects of migration narratives on policymaking, must be encouraged and pursued at all levels of governance.

*Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) alone.*

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