

Policy brief on the impact of narratives in potential migrants' decisions

Jan-Paul Brekke
Florian Trauner
Ilke Adam
Omar N. Cham
Hannah Sattlecker
Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud

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BRIDGES
Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

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Authors

Jan-Paul Brekke is a Senior Research Fellow in the Migration and Integration Research Area at ISF. He holds a PhD Sociology from the University of Oslo. He is a member of the IMISCOE network and has engaged as an expert by IMISCOE under the H2020 CROSS MIGRATION project. He has served as an expert for the EU Commission evaluating H2020 applications and projects in the field of migration and integration. He is a frequent media commentator and has been invited by the EU Commission, the Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum and Refugees (IGC) and the General Directors of Immigration Services Conference (GDISC) as speaker on the topic of media campaigns directed at migrants. He has recently conducted research on social media information campaigns launched by the EU, the IOM and UNHCR and targeted at potential migrants, including fieldwork in Khartoum, Sudan. He is head of the bi-annual Integration Barometer.

Florian Trauner holds a Jean Monnet Chair at the Brussels School of Governance of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). He also co-directs the Brussels Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Migration and Minorities (BIRMM), a VUB Centre of Expertise gathering 110 researchers from 11 disciplines. His research concerns the European integration process with a focus on EU asylum, migration, border control, return and internal security policies including the EU's relations with third countries on these issues. He regularly teaches at the College of Europe and held permanent or visiting positions at the University of Vienna, the University of Renmin in China, Science Po Paris, and the EU Institute for Security Studies.

Ilke Adam is a Professor of Political Science at VUB's Brussels School of Governance. She is also a co-coordinator of the Brussels Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Migration and Minorities (BIRMM) at VUB. Her research focuses on the multi-level governance of immigration, immigrant integration, and anti-discrimination policies, as well as on anti-racist activism, multiculturalism, and (sub-state) nationalism. She has (co-)authored three monographs and around 40 academic articles and book chapters, (co-)edited three books, including *Intergovernmental Relations on Immigrant Integration in Multi-Level States* (Routledge, 2021) and *Migration, Equality and Racism. 40 Opinions* (ASP Publishing/VUB Press, 2021). She teaches Diversity Policies in the EU and EU Immigration Policies in the Advanced Master on European Integration at VUB. She is regularly consulted by European and national policymakers and journalists.

Omar N. Cham, originally from The Gambia, is a PhD candidate at the Brussels School of Governance and the Department of Political Science of VUB. His PhD research focuses on the politics of return migration in The Gambia. He seeks to explore how migration cooperation between The Gambia and the EU evolved with the transition to democracy in 2016. His research interests include the EU-Africa cooperation on migration issues and externalization policies. He holds a Master's Degree in Social Policy and Social Services from Istanbul University, a Master's Degree in Management from VUB, and a Bachelor's Degree (with Honors) in Development Studies from the University of The Gambia.

Hannah Sattlecker is a research assistant at the VUB. She finished her BA in German Language and Literature, as well as Education Science, in Vienna, where she focused on political education, inequalities in education, and migrant pedagogy. During her studies, she spent one semester in Sweden, focusing on the Austrian and Swedish education systems from a comparative perspective. She was the European Youth Delegate for the Austrian Youth Council for two years, representing young people in Austria on a European level. After working as a facilitator and moderator for workshops on integration and migration in Vienna, she moved to Copenhagen to start a Masters in Advanced Migration Studies in September 2021.

Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud is a Research Professor at ISF in the areas of Politics, Democracy and Civil Society, and Migration and Integration Studies. She is a political scientist who holds a PhD in Media and Communication from the University of Oslo. She has headed several international, multi-method, and comparative research projects, including the Mediation of Migration project funded by the Norwegian Research Council. Her research focuses on the global spread of stories on migration between different media and personal networks, including fieldwork among migrants and media analysis in the Iraqi Kurdistan. She is an expert in mixed-method studies, combining surveys, quantitative media analysis, and in-depth fieldwork. She frequently serves as a media commentator and publishes in international media, migration, and political science journals. Her current research focuses on the right-wing and anti-immigration debate in a new media landscape, heading a research project on monitoring free speech in Norway.

Reviewer

Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas

Executive Summary

This Policy Brief provides an analysis of the narratives of (potential) migrants of Gambian and Afghan origin. This brief focuses on how locally held narratives relate to the messages of EU-funded information campaigns, which usually aim at deterring irregular migration.

The research is based on data gathered in interviews and focus groups with Gambians in The Gambia and Afghans in Turkey. The narratives on Europe and migration in both settings are positive, albeit slightly more nuanced and critical in the Gambian context. According to the dominant narratives, there are few or hardly any opportunities in their countries of origin and/or transit. The irregular journey to Europe is dangerous; however, this risk can hardly be avoided given a lack of legal migration opportunities and their current situation. Life in Europe brings opportunities for a positive life change. The migrants' narratives tend to differ strongly from the messages communicated in the EU-funded information campaigns, with the partial exception of the message emphasizing the dangers of an irregular migration route.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the messages of EU-funded information campaigns often compete with locally held narratives on migration and Europe. When the messages of information campaigns appear irrelevant or at odds with the life conditions of (potential) migrants, they tend to be discarded in favor of local narratives that better express these realities. As a matter of fact, it is relevant not to overestimate the capacity of migration information campaigns and carefully reflect upon their objectives.

Introduction

The overall objective of the BRIDGES project funded by the EU's H2020 program is to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in the context of increasing politicization and polarization. This Policy Brief investigates the migration narratives in countries of migrants' origin and transit. It compares the migration narratives of potential migrants in The Gambia with those of Afghan (transit) migrants in Istanbul, Turkey. We particularly focus on how their personal and local narratives interrelate with the messages put forward in EU-funded migration information campaigns.

The research presented here builds upon extensive fieldwork in The Gambia and Turkey. In The Gambia, we conducted in-depth and focus group interviews with 60 young Gambians during the spring of 2022. In Turkey, we interviewed 46 Afghan refugees and migrants in May 2022, in addition to NGO and civil servant experts. Most of the Afghan interviewees had fled Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The fieldwork in Istanbul and The Gambia were closely aligned and coordinated, thereby ensuring comparability of the findings. More details on the methods, research process, and findings can be found in the country and comparative reports, which are the basis for this Policy Brief (Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2023; Brekke et al. 2023; Trauner et al. 2023).

Evidence and analysis

Master narratives on migration and Europe

We use the concept of *master narratives* to describe the dominant and mutually shared understandings and storylines related to migration and life in Europe. The Gambian and Afghan interviewees share a positive image of migration to Europe, although differing life situations obviously affect their perspectives. Both groups tend to consider irregular routes to Europe as the most realistic option available for them. Despite their different situations, Gambians and Afghans are both constrained in terms of opportunities for legal migration to Europe.

a) *The master narrative on migration*

Both in The Gambia and Turkey (Istanbul), the interviewees perceive migration as a vehicle for a positive life change. The master narrative on migration is, therefore, clearly positive in both groups. There are, however, also key differences. While the risk–benefit calculation of many Gambians favors migration, they still have a fallback option – they can choose to remain in The Gambia, even if economic and family pressures are strong. By contrast, the Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Turkey are not willing to return to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Fearing deportation from Turkey back to their home country, most of them endure a very unstable and precarious situation in Turkey. Therefore, the narrative on the migration of Gambians in The Gambia corresponds more closely to one of *voluntary migration*, while that of Afghans in Turkey is one of *forced migration*.

b) *The master narrative on Europe*

The master narrative on Europe is largely positive amongst both Gambians and Afghans. Europe is generally seen as a place of opportunity and higher living standards, providing avenues for work, education, and family welfare. For the Afghan interviewees, Europe is also related to respect for individual rights. Many perceived migration to Europe as an escape from the stigma and discrimination they increasingly experience in Turkey. Gambian participants are more critical toward Europe due to the

continent's colonial past and treatment of migrants in Europe. In this sense, the narrative on Europe is more nuanced among the potential migrants in The Gambia than among the Afghans in Turkey (Istanbul).

The messages of EU-funded information campaigns

A first re-occurring message of the EU-funded migration information campaigns is that “there are opportunities at home (stay)”, notably regarding the countries of origin (it is of no relevance for Afghan migrants in Turkey given the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan). The opportunities showcased in the campaigns in The Gambia refer to professional training and business opportunities. For the Gambians, the message is often positively received at first glance. However, upon closer inspection, the message is challenged and put aside. Most Gambians participating in this study find it difficult to see and make use of (professional) opportunities, which are considered to be missing entirely (e.g., in rural Gambia) or to be open only for people with connections and resources. In addition, it is argued that there may be opportunities for trainings and launching a small business, but that does not necessarily lead to sufficient resources to cover basic living expenses, thereby not diminishing the pressure to emigrate.

A second key message of the campaigns highlights the risks involved when a person migrates to Europe in an irregular way. This EU-promoted message is closely aligned with locally held narratives. Gambians and Afghans tend to be aware of the dangers and risks of migrating irregularly. The risks of the irregular journey need to be placed into a different context for Gambians and Afghans. A return to Afghanistan is not an option. At the same time, staying in Turkey also involves risks (forcible deportation back to Afghanistan). Therefore, Afghans often accept the risks of migrating to Europe. The Gambians weigh the dangers and risks of the route against their current life situation in The Gambia and the possibility of arriving and making a living in Europe. Whilst some young Gambians stated that their awareness of the risks of the journey makes them opt for (an often unrealistic) legal migration path, several argued that the risks do not alter their plans, as they see leaving as the only option. Predestination thinking also influences the non-consideration of messages on risks.

A third key message of the EU-funded information campaigns is that “life is difficult in Europe (do not come).” This message is largely contested by both Gambians and Afghans in Turkey. They refer to opportunities in Europe that are perceived as manifold. The examples of “successful migrants” are often the underpinning of this narrative. A positive image of Europe is also displayed in popular culture and social media and has been promoted for centuries, largely undermining this message of information campaigns. While the narrative in The Gambia also includes critical elements, such as reported instances of discrimination in Europe, the Afghans do not highlight comparable criticism.

The overall narrative on migration and Europe is positive, both for the Gambians and Afghan migrants. It is strongly influenced by historically dominant messages on the “developed Europe” and the “underdeveloped Global South,” as well as by the information sources that are considered trustworthy: private social networks. The more negative EU-promoted narratives on migration and Europe are mostly contested, mainly due to other information, personal experiences, and a lack of alternatives. Overall, their impact on migration decision-making seems to be minor, not only because they contradict local migration narratives but also because information is only one among many migration drivers. As summarized by one young Gambian: “It is the situation, not the information” that makes them want to leave.

Policy implications and recommendations

Based on the data and conclusions of this report, we would like to make four recommendations that European or national stakeholders may consider:

Enhance the transparency of existing information campaigns

European information campaigns targeting potential migrants from third countries must be based on a deep knowledge of the precarities of the situation of refugees and existing opportunities for migrants. The legitimacy of these campaigns hinges on transparency regarding sponsors and the inclusion of legal migration alternatives.

Increase predictability and options for Afghan refugees in Turkey

European governments should consider speeding up visa processing and look for additional resettlement options for Afghans residing in Turkey. Currently, many Afghan refugees are at risk of being deported from Turkey to Afghanistan. Furthermore, European governments should consider working with Turkish immigration authorities to increase the predictability, affordability, and transparency of the process of issuing residence permits to refugees and migrants waiting for a durable solution.

Expand legal routes, visa predictability, and real opportunities in the Gambia

At present, legal migration to Europe plays a minuscule role in the migration narratives of young Gambians. The EU may consider increasing access to legal migration avenues for Gambians, thereby reducing the attractiveness of the “backway.” The EU and its member states can, for example, consider reimbursing visa application fees for younger applicants, introducing visa lottery programs (similar to the US Diversity Immigrant Visa Program), or opening up other legal pathways in their cooperation with the Gambian government. In addition, the EU may support the Gambian government in developing tailor-made, sustainable, and targeted policies that will enable young Gambians to access the labor market or start viable businesses. Currently, the lack of opportunities also affects return migrants and their efforts to secure reintegration.

Move toward more inclusive communicative engagements and debates

The research in The Gambia suggests that local or international actors may consider developing more inclusive and open-ended forms of engagement that are less oriented toward the overarching goal of persuading people to stay. Hence, the Gambian youth may contribute new ideas on how to deal with migration in The Gambia, be it having more and different opportunities at home or enhancing the safety of their fellow citizens en route.

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Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

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The **BRIDGES Policy Briefs** are a series of recommendations to advise EU and national governments on strategic policy actions taking on board the results of the project.

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