

## WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT MIGRATION: THE NEED FOR A NEW COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

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**T**he sinking of a boat off the coast of Lampedusa and the more than 250 deaths it caused exposed the weaknesses of the European Union's borders and the laws governing them. It also exposed the thorny issue of responsibility over migration and asylum seekers between member states. *The Guardian* article (Traynor and Kington, 2013) discussed at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) "Europe: behind (mis)understandings" workshop highlighted the divisiveness of the issue. The following paper will briefly summarise the article, then discuss the challenges emerging from the media report of the event, and finally offer solutions that emerged from the panel sessions at the event.

A week after the tragedy, *The Guardian* reported on an EU meeting in Brussels to deliberate on a policy response. The European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Cecilia Malmström, called for a rescue mission in the Mediterranean. The EU's border force, Frontex, would carry out an operation covering Mediterranean shores in an effort to track, identify and, if necessary, rescue migrant boats. At the time, Malmström's call failed to receive much support from the 28 member states, as most national governments were reluctant to delegate immigration policies to Brussels. Italy, one of the main recipients of migrant boats, has repeatedly called for more EU help to control the migration influx. The Italian interior minister recalled that the borders are not just Italy's, but the EU's too. The German interior minister instead claimed that other EU countries, like Germany, are doing their part by hosting great numbers of asylum seekers and warned that most migrants are seeking better economic conditions rather than escaping adversarial political conditions at home. The article also included accounts of the shipwreck's survivors and other migrants protesting in Lampedusa against the poor living conditions they endure, as their future remained uncertain.

Immigration policies are portrayed as one of the most divisive issues in the EU, and they may very well be, as most national governments are reluctant to allow a higher number of migrants to cross the borders into their countries. Italy and Germany's positions are emblematic of the arguments dividing the member states: the countries receiving migrants on their shores ask for increased support, while the countries hosting most

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asylum-seekers claim they are already making a contribution. Perhaps in the name of neutrality and objectivity the journalists fail to challenge those claims, despite Italy's shortcomings in providing accommodation for refugees and Germany's argument disregarding the difficulties in distinguishing between economic and political adversities in countries affected by wars and famine. The authors note that Germany's interior minister's comments seem to be a rather common view in the UK too: the minister's attempt at differentiating between 'economic' migrants and political refugees suggests that the EU is unable (or unwilling) to accommodate migrants looking for better living conditions.

From what emerged in the CIDOB discussion, when coming to terms with understanding the issue of migration to the EU, the communication problems are rooted in two aspects, one of which is political, and the other has to do with the media.

From the political side, there is a lack of leadership in tackling the issue of migration and asylum seekers in the EU. The development of the financial crisis has overshadowed human rights issues, with the political discussion no longer engaging with issues of European responsibilities. Regarding the issue of migration, but not limited to it, the EU seems to have given up on the idea of being a global player.

At the media level, the issue of migration is framed too often as one of economic or social security for those of the receiving country, rather than a universal human rights issue. The focus is often on the problems potentially faced by the receiving country rather than the ones faced by the migrants, who are too easily framed as antagonists or threats. There is also a lack of appropriate language and explanation. The policies and regulations are mentioned with hardly an explanation of what they require. The migrants, potential asylum-seekers or economic, are mostly represented as a number rather than as human beings, with their own stories and reasons to leave the country mostly ignored.

This is not a situation without solutions. Politically, member states should keep revising the Dublin Regulation, now in its third stage, and discussing a cohesive foreign policy. If Europe truly has to be a union, border regulation and diplomacy with foreign countries have to be equally developed. Involving the more recent member states in this operation is also a necessity to equalise the EU's shares of privileges and responsibilities.

The media have perhaps the biggest power in shaping the general image of migration to the EU. Firstly, it is recommendable to use more consistent and accurate language in reporting migrants' circumstances. Secondly, the human dimension of these stories should not be lost to policy or economic arguments, but highlighted as a way to better understand the reasons for migration. There is also a need for the media to report more often and more in depth about the migrants' countries of origin. This would allow the public to be better informed about the issues affecting migrants' decisions to leave their countries in search of a better future. Fact-checking the various politicians' claims would also be of benefit to the public, to give them the means to evaluate the extent to which politicians' claims are feasible policy proposals or simple slogans.

In conclusion, a reframing of communication of migration issues is needed both at the political and media level to recognise migration, which is essentially freedom of movement, as not just a part of Europe's past, but also as a present feature of European's identity.

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