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# Fear and lying in the EU: Fighting disinformation on migration with alternative narratives

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The cover image is a collage of the most frequent themes which the authors identified in their research of disinformation narratives on migration.

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# List of terminology

## Alternative narrative

A type of messaging that promotes a story or subject which is different from that promoted by disinformation actors. Alternative narratives focus on what society stands *for*, rather than *against*. Unlike *counternarratives*, alternative narratives do not seek to respond directly to or rebuke an existing false narrative, but rather try to reframe the debate and shift the attention away from the threats and fears propagated by disinformation actors.

## Communicator/communication actor

In the context of this Issue Paper, *communicators* and *communication actors* refer to all those practitioners who share the common purpose of counteracting disinformation by promoting a fair and balanced narration of migration. This includes communication officers and those with responsibility for campaign and advocacy strategies in the EU institutions, national governments, local and regional authorities, non-governmental organisations and international organisations.

## Counternarrative

A communication strategy that tries to directly oppose a particular false claim or narrative by uncovering lies and untruths and by discrediting disinformation actors. See *alternative narrative*.

## Disinformation

This Issue Paper follows the definition of disinformation given by the EU's independent high-level expert group on fake news and online disinformation: "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit."<sup>\*</sup>

## Disinformation actor

Any individual, organisation or institution that contributes to the writing, spreading or propagation of disinformation. This may include state actors (notably Russia and China), but also domestic (European) supporters of radical political options. The precise origin or background of disinformation actors is not of primary importance for developing a communication-based response to it; rather, their message is what is important.

## Fringe media

Online media sources that promote a highly partisan or anti-establishment viewpoint, especially those that depict themselves as standing in opposition to the 'mainstream media'.

## Movable/conflicted/anxious middle

A variety of groups who have not picked sides on a particular topic and are positioned in the 'middle' of the debate. Groups in the movable middle tend not to have strong ideological preferences but are united by values, beliefs and worldviews. Middle groups are 'movable' in the sense that they are relatively open to changing their views, depending on the policy options offered and the information to which they are exposed.

## Reverse discrimination

The perceived discrimination against a dominant or majority group, to the advantage of vulnerable groups. For example, favouring migrants over the local population.

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\* High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (2018), [A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation](#), European Commission, p.5.

# Executive summary

Migration remains a salient political issue and a major topic of disinformation. Lies and half-truths about migrants spread freely across the EU. But the narratives and themes used by disinformation actors are not static. As events develop and public concerns shift, so do the types of stories pushed by those seeking to mislead. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a growing stream of articles linking migrants to infection risks and accusing them of receiving preferential treatment.

Disinformation actors have certain advantages over other communicators, as they can promote simplistic or one-sided depictions of migration without regard for truth or accuracy. Rather than seeking to counteract specific claims, such as through fact-checking or counternarratives, communicators and policymakers should instead promote **alternative narratives** that can undermine the appeal of hostile frames and create ‘herd immunity’ against disinformation. Alternative narratives should especially target those in the ‘movable middle’ who are most open to changing their views, especially as these groups may also be more liable to being influenced by disinformation.

This Issue Paper examines nearly 1,500 news articles from four EU member states (Germany, Italy, Spain and the Czech Republic) published between May 2019 and July 2020. It shows that disinformation narratives about migration seek to exploit readers’ fears to polarise public opinion, manufacture discontent, sow divisions and set the political agenda. Disinformation actors link migration to existing insecurities, depicting it as a threat to three partly-overlapping areas:

**Health** (migrants as violent criminals, potential terrorists, or a COVID-19 infection risk);

**Wealth** (migrants as social benefits cheats, unfair competition for jobs, or a drain on community resources);

**Identity** (migrants as a hostile invasion force, a threat to European or Christian traditions, or the subject of a conspiracy to replace white Europeans).

An effective communication strategy based on alternative narratives should take account of the following recommendations:



The **message** should aim to **reframe** the debate. It should *resonate with the target audience’s lived experience*, acknowledging their values and concerns, but avoid amplifying anxieties. Messages promoting alternative narratives must *be timely and reflect the news cycle*. Like a vaccine administered at regular intervals, communicators should *repeat simple, specific messages* that can prompt the best immune response against hostile frames spread by disinformation.



The **medium** should aim to **restore** trust among groups. Institutions, which are often subject to discrediting campaigns, should *prioritise communication through trusted intermediaries* who can get messages to the hard-to-reach. They should work in partnership with civil society and local actors to deliver *coordinated messages* in the right environments. They should seek to reach people ‘where they are’ using *the most appropriate communication channel*, taking into consideration where their audience consumes information.



The selection of the **audience** should aim to **reclaim** readers from the fringes. Audiences should *be targeted based on their values and what they feel is important*. To gain a first hearing, communicators should *find an ‘entry point’* where the messenger and audience share common ground. All communicators seeking to promote a more balanced debate should aim to develop messages that can *support a single overarching meta-narrative*: for example, that migration is a normal phenomenon that can bring benefits to European societies if managed effectively and in full respect of fundamental human rights.

More effective communication strategies can help to undermine threat-based discourses about migration. But such narrative strategies must also be backed up by policy changes. Effective policies combined with alternative narratives will go a long way towards resolving the concerns that drive disinformation on migration. A more balanced debate will, in turn, facilitate the adoption of meaningful reforms in line with EU fundamental values and human rights, thus creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of alternative narratives and policymaking.

# Introduction

In December 2018, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) “got trolled”.<sup>1</sup> The GCM is an intergovernmental agreement prepared under the auspices of the UN that covers all dimensions of international migration and highlights the need for more international cooperation to manage migration effectively. After two years of negotiations – during which it had not been widely known, let alone controversial – the Compact suddenly became subject to heated debate across the EU. In what they termed an “information war”, far-right actors coordinated campaigns to spread the false narrative that the GCM was legally binding and would lead to the “demise of the European people”.<sup>2</sup> In the end, and in spite of earlier commitments, nine EU member states refused to endorse the Compact.

This is just one, high-profile example of how disinformation is employed to disrupt and sow divisions in Europe, with clear policy consequences. State or non-state actors seeking to promote anti-immigration agendas have had notable success in their objectives of polarising public opinion and undermining trust in institutions by using disinformation techniques.<sup>3</sup>

Migration is a key subject of disinformation campaigns, especially since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 turned it into one of the most salient and divisive topics in European political debate.<sup>4</sup> By manipulating public perceptions, disinformation campaigns have made it harder to keep policy discussions well-informed and evidence-based. For example, Europeans consistently overestimate the number of residents who were born abroad, partly due to the prevalence of claims that Europe is subject to an ‘invasion’ of immigrants.<sup>5</sup> This perception, combined with the subject’s high salience, leads to demands for stricter measures against new arrivals and makes it harder to argue a nuanced case for legal migration to Europe.<sup>6</sup>

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Most politicians tend to build their campaigns on evidence-based policy. However, populist politicians, and especially leaders of the radical right, have profited from and sometimes even generated or amplified disinformation themselves. By doing so, they attempt to mobilise voters and increase their base by scapegoating migrants for wider, structural social and economic problems. Disinformation on migration has become so prominent, and the discussion so polarised, that some

politicians, officials and institutional actors have found themselves on the back foot, struggling to reclaim the debate or promote their own values and policies in a public sphere distorted by misleading information.<sup>7</sup> Other politicians have even repositioned themselves as anti-immigration champions for electoral purposes.<sup>8</sup>

EU and member state responses to disinformation so far have largely focused on regulatory and technical measures, in an attempt to reduce the spread of misleading content on social media, increase information transparency, and remove fake and automated accounts (i.e. ‘bots’).<sup>9</sup> However, the European Commission’s own appraisals of these techniques in the course of the Action Plan against Disinformation suggest that they have had only limited impact.<sup>10</sup>

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**Technical measures to combat disinformation must be accompanied by effective and pro-active communication strategies that can reframe debates and undermine the appeal of inaccurate narratives.**

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What other solutions are available? The forthcoming European Democracy Action Plan will put further emphasis on supporting journalists, fact-checkers and media literacy efforts to increase societal resilience to disinformation. For this task to be successful, such measures must be accompanied by effective and pro-active communication strategies that can reframe debates and undermine the appeal of inaccurate narratives. As disinformation actors attempt to shape general attitudes, including on migration, the EU, national authorities and other similarly motivated groups and organisations must come forward to defend what they stand for, rather than letting radical actors set the agenda and tone of the debate.

## **MANUFACTURING DISCONTENT: DISINFORMATION AND THREAT-BASED NARRATIVES**

This Issue Paper delineates how to build an effective response to disinformation narratives based on communication strategies. Chapter 1 presents the findings of the European Policy Centre’s (EPC) original research into the prevalence of online disinformation narratives relating to migration. The period under consideration starts with the European Parliament election campaign in May 2019 and runs to the end of July 2020. By analysing a total of 1,425 news articles published in online media from

Germany, Italy, Spain and the Czech Republic, the authors identified disinformation narratives that generated significant social media engagement in this period. Based on these findings, Chapter 2 evaluates the potential of alternative narratives to counteract disinformation. It offers recommendations for communicators from EU institutions, national and local authorities, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on how to reframe the debate on migration and fight disinforming messaging.

Not all hostile narratives and political propaganda are based on objectively false messages. For this reason, a particular challenge was defining whether or not a given article or narrative could be fairly labelled as disinformation. This exercise is especially difficult when authors use information that is not clearly, demonstrably false, but may be distorted, misrepresented, or unverifiable, as was the case for at least 84% of the articles analysed for this study.

Most commonly accepted definitions of *disinformation* refer to the intent to mislead.<sup>11</sup> However, as an author's intention can be hard to ascertain, it is often difficult to draw the lines between disinformation, genuine error and biased partisan material. For this reason, this Issue Paper focuses on *narratives* with a strong disinformation element, rather than labelling individual articles as true or false. Similarly, while many narratives relating to migration and migrants contain xenophobic and Islamophobic elements, most sources examined in this study would not qualify as hate speech.<sup>12</sup>

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### Most articles analysed in this study demonstrate that disinformation actors seek to exploit readers' fears and concerns.

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Overall, while the specific messages and techniques between sources, target audiences and political contexts vary to some degree, it is possible to determine some converging patterns and commonalities across the European disinformation landscape. Most articles analysed in this study demonstrate that disinformation actors seek to exploit readers' fears and concerns.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, these fears are not connected to migration in a narrow sense. Rather, disinformation actors try to link insecurities with a supposed threat posed by immigration and migrant groups. The research revealed that the most prominent narratives framed migration as a threat to three, partly overlapping areas:<sup>14</sup>

- ▶ **Health**, especially but not only during the COVID-19 period, with migrants being accused of ignoring social distancing rules, receiving preferential access to healthcare systems, committing violent and/or sexual crimes, or plotting terror attacks.

- ▶ **Wealth**, depicting migrants as a drain on social welfare systems, receiving 'free' handouts of taxpayers' money, or wasting community resources.
- ▶ **Identity**, particularly relating to supposed elite conspiracies to replace Christian European populations with 'waves' or 'hordes' of Muslim, African or Middle Eastern migrants.

Multiple narratives exploit fears linked to these three frames. The most prominent relate to a supposed invasion of hostile migrants, depict migrants as a security threat and source of violence, refer to an elite conspiracy to increase migration rates or otherwise impose migration on a reluctant population, or imply that migrants are the undeserving recipients of social benefits.

This study shows that hostile narratives are evolving, and will likely continue to do so in parallel with the shifting news cycle and political priorities. In earlier phases of the research project, disinformation strategies exploited fears about uncontrolled arrivals. These narratives did not disappear. However, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, priorities shifted, with health becoming an overriding public concern. Migrants and minorities were accused of carrying the virus, ignoring social distancing rules, or obtaining better treatment than local populations. Other prominent messages, such as claims that migrants abuse social welfare systems or commit violent crimes, have been adapted to respond to the new circumstances brought about by the pandemic and its accompanying worries and insecurities (see Figure 1, page 8).<sup>15</sup>

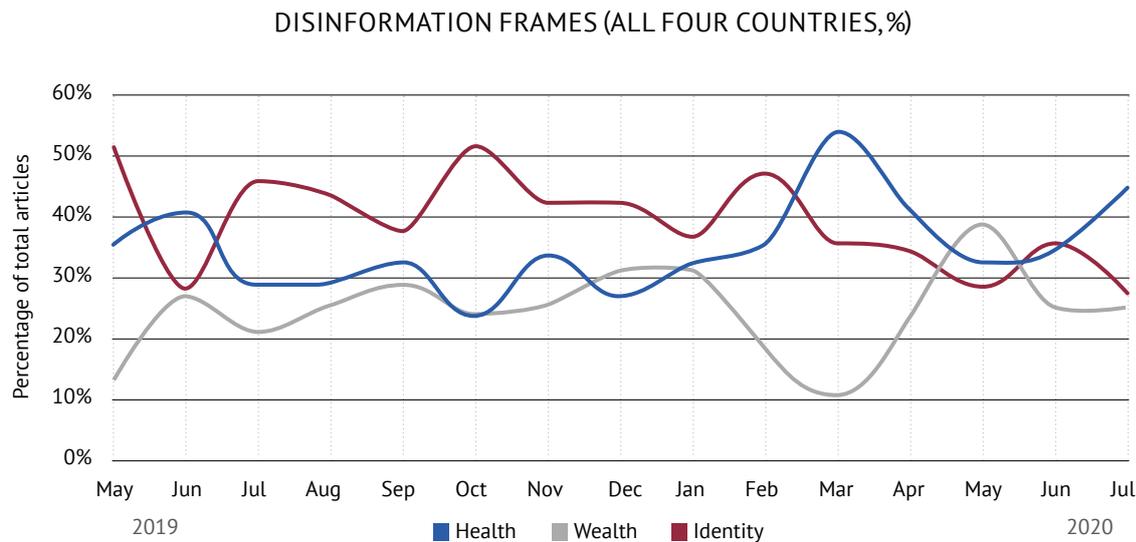
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The increase in health-related narratives that accompanied the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe between February and March 2020 supports the idea that the three frames may not be of equal effectiveness for disinformation actors. Psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs puts physiological and safety needs, such as bodily health and security, at the base of the pyramid, while psychological needs like belonging and esteem appear higher up.<sup>16</sup> Thus, fears relating to health and wealth are more pressing, and therefore psychologically unsettling, than those relating to identity. As such, it is no surprise to find that narrative frames relating to identity are most widespread in circumstances where there is no apparent immediate threat, but quickly lose ground to more urgent health- or wealth-related frames when migrant arrivals increase, social services come under pressure, or a new crisis like a global pandemic transforms the discourse environment.

Fig. 1



## WHY ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES?

Experts are increasingly drawing attention to the importance of effective and positive communication about migration.<sup>17</sup> There is a growing awareness among EU officials, national and local authorities, and civil society of the need to better frame migration policy issues to promote a more balanced narrative. Some international organisations, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, have developed sophisticated instruments and digital campaigns to engage people with the refugee cause.<sup>18</sup> However, these strategies still largely overlook the most prominent and widespread disinformation narratives on migration. This Issue Paper suggests that all communication on the subject of migration should be crafted with an understanding of existing disinformation narratives, seeking to undermine them wherever possible.

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In order to be effective, any communication strategy must be sensitive, well-crafted and appropriately targeted. Counternarratives – the prevalent communication-based approach to disinformation until now – are not necessarily the most appropriate response to disinformation.<sup>19</sup> Counternarratives that attempt to ‘prove the opponent wrong’ may antagonise those who are attracted to the message further. Attacking the opponent’s frame does little to diffuse concerns among

the general public and may even strengthen fringe groups.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in an oft-saturated information environment, where media consumers are already inundated by an overwhelming number of articles, claims and counterclaims, any counternarrative will struggle to be heard. Attempting to respond to every hostile narrative individually is not only futile but contributes to the ‘noise’.<sup>21</sup>

Fact-checking, while forming an important part of the arsenal against disinformation tactics, is also insufficient. In fact, like counternarratives, myth-busting could be harmful in certain contexts, since it may unintentionally give more visibility to the message and frame used by disinformation actors. Furthermore, selective perception and motivated reasoning imply that those attracted to disinformation will disregard new information or evidence that contradicts their prior beliefs or assumptions. Disinformation is appealing not only for the claims it makes (whether factual or not) but also for the ideology and/or values it supports and the concerns it exploits. It provides material to strengthen the beliefs of a particular group, while also trying to win over new supporters by stoking their fears.<sup>22</sup> Those who respond positively to messaging without regard for its veracity are unlikely to be swayed by fact-checking or counternarratives. They could, however, be reached through other techniques and means.

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**Communicators and policymakers must move beyond counternarratives and think more in terms of alternative narratives which do not necessarily seek to debunk a particular disinformation theme.**

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Thus, communicators and policymakers must pick their battles carefully. This Issue Paper suggests that they must move beyond *counternarratives* and think more in terms of *alternative* narratives which do not necessarily seek to debunk a particular disinformation theme.<sup>23</sup> Rather, a more appropriate response may be to ‘defuse’ disinformation at its ‘source’ by addressing citizens’ fears and concerns head-on. Debunking and countering individual claims function like palliative care: they can remove the pain in the short term, but do not cure the disorder. The goal should instead be to develop a ‘vaccine’ to disinformation, promoting the development of ‘antibodies’. This can only be achieved by eliminating the root causes of disinformation’s appeal, while also promoting a healthier political discourse.

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The main targets of this communication-based response should not be those positioned on the extremes, but rather those who are especially open to being influenced in one direction or the other: the ‘movable’ or ‘conflicted middle’. Researchers and communication experts have argued that between those who have very positive views about migration and those who maintain hostile positions, there is a large middle group formed by persons who do not hold fixed ideological positions.<sup>24</sup> If their cultural anxieties or fears of economic insecurity are fuelled by disinformation, and remain unaddressed or are dismissed, the middle may take a position hostile to migration. However, if these fears are addressed by alternative narratives that are backed up by concrete and positive policy changes, they can be inoculated against the appeal of disinformation.

Considering this, experts have proposed to design targeted forms of communication with the twofold objective of (i) persuading those in the ‘movable middle’ and (ii) pushing back the mainstreaming of hostile narratives.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, this Issue Paper argues that strategic responses to hostile narratives must address underlying fears, demonstrating with hard evidence that people’s concerns are driven by distorted and manipulative information. At the same time, value-based communication should open up a middle ground for moderate debate, rejecting the simplistic binaries promoted by disinformation. This response may prove especially effective for the movable middle, while also leaving open the opportunity for those on the fringes to come back into the fold.

Focusing on middle groups does not mean ignoring other segments and their needs. However, those who are already positioned at the extreme side of the debate or have embraced a radical ideological stance against migrants cannot be reached via moderate communication strategies or alternative narratives. Instead, they must be approached through specific counter-radicalisation methods, which often involve deep, one-on-one work that can last months.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, alternative narratives can have profound effects on a wide spectrum of individuals, thus contributing to preventing the risk of radicalisation.<sup>27</sup> Normalising the discourse on migration should lead to stronger ‘herd immunity’, thus limiting the spread of disinformation among the most vulnerable individuals.

The task of normalising the debate is not only a communication challenge but also a political one. Policymakers must demonstrate that their policies constitute an effective and credible attempt to resolve the situations making European citizens feel insecure, uncertain or afraid. Where citizens’ concerns are well-founded, restricting disinformation actors’ ability to take advantage of them means showing empathy and understanding as well as providing remedies. Especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impact, EU citizens and residents are not only legitimately concerned about health risks but also economic (in)security and increased inequality.

At the same time, the pandemic has also shown ways to promote a more balanced account of questions linked to migration. Thus, it has also created opportunities to look at the positive side of the migration story, drawing on the idea that migrants and resident populations face common challenges and have a shared future.<sup>28</sup> This Issue Paper seeks to demonstrate how such narratives can be promoted to undermine existing disinformation in this field.

## METHODOLOGY

The research for this study was carried out using BuzzSumo, an online tool initially developed for market research that specialises in searching trending topics, analysing web content and determining levels of engagement. Using this tool, the research team was able to conduct a content analysis of the online media landscapes of four European countries and identify the news articles that received the greatest engagement (i.e. likes, comments and shares on Facebook and Twitter) in the chosen timeframe. High engagement signals that a given article has evoked a reaction from its readers, suggesting its content is especially resonant. The sources examined in this Issue Paper consist of freely accessible national and local media outlets, from the online versions of mainstream newspapers to ‘fringe’ media (e.g. blogs, dedicated disinformation portals, political activist pages).

Mapping and comparing disinformation narratives across multiple countries requires context-specific expertise. This research was conducted with the help of a project task force of expert researchers from each of

the case study countries, who were able to advise on the political contexts, widespread disinformation techniques and common narratives they had come across in their respective work. This was valuable for cross-referencing the research findings and determining which articles included a strong disinformation element.

Alongside the research, three expert roundtable events were held throughout 2020 to obtain input and feedback from a variety of stakeholders, including representatives from European institutions, local authorities, NGOs, communication agencies and researchers. These roundtables served to steer the research direction of the study and provide ideas and context for developing alternative narratives. The desk research was also complemented by five semi-structured interviews with communication experts and representatives of EU institutions. The interviews were conducted online in September 2020 to determine the challenges these actors face when confronting disinformation, and the potential of alternative narratives for responding to it. This Issue Paper was also subject to peer review, involving five media and disinformation experts, which took place in October 2020.

In total, 1,425 articles were analysed for the study, with a combined engagement of over 13.7 million likes, comments and shares. The sample of articles was selected by using a set of broad, migration-related keywords, such as *migrants* and *refugees*. Of these results, only those articles that contained significantly questionable material were included in the dataset: either recognised disinformation (as determined by fact-checkers, secondary sources or the experience of task force members), or misrepresentations of reality based upon manipulative use of information. Thus, while not all 1,425 articles are necessarily disinformation articles, they do all support narratives founded upon disinformation.

The results of the study reflect the grey areas in defining disinformation. Most articles are not clearly or demonstrably false, but rather make use of manipulated, out-of-context or unverifiable information. Only 16%

of the 1,425 articles were outright false, while 23% used distorted (e.g. manipulated figures) and 34% misleading (e.g. accurate figures or facts used out of context) information. Furthermore, 26% of articles made claims that were simply unverifiable, usually because they lacked sufficient detail to fact-check (see Figure 2). However, the analysis of underlying narratives revealed that, even in the case of unverifiable statements, sources reproduced content that matched hostile frames, strongly implying malicious intent to mislead.

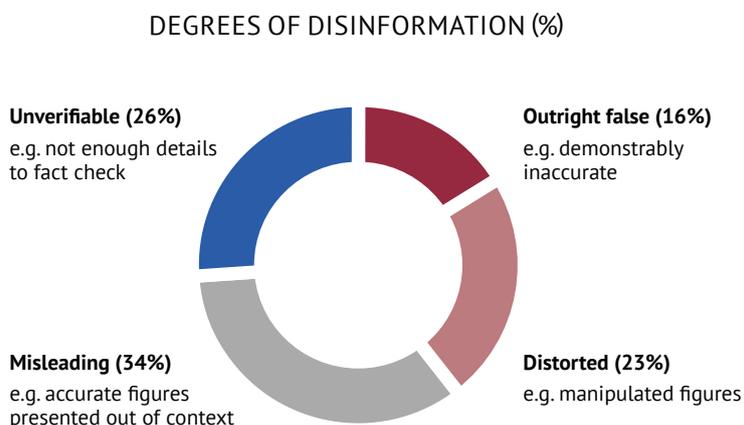
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Only articles that reached a certain threshold of engagements (with respect to the country's population) were included in the study. Following a content analysis, each of the articles was categorised according to a coding scheme developed by the research team, in order to determine the degree of disinformation present, type of media source, frames used, themes depicted, and other relevant features. Finally, the researchers identified the predominant narratives using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, comparing analytical impressions with the results relating to frames and themes. (For further details on the coding and methodology, see the Annex, page 45.)

Fig. 2



The timeframe for the research was initially planned to run for one year, from the European Parliament election campaign in May 2019 until May 2020. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, it was decided to extend the timeframe to cover the changed – and changing – political debate in Europe, which in turn influenced the migration field strongly. Thus, data gathering was extended to the end of July 2020. Selecting two periods of ‘special’ interest for disinformation actors and policymakers alike, namely the European Parliament election campaign period and the COVID-19 shutdown, made it possible to compare and contrast disinformation messages at ‘high-intensity’ moments.

The research covered online news sources in four EU member states, selected to ensure a wide geographical spread as well as diversity in terms of the salience and prominence of migration in each country, both in reality and in public debate.<sup>29</sup> The four selected countries also have different experiences in managing migration and divergent preferences concerning reforms to the EU’s common asylum and migration policy. For example, they have different positions on mandatory relocation quotas, solidarity and the fair sharing of responsibility.<sup>30</sup> The chosen countries were the following:

#### **Germany** (430 articles)

Germany is the EU member state with the highest number of asylum applications per year.<sup>31</sup> The topic of immigration became especially prominent in the country after Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision in 2015 to admit over a million refugees. Since then, German media has undergone a shift from a “sympathetic treatment of refugees” to one in which insufficient attention is given to the positive social and economic effects of migration.<sup>32</sup> This shift can be partly explained by the widely reported sexual assaults that took place during the 2015-16 New Year’s Eve across Germany, and the subsequent growth of nationalist discourses, hate speech and false representations of migrants in German traditional and social media.<sup>33</sup>

#### **Italy** (363 articles)

Despite still having a high number of irregular arrivals by sea, Italy has seen a steady decline in asylum applications since 2015. Nevertheless, immigration remains a source of political debate and campaigning in Italy, especially due to the activism of Matteo Salvini’s Lega (League), a party which has made it its flagship political issue. Major Italian media outlets struggle to do justice to the complexity of the topic. Instead, they have contributed to the polarisation of the debate by covering specific and salient topics in accordance with political agendas. The partisan position taken by most media also leads them to ignore or even contradict reality, facts and figures. The coverage tends to take an alarmist and anxiety-inducing tone, while migrants’ voices are almost completely missing from the national debate.<sup>34</sup>

#### **Spain** (374 articles)

Spain is another major European country of arrival, from both North Africa and South America. However, migration

has not been a major topic of political discussion and controversy in the country until relatively recently.<sup>35</sup> Since 2015, Spanish media have increased their coverage of migration. At the outset of the European ‘migration crisis’, most outlets produced emotional content in line with a ‘pro-refugee’ narrative. This was quickly counterweighted by a growing anti-migration discourse which portrays migrants as security and health risks and as alien or hostile to Spanish traditions.<sup>36</sup> Spanish media struggle to provide a balanced and comprehensive picture of migration, with emotional reporting in favour of migrants’ rights on the one hand, and inflammatory content against them on the other.<sup>37</sup>

#### **Czech Republic** (259 articles)

The Czech Republic receives very low levels of migration in comparison with Western EU member states and has the lowest level of asylum recognition rates in the EU at only 10%.<sup>38</sup> Migration is nevertheless a controversial subject that features prominently in electoral campaigns, especially in relation to the mandatory solidarity mechanism for the relocation of asylum seekers and the country’s refusal to implement it. Previous research has found that Czech commentary on migration is provided mostly by politicians rather than experts, and migrants themselves have very little voice. Czech media has a disproportionate focus on migration-related problems or unrest.<sup>39</sup> The Czech Republic also has a particularly strong and widespread network of disinformation-promoting news outlets, some of which enjoy support from senior politicians, including President Miloš Zeman.<sup>40</sup> The Czech media scene is largely concentrated in the hands of a few conglomerates, with local media facing buy-outs.<sup>41</sup>

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**This study tracks the extent to which disinformation and hostile narratives appear not only in dedicated ‘fake news’ outlets but also the mainstream. Through mainstream media, they reach larger, potentially less biased or non-radicalised audiences, including groups in the movable middle.**

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The media monitoring via BuzzSumo and analysis of disinformation and hostile narratives covered online sources in these four countries (and also included some Austrian, Swiss and Belgian results within the German-language searches). By analysing both mainstream and fringe media, this study tracks the extent to which disinformation and hostile narratives appear not only in dedicated ‘fake news’ outlets but also the mainstream. Through mainstream media, they reach larger, potentially less biased or non-radicalised audiences, including groups in the movable middle. In this way, the research reveals how social networks help these stories

to attract and engage thousands of people who are often both the target of disinformation campaigns and their unwitting distributors.<sup>42</sup>

Naturally, the full extent and impact of disinformation are not quantifiable. The degree to which those who are exposed to disinformation actually believe in it, and whether their behaviour (voting or otherwise) is directly influenced as a result, are impossible to determine with certainty.<sup>43</sup>

As outlined above and indicated in the study's findings, the four countries have distinct media and political environments. This provides a sufficiently diverse

sample of articles to identify significant disinformation trends across Europe while also determining context-specific developments. This study's overview should therefore not be taken for an exhaustive depiction of the disinformation media scene in Europe or in each country monitored. Rather, it examines common disinformation patterns and apparent differences between them. Although the results of this research reflect the specific national settings of the countries concerned, these patterns nevertheless point towards the shared challenges that institutions and communicators should consider to effectively address disinformation and promote alternative narratives at the local, national and European levels.

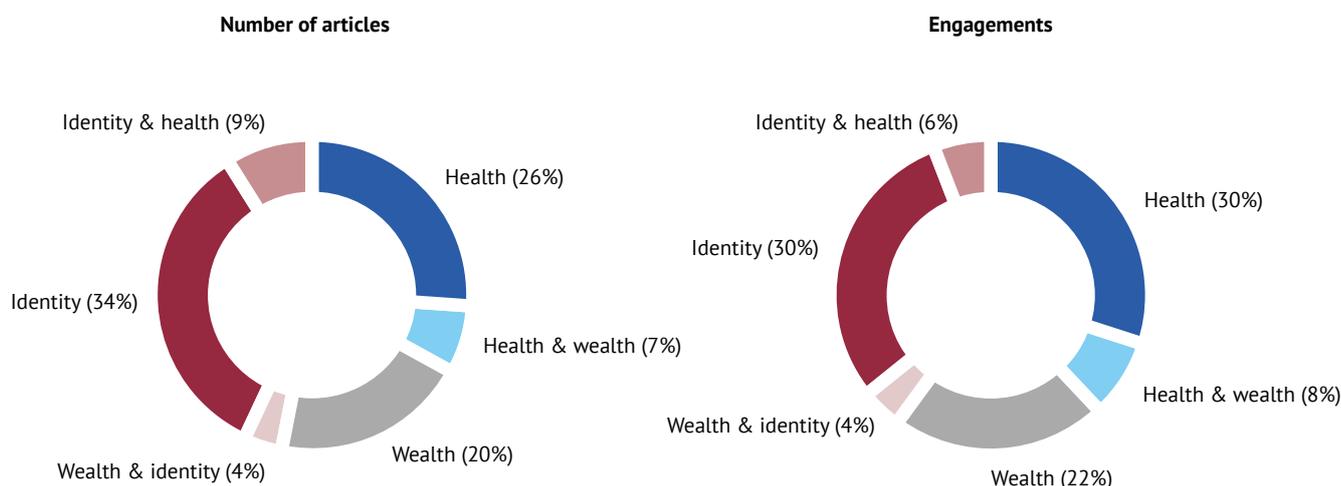
# Chapter 1: Patterns of disinformation frames and narratives

Threat-based narratives are framed in terms of fears relating to the physical integrity and well-being of the resident population (health), the economic prospects of the community or the individual (wealth), concerns about cultural and racial heritage (identity), or a combination of these. Of the threat-based frames used in the articles analysed for this study, 26% related to health, 20% to wealth, and 34% to identity, while 20% referred to more than one of these. Health- and wealth-related frames received proportionately slightly higher levels of engagement, and identity slightly lower (see Figure 3).

**Health- and wealth-related frames received proportionately slightly higher levels of engagement, and identity slightly lower.**

Fig. 3

NUMBER OF ARTICLES AND ENGAGEMENTS RELATING TO HEALTH, WEALTH AND IDENTITY FRAMES (%)



Total: 1,425 articles

Total: 13,749,970 engagements

While certain narratives are ‘endemic’, consistently evoking high engagement throughout the period under study, disinformation actors are also quick to adapt their core messages to the news cycle. Local, national and European political events play a large role in shaping the specific narratives and the level of engagement of disinformation articles. Examples include the arrest of German activist Carola Rackete for docking a migrant rescue ship without authorisation in the port of Lampedusa in June 2019; the Italian government crisis in August 2019; and the Malta Declaration on search and rescue (i.e. the ‘Malta agreement’) in October 2019.

All these events, however, pale in comparison with the transformation of the European political scene caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns and restrictions. Virtually overnight, the pandemic realigned the topics of political discussion, first in Italy – which initially had the highest number of infections –

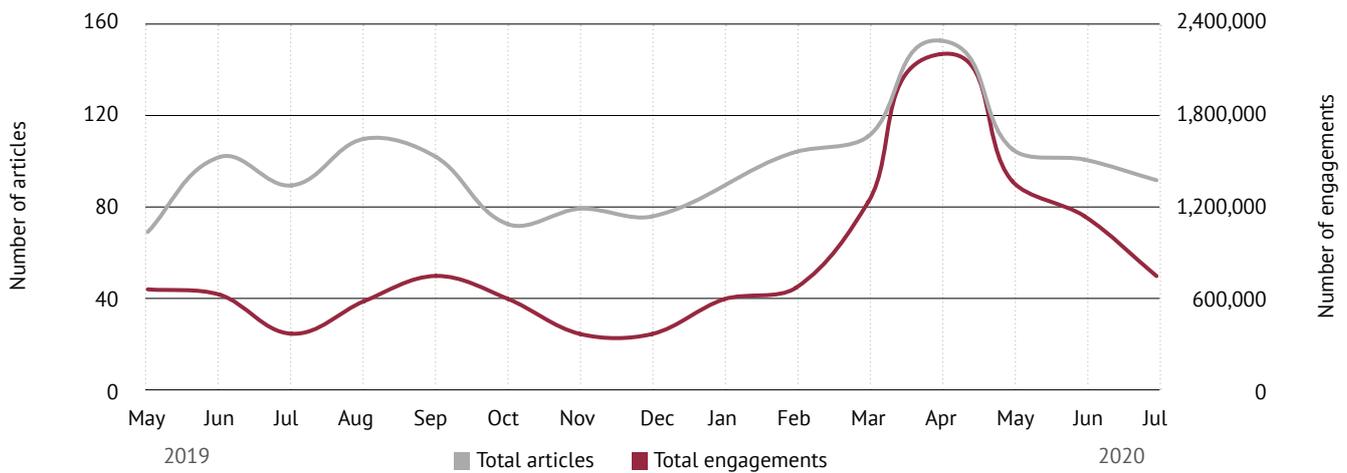
and then in the other countries. Past anti-immigration discourse had largely focused on cultural and economic threats, supporting findings from other studies that health policy was ‘unclaimed’ political territory until recently.<sup>44</sup> The immediate effect of the pandemic on the media scene was a dip in the salience of migration-related topics, as health concerns rocketed to the top of public debate across Europe (see Figure 1, page 8).

Nevertheless, this study shows that disinformation actors spared no time in adapting their existing narratives to the new circumstances and developing new ones. In particular, it shows that disinformation actors tried to link health concerns to an anti-immigration agenda. Thus, it is possible to trace a definite readjustment of narratives in the period under study.

The proportion of disinformation articles and their engagements also fluctuated over time, with a notable

Fig. 4

### ARTICLES AND ENGAGEMENTS OVER TIME



spike in both during the onset of the COVID-19 period (see Figure 4). This may reflect higher levels of internet use during March and April 2020, when quarantined people all across Europe turned to social media and online news sources to stay up to date with rapidly changing developments. Studies have demonstrated that online news consumption rose significantly in this period.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps as a result of this dynamic, the online space was rapidly filled with disinformation and conspiracy theories relating to the virus. The results of this research project suggest that articles relating to migration were no small part of that surge in disinformation content.

**During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the online space was rapidly filled with disinformation and conspiracy theories relating to the virus. The results of this research project suggest that articles relating to migration were no small part of that surge in disinformation content.**

In what follows, some of the most prominent specific narratives identified by the research are presented (see Figure 5 and Table 1). They are grouped according to their frame and presented alongside connected themes,

such as the risk of infection or violence. Narratives are not mutually exclusive, and each narrative may be connected with more than one frame and theme.

Fig. 5

### MOST PROMINENT THEMES AND FRAMES



**Table 1. Themes covered by disinformation narratives in the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Spain**

Theme	Total		Czech Republic		Germany		Italy		Spain	
Number of articles	1425		259		430		362		374	
Invasion	482	34%	85	33%	145	34%	174	48%	78	21%
Violence	296	21%	81	31%	60	14%	61	17%	94	25%
Elite conspiracy	275	19%	96	37%	50	12%	66	18%	63	17%
Social benefits	214	15%	19	7%	60	14%	58	16%	77	21%
Reverse discrimination	211	15%	33	13%	72	17%	44	12%	62	17%
Other crimes	210	15%	41	16%	61	14%	52	14%	56	15%
Disease and infection	198	14%	26	10%	39	9%	83	23%	50	13%
Religion	169	12%	50	19%	41	10%	29	8%	49	13%
Integration	152	11%	43	17%	68	16%	19	5%	22	6%
NGOs	138	10%	19	7%	48	11%	42	12%	29	8%
Replacement	111	8%	38	15%	19	4%	15	4%	39	10%
Anti-EU sentiment	104	7%	37	14%	26	6%	34	9%	7	2%
Sexual violence	98	7%	34	13%	7	2%	8	2%	49	13%
Housing	94	7%	8	3%	38	9%	13	4%	35	9%
(Un)employment	84	6%	12	5%	14	3%	20	6%	38	10%
Healthcare	41	3%	3	1%	7	2%	9	2%	22	6%

N.B. articles may contain more than one theme.

## 1.1. PROMINENT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

### 1.1.1. Migration as a threat to health

Narratives framed in terms of migrants' supposed threat to the bodily health and security of the 'native' population rank among the most frequent in the disinformation articles identified in all four countries. Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic massively increased Europeans' worries and insecurities about health and access to healthcare, with a corresponding rise in the number of and engagement with disinformation narratives that exploit this concern. The pandemic was accompanied by an "infodemic" of confusing and conflicting information,<sup>46</sup> as Europeans scrambled to understand what was happening and how they should react to the pandemic. This environment provided fertile ground for malicious disinformation actors to sow further confusion and distrust. While narratives depicting migrants as unhygienic or vectors for diseases had existed before,<sup>47</sup> they took on a more urgent tone as COVID-19 became an unavoidable topic of daily life.<sup>48</sup>

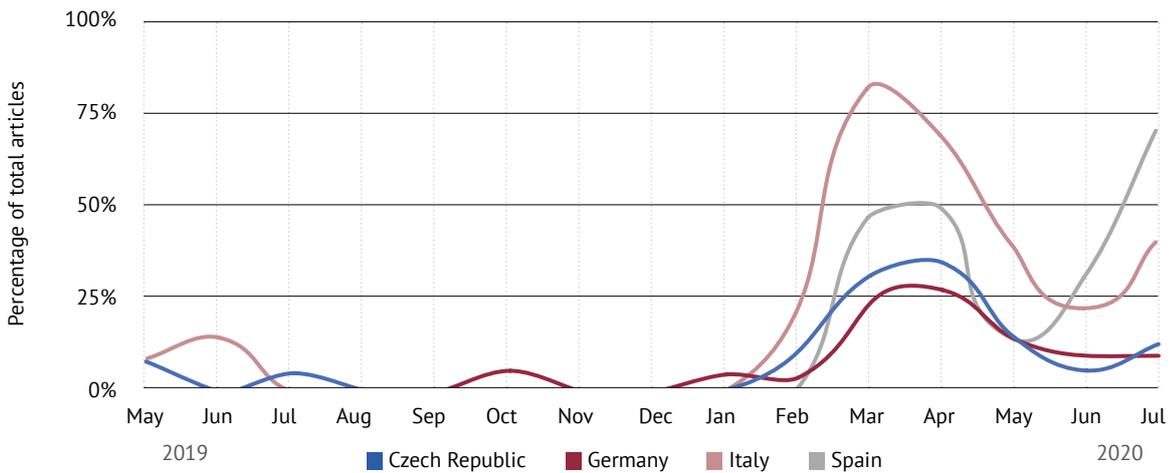
In this high-stakes and stressful pandemic context, disinformation narratives tying migrants to the virus appear to have had some real-world impact and even success in forcing policy change. As migrants and

minorities were blamed for the spread of the virus, there were a few instances of violence against minority communities, especially those of Chinese descent.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, in some EU countries, populist politicians exploited the confused information environment for political ends. For example, before Italy closed its ports to NGO rescue ships, migrants arriving by sea were accused of importing the virus to Europe.<sup>50</sup> However, not a single case of COVID-19 had been identified until then among rescued and disembarked persons.<sup>51</sup>

The research data also reveals that each country's respective experience with battling the pandemic was reflected in the prominence of disinformation tying migrants to infection risks. While all four experienced a surge in infection-related articles starting in February 2020, this surge was highest in the countries most severely impacted by the virus – Italy and Spain. In Italy, the hardest-hit country, articles with infection-related themes accounted for 83% of all articles in March 2020 (24 of 29). As the initial shock of the pandemic receded from the news cycle, infection-related disinformation fell post-April 2020. The onset of the second wave of COVID-19 cases could partly explain the new spike of infection-related articles at the end of the summer, in Italy and especially Spain. In comparatively less affected (at the time) Germany and the Czech Republic, this upward trend was less noticeable (see Figure 6, page 16).

Fig. 6

### INFECTION NARRATIVES BY COUNTRY (%)



Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, health-related disinformation narratives were widespread in all four countries. This was especially the case in Spain, where multiple election campaigns throughout the study period ensured the high salience of issues relating to the funding and sustainability of the health service. Before the pandemic, however, most health-related narratives were connected to security. The extent to which the pandemic changed the discourse tying migration to supposed health threats is depicted by the apparent trade-off between violence-related themes and those relating to infection (see Figure 7). In Germany, terrorist attacks, both by Islamists and far-right actors (e.g. the foiled Islamist terrorist plots in Cologne and Schleswig-Holstein during 2018, the far-right shootings in Halle and Hanau in October 2019 and February 2020 respectively) provided opportunities for disinformation actors to push narratives

relating to security. Meanwhile, in the Czech Republic, articles relating to alleged episodes of violence (often cases in Western countries, e.g. Germany, Sweden) were consistently evoked throughout the period under study.

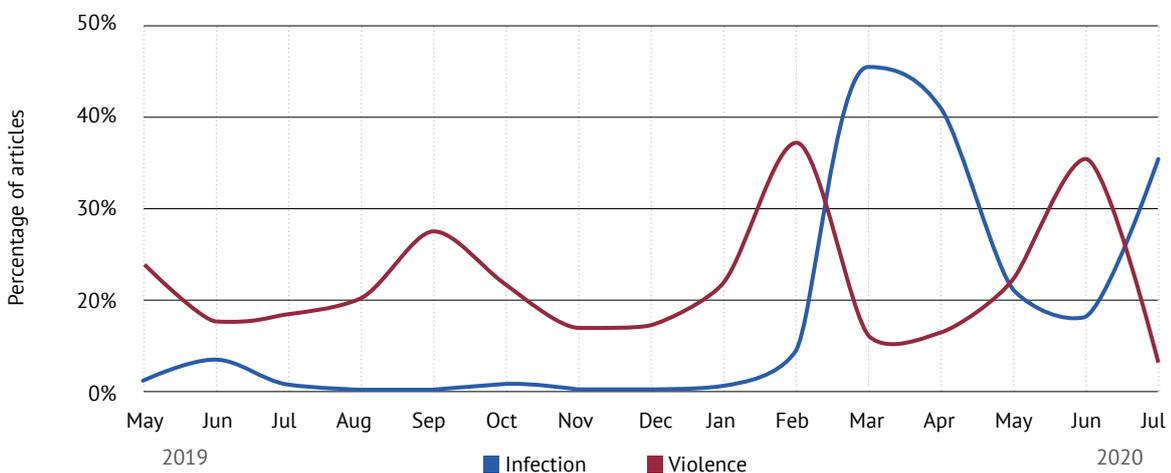
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**Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, health-related narratives were widespread in all four countries. However, before the pandemic, most of them were related to security or violence rather than disease or infection.**

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Fig. 7

### INFECTION-RELATED VS VIOLENCE-RELATED NARRATIVES (ALL FOUR COUNTRIES, %)



The most prominent narratives frequently linked to health-related frames are the following:

- ▶ *Migrants get **preferential access to healthcare systems** or even prevent locals from getting access.* This claim, which appears in connection with both completely invented examples and out-of-context or distorted information, aims to create the perception that the local population is being exploited for the advantage of underserving immigrants (for further examples of ‘reverse discrimination’, see sections 1.2. and 1.3.). In total, only 3% of the articles made prominent reference to the healthcare system, predominantly in Spain. A third (32%) of all articles referring to healthcare in the four countries depicted the welfare situation as unfair by implying that migrants received better healthcare than locals.
- ▶ *Migrants are an **infection risk** for the native population, especially for **COVID-19**.* This accounted for 14% of the total articles, and 29% during the first wave of the pandemic and resulting lockdowns (February-July 2020). Many articles refer to migrants **not respecting social distancing measures**, continuing to gather in large numbers even while local populations were confined to quarantine. This appears to have been particularly resonant in Spain and Italy, among the European countries which introduced the most extreme quarantine measures.<sup>52</sup> Sometimes these narratives also have a culture-related element to emphasise the difference between ‘free-roaming’ migrants and quarantined locals: Muslim migrants gathering to pray is a common trope, appearing in 11% of infection-related articles.<sup>53</sup> Many of these articles made use of images as ‘proof’. Nonetheless, in most cases the pictures were presented out of context, having been taken before the pandemic or showing people who were actually fully respecting social distancing requirements.

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Example headlines:<sup>54</sup>

*“The citizens of Trento are forced to stay at home while immigrants are free: another instance of the one-way racism against Italians” (Italy)*

*“Muslims break confinement for Ramadan” (Spain)*

*“Migrants deliberately spit and sneeze at Germans and shout ‘now you have coronavirus!’” (Czech Republic)*

*“No quarantine for sick refugees in Greece, but for healthy German holidaymakers” (Germany)*

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- ▶ *Migrants commit **violent crimes**, both against each other and against members of the ‘native’ community.* Behind the ‘invasion’ narrative (see section 1.3), this was the second-most dominant narrative overall, appearing in 21% of all the articles. Claims of migrants committing **sexual violence** account for a further 7%. However, narratives of sexual violence are disproportionately concentrated in Spain and the Czech Republic, even if

many of the events described (supposedly) took place in Germany, where the 2015-16 New Year’s Eve sexual assaults have served to give false accounts of similar occurrences a sheen of credibility.

A large number of these articles refer to such events, whether real or fake, to imply a consistent pattern of behaviour. Many of these events supposedly took place in specific localities (often without proof). A large part of these articles suggests that white or European women can ‘no longer feel safe’ because of ‘migrant sexual predators’.

- ▶ Several articles refer to *supposed ‘no-go zones’, populated by migrant groups, where police cannot enter*, often misleadingly citing incidences of criminality or manipulating statistics to amplify existing problems.<sup>55</sup> It is also common to refer to events that have supposedly taken place in other countries. Besides Germany, depictions of ‘out-of-control’ and ‘violent’ migrants in France and Sweden occurred in Czech and Spanish sources.<sup>56</sup> In Italy, manipulated statistics of foreign-born persons sentenced in Spain are exhibited as proof of the failure of all migrants to integrate.<sup>57</sup> In the case of the Czech Republic, such stories are often presented as ‘warnings’ of how Western countries have succumbed to anarchy and injustice as a result of mass migration, with the implication that the Czech Republic must reject migration to avoid becoming like them. They thereby support the case for the country to continue opposing mandatory relocation quotas. About a third of the articles relating to violence or sexual assault describe events taking place in other countries. However, in the Czech case, this figure approaches 85%.
- ▶ Another pattern presents migrants – whether specific subgroups of foreign-born persons or ethnic minorities – as *especially dangerous and more likely to be responsible for committing crimes compared to natives*. This narrative is also consistently identified by studies examining media sources in the period following the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’.<sup>58</sup> The idea that many refugees and migrants coming to Europe actually have **terrorist** motives is a recurring story.
- ▶ Narratives of migrant **lawlessness** are common even when not connected to violence. Many seemingly trivial incidents are used as opportunities to reinforce claims about *migrants being ungrateful, disrespectful or harassing*, even if they are not responsible for actually criminal actions.<sup>59</sup> Through recurrent unverifiable or falsified stories about ‘disrespectful behaviour’, migrant groups become associated with disorderliness and an incapacity to integrate into the host country.<sup>60</sup> 15% of the articles refer to migrants committing non-violent crimes, or generally behaving irresponsibly.
- ▶ Overall, 45% of the articles refer to migrants as a source of **criminal or disrespectful behaviour**, whether it be violence, robbery, terrorism, or flouting asylum laws. Lawlessness is also cited in terms of *migrants ‘cheating’ the system or otherwise being plainly dishonest*. In Italy, migrants are accused of lying about their age to gain access to integration resources.<sup>61</sup> Those who

were stranded on NGO rescue boats in the summer months of 2019 were falsely accused of fabricating medical conditions to bypass port blockades.<sup>62</sup> In Germany and Spain, articles about unaccompanied minors implying that they are lying about their age, not really unaccompanied, and/or exclusively male are common, often using these claims to insist that they should not be relocated or admitted to Europe, or claiming that this is a means to exploit the system.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the depiction of migrants as a hostile group that is unwilling to ‘play by the rules’ is reinforced, strengthening the ‘us versus them’ rhetoric.

### 1.1.2. Migration as a threat to wealth

Just as disinformation actors seek to exploit concerns about a community’s physical integrity and well-being, narratives targeting insecurities about prosperity and economic opportunities are common. In most cases, they relate to the use of state money, such as through the social welfare system or direct spending on handling arrivals, the accommodation of migrants, or provision of medical assistance. Wealth-related narratives also exploit fears about the individual’s ability to make a living, such as employment opportunities. These narratives also have an impact on public perception and policy preferences, as EU citizens who believe that immigrants produce a negative fiscal impact on the welfare state are significantly more likely to support restrictions to immigration.<sup>64</sup>

Despite accounting for the smallest proportion out of the three frames, articles with wealth-related frames generally attracted somewhat higher levels of engagement than health- and identity-related ones. Unlike the more volatile narratives of violence, invasion or infection, the prominence of economic narratives also remained relatively steady throughout the period, dipping only in February–March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic and the tense situation at the Greek–Turkish border drove a surge in health- and identity-related frames.

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**Unlike the more volatile narratives of violence, invasion or infection, the prominence of economic narratives remained relatively steady throughout the period.**

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However, as the COVID-19 crisis moves from an immediate healthcare emergency to a long-term economic challenge, disinformation actors will likely follow the news cycle again and adapt to the increasing salience of wealth-related narratives over health-related ones. Signs of this emerged as early as May 2020, when articles and social media posts started spreading false news of packed buses full of migrant workers stealing jobs from locals.<sup>65</sup> With the looming economic crisis likely to be long-lasting, and almost certain to cause

unprecedented levels of unemployment, the salience of wealth-related frames will probably increase steadily over the coming years. However, just as the health emergency phase of the pandemic did not result in a total eclipse of other frames by health-related themes, other topics will adapt to the new circumstances rather than give way to wealth-related frames entirely.

Italy and Spain, the countries facing the most uncertain economic situations during this period, have the greatest concentration of wealth-related frames, at 32% and 44% of articles respectively (117 out of 363 and 163 out of 374). Wealth-related frames increased in number in Italy after April 2020, possibly because resources were invested to ensure the quarantine of migrants rescued at sea and the government started discussing the regularisation of migrant agricultural workers. Wealth briefly became the largest frame in Spain in May and June 2020, accounting for three-quarters of articles in those months (21 out of 28 in May, and 19 out of 26 in June) as debate about the EU’s COVID-19 recovery plan and the eligibility criteria for the new Spanish national basic income (*Ingreso Mínimo Vital*) reached fever pitch.<sup>66</sup> In Germany and especially the Czech Republic, wealth appears to be less salient, accounting for only 27% and 14% of articles respectively (118 out of 430 and 35 out of 259). In the case of the Czech Republic, this may reflect the fact that the low number of migrants in the country makes it difficult to depict them as a drain on the country’s resources.

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The most prominent narratives frequently connected to wealth-related frames are the following:

- ▶ *Migrants obtain preferential treatment from authorities, such as higher daily allowances than locals on unemployment benefit, better access to housing or more luxurious accommodation, or other kinds of prioritised access to social benefits.* Similar narratives depict migrants as intentionally abusing social welfare systems, such as by exploiting loopholes; or claim that welfare reform will work as a pull factor for further migration. 15% of the articles referred to social benefits, evoking a disproportionately high amount of engagement at 20% of the total.

This was a particularly common narrative in Spain, where it accounted for 21% of articles and 33% of engagement. While articles depicting migrants as competition for social benefits were not significant leading up to the November 2019 Spanish general election – possibly due to the salience of other issues,

such as the Catalan independence movement –<sup>67</sup> the issue appears to have become one of the dominant topics during the COVID-19 period. This was especially the case following the government’s announcement of a basic income.

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Example headlines:<sup>68</sup>

“Conte: 6 euros for Italians to buy food, and 42 euros a day for immigrants” (Italy)

“In Morocco, they are going wild for the universal basic income. The Spanish government is announcing it so that they can fill Spain with Moroccans who will live without working at the expense of the Spanish” (Spain)

“Asylum seekers are worth three times as much as Hartz-IV welfare recipients” (Germany)

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- ▶ **Privileged access to social housing** is also a prominent topic. Although it did spike during the COVID-19 pandemic, this narrative is used consistently to stoke fears about ‘reverse discrimination’. It is generally framed in its local context, with foreign workers and asylum seekers being accused of benefitting from new housing whilst the local population struggles to make ends meet. References to the supposedly high standards of refugee accommodation, especially during the quarantine, are also common. As an example, during the first wave of the pandemic, several articles circulated regarding migrants being accommodated in hotels and luxurious cruise liners, enjoying a pleasant lifestyle at great public expense.<sup>69</sup> Overall, 28% of articles about social benefits, and 21% of wealth-framed articles overall, implied systematic discrimination against locals and in favour of migrants.
- ▶ The claim that *migrants will steal jobs from local populations* is old enough and sufficiently widespread to have become a well-recognised cliché. Nevertheless, communicators still struggle to refute it, and it continues to appear in all the countries studied, with a certain pre-eminence in those already struggling with high unemployment rates (i.e. Italy and especially Spain).<sup>70</sup> In total, 6% of the articles refer to jobs or unemployment. In some cases, this is paired with the concept of a conspiracy by elites to ‘import’ migrant workers, either because they work harder, are cheaper or are simply ‘preferred’ for unspecified reasons.<sup>71</sup>
- ▶ *Migrants are wasteful, abusing the community’s resources; for example, asylum seekers hosted in reception centres are throwing away uneaten food.*<sup>72</sup> This touches on a similar trope that appears in health-related narratives about migrants being disorderly, lawless and unwilling to integrate.

### 1.1.3. Migration as a threat to identity

The most frequently occurring single frame identified in this research depicts migrants as a threat to identity, culture or a general concept of Europe as a ‘civilisation’.<sup>73</sup>

However, identity frames generally attract lower levels of engagement than health- or wealth-related frames: despite accounting for 34% of the articles, they received only 29% of engagements. Thus, health and wealth, as more existentially urgent needs (appearing at the base of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs), appear to be more effective as disinformation subjects. When opportunities to exploit health- or wealth-related fears are low, identity functions as a ‘second-order’ narrative for disinformation actors to fall back on. It is often combined with at least one of the other two fears as a ‘strengthening factor’: 9% of articles relate to identity and health, and 4% to identity and wealth.

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**Identity frames generally attract lower levels of engagement than health- or wealth-related frames. Health and wealth, as more existentially urgent needs, appear to be more effective as disinformation subjects.**

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An example in this regard is the Czech Republic, where health- and wealth-related insecurities are more difficult to connect with migrants due to their low numbers in the country. Instead, migrants are depicted as a threat to European culture, which is largely equated with Christian culture and values. Thus, Czech fringe media outlets frequently present the Czech Republic (and Central and Eastern Europe more widely) as a bastion of European culture and identity, precisely because they reject ‘mass migration’.<sup>74</sup> Migration-friendly policies and supposed incidents (e.g. migrant violence, cultural disrespect, double standards) in Western European countries can be depicted as vindicating Central European countries’ migration-sceptic outlook, serving as warnings of what would supposedly happen there if migrants were allowed in.

Identity-related frames account for 60% of the total articles in the Czech Republic. By contrast, only 30% of articles in Spain and 27% in Italy use an identity frame. In Germany, fully 65% of articles refer to identity, implying that identity-related frames resonate better with comparatively wealthy Germans who are not subject to the same immediate perception of economic or health threats as crisis-struck and economically struggling Southern Europeans.

Several of the articles and narratives with health and wealth frames also contain elements linked to identity. The claims that migrants waste food or do not respect COVID-19 social distancing rules, for example, are used to suggest that they are unable or unwilling to behave in compliance with social norms and national laws, and thus threaten the ‘European way of life’. Notably, the idea that migrants enjoy preferential treatment – being held to different standards on everything from the applicability of quarantine restrictions to access to social services and

unemployment benefits – has an element of identity-related concerns. The topic of alleged discrimination against natives comes up frequently, even when it is not tied to health- or wealth-related narratives. For example, there is frequent reference to the idea that migrants can freely travel to and in Europe while Europeans are quarantined and subject to travel restrictions. Several articles sought to portray this as a conspiracy on the part of elites. Thus, 15% of the articles refer to ‘reverse discrimination’ and migrants receiving a better deal than locals, and 19% connect migration with a supposed conspiracy or plan by politicians, the EU or NGOs.

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**Claims that migrants waste food or do not respect COVID-19 social distancing rules are used to suggest that they are unable or unwilling to behave in compliance with social norms and national laws, and thus threaten the ‘European way of life’.**

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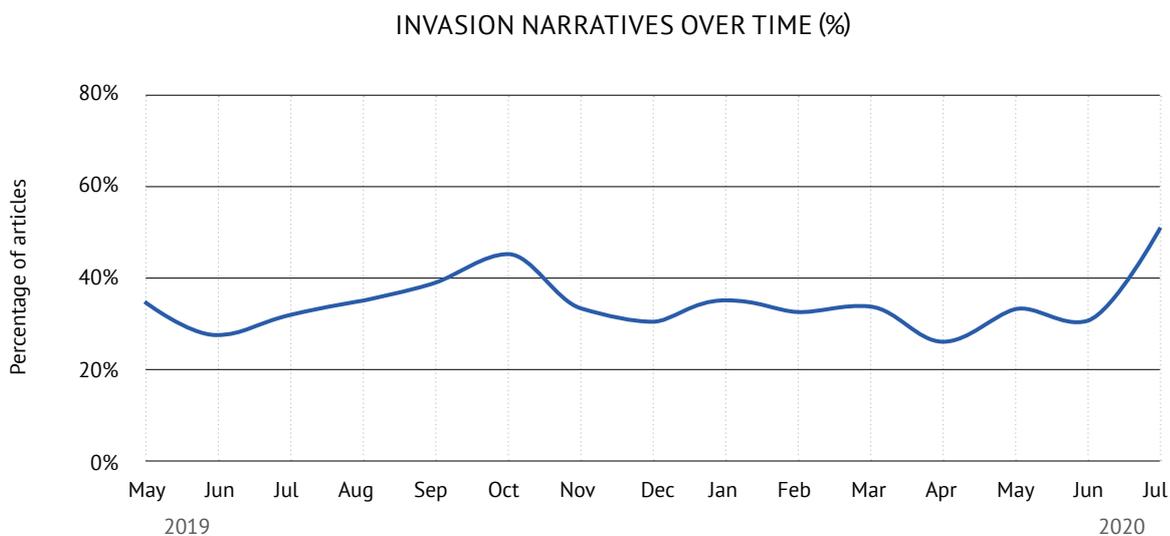
The most prominent identity-related narratives revealed by the research are the following:

- ▶ *Hordes of migrants and refugees are invading Europe.* This claim seeks to portray the numbers as overwhelming and/or the migrants as hostile or alien to European culture. This theme is the single most

prominent narrative by some distance, appearing in 34% of all articles.<sup>75</sup> It was the most dominant narrative between September and October 2019, when the Malta agreement was reached, and Carola Rackete, captain of *Sea-Watch 3*, sailed rescued migrants into a blocked Italian port. It remained the largest narrative in all four countries prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, and its salience increased briefly after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that asylum seekers and refugees would be allowed to reach the border with Greece in February 2020.

- ▶ Some articles in March 2020 *combined the infection and invasion narratives.*<sup>76</sup> The proportion of articles with an invasion narrative also increased significantly in July 2020, perhaps owing to the high number of summer arrivals coinciding with intensified fears of large movements of people due to the pandemic, while governments were already struggling to provide for quarantined local populations (see Figure 8).
- ▶ Metaphors of natural disasters (e.g. waves, floods) are common across the countries monitored, confirming a trend of *dehumanisation*, which studies employing discourse analysis have long observed.<sup>77</sup> In some cases, however, the *migrants are depicted not as a natural disaster but an organised army seeking to ‘assault’ Europe*, often with the consent or support of elites. This appears to be a particularly common message in the Czech Republic and Spain, countries where historical references to ‘Muslim invaders’ (i.e. Ottomans, Moors) continue to have cultural resonance.<sup>78</sup> Narratives based on distorted numbers and militaristic vocabularies are advanced together with claims for the need to securitise migration or close borders.<sup>79</sup>

Fig. 8



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Example headlines:<sup>80</sup>

“Invasion in Trieste: 1000 Pakistani and Afghani illegals assault the border” (Italy)

“Are they really refugees or an invading Islamic army?” (Czech Republic)

“Illegals storm the borders. Police: we’re powerless” (Germany)

“The Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party gives the green light for the migrant invasion: they order the fences to be pulled down to satisfy Podemos” (Spain)

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- ▶ The supposed invasion threat is closely connected to a long-standing conspiracy theory about *political elites seeking to replace white, Christian Europeans with non-whites, Muslims, Africans or Arabs*. French writer Renaud Camus popularised this theory in his 2011 book, *The Great Replacement*. According to this theory, elites seek to replace the native European population through a combination of mass immigration and low birth rates. Their motivations for doing so are either to obtain a more sympathetic voter base or to undermine Christian European traditions for ideological reasons.<sup>81</sup> Recurrent stories citing the male gender and young age of migrants are also used to reinforce this theory, tapping into popular concerns about declining birth rates, ageing societies and changing future demographics. Direct references to “replacement” or “**white genocide**” appear to be relatively rare, but the conspiracy theory is referenced or alluded to in many articles relating to the supposed invasion or Islamisation of Europe.<sup>82</sup> References to replacement appear in 8% of the analysed articles and are highest in the Czech Republic at 15%.
- ▶ Many articles seek to depict migrants as either **unwilling or unable to integrate** into European society, often owing to their *inherent difference and supposed incompatibility with European culture and values*. Other narratives, such as those claiming that migrants are naturally predisposed to violence, are often advanced alongside such messages to imply that they cannot possibly live like Europeans. Themes of integration appear in 11% of articles, especially those from Germany and the Czech Republic.
- ▶ Disinformation actors seek to equate openness to migration with an *inevitable erosion of national, cultural and religious identities and the social fabric*, therefore posing a threat to the integrity and future of European nations. The claim that Europe is being ‘**Islamised**’, with Christian (or secular) traditions being replaced by Islam – a religion which is depicted as inherently violent – is especially dominant in this context. References to religion and the supposed incompatibility of Muslims with ‘Christian’ Europe appear in 12% of the articles.

▶ One common variation on the Islamisation narrative is the claim that migrants enforce **patriarchal or sexist norms**. This can be within their own community, thus underlining their supposed inability to integrate; or on the wider local area, for example, by complaining about or shaming unveiled women. Such articles depict particular incidents as a step on the road towards requiring all women to wear burqas, implementing Sharia law, or otherwise expanding the traditions of conservative Muslim societies to the whole community, sometimes in cooperation with local authorities.<sup>85</sup> 6% of the articles contained a gender-related element, mostly relating to Muslim treatment of women or the demographic consequences of supposedly all-male mass migration.

▶ A relatively small number of articles also refer to *migrants attacking or destroying symbols of European culture or cultural heritage*, often drawing on alleged episodes occurring abroad. Examples include Muslim children desecrating Catholic churches in France<sup>84</sup> and incidents on the Greek island of Lesbos, where migrants supposedly pulled down an ancient olive grove and/or attacked an Orthodox church.<sup>85</sup> While this bears similarities with other narratives of migrants being violent or lawless, the addition of an identity-related significance appears to be a technique to increase the salience of the story.

## 1.2. MIGRATION IN THE HEADLINES

An analysis of the most frequently appearing words in the headlines of the researched articles indicates the relative prominence of frames and narratives in each country, as well as the use of national-specific terminology. Overall, the picture in each country is unsurprisingly dominated by various terms referring to migrants, including *refugees* and *illegals*. Radical right-wing or populist parties appear in the headlines of three countries: the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in Germany, Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) in the Czech Republic, and Vox in Spain. Meanwhile, the name of Lega leader Matteo Salvini is one of the most frequently occurring terms in Italy. The word *euro* regularly appears in each of the three countries that use it as their currency, in relation to narratives highlighting the supposed cost of migration (see Figure 9, page 22).

In the Czech Republic, *Německo* (Germany) appears more frequently than even *Česko* or *Česká republika* (Czechia or Czech Republic), indicating the high number of articles depicting events in the neighbouring country. The term *uprchlík* and *uprchlíci* (refugee/s) is used interchangeably with migrant, often carrying a negative connotation. Other common terms include *hranice* (borders), *integrace* (integration), *islamizace* (Islamisation), *útoči* (attacks), *válka* (army) and *znásilnění* (rape). This reflects the predominance of articles depicting migrants as integration-resistant threats to physical safety or security.

In Germany, the prominence of articles relating to Carola Rackete and the situation regarding rescue ships in the



having been replaced by health concerns.<sup>89</sup> As discussed above, the disinformation landscape reflects these changes and variations, with the dip in the salience of migration-related topics followed by the emergence of health-related negative frames associating immigrants with an infection risk. This suggests that disinformation actors are seeking to combine fears to keep migration a salient issue. It also raises the question of whether this effort is successful.

Comparing the levels of engagement (i.e. likes, comments and shares) with the number of articles can give some indication of which issues dominate the information environment and the extent to which a given narrative resonates with readers. While the figures are generally quite similar, some patterns are observable. Notably, it appears that several of the most common narratives return proportionally less engagement, suggesting that they are not necessarily the topics that elicit the greatest response.

**Several of the most common narratives return proportionally less engagement, suggesting that they are not necessarily the topics that elicit the greatest response.**

For example, the ‘violence’ narrative accounts for 21% of the articles, but only 17% of engagements; articles referring specifically to sexual violence obtained only 4% of engagements for 7% of the articles. On the other hand, ‘invasion’ (34% versus 35%), ‘social benefits’ (15% versus 20%) and especially ‘infection’ (14% versus 20%) narratives resulted in significantly higher levels of engagement proportionate to their number of articles (see Figure 10). Overall, it appears that economic narratives and wealth-related frames obtain high engagements, while those connected to supposed violence or criminal behaviour are less attractive for readers. The prominence of the infection narrative is perhaps unsurprising given the COVID-19 emergency and the ‘infodemic’ that followed it.

The proportion of engagements also varies between countries. In proportion to its population, Germany has significantly lower levels of engagement than the other countries, while Spain and the Czech Republic are highest (see Figure 11, page 24). However, this does not necessarily imply that Germans are more resistant to disinformation – it could be spread through other channels not analysed for this study, such as YouTube or WhatsApp.

As in the case of national variations at the peak of the ‘refugee crisis’, the dominance of certain narratives varies at the state level, although all the identified frames and narratives appear in each of the four countries. In 2020, this can be partly explained by the different countries’

Fig. 10

NUMBER OF ARTICLES VS ENGAGEMENTS BY NARRATIVE (%)

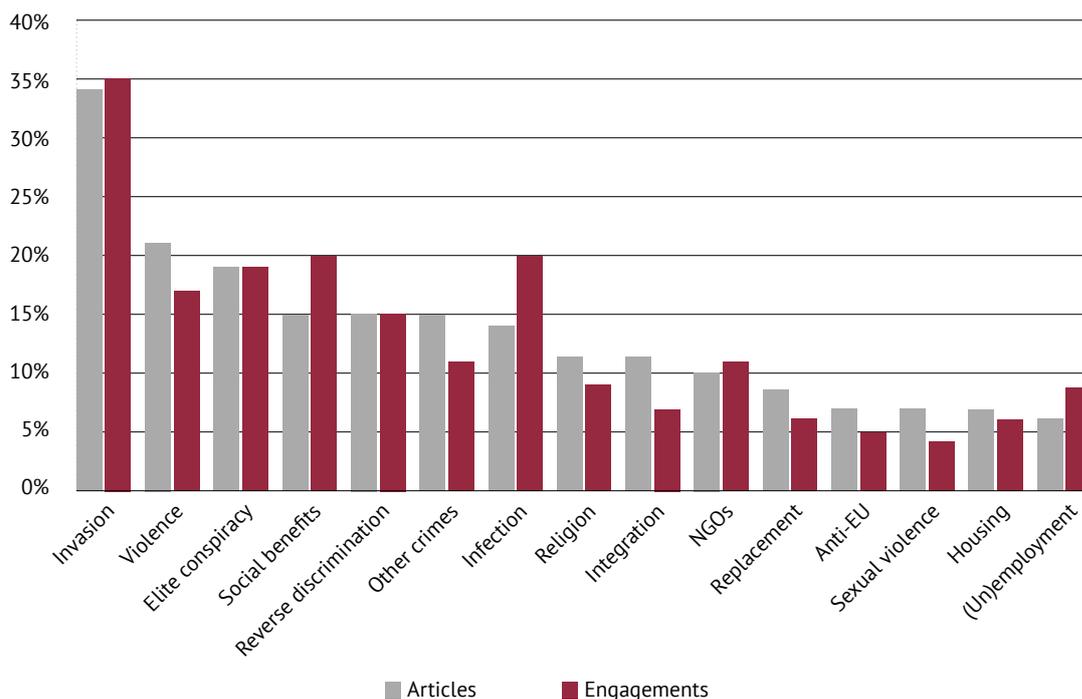
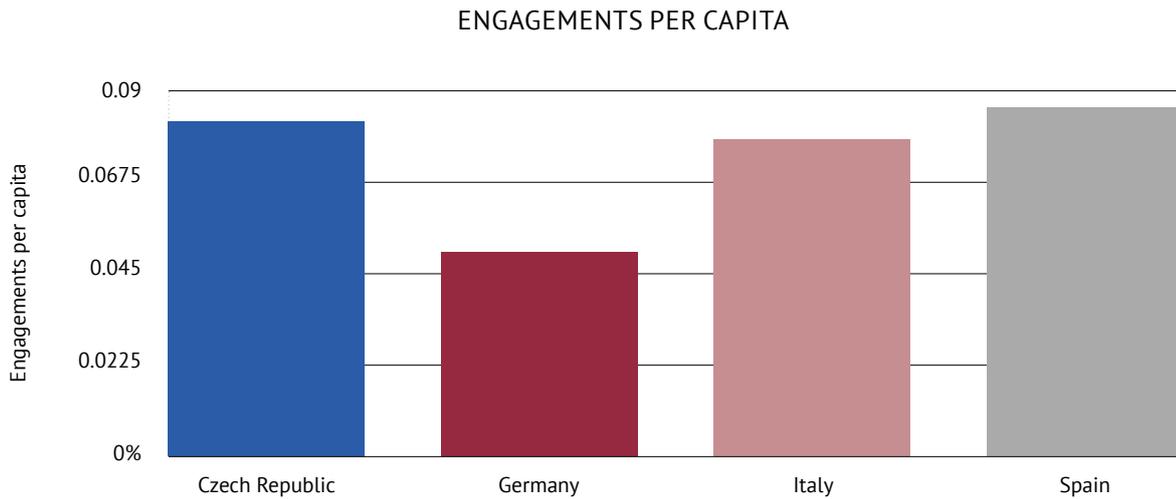


Fig. 11



experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Italy and Spain register a higher level of health-related frames from February 2020 onwards, owing in part to the prominence of the infection narrative in those countries as they struggled with some of the highest numbers of cases in Europe. However, this is not the whole story, as it does not account for the massively higher proportion of identity-related frames and lower appeal of wealth-related frames in Germany and the Czech Republic (see Figure 12).

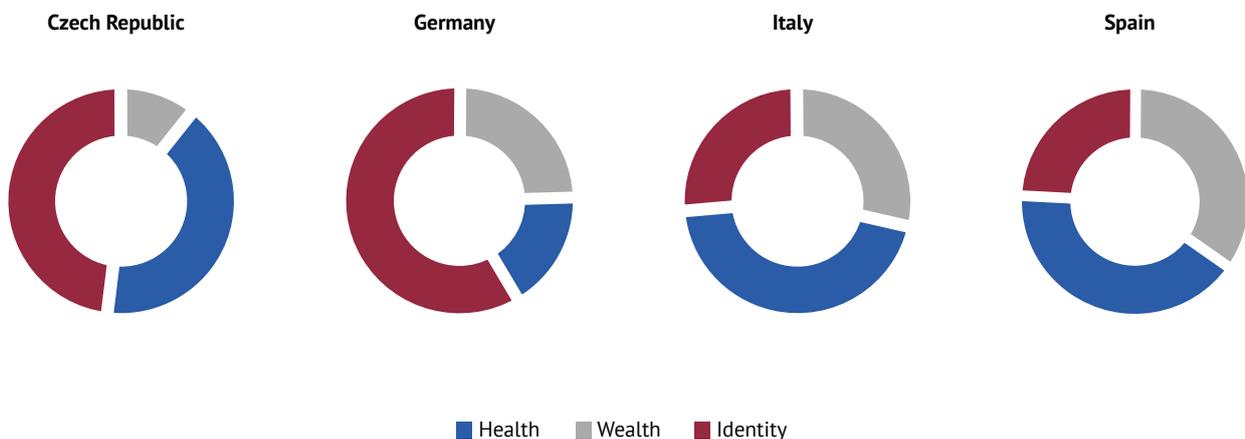
These differences may be accounted for by referring to the general political and economic situation in each country. Italy and Spain, still struggling with the impact of the last economic crisis and now facing another, are environments where insecurities about jobs and public spending have high salience that can easily be exploited by malicious actors, unlike comparatively

wealthy Germany. On the other hand, Germany's status as host to the largest number of refugees in Europe could serve to increase cultural concerns about the impact of migration on German society in the long term, beyond the immediate question of providing for arrivals. German parties and movements opposed to migration, such as the AfD and the PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West) movement, have tended to frame their opposition in terms of identity and belonging,<sup>90</sup> in contrast to the messaging of Italian and Spanish parties that prioritise security, health and jobs.

Many Central European countries not only have less experience with *immigration* but have experienced high rates of *emigration* in recent years, provoking widespread insecurity about demographic change and societal decline. According to UN projections, Central and Eastern European countries are expected to lose between 10% and

Fig. 12

### PROPORTION OF ARTICLES RELATING TO HEALTH, WEALTH AND IDENTITY FRAMES PER COUNTRY



20% of their populations by 2050.<sup>91</sup> Political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes have drawn a connection between Central Europe's experience of depopulation and the appeal of claims depicting migration as a threat.<sup>92</sup>

Although the Czech Republic enjoys a better demographic situation than many of its neighbours, with the population remaining steady over the last 15 to 20 years, it may be influenced by such debates from neighbouring Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Concerns about being 'forgotten by history' may also be appealing in a small country with experiences of invasion, providing support for identity-related fears. Finally, the Czech Republic's proximity to and connections with Germany make it especially fertile ground for claims depicting its western neighbour as decadent or dangerous.

While disinformation narratives vary between the countries in terms of content and prominence, it is common to find the same story appearing in multiple countries. Articles about migrant arrivals in Italy appear in the German media,<sup>93</sup> while Czech media reports on sexual assaults in Germany.<sup>94</sup> One incident that received significant attention was the case of Carola Rackete and *Sea-Watch 3*, which dominated both German and Italian media in July and August 2019. In Italy, her decision to ignore the port blockade was framed in conspiratorial tones as being ordered by Germany to destabilise the Italian government.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, in Germany, Rackete was depicted as a radical left-winger breaking the law and trying to bring dangerous migrants to Europe.<sup>95</sup> Such cross-border stories serve different purposes in different national contexts. These national differences underscore the importance of national and even local experience in determining the appeal of a given message.

#### 1.4. SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION

The material collected and analysed in this study points to the sheer scale of disinformation in the European online media sphere, with a total social media engagement reaching into the millions (though this does not necessarily imply that these articles have reached millions of people). While the study did not set out to determine the proportion of the online media landscape that consists of disinforming or questionable material, it appears that disinformation appears predominantly in fringe media, but also to a lesser extent in mainstream sources.

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**Only a handful of sources in each country account for a high proportion of the total articles and engagements.**

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The vast majority of sources repeatedly spreading disinformation are affiliated with the far-right, often openly, or imply a rejection of all political parties. While

the total number of pages and media outlets distributing disinformation is impossible to calculate, the research suggests that a handful of sources in each country account for a high proportion of the total articles and engagements. The full dataset covers 283 sources, but fewer than ten sources published more than half of each country's articles. This shows that disinformation narratives often originate from a few sources, but are multiplied and amplified by smaller sources and readers sharing and commenting on their contents.

The majority of the articles analysed (77%) were published in highly partisan or systematically misleading 'fringe media'. However, a significant minority also appeared in mainstream sources, whether sensationalist tabloids or respectable broadsheets. While only 13% to 15% of articles in Germany, Spain and the Czech Republic appeared in national mainstream media, this figure reached 25% in Italy, suggesting that Italian mainstream sources are disproportionately likely to spread inaccurate narratives about migrants. In fact, the Silvio Berlusconi-owned tabloid *Il Giornale*, with a daily circulation of 50,000 copies, accounted for more articles than any other Italian source (see Figure 13, page 26). Although not all the inaccurate information distributed by mainstream sources qualifies, strictly speaking, as intentional disinformation, it is clear that mainstream media plays a key role in spreading and legitimating threat-based narratives.

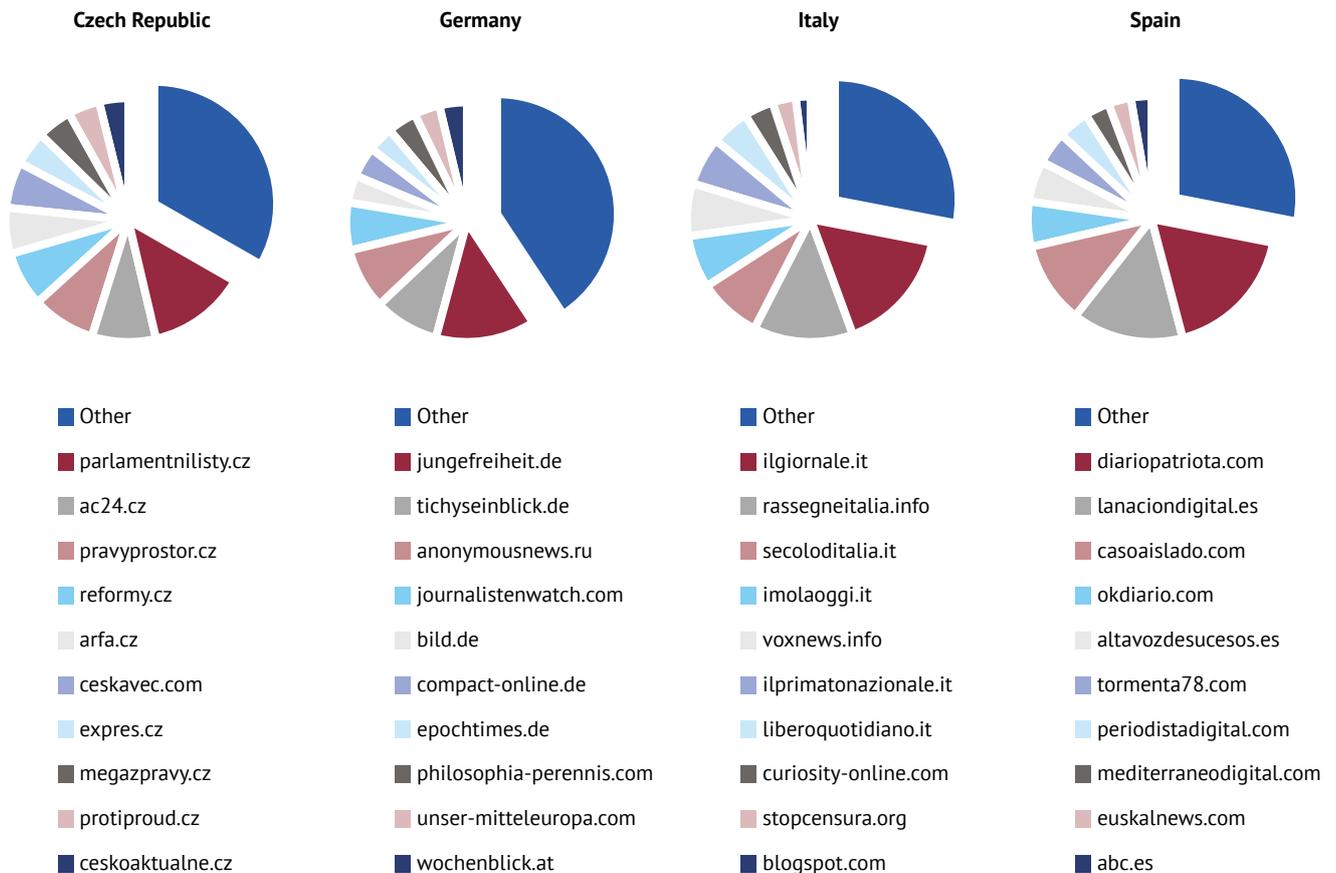
'Domestic' outlets clearly dedicated to a national audience obtained significantly more attention than the local pages of 'international' sources, including well-known Russian state-affiliated media, such as Sputnik and RT. Only 11 articles from the former and 6 from the latter appeared in the dataset (1% of the total), obtaining an average of just 5,000 engagements each. Thus, foreign-sponsored disinformation does not appear to be of high significance in this dataset. That said, the research does not allow us to draw conclusions about the funding or interests behind each source.

Two prominent exceptions appear among the most common sources in Germany. The *Epoch Times* is an international outlet that publishes in 18 languages, and its German-language version published several misleading and occasionally outright false articles about migration in the period under study. The outlet was founded by a group of Chinese Americans and is associated with the Falun Gong religious movement.<sup>97</sup> Another prominent site in Germany, anonymousnews.ru, does not make its ownership or affiliation clear. Nonetheless, its domain name implies a Russian connection. It appears to be registered in the Czech Republic.<sup>98</sup> The only other notable international source in the dataset is the *Gatestone Institute*, an American far-right think tank known for anti-Muslim articles which runs a Czech version of its website.<sup>99</sup>

Local news accounts for about one in ten articles in each country except for the Czech Republic, which, as a smaller country, has fewer local news sources. Like at the national level, local news sites can be mainstream and largely accurate, with only occasional disinforming material (4% of total articles), or cater to a fringe audience with extremist or biased messaging (8%). This finding

Fig. 13

SOURCES WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF ARTICLES, BY COUNTRY



resonates with national reports which emphasise that, in contrast with local media, national outlets contribute the most to maintaining negative stereotypes about migrants.<sup>100</sup> It also echoes the results of public opinion surveys indicating that the perception of migration is more positive at the local than national level.<sup>101</sup>

### 1.5. ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT SENTIMENT AND DISTRUST

In total, more than half of the articles analysed expressed some kind of anti-establishment views (55%), ranging from criticism of mainstream politicians for enabling migration to outright conspiracy theories. 7% of the total articles were explicitly anti-EU, while 10% contained hostility towards NGOs. This finding highlights a lack of trust in institutions and suspicions about the activities and goals of prominent NGOs, especially those carrying out search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean Sea.

**Many disinformation-spreading websites openly portray themselves as the views of a single blogger, who can develop a personal relationship with the reader.**

Nearly all of the fringe sources analysed in this study make no attempt to hide their opposition to and rejection of ‘establishment’ media and viewpoints. On the contrary, they revel in this difference and openly support radical political options. What is more, many disinformation-spreading websites openly portray themselves as the views of a single blogger, who can develop a personal relationship with the reader. Examples include *Tichys Einblick* in Germany and *Protiproud* (“Petr Hájek’s counterrevolutionary magazine”) in the Czech Republic.

In many cases, disinformation sources also refer to the unfounded statements of an influential personality or politician without any comment on their accuracy. In this way, disinformation reinforces the impression of a community directed against the mainstream, promoting its own message while simultaneously sowing distrust of views that might seek to contradict it.

Claims of conspiracy or unfairness are especially prominent where real events or policies lend credibility to them. Fully 37% of Czech articles refer to an elite conspiracy, often connected with the EU's alleged attempt to 'force' migrants on Central Europe and thereby violate

Czech national sovereignty. By contrast, in Italy, which has been marked by genuine emergencies over the period of study, only 18% of the articles imply a conspiracy. Most appeared in August 2019, during the political crisis after Salvini's League quit the coalition government.

As the findings demonstrate, fringe groups seek to normalise xenophobic discourses, turning reasonable concerns and legitimate frustrations into anger, with the potential of undermining social cohesion. The following chapter will explore how communicators can build effective strategies to address and undermine disinformation on migration.

# Chapter 2: Countering disinformation with alternative narratives

Chapter 1 demonstrates the patterns that are widespread in disinformation narratives relating to migration in several different European contexts, both geographical and temporal. For communicators who seek to counteract disinformation, the data provides several lessons.

## LESSON 1

**Almost all narratives and frames are threat-based, exploiting readers' concerns.** The goal of disinformation actors is to promote the view that the current democratic system is not able to provide security and prosperity to its citizens, encouraging them to be open to radical shifts in policy or leadership. Sensitive subjects like migration are merely a means to this end. They seek to draw a link between concerns and the supposed threat posed by migrants or migration policy. They depict migrants as alien to Western culture or religion; terrorists or criminals; competitors over jobs; and, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, a threat to public health. In other words, they promote an 'us versus them' mentality. In this context, threat-based narratives can lead to increased levels of insecurity about jobs, crime and culture, and hence greater public support for restrictive policies and anti-immigration agendas.<sup>102</sup>

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**Alternative narratives should address the public's concerns while also undermining artificial links with migration.**

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These insecurities exist irrespective of migratory phenomena. In countries severely hit by pandemics or economic crises, for example, the public may have reasonable concerns about health or employment prospects. Nevertheless, disinformation actors try to exploit these fears by misleading the public into assuming the existence of a causal nexus between immigration and health risks or unemployment. Thus, alternative narratives should address the public's concerns while also undermining artificial links with migration. In other words, communicators should acknowledge insecurities but also separate fact from fiction surrounding migration.

## LESSON 2

**The line between a *disinformation* narrative and a narrative that is merely hostile or anti-migration is not always clear-cut.** All disinformation narratives

identified in the course of this study are hostile towards migration. They all deliberately attempt to elicit an emotional reaction in the reader, regardless of the *factualness* of a given story. However, not all hostile messages are disinforming.

Only 16% of all the articles identified in this study contain demonstrably false information, while the majority are misleading or unverifiable. This is further complicated by the fact that the very definition of *disinformation* is not black and white, but is subject to a certain degree of interpretation, especially given the prevalence of distorted and misleading information.

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**Fact-checking should be employed carefully, while efforts should be devoted to 'prebunking'. By furthering digital literacy and pre-emptively addressing concerns, it is possible to create mental antibodies and psychological resilience against hostile frames.**

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This lesson confirms that fact-checking does not constitute a sufficient answer to the complexity of the disinformation landscape in Europe. In fact, it risks repeating hostile frames and reinforcing their underlying message. Fact-checking should therefore be employed carefully, while efforts should be devoted to 'prebunking'. By furthering digital literacy and pre-emptively addressing concerns, it is possible to create mental antibodies and psychological resilience against hostile frames amongst the public.

## LESSON 3

**The actors promoting hostile narratives about migration employ values effectively and systematically.**<sup>103</sup>

In their campaigns, disinformation actors mostly appeal to values associated with anti-immigration policies, such as security and tradition. However, many disinformation sources also tap into values that are generally linked with *pro-migrants'* rights positions.

For example, stories of reverse discrimination seek to elicit a sympathetic response for those who belong to the in-group and have lost their job or house. These stories are based on the value of benevolence, inspiring feelings of solidarity and care while simultaneously pitching the needs of the local community against those of migrants.<sup>104</sup>

Disinformation actors appeal to the emotions and values of their readers, particularly those who feel their concerns are not taken seriously, to draw them away from mainstream debate and co-opt them into their own “community of values”.<sup>105</sup> This attempt to build a like-minded community is reinforced by social media ‘echo chambers’, whereby the content displayed to users is determined with reference to what they have already seen and ‘liked’. Community-building among disinformation actors is evident from the extent to which fringe media sources share material among themselves and reproduce each other’s content.

In response, the goal of alternative narratives should be to arrest this drift away from ‘mainstream’ positions and undermine the appeal of the frames used by disinformation actors. Many studies making recommendations on how to communicate about migration have tried to promote a positive view of the topic, also using values to segment and target their audience more precisely. However, most campaigns and advocacy strategies in favour of protecting migrants’ rights continue to be almost exclusively based on *universalist* values, such as humanitarianism and solidarity. In doing so, they prioritise liberal and progressive groups, neglecting those with different value systems who do not actively support their cause.

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**The priority should be to provide a middle ground where people with fears and insecurities, and those with more conservative or traditional values, also feel heard.**

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Those who do not share these views and are exposed to disinformation may therefore drift towards the extremes in search of a place where they ‘fit in’. The information environment is often dominated by a polarised discussion where most messages are either enthusiastically pro-migrants’ rights or fanatically opposed to immigration. In order to further resilience against disinformation, the priority should be to provide a middle ground where people with fears and insecurities, and those with more conservative or traditional values, also feel heard.

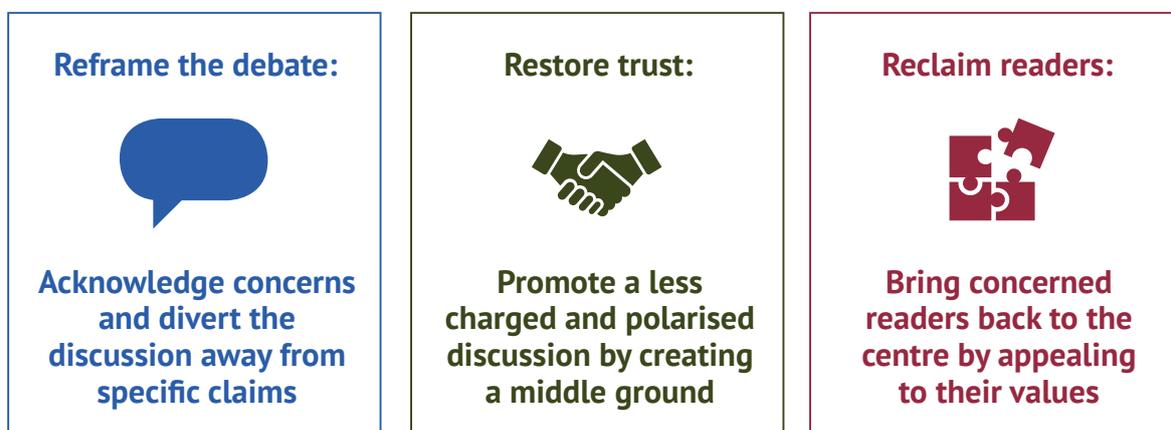
It is for this reason that this Issue Paper advocates developing and promoting **alternative narratives** that can (i) **reframe the debate**; (ii) **restore trust** between groups; and ultimately (iii) **reclaim readers** who might otherwise be drawn into radical positions through disinformation (see Figure 14).

Changing the narrative does not entail manipulating public opinion or promoting an ‘official’, politically correct take. Rather, it aims to rebalance the public debate by replacing negative clichés with a more objective and balanced view about migration that can also stimulate forward-looking and inclusive policies. This is a delicate task which requires careful planning and tailor-made strategies. To some extent, it involves beating disinformation actors ‘at their own game’. In order to promote alternative narratives effectively, it is necessary to find adequate communication-based responses to the challenges raised by disinformation identified in Chapter 1.

To facilitate this task, this Issue Paper offers nine recommendations for communication actors. Although they are mainly intended for European, national and local institutional authorities, they can also be used by campaign managers and advocacy officers working for international organisations, political groups or NGOs that wish to contribute to normalising the debate.

Fig. 14

#### THE THREEFOLD GOAL OF ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES



The recommendations contain key principles relating to the three aspects of any communication strategy. These are the **message**, the **medium** and the **audience**.



## 2.1. THE MESSAGE

The success of disinformation narratives rests partly on the systematic way in which they use negative emotions to evoke angry responses in the public. They also exploit fears to steer public attention and polarise the discourse. In this context, new narratives must be able to calm insecurities by taking into account widely held concerns. In other words, the message must resonate with the lived experience of the target audience. At the same time, to promote a balanced narrative of migration, the message must not reproduce stereotypes nor push the targeted audience towards negative frames.

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**The message must resonate with the lived experience of the target audience.**

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The goal of a counter-communication strategy’s **message** should therefore be to **reframe the topic of discussion**, breaking disinformation’s equation of migration with concepts of threat, negativity or fear. Communicators must choose a message that is relevant to their audience’s needs and employs simple, appealing yet precise language (see Figure 15).

### 2.1.1. Craft messages which resonate with lived experience

Disinformation narratives do not develop in a vacuum; they respond to and exacerbate existing (and shifting) concerns. In order to counteract them, alternative narratives must resonate equally well – or better – with the needs of the target audience.

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**Offering a positive frame of interpretation that ignores the wider socioeconomic environment – the public’s concerns and values – is unlikely to be effective.**

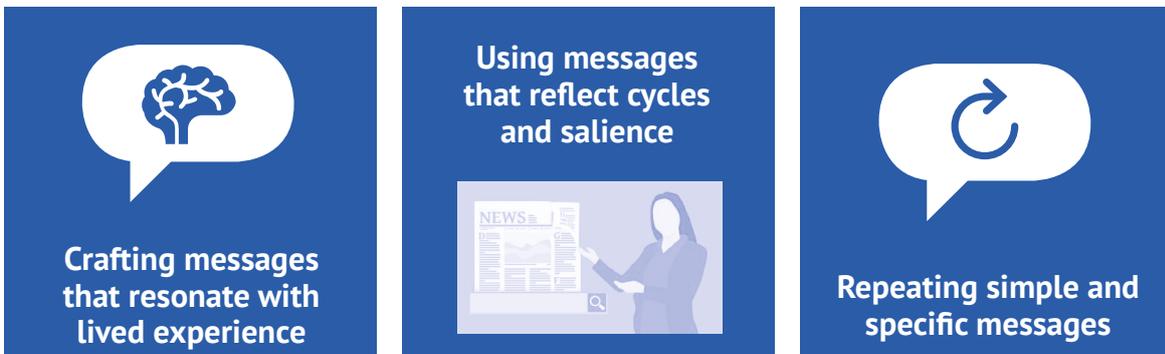
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Most narratives responding to hostile frames portray migrants as helpless victims.<sup>106</sup> Many communicators also advise using positive emotions and ‘humanitarian’ frames that can trigger a sympathetic response in the public. However, offering a positive frame of interpretation that ignores the wider socioeconomic environment – the public’s concerns and values – is unlikely to be effective, simply because it may not be relevant for the audience. In fact, pushing dissonant narratives could even produce a backfire effect, leading to further alienation in the targeted group or greater hostility towards the source and/or subject of the communication. The absence of stories and messages between the two extremes also fails to show migrants as ‘ordinary people’, such as in their capacity as teachers, nurses or firefighters. To a certain extent, this absence also contributes to polarising the debate.

Fig. 15

### KEY COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE MESSAGE

Reframe the debate away from disinformation claims by:



Alternative narratives must have ‘social currency’ and resonate with the audience’s everyday experiences. However, developing messages that reflect public concerns does not mean fuelling those concerns. Rather, it implies – and requires – a change of perspective. Behind fears and insecurities lie aspirations and wishes. Anxieties about the pace and intensity of cultural and social change accompany a yearning for stronger cultural bonds and greater social cohesion. Worries about violence and infectious diseases exist alongside a desire for physical integrity and a healthy life. Fears about lawlessness and reverse discrimination co-exist with feelings of care and solidarity, and with aspirations for fairness and justice. Concerns about the economy and (un)employment can be translated into hopes for stability and a prosperous future.

By saying more about the desired change than the problem, alternative narratives can employ positive frameworks that do not ignore concerns. For example, concerns about inequality and corruption – a likely motivation for the appeal of wealth-related disinformation narratives – can be countered by promoting an inclusive vision of intergroup solidarity, demonstrating how migrant and non-migrant communities face the same issues. Similarly, disinformation which exploits fears about unemployment and the consequences of economic recessions can be countered by promoting the vision of a society where the contribution of every person is vital. However, this strategy will only work so long as these messages resonate with the audience’s values (see section 2.3.1).

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**By saying more about the desired change than the problem, alternative narratives can employ positive frameworks that do not ignore concerns.**

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Such a strategy applies to all threat-based discourses, whether identity-, wealth- or health-related. The outbreak of COVID-19 presented unprecedented challenges, but also opportunities to effectively promote alternative narratives about migration. The success of campaigns and widespread commentaries highlighting the essential role played by migrant doctors and care workers during the pandemic originated from campaigners’ awareness about the ascendancy of health-related concerns.<sup>107</sup> This was effectively combined with positive messaging that resonated with peoples’ concerns and needs and contributed to reassuring those influenced by fear-mongering disinformation. It is possible that coordinated and sustained campaigning about this issue raised the sense of a ‘shared future’ and the perceived value of strong and cohesive communities in the aftermath of the first wave of the pandemic, as demonstrated by opinion polls.<sup>108</sup>

These campaigns evoke a shared feeling of vulnerability and exposure to a common threat (i.e. COVID-19), while

simultaneously stressing the growing perception of togetherness, solidarity and empathy. By referring to its audience’s real-world, everyday experience during the crisis, such messaging creates resilience against threat-based disinformation and helps to normalise the discourse about migration.

Campaigns promoting the vision of a shared future in the face of common challenges also undermine the ‘us versus them’ frame pushed by disinformation narratives, thus opposing their divisive and polarising rhetoric. If the concern is addressed and the need acknowledged, this ‘larger us’ framework makes it possible to bring about the desired shift in public discourse and erode the artificial link between the alleged threat and migration. It opens up opportunities to gradually shift the discourse away from hostile narratives towards inclusive solutions.

### **2.1.2. Use messages which reflect news cycles and salience**

This study’s research findings demonstrate that disinformation actors are quick to react to changes in the news cycle (see Chapter 1). A communication strategy built on fact-checking or counternarratives will trail behind the disinformation agenda. By the time a narrative has been established, it is too late to combat it effectively.

In developing pre-emptive alternative narratives, communicators should pay attention to which narratives are generating high levels of engagement from an early stage, and compare new stories with historical trends. They should also consider periods of special interest when individuals are likely to seek out information about specific issues of interest or concern, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic or the European Parliament election.<sup>109</sup> Depending on which disinformation narrative is gaining the most traction, communicators may wish to refocus their efforts on a specific concern (e.g. economics, security, values, health). This does not mean *reacting* to disinformation, but rather *anticipating* the direction in which the conversation may go, and preventing it from being driven towards hostile narratives.

For this reason, forecasting should be at the heart of future communication and advocacy strategies. Communicators should aim to create resilience, particularly before a certain negative frame becomes part of the news cycle. In other words, the focus should be not on *debunking*, but *prebunking*: inoculating readers and internet users against likely future disinformation while undermining the appeal of a given narrative by being the first to stake that ground and address the relevant concern. Using the momentum created by external events and having a degree of first-mover’s advantage can be invaluable in the fast-paced (dis)information landscape.

The rise in frequency of a certain narrative does not necessarily warrant a response, as it merely proves that disinformation actors are pushing its visibility. Communication actors should thus consider whether specific disinformation narratives are receiving significant social media engagement before crafting alternatives, to avoid inadvertently boosting the original message or

concern. Similarly, should the forecasted concern turn out not to be the focus of disinformation, there is a risk that pre-emptive communication could be counterproductive and actually raise the topic's salience. Thus, these messages should be crafted carefully to ensure that they do not raise concerns that do not already exist. Rather, they should establish frames that will contribute to a balanced, moderate debate, even if the subject does not become a prominent topic of disinformation.

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**Communication actors should consider whether specific disinformation narratives are receiving significant social media engagement before crafting alternatives, to avoid inadvertently boosting the original message or concern.**

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The news cycle is fast-paced; what dominates the news is quickly replaced by another story. Communicators should be able to adjust narratives quickly to respond to events, as disinformation actors do. Messages that worked in the past will not necessarily work again, so updating them for new contexts is crucial. For example, in the immediate future, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the likely long-term recession will heighten the salience of economic concerns. Xenophobic groups will try to exploit the population's legitimate anxiety about the economic recession and job prospects to redirect frustrations against migrant groups. Narratives highlighting the contribution by doctors, frontline workers and emergency workers with a migratory background in the fight against the pandemic may no longer resonate effectively with peoples' immediate concerns.

Given the ongoing growth of hostile narratives exploiting economic anxieties (with wealth-related frames accounting for almost 52% of the 102 articles in May 2020), a communication strategy that stresses an alternative vision is needed now to prevent such a narrative from gaining hold later. Upcoming concerns about the economy could be addressed by referring to the high share of migrants among 'key workers' who deliver essential services during economic crises, and their contribution to 'systemic resilience'.<sup>110</sup> In European societies with shrinking workforces, or those facing economic decline, migrant workers help to ensure the sustainability of welfare systems. An appropriately timed economic frame could thus undermine the myth of lazy, welfare-dependent foreigners (or other stereotypical depictions of migrant workers) while also strengthening the narrative of a 'larger us', whose present and future prosperity depends on the contribution of all.

Forecasting implies identifying the right moment to promote alternative narratives. Equally important is considering when it is appropriate *not* to enter the

debate. The prevalence of disinformation narratives about migration feeds and is fed by the salience of the topic, thus moving migration back to the headlines and higher in the political agenda. When this happens, threat-based discourses can mobilise increasing numbers of supporters. For this reason, radical actors are keen to maintain the high salience of migration. Communication strategies must therefore carefully weigh the pros and cons of entering the debate at a particular time. Inundating the news with migration-related campaigns may inadvertently contribute to keeping it a salient issue, thus making it easier for disinformation actors to reproduce negative frames. This would be an obstacle to a normalised discourse on the topic.

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**Communication strategies must carefully weigh the pros and cons of entering the debate at a particular time. Inundating the news with migration-related campaigns may inadvertently contribute to keeping it a salient issue.**

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When migration is no longer in the headlines, public attention towards other salient issues can be used to promote a larger but consistent narrative. For example, it can be resituated on wider structural inequalities, of which migration is a component, thus keeping migration-related issues proportionate in the debate.

However, not talking about migration per se at particular times does not entail leaving the field open to the agenda set by radical actors. On the contrary, it means using alternative narratives to pre-empt the appeal of their frames. For example, in the case of campaigns addressing inequality, commentators should be mindful of the increasing reverse discrimination claims (which rose from 11% in the pre-COVID period to 21% post-February 2020) and of the narrative that portrays migrants as the chief or only beneficiaries of housing or employment policies. Accordingly, communicators should build their messages around the idea that equality is not a zero-sum game and that it can only grow if nobody is left behind.

By reinforcing awareness of challenges faced by society as a whole, and reminding all groups that a stronger and more cohesive society is within reach, the migration debate can be directed away from divisiveness and depicted as a small part of a greater project in which everyone is involved.

### **2.1.3. Repeat simple and specific messages**

Faced with complex and multifaceted phenomena such as migration, part of what makes hostile narratives successful is their simplicity. A simple message, repeated often, is more attractive than overly complicated communication,

even if closer to reality. For example, disinformation actors typically use “emotional data”: they convert figures into sources of the threat itself, particularly but not exclusively when discussing the alleged ‘migrant invasion’.<sup>111</sup> It does not matter if statistics are manipulated, or sources unreliable. Readers can cherry-pick only those elements within each story which resonate with their pre-existing biases and fill the gaps with their own prejudices as long as contradictory stories remain coherent with a broader and simpler narrative.<sup>112</sup>

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### **A simple message, repeated often, is more attractive than overly complicated communication.**

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In this context, technical communication which exposes fabrications and distortions with hard numbers and statistics will not convince. Technicalities and complex language not only make the message less accessible but may undermine public trust further. Legal or political jargon can also be easily exploited by disinformation actors who deliberately use it to reproduce stereotypes and mock overly bureaucratic official responses to migration, depicting it as ineffective or conspiratorial. Developing understandable messages and adopting simple everyday language wherever possible thus becomes a priority.

Even the choice of individual words can make a big difference. Disinformation actors consistently use everyday terms in their communication, associating them with negative frames. In the Italian media, for example, this is illustrated by the word *clandestino* (clandestine, illegal immigrant), which is used contemptuously to refer to foreign nationals regardless of their status.<sup>113</sup> Spanish sources use *menas*, an acronym to refer to unaccompanied foreign minors, to build a negative narrative around them. Although the term is seemingly neutral and has been used for years in Spanish legislation and immigration studies, in the hands of hostile messengers it is used to divert attention away from the fact that they are children and instead portray them as foreign delinquents.<sup>114</sup> (See Figure 9, page 22, for more details of how widespread such terms are in the articles analysed for this study.)

Strict adherence to technically correct terms, or distinctions between a migrant, refugee, asylum seeker and further sub-categories like economic migrant or unaccompanied minor, may be of significance to policymakers, experts and informed readers; however, it could be a barrier to effective communication with other audiences. Communicators who have successfully used the correct legal terminology should continue to do so where appropriate. However, those targeting a general audience should consider alternatives to the broad terms embedded in hostile narratives, and choose terms that resonate within the context of alternative narratives.

For example, experts have proposed to replace terms such as *migrant* and *refugee* with *newcomers*, *persons with a refugee background*, or simply *people on the move*.<sup>115</sup> These terms are not only easier to understand, but also have the benefit of showing that being a migrant is not a permanent status. Thus, employing a different and simpler lexicon can help normalise the discourse and undermine clichés. When crafting the message, communication actors should also exclude specific terms that have been effectively ‘captured’ by hostile messengers who echo them sarcastically to highlight supposedly failed policies. The terms *diversity* and *multiculturalism*, for example, are extensively used by disinformation messengers in connection with narratives of violence.<sup>116</sup> *Integration* is also cited ironically to imply that migrants cannot integrate into European societies and that liberal governments have failed in their efforts.

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Example headlines:<sup>117</sup>

*“The Swedish government has lost control of the country: 120 bombings in six months. Integration of migrants in practice”* (Czech Republic)

*“Multicultural enrichment has reached us: an African refugee raped a 16-year-old near Terezín!”* (Czech Republic)

*“Racism against non-Muslims at a ‘school without racism”* (Germany)

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The message should be not only simple but specific. In particular, it should be connected to the local realities of the target audience (see section 2.2.1). Appealing to universal justice and peaceful coexistence are strongly evocative visions. However, they are also abstract and excessively broad.<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, in all countries except for the Czech Republic, a large share of disinformation concerns specific local events, incidents and developments which tap into and feed local residents’ concerns and fears (30% of the articles). In response, communicators must also craft messages which resonate with the local reality, to undermine narratives portraying migrants as a threat to local communities.

Finally, the reliability of the message is reinforced by its regularity. Prebunking requires sustained and persistent communication, rather than isolated efforts or excessively frequent messaging over a short space of time. To reinforce prejudices and clichés, disinformation actors produce a constant stream of alarming stories. For example, when reporting on local incidents and developments, they often refer to what may seem to be small, trivial incidents. However, they can deliberately be depicted as part of a broader pattern, leading the reader to conclusions not necessarily supported by isolated instances. This is especially the case with disinformation stories relating to migrant violence, which often subtly imply trends via language that suggests regularity and/or repetition.



## 2.2. THE MEDIUM

**The reliability of the message is reinforced by its regularity. Prebunking requires sustained and persistent communication, rather than isolated efforts or excessively frequent messaging over a short space of time.**

Most people do not decide on the issues that are important to them based on a rigorous analysis of the ‘facts’ at their disposal. Rather, they relate to and connect with certain people who they consider trustworthy and/or inspiring, internalising the views that those trusted messengers promote – so long as they correspond to their values.<sup>121</sup> This instinctual, emotional social connection is skilfully exploited by some disinformation actors who create their own brand ambassadors, spreading their narratives through social and identity-based appeal instead of convincing arguments.

Example headlines:<sup>119</sup>

*“Series of rapes all over Germany. Bonn, Potsdam, Munich... How much more will Germans endure?”* (Czech Republic)

*“Muslims break confinement again and call to prayer from the Old Cathedral of Lleida”* (Spain)

*“Germans go empty-handed again: 100 brand new laptops for illegal migrants in Hanover”* (Germany)

*“Another rape: foreigner under suspicion. [...] The series of rapes by foreigners continues.”* (Germany)

Most disinformation sources refer to events and developments from a local perspective, pitching local interests against those of the EU, governments or the elites. Many sources also pose as legitimate local news channels to gain readers’ trust and credibility. Messages referring to local events are then taken up and published in other national contexts, generating high levels of engagement by being connected to threat-based frames and narratives that are prevalent and resonant in the new audience’s national context. Whether through ‘local sources’ or coordinated actions at the transnational level, disinformation actors sow divisions among groups and erode trust in national and supranational institutions by presenting themselves as the voices of a community or group more in touch with the needs of ‘real people’ than the establishment, mainstream media or ‘intellectuals’.

What is more, research in political communication and media psychology studying viewers’ reaction to news indicates that audiences tend to remember stories that trigger fears better than those with positive frames.<sup>120</sup> Hence, communicators must vigorously promote alternative narratives over time and expose their target audience to a consistent flow of messaging to counteract the impact of negative frames. At the same time, they must create greater resilience against disinformation to deny disinformation actors the opportunity to blow single incidents out of proportion.

**Communicators must choose the medium which enables them to reach the targeted audiences ‘where they are’ – in environments where they feel comfortable and will be more receptive to new messaging.**

Fig. 16

### THE MEDIUM AND MESSENGER

Restore trust, providing a middle ground by:

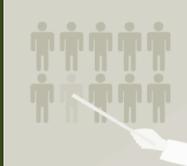


**Using trusted messengers as amplifiers**



**Coordinating activities and communication strategies**

**Identifying the most appropriate communication channel**



In seeking to develop a counterstrategy, communicators must also consider the **medium** and messenger: How should the message be delivered? How should its delivery be coordinated and organised? Above all, the aim of determining an appropriate medium should be to **restore trust** by breaking existing echo chambers and providing a middle ground where people with different backgrounds can discuss migration objectively and critically, without feeling pulled to one or the other extreme. Communicators must choose the medium which enables them to reach the targeted audiences ‘where they are’ – in environments where they feel comfortable and will be more receptive to new messaging (see Figure 16).

### 2.2.1. Use trusted messengers as amplifiers

Conspiracy theories and distrust make it difficult for political institutions (at both national and supranational levels) and mainstream media to reach those who have already been influenced by disinformation, as they are often subject to suspicion of political motives. This is especially the case for European institutions and prominent pro-migrants’ rights NGOs, which are often the subject of persistent disinformation and discrediting campaigns.

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**Conspiracy theories and distrust make it difficult for political institutions and mainstream media to reach those who have already been influenced by disinformation.**

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For this reason, the ability of institutional actors to reach the target audience is limited, and initial responsibility for communicating should be delegated to those who can do so best. Giving voice to others, or encouraging them to speak up under their own initiative, is also necessary because EU institutions and Brussels-based organisations face the additional challenge of the lack of a ‘European body politic’ with which they can communicate. Governmental institutions and international organisations should rely on communication experts who are more familiar with local contexts and interests and the values of the targeted audience.<sup>122</sup> The European Commission uses its representations in the member states to do this, but they too must contend with distrust or resistance to ‘official’ messaging.

Media and journalists play an important role in this respect, and EU support for independent media foreseen in the European Commission’s forthcoming Democracy Action Plan is intended to help promote a high standard of journalistic ethics and help the European media sector cope with economic challenges.

However, communicators should also consider going beyond the media and involving trusted messengers *within* communities to deliver the message, and cooperating with ‘amplifiers’ who enjoy a privileged relationship with the target audience. The trusted messenger or amplifier must be someone who can relate to the group and ‘speaks their language’. It should be someone who can meet them ‘where they are’, using their own preferred medium of interaction and communication to engage them in discussion and trigger their interest to discover more. Such intermediaries do not need to be supported financially or formally involved in communication campaigns, although this may be an option. Merely providing such people with the techniques and talking points for positive communication and encouraging them to speak up within their communities on their own initiative can also be an effective way to reach the hard-to-reach.

The best-trusted messengers are likely to be those who are not already associated with migration or even with ‘political’ topics at all. Friends and family members are among the best messengers, as they already enjoy a bond of trust with the audience. Community leaders, such as employers, doctors and clergy, can also be effective. Cultural figures like celebrities and influencers can help to bring messages into environments where they are unexpected and so likely to be effective.

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**The best-trusted messengers are likely to be those who are not already associated with migration or even with ‘political’ topics at all.**

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Migrants themselves can and should be messengers, as sustained interaction with the targeted group can be especially effective in breaking down stereotypes. A prominent example is Alphonso Davies, the Bayern Munich footballer born to Liberian parents in a refugee camp in Ghana, who uses his public profile and social media platforms to raise awareness and fundraise in support of refugees.<sup>123</sup> The involvement of celebrities is not only helpful for strengthening alternative narratives, but also for migrants and refugees themselves, as it encourages them to follow their footsteps. Following Davies’ example, the direct participation of migrants from all walks of life in the production and distribution of new messages – particularly if in partnership with local associations and schools – is to be encouraged, since this can highlight their positive social and economic contribution while also building bridges with residents and their needs (see section 2.2.2).<sup>124</sup>

### 2.2.2. Coordinate activities and communication strategies

Giving voice to other actors who are better positioned to face the public directly does not mean that governmental institutions and international organisations should remain silent, or that they have no role to play. Rather, other actors are needed to first break through to the resistant audience (see section 2.3.2). After the audience's willingness to listen to an alternative narrative has been established, they may return to 'mainstream' messengers with a more trusting ear.

Meanwhile, institutional actors should work in partnership with local actors and civil society to raise awareness about threat-based disinformation and normalise the public debate about migration. At the institutional level, municipal authorities are best situated to reach out to local audiences. Local actors are generally more trusted than national or European-level authorities.<sup>125</sup> Civil society organisations (CSOs) and grassroots movements are also better positioned than prominent international organisations to reach out to targeted groups and create opportunities for their sustained social interaction with persons with a migratory background.

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**Institutional actors should work in partnership with local actors and civil society to raise awareness about threat-based disinformation and normalise the public debate about migration.**

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An example of a collaboration between civil society and regional authorities is the Spanish Federación Andalucía Acoge and its *Stop Rumores* initiative, a network of local organisations that combines depolarising techniques and communication-based responses with in-person meetings. The initiative's aim is to pre-empt disinformation narratives and normalise the debate.<sup>126</sup>

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Promoting messages that are tailored to a specific local environment also minimises the risk of reproducing broad assumptions and strengthening negative frames by using the same message across the board. For example, communication responses to disinformation about unemployment or 'social dumping' (e.g. employers recruiting workers from abroad to pay lower wages) may not be best fought with national or international campaigns and initiatives, since not every locality is equally affected by this wealth-related disinformation narrative. The unfounded claim that migrants steal jobs or have preferential access to social services especially

holds sway in areas where there are predominantly low- and medium-skilled workers and native workers have no stable income.<sup>127</sup>

In relation to this, researchers also found that strong feelings of economic insecurity, and the perceived threat constituted by migrants, are also present among those who are employed, making them as vulnerable to threat-based stories as the unemployed.<sup>128</sup> It is thus in local settings that specific campaigns can more effectively avoid polarisation, rather than at the national or international level.

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**It is in local settings that specific campaigns can more effectively avoid polarisation, rather than at the national or international level.**

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The involvement of multiple messengers who can deliver ad hoc messages and combine different frames for different audiences is vital for promoting alternative narratives and creating societal resilience against disinformation.<sup>129</sup> In relation to this, however, communication actors, especially from CSOs, have highlighted the lack of a sector-wide network where they can share successful practices and discuss narrative tactics on specific issues.<sup>130</sup> Successful campaigns and strategies could be replicated in different localities and even abroad, so long as they are connected to the concerns, aspirations and values of the targeted audience. In this context, resources should be invested in strengthening cooperation and coordination among communication actors.

To this end, alliances of like-minded communicators can work together to increase the reach and regularity of their message, helping to turn a number of individual communication campaigns into a coherent *metanarrative* that can compete with the ubiquity of disinformation frames and themes (on metanarratives, see section 2.3.3). However, they must bear in mind any potential weaknesses: one weak link can be enough for disinformation actors to seek to discredit the whole coalition. For example, EU institutions should consider whether their direct participation is strategically necessary, or whether it would allow the whole effort to be depicted as propagandistic. On the other hand, the explicit presence of EU institutions or national government ministries in a communication campaign could be an advantage in some instances, such as to demonstrate real commitment to a policy change.

### 2.2.3. Identify the most appropriate communication channel

Much of the debate on disinformation focuses on online sources, especially social media. Although disinformation is not limited to online media, the

circulation of hoaxes and half-truths has been facilitated by the democratisation of the media, (more) affordable hosting services and web design, and the proliferation of online social networks. The online environment is also dominated by short attention spans, sensationalist content and algorithmic echo chambers. Disinformation actors are adept at using the opportunities provided by social media to maximise their outreach.<sup>151</sup> However, communicators also have a variety of both online and offline channels to reach potential audiences, and should make the most of them.

When considering which medium is most effective to reach a specific group, the answer partly depends on where that group typically accesses its information – here, too, they should be met ‘where they are’. However, identifying the appropriate channel may not be straightforward. Different social media platforms are used by different communities and demographics, and there are significant differences between countries. Communication actors should not exclusively rely on the online platforms they themselves are most familiar with, such as Twitter, if their targeted audience is exposed to disinformation on Facebook or YouTube.

Having a communication presence on the same platform used by disinformation actors is desirable, as it will allow communicators to demonstrate to that platform’s users that disinformation is not uncontested, and that the hostile narratives it promotes are not the only options. Nevertheless, it need not be the exclusive or even primary medium of a campaign. Above all, the false dichotomy between online and offline should be avoided. Even people who consume most of their media virtually talk with their family and peers and share information face-to-face, too. Thus, the offline sphere is every bit as important as the online one – perhaps even more so, because our interactions in person tend to be associated with a higher level of trust and credibility than hyperbolic online content.

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### **The false dichotomy between online and offline should be avoided.**

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For those who are exposed to disinformation in the context of a polarised online environment, exposure to contrary messaging in the ‘real world’ can help to highlight the disconnection between their everyday experience and the material they are exposed to online. Even such simple methods as messaging through offline advertising spaces (e.g. bus stops, billboards) can serve this purpose.

Offering opportunities for sustained interaction in person should also be a priority, as it is this environment that offers the best opportunities for trusted intermediaries like family and community members to make a difference. In-person exchanges involving members of different

groups, including persons with a migratory background, can help reduce intergroup anxiety and create greater resilience against threat-based disinformation.

This anxiety, researchers have found, derives in part from the belief that members of an ‘outgroup’ are potentially dangerous and pose a threat to the individual or society at large.<sup>152</sup> This message is easy for disinformation actors to promote so long as their audience has little or no real-world experience to counteract it. However, it is met with greater resistance if the reader has had positive personal experiences with members of that outgroup. Through contact sessions, migrants and natives can work towards common goals, experience intergroup empathy and forge new bonds. Positive intergroup contact thus helps to reduce anxieties and undermines threat-based disinformation. Such contact can be promoted by CSOs or local authorities through community events attended by both locals and migrants.

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### **Positive intergroup contact helps to reduce anxieties and undermines threat-based disinformation.**

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This has clearly become more difficult in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent restrictions on in-person meetings. During this period, people are spending more time online and therefore may have been more exposed to disinformation. This has raised the relative importance of effective online campaigns and channels, such as media coverage. However, it has simultaneously raised feelings of community solidarity, which can be used as an opportunity for communication campaigns to obtain a favourable reaction from people who may previously have been opposed.



### **2.3. THE AUDIENCE**

Disinformation actors seek to build a community of loyal readers, drawing people *away* from the mainstream debate and towards more radical positions. Above all, disinformation actors aim to polarise the debate, implying that there is no middle ground and thus forcing people to choose between extremes. With the exception of those who have already been radicalised, those who are at greatest risk of being manipulated by this polarising rhetoric belong to the ‘movable’ or ‘conflicted middle’: in other words, those who do not fully subscribe to a liberal or conservative worldview or are not already convinced partisans in favour of or against migrants’ rights. Those in the middle may be susceptible to some of the messaging pushed by disinformation actors, especially when it resonates with their core values and concerns. On the other hand, it is precisely this ambivalence of position that also makes them open to alternative narratives.

## IDENTIFYING THE TARGET AUDIENCE

Reclaim the audience most vulnerable to disinformation by:



**Communication actors must reach beyond their typical audience and nudge individuals back towards the mainstream, starting with those whose values do not entirely overlap with the values of disinformation-pushing extremists.**

Communication actors must work to reach beyond their typical audience and nudge individuals back towards the mainstream, starting with those whose values do not entirely overlap with the values of disinformation-pushing extremists. Communication-based responses to disinformation should prioritise creating messages that speak to those conflicted segments of society who may feel underrepresented in public discourse but are at least potentially open to changing their views. They should target groups that are more likely to recognise the social and economic advantages of a balanced migration policy. Therefore, the main goal of communicators seeking to counteract disinformation must be to identify and reach the **audience** most receptive to it. They must craft campaigns which are in tune with their audience's values and then seek to **reclaim** those who have already come under disinformation's influence, bringing them back to the centre (see Figure 17).

### 2.3.1. Target values, not demographics

There is no one-size-fits-all response to any given disinformation narrative, nor one universal message that can be used uniformly in any country or with any community. For this reason, audience segmentation constitutes the essential preliminary step of any communication strategy to respond to disinformation. It allows communicators to 'break down' the target

audience to prioritise and personalise messages, thus enabling the effective promotion of alternative narratives.

In order to depolarise the debate on migration, narratives must resonate with the value systems of those who hold conflicting views or less entrenched positions.<sup>133</sup> These values may include, among others, traditional attitudes or feelings of loyalty and conformity towards social and religious conventions. Nevertheless, widespread disinformation about migration also calls for communication strategies that take into account fears and insecurities. Even studies advocating for communication which targets the movable middle have not fully considered the prevalence of the latter's concerns and anxieties, perhaps assuming that they are unjustified.

**Narratives must resonate with the value systems of those who hold conflicting views or less entrenched positions.**

Middle groups may hold a sympathetic view of migrants or refugees. However, they may also be concerned about job security, the pace of cultural change, or their health and physical integrity. These worries could make them especially receptive to disinformation narratives that seek to manufacture an artificial link between these concerns and immigration while aggressively pushing polarising discourses. Similarly, disengaged groups who also do not have a definitive stance on migration may be reluctant to engage in debates that could cause further social divisions. They may feel that there is a lot of pressure to be in favour of or against migrants or refugees, or may even disengage from certain issues altogether if the information space becomes too violent and polarised.

Since the values of the middle groups do not fully overlap with those of the extremist fringe, however, the appeal of disinformation to these groups is mainly concern-based, and not necessarily value-based. Many may feel alienated by the polarised discourse promoted by disinformation and be open to alternative narratives that address their concerns without recourse to anxiety-inducing threat-based discourse that contradicts some of their values and beliefs.

For example, those who are worried about their health or security may feel uncomfortable with xenophobic messages that label all migrant children as ‘delinquents’ or foreigners as ‘sources of infection’. Communicators have an opportunity to win over these groups by addressing their concerns while also providing a better match with their values than hostile disinformation narratives do. The details, of course, depend on the particular circumstances facing each community. Middle groups also tend to be less ideological, and less engaged in political debates. For this reason, they may pragmatically be open to alternatives – provided that they are not incoherent with their worldviews.

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**Communicators have an opportunity to win over middle groups by addressing their concerns while also providing a better match with their values than hostile disinformation narratives do. They should be targeted not according to their demographic characteristics, but according to what they value the most.**

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The movable middle does not consist of a group that can be pinpointed with reference to demographics such as age, sex, occupation or education. Rather, it is their *values* that sets them apart: individuals with the same values can be found in all demographic categories. Even within a single geographical location, professional class or age group, audiences are very diverse. For this reason, they should be targeted not according to their demographic characteristics, but according to what they value the most.

Several researchers have produced studies which segment middle groups by their values and attitudes to migration. For example, the research teams of More in Common conduct country-specific surveys which examine and identify distinct segments of the local population in various European countries. In Germany, they found that between the two sides of liberal cosmopolitans and radical opponents, there is a majority composed of ‘economic pragmatists’, ‘humanitarian sceptics’ and ‘moderate opponents’.<sup>134</sup> About half of the Italian

population is made up of ‘disengaged moderates’, persons concerned about security or people who feel ‘left behind’.<sup>135</sup> Other studies which employ different taxonomies have produced comparable results.<sup>136</sup>

In order to engage middle groups effectively, communicators should acknowledge their concerns while simultaneously appealing to their worldviews. For example, distrust of ‘the system’ makes ‘disengaged moderates’ in Italy question the social and economic benefits of immigration.<sup>137</sup> They are especially concerned about unemployment. However, they may also identify with migrants, as they also struggle to advance in a socioeconomically unsupportive environment. Similarly, the ‘left behind’ and the ‘security-concerned’ may express scepticism about immigration due to its perceived negative impact on the economy or crime.

Conversely, the ‘left behind’ tend to welcome refugees so long as they are perceived as respecting Italian culture. Although anxious about terrorism and violence, ‘security-concerned’ persons are preoccupied by growing racism and discrimination. Their core beliefs, such as loyalty or respect for social conventions, can thus be combined with other values, such as benevolence, to ensure that they are receptive to alternative narratives.

Other groups also have conflicting leanings and beliefs. For example, ‘pragmatists’ – who are present across all European countries – may believe that unrestricted immigration increases security risks. Conversely, they also think that immigration can generate economic benefits, thus opening opportunities for tailor-made communication strategies that emphasise the needs for regular and labour migration. Groups with traditional beliefs can also be receptive to alternative narratives that are based on values. Holding traditional values does not in itself make one an opponent of migration. Quite the contrary; many conservatives have a strong humanitarian impulse and act in accordance with what they consider to be strong moral foundations. For example, Italian Catholic humanitarians may be vulnerable to hostile frames and identity-based disinformation, but research indicates that they are also receptive to solidarity- and compassion-based communication.<sup>138</sup>

Communicating without regard for the audience’s core beliefs and attitudes would, in the best-case scenario, be met with no response. In the worst-case scenario, it would be not merely ineffective but actively counterproductive, evoking a further hostile response from those more inclined to reject the message.<sup>139</sup> This would also give disinformation actors the opportunity to push their message that mainstream media, politicians and NGOs do not understand or represent the needs of ‘real people’.

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**Communicating without regard for the audience's core beliefs and attitudes would, in the best-case scenario, be met with no response. In the worst-case scenario, it would be actively counterproductive.**

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Focusing on middle groups is not to say that other social segments should be ignored altogether. Progressive and liberal groups should continue to be the target of communication that employs positive frames and universalist values. Those on the fringes, or who already hold extremist views, should also not be written off as a lost cause. However, reaching out to them is a different task that requires different counter-radicalisation expertise.

### 2.3.2. Find entry points and common ground

Once the audience to be targeted has been identified, the next step is to obtain a sympathetic hearing. Due to the nature of their concerns and the possible influence of disinformation, those in the movable middle may not necessarily be immediately receptive to positive messaging from the start. To break through any initial resistance, communicators must find an 'entry point': a topic or position upon which the communicator and the audience share common values. This opening can then be used to enter into a dialogue and move the discussion towards other common ground.

This task is easier for those actors and intermediaries who already enjoy a relationship of trust with the audience (see section 2.2.1). Communicators approaching the audience 'cold', meanwhile, must first develop a certain rapport with their target, demonstrating *why* a given individual should listen to their message. This can be done with reference to their concerns and values; by framing communication in terms that are not evocative of either partisan side in the polarised discourse but acknowledge fears and insecurities (health-, wealth- or identity-based), communicators can provide a safe middle ground for realistic, balanced discussion. Concerned individuals can feel at ease in this middle ground and will be receptive to further messaging. If successful in this operation, value-based communication can trigger interest, foster a sympathetic hearing and open up the opportunity for a more detailed conversation that can shift the focus away from negative frames.<sup>140</sup>

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An example of a successful campaign finding a suitable entry point is the *Wir sind Oberösterreich* (We Are Upper Austria) campaign,<sup>141</sup> in which people with a migrant background pose with white Austrians, both wearing uniforms of service workers (e.g. firefighters, nurses).

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When finding entry points for appealing to the values of middle groups, communicators should go beyond the worldview of the targeted audience. They should also include an element that challenges the audience's pre-conceptions or leads them to take a different viewpoint: an "element of dissonance".<sup>142</sup> In other words, they must shape their message to make what needs to be said popular, rather than repeating what is popular among a certain audience. Accordingly, in the case of the *Wir sind Oberösterreich* campaign, the message appeals to the values of conformity and tradition, while also incorporating solidarity to break down the polarising 'us versus them' framework.

In adjusting the message and medium to fit the audience, therefore, the important thing is not to find a perfect match between social concerns and values, but to find the entry point that will convince the audience that the messenger is honest, reasonable, and has their best interest at heart. By doing so, communicators can build a message that is both more attractive than that offered by disinformation actors and can be used to build alternative narratives.

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**The important thing is not to find a perfect match between social concerns and values, but to find the entry point that will convince the audience that the messenger is honest, reasonable, and has their best interest at heart.**

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Once this rapport has been established, the opportunities for communication multiply rapidly. An individual who has acknowledged the essential trustworthiness and good intentions of the communicator may then be more receptive to receiving information from formerly untrusted sources, like governments, institutional representatives or mainstream media. Fact-checking, too, can play a role once this point has been reached and trust has been established.

In the meantime, EU institutions and national governments must work to demonstrate that they have effective policies that can resolve legitimate concerns while also respecting EU fundamental values and human rights. In this way, once external communicators have broken through to sceptics by using entry points, institutional communicators can indicate to them how EU and national policies are making a real-world difference to the issues that concern them.

### 2.3.3. Promote a coherent metanarrative

Disinformation actors paint a black and white picture of migration. They adapt their messages to changing circumstances and external events, but always adhere to a coherent, overarching narrative portraying

immigration as a fundamental threat to European societies. They can ignore or disregard complex details that do not fit their simplistic representation of migration. This gives them a head start over other communicators who must first convince the public that migration is far from a clear-cut issue. Audience segmentation and value-based communication, which are necessary to increase the outreach and effectiveness of alternative messaging, further complicate the construction of an alternative metanarrative which is equally convincing for all audiences.

To strengthen resilience against disinformation, communicators, political actors and EU institutions should nevertheless strive to build and follow such a metanarrative. So far, progressive actors, CSOs and governmental institutions have not been able to construct a persuasive overarching message.<sup>143</sup> In the absence of such a metanarrative, communication initiatives may end up merely disorienting the public at large instead of facilitating the mainstreaming of alternative narratives. One example comes from the European Commission's original designation of the portfolio of Vice-President Margaritis Schinas as "Protecting our European Way of Life". This wording attracted widespread criticism for suggesting that migrants pose a threat to the 'European lifestyle', mainstreaming the fear-mongering rhetoric of the radical right and appearing to clash with other Commission messaging on migration.<sup>144</sup>

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**To strengthen resilience against disinformation, communicators, political actors and EU institutions should strive to build and follow a metanarrative. In the absence of an overarching metanarrative, communication initiatives may end up merely disorienting the public at large instead of facilitating the mainstreaming of alternative narratives.**

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A coherent metanarrative of migration should expose the fallacy of the opponents' negative frame and replace it with a more balanced overarching account, providing structure and meaning to otherwise fragmented communication strategies. It need not be an official and codified metanarrative, so long as all the communication actors are aware of one another's campaigns and can coordinate their activities in support of a single grand principle (on coordination, see section 2.2.2). If all the relevant actors are clearly on the same page when it comes to their communication, formal coordination will not be needed, as mutually supportive messaging will come naturally.

Conversely, targeted messages that fail to support one another will have little effect, and a cacophony of partly contradictory messages will continue to fail to normalise the discussion. Information overload without overall structure may only serve to increase the social distance between groups, rather than bringing about greater cohesion. Worse still, 'dog-whistle communication' intended to catch the attention of the most extreme groups instead of persuading middle segments risks moving moderates in the wrong direction. Instead of pushing forward a multiplicity of stories, communicators should therefore present different sides of the same story, building a normalising metanarrative which is supported by every message and communication campaign.

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**Instead of pushing forward a multiplicity of stories, communicators should present different sides of the same story.**

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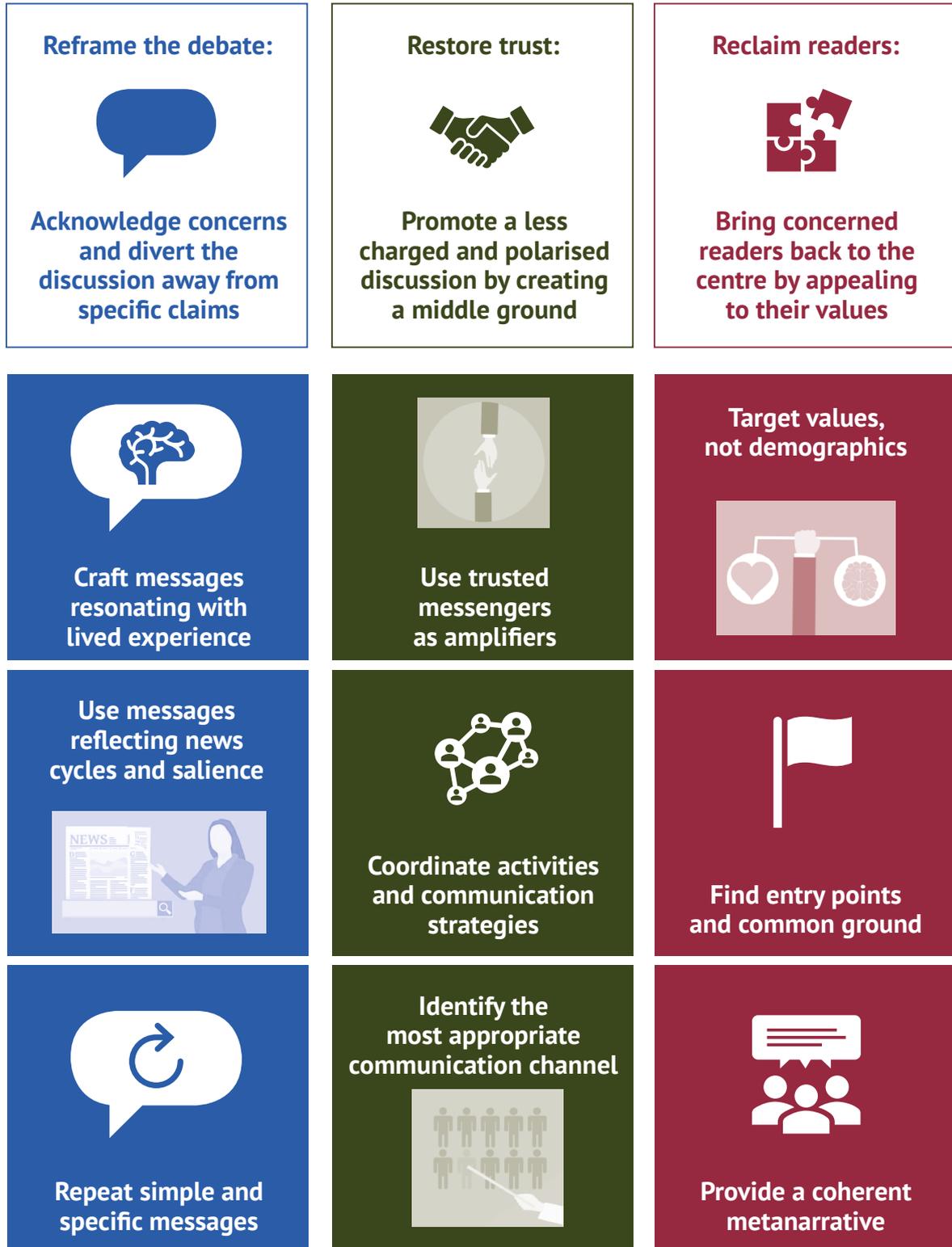
Some ideas for possible elements of this metanarrative have already been presented in this chapter, such as using the 'larger us' frame, referring to a shared future, or drawing attention to the contribution that migrants make to the community at large. These elements should be adapted to local contexts and different audiences, thus delivering the most effective sub-message to each group while supporting a coherent overall frame.

The von der Leyen Commission has undertaken efforts to adhere to an alternative coherent frame to replace the 'crisis talk' that characterised the 2015-2019 period.<sup>145</sup> Consider, for example, the words introducing the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, published in September 2020:

*"Migration has been a constant feature of human history with a profound impact on European society, its economy and its culture. With a well-managed system, migration can contribute to growth, innovation and social dynamism."<sup>146</sup>*

This solution-oriented and positive frame contains many of the necessary elements for a successful metanarrative about migration. CSOs appreciated this alternative frame, indicating that different actors can converge around this metanarrative.

## Countering disinformation with alternative narratives



# Conclusion

This study's analysis has found that actors spreading disinforming and hostile narratives have had some success in using strategies similar to those recommended in this Issue Paper. They push messages with emotional appeal, demonstrating an awareness of what to say when. They share and coordinate their material to support one another and boost their messages through community-building. They seek to exploit fears or concerns as entry points for winning over new audiences. Above all, they have an overarching metanarrative: every individual message supports the greater claim that migration constitutes a threat.

These disinformation actors systematically depict migration as a threat, closely following the news cycle to ensure the timeliness of their message. Where possible, they promote narratives which relate to urgent existential needs, such as health and wealth. When such emergencies are missing, they can always fall back on framing migration as a threat to identity or culture. While the precise content of their messages differs over time and between countries, certain narratives are especially prominent. Of particular note are those depicting migrants as a hostile invasion force or integration-resistant violent criminals, and those claiming that elites are conspiring to increase arrivals or support migrants over the local populations.

Most importantly, disinformation actors have an inherent advantage in trying to manipulate public perception. Unlike other communicators, particularly institutional representatives, they can promote a simplistic view by drawing public attention to the alleged risks and dangers created by immigration without regard for truth or accuracy. With the balance so tilted against them, it is little wonder that EU institutions, and national and local authorities have often struggled to counteract disinformation effectively.

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**Unlike other communicators, particularly institutional representatives, disinformation actors can promote a simplistic view by drawing public attention to the alleged risks and dangers created by immigration without regard for truth or accuracy.**

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Nonetheless, by adopting the lessons of this study, communicators can go some distance towards evening the score. Tackling disinformation entails recognising that its appeal is not based on any claim to factual

accuracy. Thus, an effective response cannot be based solely on regulatory approaches, fact-checking or myth-busting. Instead, all communication should be crafted with an awareness of the challenges posed by disinformation and hostile narratives, and seek to undermine it where possible. To do so, it should use not *counternarratives*, which may only increase the visibility of the disinformation frame, but *alternative* narratives that can contribute to reframing the debate.

Communicators should use value-based messaging that takes account of public concerns. Not acknowledging concerns makes it easier for disinformation actors to 'capture' the debate. At the same time, communicators should be careful not to amplify these concerns. In order to prevent disinformation actors from drawing connections between immigration and 'real-world' events – such as rising unemployment or the spread of infectious diseases – communicators should promote messages that resonate with the target audience's needs by saying more about the desired change than about the problem. They should use European citizens' corresponding hopes – for a prosperous future, for a stronger and more cohesive society – to promote a more balanced discussion about migration.

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**By demonstrating to their audience that anti-migration messengers are not the only ones who can acknowledge their insecurities, communicators can better gain a hearing and work to pre-empt the appeal of disinformation.**

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Promoting alternative narratives can also help to reclaim readers who may otherwise be drawn into radical positions. By demonstrating to their audience that anti-migration messengers are not the only ones who can acknowledge their insecurities, communicators can better gain a hearing and work to pre-empt the appeal of disinformation. This can contribute to rebuilding public trust among groups and in institutions. Most importantly, it can create and strengthen societal resilience against disinformation.

Amid a pandemic and ahead of a protracted economic recession, the discussion on migration must be normalised. For now, the salience of migration has dipped. Nevertheless, with economic inequalities and unemployment likely to become an overriding public concern in the near and mid-term future, disinformation actors will likely try to sow new divisions and drive

public anger against migrants once again. It is therefore imperative that communicators act quickly to prepare new messaging strategies to stay ahead of the game.

However, there cannot be dissonance between alternative narratives and policy. Messages that EU institutions and national or local authorities take the public's concerns seriously, and that migration can be managed to the benefit of all members of society, will only resonate if they are backed up politically. Policies that can benefit citizens, residents and migrants alike are necessary to resolve or improve the very situations which make them feel insecure in the first place, thereby showing that disinformation narratives are based on fiction.

Furthermore, if effective, such policies will go a long way towards improving the situation of distrust that drives a great deal of disinformation's appeal in the first instance. If it can be demonstrated to citizens that institutional actors are aware of their worries and are taking concrete action to address them, they may also become more receptive to further communication from these formerly untrusted sources. This would create a mutually reinforcing cycle of alternative narratives and effective policymaking.

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**The current lower salience of migration offers a window of opportunity to introduce meaningful reforms and policy changes.**

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The current lower salience of migration offers a window of opportunity to introduce meaningful reforms and policy changes in the migration policy area, at European and national levels. EU institutions and member states should capitalise on this opportunity to overcome divisions and conflicting priorities. In order to effectively normalise the debate and improve the situation on the ground, however, policies must be coherent with hope-based, positive and solution-oriented narratives. If policymakers cannot back up words with actions, disinformation actors will continue to set the agenda, to the further detriment of public opinion, institutional trust and migrants' rights.

# Annex: Methodological details

The disinformation articles analysed in this study were selected using the market research tool BuzzSumo. The research team coded the results according to the following scheme:

- ▶ **Type of source:** Local mainstream media, local fringe media, national mainstream media, national fringe media, international media.
- ▶ **Implied provenance of story:** Local event, national event, EU policy-related development, event in another European country (not EU policy-related), event outside Europe.
- ▶ **Degree of disinformation:** Outright false, distorted information, misleading information, unverifiable information.
- ▶ **Frame (max. 2):** Health, wealth, identity, none of the above.
- ▶ **Theme keywords (max. 10):** Security, infection, healthcare, high-skilled, low-skilled, social benefits, housing, (un)employment, integration, religion, violence, sexual violence, other crimes, invasion, elite conspiracy, NGOs, replacement, terrorism, Islamophobic, xenophobic, anti-establishment, anti-EU, gender-related.

Furthermore, data collected via BuzzSumo provides the following details:

- ▶ Article headline, URL
- ▶ Published date
- ▶ Total shares (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit)
- ▶ Alexa rank (i.e. a rating indicating the approximate level of traffic/unique users a website receives)

Articles were selected using search terms such as the following:

## CZECH REPUBLIC

- ▶ Migrant, migranti, migrace, přistěhovalec, přistěhovalectví, cizinec
- ▶ Uprchlík, uprchlíci, azyl, žadatel o azyl, žadatelé o azyl
- ▶ Muslim, muslimové, Africký, Islamizace
- ▶ Sociální pojištění, sociální péče, sociální dávky
- ▶ Multikulturalismus, kvóta / kvóty, no-go zóny, integrace

## GERMANY

- ▶ Migration, Migrant, Einwanderer, Einwanderung, Ausländer
- ▶ Flüchtling, Flucht, Asyl, Asylbewerber, Asylwerber, Asylsuchende, unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge
- ▶ Islam, Islamisierung, Muslim, Muslime, Moslem
- ▶ Hartz IV, Mindestsicherung, Sozialhilfe
- ▶ NGO, Seenotrettung, Integration, Rassismus, Grenzen, Grenzkontrolle, Grenzsicherheit, offene Grenzen

## ITALY

- ▶ Migrante, migranti, immigrato, immigrati, clandestino, clandestini, extra-comunitario, extra-comunitari
- ▶ Rifugiato, rifugiati, richiedente asilo, richiedenti asilo, sbarchi, arrivi
- ▶ Musulmano, musulmani, islamico, islamici, islamista, islamisti, africano, subsahariano
- ▶ Risorse INPS
- ▶ Integrazione, multiculturalismo, regolarizzazione, porti chiusi, porti aperti, ONG

## SPAIN

- ▶ Migrantes, inmigrantes, ilegales, llegado, inmigración, migración, migrante irregular.
- ▶ Refugiados, MENA(S), asilo, solicitantes de asilo
- ▶ Musulmán, islamista, islámico, islamización, marroquí, magrebí, africano, norteafricano, subsahariano, árabe, arábico, moros
- ▶ Seguridad social, paguita, paro
- ▶ ONG, integración, permiso de residencia

Articles containing at least one major disinforming element were selected, provided they reached at least 1,000 (Germany, Italy, Spain) or 400 (Czech Republic) engagements. This resulted in a dataset of 1,425 articles between 1 May 2019 and 31 July 2020, or a monthly average of 30 articles per country.

- 1 Cerulus, Laurens and Eline Schaart, "[How the UN migration pact got trolled](#)", *Politico*, 05 January 2019.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Flore, Massimo; Alexandra Balahur-Dobrescu; Aldo Podavini; and Marco Verile (2019), [Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities to Disinformation and Data-Driven Propaganda. Case Study: The 2018 Italian General Election](#), EUR 29741 EN, Brussels: Joint Research Centre. Researchers have long shown that the 'ethnicity' of news subjects combined with 'threats' to national identity and economic well-being can increase hostility towards migrant groups and mobilise support for exclusionary policies. See Sniderman, Paul M.; Louk Hagendoorn; and Markus Prior (2004), "[Predisposing Factors and Situational Triggers: Exclusionary Reactions to Immigrant Minorities](#)", *The American Political Science Review*, Volume 98, Number 1, pp.35-49.
- 4 Juhász, Attila and Patrik Szicherle (2017), "[The political effects of migration-related fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories in Europe](#)", Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Büro Budapest/Political Capital.
- 5 Swanson, Ana, "[Why you're probably wrong about levels of immigration in your country](#)", World Economic Forum, 05 September 2016.
- 6 See Dennison, James and Andrew Geddes (2019), "[A Rising Tide? The Salience of Immigration and the Rise of Anti-Immigration Political Parties in Western Europe](#)", *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 90, Issue 1, pp.107-116. For Dennison and Geddes, anti-immigration sentiment did not drive the increase in votes for Western European anti-immigration parties in the past decade, but rather the sharp rise in the salience of immigration after 2015, which was in part driven by media coverage. For a long-term, country-specific study, see Boomgaarden, Hajo G. and Rend Vliegenthart (2009), "[How news content influences anti-immigration attitudes: Germany, 1993-2005](#)", *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 48, Issue 4, pp.516-542. On legal migration, see Mortera-Martinez, Camino and Beth Oppenheim (2018), "[Why Europe needs legal migration and how to sell it](#)", Centre for European Reform.
- 7 Rasche, Lucas and Paul-Jasper Dittrich (2019), "[Interpretation and Truth. How Right-wing populist disinformation informs the debate on migration](#)", Berlin: Jacques Delors Centre
- 8 Hume, Tim, "[Denmark's Elections Show How Much Europe Is Normalizing Anti-Immigrant Politics](#)", *Vice News*, 08 June 2019.
- 9 Dittrich, Paul-Jasper (2019), "[Tackling the spread of disinformation: Why a co-regulatory approach is the right way forward for the EU](#)", Berlin: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Jacques Delors Centre.
- 10 European Commission, [A Europe that protects: EU reports on progress in fighting disinformation ahead of European Council](#), 14 June 2019a.
- 11 E.g. "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit." High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (2018), [A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation](#), European Commission, p.3.
- 12 Reppell, Lisa and Erica Schein (2019), "[Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech: Exploring the Relationship and Programming Interventions](#)", Arlington: International Foundation for Electoral Systems.
- 13 On the frequency of and vulnerability to negative frames, particularly in migration-related news, see Van Gorp, Baldwin; Paul Hendriks Vettehen; and Johannes W.J. Beentjes (2009), "[Challenging the frame in the news: The role of issue involvement, attitude, and competing frames](#)", *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, Volume 21, Issue 4, pp.161-170. Soroka, Stuart and Stephen McAdams (2015), "[News, Politics, and Negativity](#)", *Political Communication*, Volume 32, Issue 1, pp.1-22.
- 14 The authors wish to thank Massimo Flore for this insight. See Flore, Massimo (2020), [Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities \(II\): from Disinformation to Hostile Narratives. Case Studies: Italy, France, Spain](#), EUR 30029 EN, Brussels: Joint Research Centre.
- 15 See Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2020), "[COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1](#)", London.
- 16 Maslow, Abraham (1970 [1954]), *Motivation and Personality*, Harper & Row, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.
- 17 Bamberg, Katharina (2019), "[Moving beyond the 'crisis': Recommendations for the European Commission's communication on migration](#)", Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- 18 See United Nations Refugee Agency (2020), "[Background Guide: Countering Toxic Narratives About Refugees and Migrants. Challenge Topic #2](#)".
- 19 The term *counternarrative* is used in relation to a wide range of communication strategies and initiatives but generally refers to targeted campaigns discrediting the ideology and actions of extremists. Counternarratives aim to deconstruct and delegitimise xenophobic discourses through logic, fact-checking or satire. See Ritzmann, Alexander (2017), [RAN guidelines for effective and alternative counter-narrative campaigns \(GAMMMMA+\)](#), Radicalisation Awareness Network. See also Tuck, Henry and Tanya Silverman (2016), "[The counter-narrative handbook](#)", London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.
- 20 Banulescu-Bogdan, Natalia (2018), "[When Facts Don't Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively About Immigration's Costs and Benefits](#)", Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute. Hemmings, Ann-Sophie and Karin Ingrid Castro (2017), "[The trouble with counter-narratives](#)", Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies.
- 21 *First Draft*, "[Too much information: A public guide to navigating the infodemic](#)" (accessed 17 November 2020). For disinformation actors' deliberate use of information overloads, see Paul, Christopher and Miriam Matthews (2016), "[The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why it Might Work and Options to Counter It](#)", Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- 22 Flore *et al.* (2019), *op.cit.*, pp.5-6. Recently published research has demonstrated that fact-checking has an overall positive effect on influencing political beliefs. However, researchers also found that fact-checking only refutes parts of a story. More problematic is how the impact of fact-checking strongly depends on the readers' pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. If it contradicts their values, they will find ways to disregard or reinterpret it. Walter, Nathan; Jonathan Cohen; R. Lance Holbert; and Yasmin Morag (2020), "[Fact-Checking: A Meta-Analysis of What Works and For Whom](#)", *Political Communication*, Volume 37, Issue 3, pp.350-375.
- 23 This Issue Paper uses the term *alternative* to refer to narratives and messages that provide a different and more balanced perspective to those promoted by disinformation actors. The authors acknowledge that, in some settings, the label *alternative* is embraced by sources that depict themselves as opposing the 'mainstream', and therefore is often also associated with disinformation. See e.g. Holt, Kristoffer; Tine Ustad Figenschou; and Lena Frischlich (2019), "[Key Dimensions of Alternative News Media](#)", *Digital Journalism*, Volume 7, Issue 7, pp.860-869. However, the authors of this study have chosen to follow established practice in the field of communication studies by referring to *alternative narratives*, while using fringe media for those outlets that depict themselves as anti-mainstream. See e.g. European Commission, "[Delivering alternative narratives](#)" (accessed 10 November 2020).
- 24 Carter, Rosie (2018), "[Fear, Hope & Loss: Understanding the Drivers of Hope and Hate](#)", London: Hope Not Hate. Helbling, Marc; Alexandra Schoen; Armgard Zingler; Daniela Kossatz; Hans-Jürgen Frieß; Liane Stavenhagen; Katja Kiefer; Nicoleta Negrea; Emily Gray; Robert Grimm; Stephen Hawkins; Tim Dixon; Vincent Wolff; and Miriam Juan-Torres (2017) "[Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration, and Refugees in Germany](#)", More in Common.
- 25 See *International Centre for Policy Advocacy*, "[Reframing guidelines](#)" (accessed 10 November 2020).
- 26 See e.g. Davey, Jacob; Jonathan Birdwell; and Rebecca Skellett (2018), "[Counter Conversations: A model for direct engagement with individuals showing signs of radicalisation online](#)", London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.
- 27 See Radicalisation Awareness Network (2019), [Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Delivering counter- or alternative narratives](#).
- 28 Xhardez, Catherine, "[Can COVID-19 positively change perceptions on migration?](#)", *openDemocracy*, 08 May 2020.
- 29 For attempts to identify narratives at the pan-European level, see Caviedes, Alexander (2015), "[An Emerging 'European' News Portrayal of Immigration?](#)", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Volume 41, Issue 6, pp.897-917. See also Eberl, Jakob-Moritz; Christine E. Meltzer; Tobias Heidenreich; Beatrice Herrero; Nora Theorin; Fabienne Lind; Rosa Berganza; Hajo G. Boomgaarden; Christian

- Schemer; and Jesper Strömbäck (2018), "[The European media discourse on immigration and its effects: a literature review](#)", *Annals of the International Communication Association*, Volume 42, Issue 3, pp.207-223.
- <sup>30</sup> Neidhardt, Alberto-Horst and Olivia Sundberg Diez (2020), "[The upcoming New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Will it be up to the challenge?](#)", Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- <sup>31</sup> European Asylum Support Office (2020), [EASO Asylum Report 2020: Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the European Union](#), Valletta.
- <sup>32</sup> Müller, Michaela Maria (2019), "Germany: 'We Can Do It': A Test of Media Solidarity and Political Nerve over Migration" in "[How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?](#)", Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, p.30.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> Maserà, Anna (2019), "Italy: The Pressure has Eased, but Media Coverage still Fails to Tell the full Migration Story" in "[How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?](#)", Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development.
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- <sup>37</sup> Calatayud (2019), *op.cit.*
- <sup>38</sup> European Asylum Support Office (2020), *op.cit.*, p.72.
- <sup>39</sup> People in Need, "[PIN Research: how do the Czech, Slovak and Estonian media report on migration?](#)", 03 November 2019. See also Svobodova, Iva (2020), "[Online Media-Monitoring of Migration Narratives in the Czech Republic and Slovakia](#)", The Beacon Project.
- <sup>40</sup> Krejčí, Markéta, "[The ins and outs of the Czech disinformation community](#)", *New Eastern Europe*, 08 November 2017.
- <sup>41</sup> Štětka, Václav; Roman Hájek; and Jana Rosenfeldová (2016), "[Media Pluralism Monitor 2016: Monitoring Risks for Media Pluralism in the EU and Beyond. Country report: Czech Republic](#)", Florence: Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
- <sup>42</sup> Flore *et al.* (2019), *op.cit.*
- <sup>43</sup> Nyhan, Brendan, "[Fake News and Bots May Be Worrisome, but Their Political Power is Overblown](#)", *The New York Times*, 13 February 2018.
- <sup>44</sup> Dennison, James and Andrew Geddes, "[Why coronavirus is likely to be bad news for Europe's radical right](#)", *Euractiv*, 07 May 2020a.
- <sup>45</sup> Newman, Nic (2020), "[Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020](#)", Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- <sup>46</sup> Department of Global Communications, "[UN tackles 'infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis](#)", United Nations, 31 March 2020.
- <sup>47</sup> E.g. in June 2019, the then Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, Matteo Salvini, alleged that migrants have the highest record of scabies and tuberculosis. The Italian medical community dismissed this claim as false and dangerous. Bocci, Michele, "[Ecco perché non è vero che, come dice Salvini, gli immigrati hanno il record di scabbia e Tbc](#)", *La Repubblica*, 01 June 2019.
- <sup>48</sup> E.g. Senaldi, Pietro, "[L'Italia di PD e M5S: porti aperti e infetti, il governo del 'tradimento' stende il tappeto rosso ai clandestini](#)", *Rassegne Italia*, 29 February 2020; *NotizieSenzaCensura*, "[Lorenzin: Vaccinate i vostri figli perché gli immigrati riportano malattie sconparse](#)", 29 February 2020; Zuloaga, J.M., "[1.800 immigrantes, sin control sanitario, se preparan para entrar en España por la fuerza](#)", *La Razon*, 08 April 2020.
- <sup>49</sup> *Bufale.net*, "[Irrefrenabile Zaia sul Coronavirus: 'I veneti si fanno la doccia, i cinesi mangiano topi vivi'](#)", 28 February 2020a; Bauomy, Jasmin, "[COVID-19 and xenophobia: Why outbreaks are often accompanied by racism](#)", *Euronews*, 06 March 2020.
- <sup>50</sup> Tondo, Lorenzo, "[Italy declares own ports 'unsafe' to stop migrants arriving](#)", *The Guardian*, 8 April 2020.
- <sup>51</sup> See Indelicato, Mauro, "[IL coronavirus non ferma l'invasione. Lamorgese spalanca i porti alla Ocean Viking con 274 clandestini a bordo](#)", *Rassegne Italia*, 23 February 2020; *Bufale.net*, "[A Messina sbarcano migranti con sintomi Coronavirus](#)", 13 March 2020b.
- <sup>52</sup> E.g. *Secolo d'Italia*, "[Immigrati alla fermata dei bus a Roma. Le regole per loro non valgono?](#)", 16 March 2020; Gauri, Cristina, "[Coronavirus, gli immigrati se ne fregano anche a Bergamo. Tutti ammassati in stazione](#)", *Il Primato Nazionale*, 18 March 2020a; Gómez, Teresa, "[Motín en el CIE de Aluche: los inmigrantes se rebelan por el confinamiento del coronavirus](#)", *OK Diario*, 17 March 2020; H50, "[MENAS jugando al futbol en Bilbao durante el estado de alarma](#)", 19 March 2020.
- <sup>53</sup> See e.g. Gauri, Cristina, "[Roma, 'decine di immigrati musulmani assembrati per pregare. E la polizia sta a guardare'](#)", *Il Primato Nazionale*, 19 May 2020b; Planas, Pablo, "[Musulmanes rompen otra vez el confinamiento y llaman a la oración desde la cathedral de Lérida](#)", *Libertad Digital*, 25 April 2020.
- <sup>54</sup> Giuliana, Emilio, "[Trentini in casa, immigrati liberi: l'altra faccia del razzismo a senso unico contro gli italiani](#)", *La Voce del Trentino*, 19 March 2020; *E-Noticias*, "[Musulmanes rompen el confinamiento por el Ramadán](#)", 18 April 2020; *Česká věc*, "[Uprchlíci schválně kýchají a prskají na Němce a křičí, 'ted máš koronavirus!'](#)", 01 April 2020; *JournalistenWatch*, "[Keine Quarantäne für kranke Flüchtlinge aus Griechenland – aber für gesunde deutsche Urlauber](#)", 17 July 2020.
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- <sup>56</sup> E.g. López, Marcos, "[Jóvenes musulmanes asaltan una iglesia en Francia y colocan banderas de Marruecos, Algeria y Túnez](#)", *La Nación Digital*, 11 February 2020; Gambin Garcia, Antonio, "[Musulmanes provocan el pánico en Suecia: Violan a cabras y juegan al fútbol con patos y erizos como pelota](#)", *Amigos de la Mila*, 29 December 2019.
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- <sup>59</sup> E.g. *Area-C*, "[Rivolta immigrati a Boville- Vogliamo soldi non cibo](#)", 07 June 2020; Erdinger, Max, "[Während deutsche Rentner hungern: Flüchtlinge entsorgen Tüten voller Tafel-Lebensmittel im Müll](#)", *anonymousnews.ru*, 05 July 2020.
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