



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities**

Kick-off meeting of the E-MINDFUL project
Enhancing European Migration Narrative to Develop Further Union's Long-term
actions

Perceptions and realities: Towards a de-polarized public debate on migration

Tuesday, 15 June 2021

Opening remarks
**Ambassador Vuk Žugić, Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and
Environmental Activities**

Ms. Jagiello, Ambassador Bräutigam, distinguished partners and speakers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to welcome you to the kick-off meeting of the extrabudgetary project E-MINDFUL. I wish to thank you all for accepting our invitation. First of all, I wish to express my thanks to DG HOME for this strategic partnership, and extend my deep appreciation to Germany and Italy for their support, and, of course, to the International Labour Organization and the European University Institute for joining the OSCE in this endeavour.

In my opening remarks today I wish to give you a brief outline of how this project was developed and why. While a more detailed description of this action will be provided in the following session, I believe it is relevant to offer this background.

As you know, my Office's engagement in the field of migration is grounded in the Helsinki Final Act – the founding document of the OSCE - and complemented

by further commitments adopted in Ljubljana, Athens and Hamburg. These commitments are shaped around an economic evidence: the movement of people – men and women -, workers, students, entrepreneurs, scientists, is a key driver for economic development. I usually support this assertion by bringing the average value of global remittances, the savings that migrants send back home to their families. Despite the inevitable shrink due to the impact of COVID-19, 508 billion dollars still represent a considerable contribution to the lives and perspectives of millions of households, including in the OSCE region. In our work at the Office, we have been guided by this evidence, focusing our efforts in supporting States to design and implement policies that could harness the economic potential of well-governed migration.

When, in 2016 the OSCE German Chairmanship invited the Office to carry out a review of the migration-related commitments, we realized that our capacity-building efforts are indeed fruitful but not enough. The broad reflection that stemmed from taking stock of the Office activities, suggested the need to engage in complementary fields of action, among which the narrative of migration was prominent. Indeed, the way migration is communicated and perceived is a key pre-condition to create the necessary space for a policy-making that can harness the economic potential of migrants and a key contributing factor to shape hosting communities where everyone feel welcome and valued, citizens and migrants alike.

In addressing this issue for the first time in 2017, on the occasion of the OSCE conference to mark the International Migrants Day, we realized that when communicating migration, facts do not really matter. There are indeed few other topics like migration that attract misinformation and polarization of opinions, despite experts' reports and economic evidence. Even simple facts about migration are subject to intense debate. From the Gallup surveys – the leading international agency conducting world's polls about public opinions -, we learned

that, for example, when people are asked how many immigrants live in their country, the answers are often overestimated by several degrees of magnitude, particularly – and somehow paradoxically - in those places with fewest immigrants.

These are trends that raise growing concerns.

Increasingly polarized public opinions on migration make policy-making choices more difficult. If migrants are persistently portrayed as criminals, policies will reflect such attitudes, despite capacity-building efforts that show how well-governed migration is beneficial for all the parties involved. Legal pathways tend to shrink, while social cohesion in hosting communities gets increasingly tested. Labour market integration of migrants becomes more and more difficult, the access to education and the academic achievements of migrant students more harduous. The idea of inclusive, diverse and prosperous societies, at the basis of the OSCE economic commitments, is therefore shaken. For my Office, engaging in promoting a balanced narrative of migration was somehow a choice dictated by the need to preserve and promote that idea.

In doing so, we found in DG HOME an attentive ear that turned into the willingness to join forces. The International Labour Organization was somehow an evident choice for partnership, given the similarities in the commitments and the past joint experiences. In this path, we are glad that the European University Institute agreed to offer its wealth of knowledge, capitalized in the Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration, a unique multinational and multidisciplinary academic environment.

The E-MINDFUL project was therefore tailored around the following questions: how do public audiences build their perceptions about migration and migrants? Which are the factors that influence the opinion of the so-called “anxious middle”, that portion of the audience that constantly shifts between the positive and

negative poles? While the question in itself may sound simple, the answer is indeed complex. The project was therefore shaped around some key criteria:

1. Scientific-led, multidisciplinary and fact-based approach: by involving experts and academicians from relevant areas of expertise - semiotics, sociology, anthropology and communication - the project will explore public attitudes to migration with a robust scientific and multidisciplinary approach;
2. Multi-stakeholder and participatory approach: at different levels and throughout its implementation, the project will steer a process of involvement and participation of various stakeholders, government institutions in charge of migration policymaking, mainstream media outlets, academia, practitioners, and educational entities in order to strengthen ownership of the project's outcomes;
3. Innovative and experimental approach: by engaging young creators through the involvement of their respective educational entities, the project wishes to explore fresh ideas on how to communicate migration, measuring which factors are more influential in shifting public perceptions.

Although an increasing negative attitude towards migrants is a worldwide trend, including in the OSCE region, the countries to be involved in the project were carefully thought over, based on common challenges and the potentialities for mutual learning and enrichment: three OSCE Chairmanships in a row, Germany, Austria and Italy, all addressing the development of human capital in increasing diverse societies among their main priorities; countries in the Western Balkans' region, all addressing common challenges towards greater economic integration and connectivity, tackling depopulation and brain drain, while being confronted with increasing migration flows.

In doing so, the project does not want to promote a positive narrative of migration or to influence public audiences in a specific direction. The activities are based

on the assumption that both the “positive” and the “negative” narratives of migration are fabricated in their own way, while the challenge is to understand why and how people are clinged to some biased pre-conceptions and how to overcome prejudices based on stereotypes and misinformation, offering an alternative and effective way to communicate challenges and opportunities of migration in an effective and balanced way.

This project is a tile in the mosaic of the Office activities to address the complex challenges posed by migration. On the one side, we will continue working on expanding employment prospects of young people, particularly in the Western Balkans, to improve the retention of young talents and prospects for innovative and digitalized start-ups. On the other, we will continue fostering inclusive and resilient communities, as a contributing factor for social cohesion and an environment where everyone, native or migrant, can give the best of him/herself. Our continued engagement in promoting effective labour mobility schemes will go parallel to these endeavours.

In doing so, we hope to offer the participating States knowledge, capacities and tools. The final key ingredient, political willingness to act, rests in the responsibility of each participating State. Yet, it is our shared responsibility, as a community of States and as Secretariat, Institutions and Field Operations, to provide the best of our knowledge, to analyze, propose, experiment together for the benefit of our common security.

This is what we will do with the E-MINDFUL project.

I therefore wish this kick-off meeting to be the start of a common path that can improve trust, co-operation and impact. Be re-assured about the full engagement of the Office and our willingness to bring tangible results for the benefit of all those involved.

Thank you