

**SHAPING BALANCED POLITICAL DISCOURSE
AND CONSTRUCTIVE NARRATIVES ON MIGRATION:**

Guidance and Good Practice from the OSCE Region



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ODIHR acknowledges Joanna Fomina who drafted this guide, with feedback from Christine Hirst.

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INTRODUCTION: MIGRATION AND NARRATIVES

Migration has been part of shaping populations across the world for centuries. Voluntary migration can include those wishing to move outside their own country for better education or work opportunities, while forced migration includes those fleeing violence and seeking asylum under the protections of international law.¹ The OSCE participating States have formally recognized, “the substantial economic and social contribution that migrants and refugees can make for inclusive growth and sustainable development,” and that migration can bring a range of positive effects for both sending and receiving communities.²

Migrants contribute to national and local economies by paying taxes and consuming goods and services. They often fill skills gaps in certain sectors of the labour market and bring innovation. Migration is of particular value for places with declining and aging populations as the arrival of young migrants and families with children can boost the receiving country’s demographics and increase the tax-paying workforce. The presence of people of migrant origin also enhances linguistic and cultural diversity in the receiving country.

1 **Migrant** is an umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students. Source: [International Organization for Migration, Glossary on migration](#), IML Series No. 34, 2019.

An **asylum seeker** is an individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every recognized refugee is initially an asylum seeker. Source: [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Master Glossary of Terms](#) (2006).

A Refugee is a person who qualifies for the protection of the United Nations provided by the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in accordance with UNHCR’s Statute and, notably, subsequent General Assembly resolutions clarifying the scope of UNHCR’s competency, regardless of whether or not he or she is in a country that is a party to the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol – or a relevant regional refugee instrument – or whether or not he or she has been recognized by his or her host country as a refugee under either of these instruments. Source: [Adapted from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Handbook and Guidelines on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status \(2011\)](#) HCR/1P/4/enG/Rev. 3, 7, para. 16.

2 OSCE [Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/16](#) on the “OSCE’s role in the governance of large movements of migrants and refugees,” Hamburg 9 December 2016; and OSCE [Ministerial Council Decision No. 5/09 on “Migration Management,”](#) Athens, 4 December 2009.

Informed and fact-based political discourse is an essential element of a well-functioning democratic system and is needed on migration just as it is about any other socioeconomic issue. A range of different political and public actors use specific narratives, accounts or stories to make sense of human mobility and inform responses to it. Such “migration narratives,” or the ways migration processes and migrant populations are framed in political discussion, as well as the media used to deliver these discussions, shape public attitudes in receiving and sending societies. They also impact the development and implementation of policies and influence electoral outcomes. This all affects the opportunities available to migrant populations and their ability to fulfil their rights in real terms, as well as the process of migrant integration more generally.

All OSCE participating States have a responsibility to protect the human rights of migrants, as well as those of their own citizens. In recent years, particularly in the context of increased numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers arriving in a number of participating States, migration has been considerably politicized and has become the subject of political controversy in the OSCE region. There have been cases of migration issues being used for particular political interests, often linked to the dissemination of selective information, misinformation or disinformation. The intention of these ‘toxic narratives’ around migration has been to cause public anxiety resulting in greater political support for certain individuals or parties.³

Toxic narratives feed intolerance and discrimination in society, not only directed against migrants, but against many minority communities and groups. The language employed to discuss issues of public concern has great influence on people’s understanding of societal processes, challenges and public policy issues. Language that dehumanizes migrants and de-personalizes migration helps to justify discrimination against migrants and violations of their rights. Messaging that frames migrants as “other” and “not like us” feeds discrimination against other minorities within a society and leads to increased intolerant thinking and behaviour in general. As well as being detrimental to relations within a society, such toxic narratives divert the focus from real issues and obstruct the development of relevant policy responses. This, in turn, negatively affects the quality of public policy and people’s ability to exercise their rights.

A number of recent initiatives have recognized the need for balanced discourse, and some organizations have responded with different resources to help different actors who can shape migration narratives in a positive way.⁴

3 For example, see: Kucharczyk, Jacek and Grigorij Mesežnikov, *Phantom Menace: The Politics and Policies of Migration in Central Europe* (Prague: Institute for Public Affairs, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2018); Asperholm Hedlund, Laura, “[Identifying and Understanding Anti-Immigration Disinformation. A case study of the 2018 Swedish national elections.](#)” (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Institute 2019); Juhász, Attila and Patrik Szicherle, “The political effects of migration-related fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories in Europe,” (Budapest: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Political Capital, 2017).

4 An excellent example is the [toolbox](#) prepared for people working on migration-related issues by the UNHCR, which offers a step-by-step approach. Others include the Global Forum on Migration and Development’s and the ODI project [Public and political narratives on refugees and other migrants: implications for action](#). The OSCE’s Office for Economic and Environmental Affairs undertakes work on labour migration and is currently implementing a project “[E-MINDFUL: Enhancing Migration Narrative to Develop Further Union’s Long-term Actions](#)” supported by the European Commission.

OSCE/ODIHR and Migration

The 57 participating States of the OSCE have recognized the importance of supporting migrant integration and counteracting xenophobia. In particular, in 2009 States agreed to continue to work on migration management by respecting the human rights of migrants and increasing efforts to combat discrimination, intolerance and xenophobia towards migrants and their families.⁵ More recently, in 2016 participating States committed to advancing dialogue on migration-related matters, including the exchange of good practices and developing common approaches.⁶

This guidance has been developed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) as part of its migration and freedom of movement programme, which offers a range of awareness raising and capacity-building activities aimed at stakeholders across the region. It aims to offer recommendations and promote good practices to stakeholders who actively set the tone of the political debate on migration. Inputs are intended as illustrations and inspiration and were gathered from a range of different individuals experienced in shaping positive migration narratives, including politicians, political party leaders, national and regional level decision-makers, and local authority and municipal leaders.

An important source of ideas and recommendations for this guidance was a joint event ODIHR held with the Quaker Council for European Affairs in Brussels in late 2019, where participants discussed ways to promote a human rights-centred approach to migration and to challenge intolerance and discrimination by raising awareness about the complexity of migrant integration. This guidance was also informed by an online webinar on combating hate speech against migrants and refugees that ODIHR organized together with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and UNHCR in July 2020, followed by a series of internal webinars in 2021.

More: [ODIHR's work on migration](#)

With the aim of encouraging constructive and human rights-centred political discourse, this guidance targets national, regional and local political leaders and decision-makers. This guidance is built around three 'Rs', designed to help politicians and government officials:

- *Resist* pressure to compete with other actors who produce toxic narratives, or to take up their language or strategies, and avoid sensationalized ways of discussing migration issues that involve stereotypes;
- *React* to instances of xenophobic and racist language, particularly within your own group, emphasize that such narratives are unacceptable and challenge disinformation on migration issues; and
- *Re-shape* migration discourse by using available opportunities or creating the conditions needed to pro-actively shape affirmative, evidence-based narratives underpinned by shared values and illustrated by positive stories.

5 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision No. 5/09, *op. cit.*, note 2.

6 OSCE [Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/16](#), *op. cit.*, note 2.

The guide is structured to provide general recommendations for anyone in a public leadership role, followed by tailored sections for politicians, central-level government officials and policy-makers, local and regional leaders and officials, and a final section aimed at encouraging co-operation with different groups of non-political actors who make important contributions to political discourse on migration.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THOSE IN PUBLIC LEADERSHIP ROLES

Resist

- Refuse to exploit public prejudice and fears about migrants or to support arguments that scapegoat migrants for wider societal, economic or political problems.
- Refrain from polemical language on migration that can push people with ‘middle ground’ views to pick sides and exacerbate social and political polarization. It is also important to avoid vilifying or denigrating civil society groups that support migrant communities and monitor human rights violations against migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.
- Avoid offensive language, loaded terms and dehumanizing metaphors to refer to migrant populations and migration processes, and avoid stereotyping of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.⁷ Emphasizing stereotyped qualities, even if some are positive, can reinforce listeners’ biases. Portraying migrants and refugees as victims undermines their agency and diversity of experience.

React

- Respond to, call out and reject all racist and xenophobic comments or messages. Silence and inaction can be read as acceptance and can be as harmful as the actual dissemination of inflammatory narratives.
- Challenge misconceptions and false information about migration, whenever possible reacting immediately to prevent counter-factual messages becoming established.
- Understand that people’s fears and concerns about migration are real, even if they are misconceived or ungrounded. Avoid dismissing these fears and respond to them with fact-based answers.

⁷ Examples of dehumanizing metaphors include references to water and natural disasters, military terms, illnesses, animals, and insects. See, Reisigl, M. and Wodak, R., *Discourse and discrimination: Rhetorics of racism and antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2005).

Re-shape

- Be far-sighted and proactive in communication about migrants and refugees – think ahead and establish constructive discourse rather than waiting to respond to those spreading toxic narratives and exploiting anxiety. International human rights law and your State’s international commitments, including OSCE commitments, and international initiatives addressing migration should inform policies.⁸ The experiences of emigrants from your country to other countries, or established figures in your country who themselves have a migrant background, can also inform discussions and public expectations of how incomers should be treated.
- Use inclusive language, reaffirm human rights principles in your communication on migration issues, and treat migrant men and women, in all their diversity, as individuals with the capacity to actively participate in society. Engage representatives of migrant communities to speak with their own voices. Combine facts and evidence-based arguments with value-based statements and personal stories in your communication to successfully reshape attitudes on migration.
- Support public institutions to mainstream diversity in their work and policies, helping them respond to the needs, interests and priorities of the whole population, including people of migrant origin. Support professional training and awareness raising, as required, and reach out to others to support learning to shape balanced, rights-based migration discourses. Exchanging experience with other countries can help develop capacities, good practices and make positive contributions to the political discourse on migration.

8 For example, see: “[Global Initiatives Addressing Migration](#)”, IOM.

POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties, usually funded at least in part from public resources, have a role and responsibility in shaping balanced, evidence-based public discourse on issues related to public policy, including that on migration. With their statements at the national level amplified by the media, political leaders have substantial power and influence over debates in the public arena. Equally, the internal debate and policy development within political parties directly feed public discussion and have a significant influence on public narratives about migration.

Some political parties have used a “tough” stance on migration to present themselves as a much-needed ‘controller’ of immigration and as a protector in a crisis. Such messages feed anxiety and can lead to dangerous escalation of messaging as the party seeks to remain relevant. Without fear, there is no need for protection, and to generate more or continued support for protection, it becomes necessary to generate more fear. Beyond the migrant groups targeted, such narratives have a negative affect across a society. In contrast, there are multiple examples from across the OSCE region that demonstrate balanced, evidenced-based approaches to migration that have allowed political parties to expand their support.

Resist

- Refrain from “talking tough” on migration or any framing that presents migration as wholly negative or a problem to be brought under control. Instead of alleviating fears, such rhetoric increases public anxiety and a sense of threat.
- Make and promote pacts with other political actors, including opposing parties, to avoid using toxic or inflammatory language on migration, and call for all-party commitments or pledges to refrain from using toxic narratives on migration or hate speech as part of pre-election preparation.
- Advocate for your party’s or institution’s code of conduct to include sanctions on the use of hate speech and inflammatory language to reflect anti-discrimination legislation, international commitments and internationally recognized good practices.

React

- Respond to false information and public anxiety by drawing on existing, verified data to inform debates on migration and call out disinformation or false claims about migration whenever these are made.
- Support and help publicize the activities of civil society groups monitoring and pushing back against hateful or intolerant narratives on migrants and migration.
- Monitor the implementation of political party and institutional (such as parliamentary) codes of conduct that prohibit the use of hate speech and inflammatory language and call out any breaches.

Re-shape

- In areas where less information exists about the migration situation, commission research to deepen understanding of the issues and of voters' opinions and concerns. Ensure that political messaging and policy-making is properly informed by a good understanding of public opinion and the issues in question.
- Support training for party members and colleagues on international and national migration processes and trends, and help ensure that they are informed and are using the correct terminology (e.g., the important difference between an asylum-seeker and a refugee). International and local civil society organizations working on migration are usually well-placed and equipped to support such training initiatives.
- Engage with migrants as people and be open about this engagement. Consider the needs and interests of different migrant communities in this dialogue. Some will be well organized and happy to meet and contribute formally to political discussions; others, for example undocumented migrants, will need 'brave spaces' in which they feel safe, and these needs should be prioritized. Migrant communities are a source of political support and potential voters, members and candidates. Encourage migrant participation in public and political affairs as provided for by your national legislative framework.

Good practice: Commitment to campaign without discrimination and intolerance

In 2014, several pan-European political parties signed a declaration of commitment to conduct an election campaign free from discrimination and intolerance in response to the rise of extremist parties across the EU. A number of national parties also endorsed the appeal.

More: [European Network Against Racism, ENAR](#)

Good practice: Politicians leading by individual example

In 2017, Polish politician Marcin Świąćicki argued during a TV debate that Poland should be more open and pro-active towards receiving refugees. When a journalist asked if he would be willing to host any in his own home, he replied “Yes”. An NGO linked him with a refugee family in need of accommodation and he and his wife have been hosting this family in their house for four years. Widely covered by the media, this case contributed to the public debate about how welcoming Polish society should be.

More: [UNHCR](#)

**Good practice: Inclusive political participation**

In a number of countries across the OSCE region, including France, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, migrants and refugees may become members of political parties, even if they cannot vote in elections, and in some countries non-citizens also have voting rights in regional and local elections, e.g. Denmark, Ireland, Portugal, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, and some cantons in Switzerland. Some parties actively reach out to migrant and refugee men and women and encourage them to join. Such pro-active approaches help to shape positive perceptions of migrant and refugee communities as people with a stake in the national community who are willing to contribute to the social and political development of their new, receiving country. These contributions to shaping countries’ political climates may also help to moderate the influence of anti-immigration groups.

For these reasons, the Irish Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration actively promotes the political participation of migrants and offers opportunities for political parties to inspire and encourage migrants to get more involved in local and national politics.

More: [Office for Promotion of Migrant Integration, Department of Justice, Ireland](#); [Info Migrants](#); [the Robert Bosch Foundation](#)

“As a member of parliament, I feel that it is my duty to promote a responsible migration policy which does not include bigotry or xenophobia. One crucial part in a holistic approach to migration, which must never be overlooked, is the civil society and the impressive work by NGOs and religious communities. Their tirelessness in supporting migrants and promoting the rights of women and all minority groups must be commemorated.”



Margareta Cederfelt
Member of Parliament, Sweden
Deputy Chair of the OSCE Delegation and Vice President,
OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
President of Parliamentarians for Global Action

“Turkey is home to the world’s largest refugee population, hosting close to 4 million refugees and asylum-seekers, including 3.6 million Syrians. Gaziantep,⁹ on the border with Syria, my home city, alone hosts more than half a million Syrian refugees. Although we refer to figures, we must not forget: all are human beings and, undoubtedly, each life represents a different example of tragedy. Turkey attaches great importance to the protection, inclusiveness and integrity of migrants. Stigmatization, xenophobia and discrimination against people escaping from precarious situations are illegal, immoral and inhumane. That is not the right message for the next generations.”



Mehmet Sait Kirazoğlu
Member of Parliament, Turkey
Member of the OSCE PA Migration Committee

“A welcoming culture for refugees and migrants can only be successfully achieved when the political framework is in place, the social sector and professionals follow up, support and training are quantitatively and qualitatively set up, and, most importantly, civil society gets included in the welcoming climate. NGOs and individuals can impact social discourse and play an important role in integration and welcoming culture. Their reach decreases fears and uncertainties and their voices put pressure on the political stakeholders for that matter. The trio of politics, social services and civil society is key and should never be underestimated.”



Djuna Bernard
Member of Parliament and Co-president of the Green
Party, Luxembourg

9 See also: “Cities Managing Migration: the State of Affairs”, GMF US Blog.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL POLICY AND DECISION-MAKERS

Public institutions have a responsibility to protect the rights of all members of society, respond to their actual needs and interests, and deliver adequate services to all, without discrimination. The relationship between policy-making and public and political discourse is reciprocal: policy makers both respond to and shape political narratives and public perceptions. Policy decisions made in response to popular fears or anxieties, for example those resulting from the politicization of migration issues, often fail to address the actual issues at hand or their underlying causes.

In designing evidence-based and inclusive social, educational, cultural, and labour market policies, policy-makers fulfil their duty to deliver policy-making that responds to the needs of diverse groups of people, including young and old, educated and non-educated, women and men, non-migrants and migrants. Inclusive policies also help reinforce public perceptions of migrants as members of society endowed with rights and duties. Equally, specific legislation or programmes addressing tolerance, diversity and inclusion, anti-discrimination and hate crime, as well as those providing for asylum processes or refugee integration, serve to safeguard people's human rights and prevent discrimination, as well as help to inform public opinion and political debate.

Addressing the needs of migrants in public policy and counteracting racism and xenophobia not only contributes to social cohesion and safety for all, but also demonstrates that decision-makers are accountable, trustworthy and responsive to societal needs and international human rights standards. Further, communication with the public about policy-making and implementation presents an important opportunity to contribute to shaping balanced and well-informed narratives.

Resist

- Strengthen hate crime legislation to send a clear message to society that any violence, particularly when motivated by racism and xenophobia, is not to be tolerated. Consider introducing hate speech legislation. In these laws and policies, ensure the definitions and terms used will mean hate crime and hate speech targeting migrants is also prohibited.
- Avoid reactive policy-making based on prejudice. Counter misinformation and disinformation by establishing systems for data collection to ensure that policy development and implementation is properly informed (e.g., the actual numbers and level of in-migration to a country are frequently far lower than popular perception, and data on relative levels

of unemployment among migrants and the receiving society can help to demonstrate the financial contributions made by immigration).

- Ensure that parliamentary or advisory committees dealing with migration issues are not dominated by politicians with an anti-migration stance and that committees' debates are both balanced and properly informed.

React

- Ensure that external communications are balanced and evidence-based, linking accessible information about practical implementation with higher level policy decisions, international and national legal commitments and also, where relevant, social values of humanity, solidarity and equality.
- Engage representatives of migrant communities in policy consultations alongside other stakeholders and inform the wider public about their contributions. The engagement of different interest groups, including different migrant communities, in the consultation and policy-making process is important to ensure that policies are based on accurate information and that key constituents feel they have been listened to and are able to contribute to the process. Engaging migrants also serves as a public acknowledgement of their agency.
- Strengthen responses to online hate. While ensuring freedom of speech, regulate or encourage self-regulation of national social networking sites with regard to disseminating misinformation and disinformation, inflammatory and toxic narratives, including around migration.

Re-shape

- Ensure that international human rights standards are the basis for national legislation and processes and build in inclusive monitoring mechanisms to ensure that rights are respected in the implementation of refugee, asylum and migration management systems. This should help refocus the debate on the actual causes of complex issues and prevent migration being presented as the 'catch all' blame factor (e.g., addressing an underfunded education system, rather than the small number of migrant children who have a right to access it).
- Ensure that government institutions, political parties, the media, academia, civil society and the public have easy access to factual and technical information on migration and related processes as an important contribution to balanced and evidence-based discussion of migration in your country. Consider issuing fact-based updates on relevant national data and ensuring public access to contact persons.
- Allocate funding for organizations working with or representing migrant communities in your country, including civil society and those undertaking research. Such organizations can generate important information and evidence on migration, as well as facilitate consultations with migrant communities and their participation in a variety of forums.

“In my work, I have seen how discrimination against immigrants can have far-reaching social consequences. Discrimination undermines trust in the authorities and affects social cohesion and the realization of democracy. The Finnish Government has set as its objective that Finland will be the safest country in the world for everyone living here and for all population groups. All authorities have an obligation to assess their activities and to plan measures to eliminate discrimination and promote equality. In equality planning, we have to listen to the experiences of different population groups, such as immigrants, to help us identify challenges that all groups face in achieving their rights. ...I am proud that, in the activities of the authorities, we are striving to create a more equal and equitable Finland where we see everyone as valuable and where we strengthen trust in others and society.”



Kirsi Pimiä
Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior,
Finland

Good practice: Migrant advisory body that contributes to policy-making

In a number of countries across the OSCE region there are formalized and informal migrant advisory bodies. Some of them advise local councils while others are affiliated with parliaments or other public institutions. In Portugal, a “Council for Migrations” is placed within the national High Commission on Migration, overseen by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. The High Commission shapes, executes and assesses public, and sectorial policies concerning migration processes and migrant integration. The Council consists of members of migrant background who advise on public policies and legislative proposals that affect the rights of migrants. This gives migrant communities a say on the policies that directly affect them and also sends a signal to the wider society that migrants are members of society, are endowed with rights and their voice is respected.

More: [The High Commission for Migration, ACM, Portugal](#)

Good practice: Research on migration narratives to inform policy-making

The European Commission research programme Horizon 2020 included a call for research proposals on “Narratives on migration and its impact: past and present.” Three multinational consortiums have been offered several-year grants to look into the consequences of discourse on migration. The outcomes of this research are expected to improve access to and dissemination of information on the social, economic and political effects of narratives of migration on host societies and to contribute to a more informed debate on migration and public perceptions.

More: [European Commission](#)

“The narratives used to discuss migration have an important effect in shaping policies and processes developed to address this phenomenon. These narratives shape our perceptions about migration dynamics, and ultimately affect the integration of migrants in our societies. It is of paramount importance to better understand causes and effects, and the role held by the media, politicians and the public at large in shaping, reinforcing and feeling bound by such narratives.”



**Luca Lixi, Migration and Mobility Policy Officer
European Commission**

“Migration is, first of all, a personal choice. The full responsibility for this choice lies on the decision maker, with all its consequences and results. Still there are objective circumstances like wars, environmental disasters and others that make people leave the places of their permanent residence. The adequate depiction of these two realities and its presentation to society should inform our debates on migration.

Merely disregarding irregular migration, “shoving it under the carpet” will not make it go away, rather it will exacerbate unrealistic notions about migration. At the same time, hate speech and intolerance toward migrants will only increase toxicity and unhealthy societal attitudes. Only well informed and evidence-based debates on migration and integration issues will help to ameliorate the situation and assist those who are really in need.”



**Armen Ghazaryan, Head of Migration Service
Ministry of Territorial Administration and
Development, Republic of Armenia**

“Migration is about progress, development, acceptance and openness. The Republic of Moldova has realized that the efficient management of migration is achieved through co-operation, the establishment of sustainable partnerships, studying best practices, successes and failures, and the creation of its own example that corresponds to social realities...Creating the appropriate system can be ensured through the protection of migrants’ rights, their involvement in the development of the host society, ensuring a positive climate in society, avoiding discrimination and xenophobia and the harmonious development of society as a whole.”



**Tatiana Ciumas, Head of Integration and
Accommodation Unit
Bureau of Migration and Asylum under the Ministry
of Interior, Moldova**

LOCAL AUTHORITY AND MUNICIPAL LEADERS

Local authorities and municipal and metropolitan leaders are responsible for implementing and delivering policies and services to all local residents, including those of migrant background, as well as ensuring that communities are supported efficiently and are safe. Through their work, leaders at the local level can inform the receiving community and increase their understanding of migration-driven changes and opportunities. Cities and local authorities are increasingly developing their own approaches to migrant integration in their work with local communities and have a crucial role to play in influencing narratives and discourse on migration.

Evidence from the OSCE region indicates that even in countries with more prominent anti-migration discourse at the national level, local authorities are often able to employ different language on migration: more nuanced, solution-oriented, practical and inclusive as they seek to prevent community divisions and maximise the benefits of migration, including business development and commercial connections, tourism and international reputation.

Given that in a number of countries across the OSCE region migrants can take part in local elections, migrant populations are an important constituency. Inclusive language and active dialogue on local issues with migrant populations not only contributes to building cohesive communities and adequate service provision, but also has a role in broadening the local base for political support.

Resist

- Refuse to use any sensationalist or poisonous language when discussing migration and avoid referring to migrants resident in your constituency as a separate group or as a 'burden' on the local community.
- Resist sensationalist local media coverage. Rather, actively co-operate with local media to raise awareness about local migrant groups, the stories behind their arrival and their contributions to the local community.
- Ensure that local officials and public service providers are properly prepared to speak on migration. Provide officials with appropriate training on terminology and procedures (which

can often be complex) and ensure they have the information they need to respond to public enquiries and media requests.

React

- Respond immediately to instances of inflammatory language regarding migrants and swiftly call out, counter and remove intolerant language in public, such as racist or xenophobic graffiti.
- Be proactive when there are changes to policies or significant new arrivals expected. Inform key stakeholders and the public early with well-prepared communications and reduce opportunities for negative or intolerant narratives.
- Acknowledge the new inhabitants in your area and the importance of their input to your work. Set up communication channels with relevant public officials, service providers and consultative bodies or mechanisms whose input can be integrated into the approaches of all relevant departments and services. Such input is important to guide service delivery but also demonstrates publicly that local authorities see listening to migrant voices as important.

Re-shape

- Encourage and support a range of local public service providers (e.g., libraries, culture and community centres, kindergartens and schools, health care institutions, law enforcement) to contribute to balanced discourse and narratives on migration. This might be through an exhibition in a public library about historical migration trends, or discussions at schools about different language skills.
- Support activities that provide an opportunity for direct exchange between different groups living in your area and celebrate diversity. Such activities can include exhibitions, cultural and sporting events, educational courses or youth initiatives, and often provide good opportunities for collaboration with civil society organizations.
- Ensure that specific migration-related programmes have effective monitoring, evaluation and learning systems in place. Such systems inform programme management and future policy-making, and also generate evidence that supports fact-based public discussion.

“In Barcelona we speak more than 300 different languages and there are more than 180 nationalities and more than 970 religious communities represented: diversity is and has always been one of the greatest riches of our city. We work from day one so that the city of Barcelona grows thanks to each of its neighbours and they with the city through the recognition and visibility of diversity, respect for human rights and prevention of any kind of discrimination.”



Ada Colau
Mayor of Barcelona, Spain

Good practice: Shaping inclusive narratives and practices through a human rights-based definition of people as ‘urban citizens’

The city of Utrecht provides shelter (“Bed, Bath and Bread”) to homeless irregular migrants and helps with securing legal residence permits or safe return to their countries of origin. The pragmatic need to solve the problem of homelessness and ensure safety on the streets is underpinned by the city’s ethos: in 2013 Utrecht became one of Europe’s first Human Rights Cities. This programme underscores that “migrants and refugees are urban citizens” and their human rights deserve equal protection.

More: [Cities of Migration](#); [the Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#)

“Integration is a two-way road. It is not only a task for migrants who have to adapt to new social and linguistic environments, but also for the inhabitants of the receiving cities, who have to learn new lessons about living together and respect for the human rights of migrants.

Rising populist parties have demonized migrants and refugees for their own political gain. Countering this narrative takes courage, but it is essential to build cohesive communities and this is the responsibility of political leaders. As mayors and local and regional councillors, we need to talk to our citizens to help them understand the benefits of migrants’ contributions, both culturally and economically. We must also talk and act with the migrants, to understand the obstacles they face and to make it easier for them to establish a livelihood in local communities. In my municipality Ovanåker we are working on just that.”



Yoomi Renström
Mayor of Ovanåker, Sweden

Good practice: Quick responses to hate speech graffiti in public places

The presence of hate-filled language in public places contributes to a hostile atmosphere and inter-community tensions. The city of Wrocław in Poland has contracted a company that is required to remove any graffiti containing hate speech, xenophobic or racist messages within 48 hours of it being reported.

More: [Gazeta Wroclawska](#)

Good Practice: Re-shaping terminology to empower people and promote equality and inclusion

Government and civil society in Scotland have taken steps to change the language used around migration and reframe it, making a conscious effort to use inclusive language.

The Scottish Government uses the term 'New Scots' in official policies on refugee integration: [New Scots: refugee integration strategy 2018 to 2022 – gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2018-to-2022/pages/introduction.aspx).

Civil society working with refugees and asylum-seekers in Glasgow and Edinburgh have also developed new terms to 'reclaim' language around migrants. In Glasgow, the charity 'Refuweegee' coined the term based on "Weegee", a slang term for a Glaswegian, someone from Glasgow, the city where the majority of Scotland's refugee community resides ([About us | Refuweegee](#)). In Edinburgh, 'The Welcoming', an association that acts as the main refugee integration implementing partner for Edinburgh City Council, places a priority on inclusive language, referring to its mixed client base of refugees, asylum-seekers and other migrants as 'Newcomers' ([The Welcoming](#)).

CO-OPERATION WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR, CIVIL SOCIETY AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Political discourse and narratives on migration are not shaped in a vacuum. They are informed by – and simultaneously influence – perspectives and messaging from a range of other non-political actors. These actors include non-governmental and international organizations, the media, businesses, trade unions and others such as education institutions, faith groups and community organizations, which can all contribute to shaping debates on migration.

A key group, the media, simultaneously respond to the expectations, interests and needs of various stakeholders, including their particular audiences, and shape their perspectives on migration. Political leaders must respect editorial independence and freedom of speech, but also ensure public access to relevant data, support independent investigative journalism and media self-regulation efforts that contribute to fact-based reporting and inform a balanced migration debate.

Equally, businesses, trade unions and employer organizations are important stakeholders in discourse about migration. They are able to share data on migrant labour and employment. With increasing moves to ethical consumption, incentives for businesses to adopt value-based strategies that contribute to social integration and public awareness can also be helpful.

Non-governmental, faith-based and international organizations have been very active in the field of shaping balanced migration discourses and counteracting racism and xenophobia, with multiple examples of public campaigns, training courses, resource materials and other awareness-raising and public information activities.¹⁰ Such initiatives offer many opportunities for political leaders and government officials to engage.

Co-operation and exchange with a range of non-political actors will contribute to political leaders' efforts to resist, react and re-shape discourse and narratives on migration.

¹⁰ For some examples, see: [Migrant Narratives; Reframe the debate! New Migration Narratives for Constructive Dialogue](#); [How to run a Digital Storytelling service for migrants and refugees](#); [Story-telling project](#); [Human Lines](#).

“Too frequently in recent years migration has been used in political discourse for short term political gains, but responsible political leaders, who understand the need to build bridges between citizens and invest in social cohesion rather than stoke fears and xenophobia, have benefitted in the long-run from the increased trust of their voters. It is assumed that the public is opposed to immigration, but public opinion surveys show the opposite to be true. Most people want sensible policies and an honest debate on this issue.”



Magdalena Majkowska-Tomkin
Acting Division Director, Migration and Inclusion,
Open Society Initiative for Europe

Good practice: A business network promoting refugee inclusion

Founded in 2016 by CEO Hamdi Ulukaya, a Turkish businessman, activist, and philanthropist of Kurdish descent based in the United States, “The Tent Partnership for Refugees” is a network of over 140 major companies committed to improving the lives and livelihoods of refugees. Tent believes that companies can most sustainably support refugees by leveraging their core business operations – by engaging refugees as potential employees, entrepreneurs and consumers.

More: [The Tent Partnership for Refugees](#)

“Companies play a critical role in shifting narratives around refugees and migrants. It’s incredibly powerful when well-known, much-loved brands publicly communicate about their efforts to include and support refugees, and the business benefits they experience as a result of their refugee programs. For example – we know from research that refugees have lower turnover rates than non-refugee employees, and that consumers – especially millennials – prefer to purchase from brands that support refugees. But it’s so much more powerful and persuasive when we hear these benefits first-hand from companies. The more companies talk about integrating refugees, the more normalized the issue becomes. As a result, more businesses are likely to support refugees. It’s a virtuous circle in which everyone benefits – refugees, businesses and society.”



Scarlet Cronin
Acting Executive Director,
Tent Partnership for Refugees

Good practices: Commitments to ethical reporting on migration

The Charter of Rome was initiated by the National Council of the Journalists' Association (Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine dei Giornalisti, CNOG) and the Italian National Press Federation (Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana, FNSI) with inputs from journalist and academic communities and representatives of the Interior Ministry, the Social Solidarity Ministry, UNAR (Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali – National Office Against Racial Discrimination) and Presidency of the Council of Ministers Department for Equal Opportunities. Charter signatories pledge to respect the fundamental principles of ethical journalism and exercise the highest care in dealing with information regarding asylum seekers. Founded in 2011, the Carta di Roma Association unites representatives of the media, civil society and academia and works to further promote and implement the principles upheld by the Charter.

More: [Carta di Roma](#); [Council of Europe](#)

The Charter of Idomeni is a code of ethics that holds journalists accountable and promotes the protection of the rights of migrants and asylum seekers. It was launched by the Greek NGO “Union of Journalists of Macedonia and Thrace” (ESIEMTH) in 2016.

For more, see: [European Federation of Journalists](#)

“By creating *The Charter of Idomeni* we offered Greek journalists a useful tool in order to facilitate and encourage them to approach refugees and other vulnerable social groups through the values of professional ethics and international law. But the *Charter of Idomeni* is not just a set of professional ethics. By setting up a network and organizing interactive seminars together with the UNHCR, the Aristotle University and the Hellenic League for Human Rights, we have been training professional journalists and journalism students on how to deal with hate speech for four years. We have been inspiring people working in key positions – for example in NGOs, local authorities or in education – to act as catalysts in order to bridge the gap and facilitate refugee inclusion within Greek society.”



Pavlos Nerantzism
Charter of Idomeni Network Co-ordinator, Greece

“Media practitioners are at the forefront of a struggle that can determine the capability of broad audiences to process information and critically interpret misleading versions of events. We have a great responsibility in reaching out particularly to young people who are at risk of developing negative attitudes due to their exposure to anti-migrant narratives. There is great need for alternative storylines in an increasingly polarized public debate because great danger is caused by misleading information and the reiteration of discriminatory messages. If we want to invest in social cohesion, stability and security, it is necessary to facilitate shifts in public opinion through appealing counter-narratives presented in an engaging and entertaining form.”



Davide Tosco
Director and Media Advisor for radio,
television and online productions, Italy

“Participating States should restate that human rights and fundamental freedoms are universal and also enjoyed by migrant workers wherever they live. States are responsible for creating conditions to foster greater harmony in relations between migrants and host societies. They should encourage migrants’ active participation in society and enable them to actively contribute to the media, public and political discourses, and educational and civil society institutions. States also should proactively promote narratives and visions of inclusive and cohesive societies.”



Regina Polak
Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-
in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia
and Discrimination

Good practice: Promoting a welcoming culture and sharing knowledge

Willkommenskultur (in German: Welcoming culture) is a concept that rests on three components: (1) a positive attitude of politicians, businesses, educational institutions, sports clubs, civilians and institutions toward migrants and citizens of migrant origin; (2) acceptance and non-discrimination of foreigners and migrants by state – and non-state institutions; and (3) a range of measures that encourage positive attitudes towards migrant populations and promote diversity.

The term was developed earlier but gained new currency as an official tagline characterizing Germany’s assistance to millions of refugees seeking safe haven since 2015.

More: [Intersections: East European Journal of Politics and Society](#)

The Welcoming Network is composed of over 200 individuals, non-profit organizations, and local governments working to build more inclusive and welcoming communities in the United States and abroad. Led by Welcoming America, the Welcoming Network is both a network and a movement, driven by the conviction that communities make better decisions when residents of all backgrounds, identities, and perspectives are meaningfully engaged.

Welcoming Network members receive the tools, resources, technical assistance, and access to a global community of practice to help communities of all sizes become more welcoming places. In turn, members commit to advancing and institutionalizing welcoming efforts in their community and to sharing their experience and lessons learned with the network, while receiving training, resources, networking and leveraged funding.

More: [Welcoming America](#)

CONCLUDING NOTE

These recommendations and examples build on ODIHR's work on migrant integration and protection of the rights of migrants, on tolerance and anti-discrimination, and on political parties and democratic processes. For a more in-depth look at these issues, this publication can be read together with other relevant publications available from the ODIHR website, www.osce.org/odihr/migration.

While this guide focuses on promoting balanced migration discourse and shaping rights-based and inclusive migration narratives, it should be emphasized that such narratives need to be supported by adequate policies, infrastructure, and political will. ODIHR offers participating States information resources and technical advice for the development and strengthening of policies and legislation relevant to migration management, as well as opportunities to share and exchange experiences with other countries.

Finally, ODIHR would like to express gratitude to all politicians, public institutions, business and civil society actors who contributed to this guide with comments based on their professional experience and examples of good practices.