Working paper 512

Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants

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Key messages

- Engaging effectively with public attitudes towards refugees and migrants requires understanding the real world concerns, emotions and values around which attitudes are formed.

- These efforts work best when clearly rooted in national and local contexts, and the nuances of public attitudes within them.

- Traditional approaches to public engagement, such as 'myth-busting', may have exacerbated negativity and are unlikely to resonate beyond those who are already supportive. While evidence remains important in influencing policy debates, strategies must acknowledge its limitations as a persuasive tool.

- Emotive and value-driven arguments may have more traction than facts and evidence. Successful strategies might highlight the manageability of the situation, while emphasising shared values.

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1.Introduction

Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants within their host communities is becoming an increasingly important task for those working on refugee and migration issues. This includes international and national NGOs, academics, think tanks and civil society. Although there is evidence that refugees and migrants can contribute significantly to society if given the opportunity to do so (Pantuliano, 2016), public attitudes have a significant bearing on their prospects. Whether organisations are trying to raise funds, disseminate work, or advocate on behalf of refugees and migrants, their success hinges on how refugees and migrants feature within public attitudes.

This Working Paper, produced by ODI and Chatham House, is intended as a primer on the drivers influencing public attitudes towards refugees and migrants, and what they mean for organisations working on refugee and migration issues. There is an extensive literature that speaks to this issue, ranging from national and international opinion polling data to academic articles drawing on economic, sociological and political debates, to communications, advocacy and campaigning pieces. This paper canvasses this large literature base to draw out commonalities and highlight potential entry points.

1.1.   Methodology

This paper draws on over 160 studies selected from an initial scan of the literature and recommended by key figures working in this area. Given time constraints, the decision was made to focus largely on studies analysing public attitudes in the UK. However, we also draw on work from other European countries, the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Pakistan and Jordan. We have tried to draw on a wide range of cross-disciplinary literature and correspondence with 20 prominent experts on the topic. The paper also benefited from discussions at a roundtable in late February 2017, organised by Chatham House and ODI as part of their joint Forum on Refugee and Migration Policy (ODI, 2017).

1.2.   Terminology

This paper uses 'refugees and migrants' as a generic term to describe people on the move across borders, whether in search of better economic and social opportunities or to flee conflict, persecution and human rights abuses. We use 'migration' to mean the process of moving, and 'immigration' when referring to people coming to a specific country or region. However, for the sake of accuracy, when we are referring to polling data or other literature we use the language used in the polling questions or study.

1.3.   Structure

This briefing paper is split into four sections:

Section 1 discusses **public attitudes towards refugees and migrants** at the global, regional and national levels. Attention is paid to how attitudes differ towards different groups of refugees and migrants. The section also explores key demographic trends among poll respondents, but argues that demographics may not tell the whole story. We highlight a new move towards 'attitudinal segmentation', an approach analysing public attitudes towards refugees and migrants in the context of other interlinked attitudes.

Section 2 discusses **the drivers of public attitudes**, beginning with **real world concerns, emotions and values**. Despite the prevalence of misinformation on the topic of refugees and migrants, we question the effectiveness of 'myth-busting' strategies. We explore how public attitudes draw on real world concerns, in particular those connected to the economy, culture and society. Finally, we discuss the idea of migrants as threats, and the importance of recognising that, for many people, attitudes are based on complex emotions and values.

Section 3 looks at the importance of **external factors** in driving public attitudes, primarily the impact of **politicians, policy, the media and civil society**. We discuss the policy environment, political narratives and media reporting,

investigating issues of causality and the pressures these actors are under. We highlight civil society initiatives aiming to engage with public attitudes, and the key strategies employed. We conclude by emphasising the importance of effective messaging, highlighting how some strategies have been counterproductive.

Finally, **Section 4** assesses the **implications of this evidence base** for those working on refugee and migration issues. It draws four key conclusions:

• Public attitudes towards refugees and migrants are complex. Attempts to engage with them are unlikely to succeed without understanding and engaging with the real world concerns, emotions and values around which attitudes are formed.

• Understanding and engaging with public attitudes works best when clearly rooted in national and local contexts, and the nuances of public attitudes within them.

• Traditional approaches to public engagement, such as 'myth-busting', may have exacerbated negativity and are unlikely to resonate beyond those who are already supportive. More successful strategies might highlight the manageability of the situation, while emphasising shared values.

• Emotive and value-driven arguments may be more persuasive than facts and evidence. While evidence remains important in influencing policy debates, it is important to acknowledge its limitations as a persuasive tool.

2. Key trends: evidence from polling data

Since the advent of public polling, a substantial literature has emerged that aims to describe and explain public attitudes towards refugees and migrants, particularly in Europe and the United States. (For the limitations of public polling, see Box 1.)

2.1. Global polling data: a mixed picture

Available global polling data paints a mixed picture of public attitudes towards refugees and migrants. Gallup analysis of 2012–14 data from 140 countries found that, in every major world region except Europe, the greatest proportion of people wanted immigration to stay at current levels or increase (IOM, 2015; see Figure 1). Although this is currently the largest dataset in existence, and is based on a consistent methodology, the rising

prominence of refugees and migrants on the world agenda in recent years suggests the need for caution in assuming the picture remains the same today.[1]

Ipsos MORI polling data from 2016, covering 16,000 people in 22 countries, showed a substantial proportion of respondents uncomfortable with current levels of immigration (Ipsos MORI, 2016a). Overall, approximately half of respondents agreed with the proposition 'there are too many immigrants in our country'. Just one in five respondents agreed that immigration had had a positive impact on their country, while almost half agreed that immigration was causing their country to change in ways they did not like. Just under half disagreed with closing their country's borders entirely to refugees, but a sizeable proportion – over one-third – agreed with the proposition.

Figure 1: Attitudes towards immigration by region (%)

In your view, should immigration in this country be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?
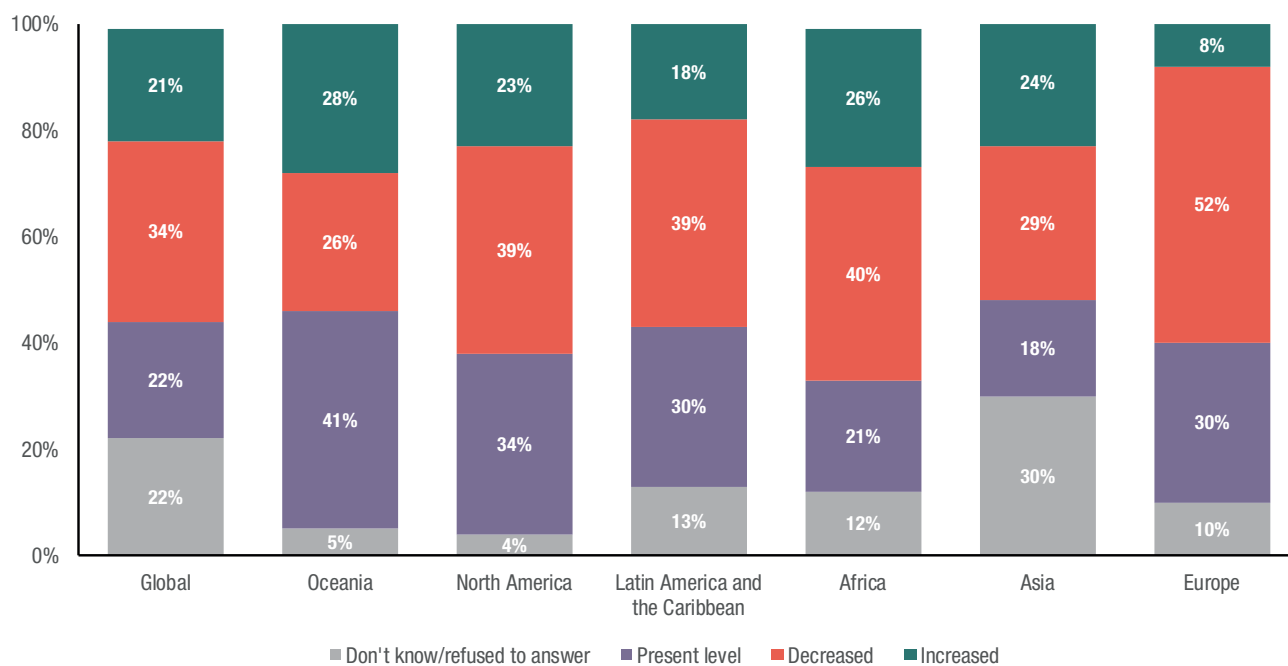
Source: IOM, 2015. Note: total group results are weighted by population size. Figures might not add up to 100% due to rounding.

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1. Gallup conducted a total of 183,772 interviews in 2012, 2013 and 2014. On average, 1,000 were conducted per country, with the same methodology and question sequencing used in each country. With some exceptions, all country samples were probability-based and nationally representative of the resident population aged 15 and older (IOM, 2015).

Between countries, the poll showed significant variations in attitudes, with many respondents positive or ambivalent about immigration. In Turkey 85% of respondents, and 65% in Italy and South Africa, agreed with the proposition that there were 'too many immigrants' in their country, and majorities in Turkey, India and Hungary showed support for closing their borders entirely to refugees. However, almost half of respondents in India and Saudi Arabia agreed that immigration had had a positive impact on their country.[2] Only a small proportion of respondents in Brazil (23%), Japan (24%), South Korea (30%) and Mexico (30%) agreed with the statement that 'immigration is causing my country to change in ways that I don't like'.[3]

Positive or ambivalent responses may be connected to the low numbers of migrants in a particular country. For example, in India, Brazil and Mexico, refugees and migrants make up less than 1% of the population, while the figure is 1.6% in Japan and 2.6% in South Korea (Kirk, 2016). In Saudi Arabia, where migrants make up a much higher proportion of the population (32%), wide public recognition of the positive impacts of immigration may be linked to government policies that encourage tightly regulated labour migration (under the *Kafala* system) and aim to attract highly skilled migrants.

Nuances in the data indicate the need for caution in drawing out topline trends. For example, although the Gallup worldwide data shows that Asia overall

prefers either increasing or maintaining current levels of immigration, it also shows that a dramatic three-quarters of those polled in Pakistan would prefer to reduce it (IOM, 2015). Within Europe, where polling has more commonly indicated negative attitudes, these vary significantly from country to country. Data from the European Social Survey shows a fairly stable distribution of attitudes in Europe over time, with Sweden, Denmark and Finland consistently most positive, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Portugal most negative, and mixed opinions in Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and France (Heath and Richards, 2016).

Even national aggregates of those 'for' and 'against' immigration can be too simplistic, hiding both geographical differences and increasing polarisation between those holding opinions most strongly on either side (Duffy et al., 2015). In the UK, studies have shown that people are markedly more tolerant in urban areas such as London, which are more ethnically diverse and have a long history of inward migration (Crawley et al., 2013; Blinder and Allen, 2016). Some have noted a 'halo effect', whereby some of the greatest opposition to immigration is found in ethnically homogeneous areas adjacent to more diverse locations (Kaufmann, 2015). In Germany, there is a significant divide between the east and west of the country, with the former more negative towards immigration, linked to each region's distinct social and political history (Foroutan, 2013; Gehrsitz and Ungerer, 2017).

Public attitudes towards refugees and migrants are best understood within the regional and national contexts in which they are formed. For example, attitudes in Turkey appear starkly negative. However, in a country hosting the largest number of refugees anywhere in the world, a two-thirds majority in favour of more restrictive policies can be seen as comparatively moderate (UNHCR, 2017a; GMF, 2015). Hiebert (2016) argues that attitudes towards refugees and migrants in Canada have been shaped by notably diverse immigration flows, a devolved immigration system and the framing of immigration as an issue of 'nation-building'. South Africa has been described as the most hostile country in the world towards refugees and migrants, but such attitudes should be understood within the country's narrow conception of national belonging, endemic xenophobia and its apartheid past (Crush et al., 2013; Freemantle, 2015). A wealth of literature has painted an extremely detailed picture of the UK public's attitudes, and their evolution over time (see Box 2). Unfortunately, there are much fewer studies providing such a detailed picture beyond countries in the global north, highlighting a clear gap in current research.

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2. Against an average of 20% across all countries polled, with lows of 6% in Hungary and Turkey (Ipsos MORI, 2016a).

3. Against an average of 46% across all countries polled, with highs of 74% in Turkey and 63% in Italy (Ipsos MORI, 2016a).

2.2. Public attitudes towards specific groups

Refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers

Numerous studies show clear distinctions in public attitudes based on refugees' and migrants' characteristics. Evidence from the UK, for instance, suggests that people tend to default to negativity when asked about 'immigration', but are much less prone to do so when asked about specific groups of migrants (Ford et al., 2012). In particular, people tend to be more favourably disposed towards those recognised as refugees than they are towards asylum-seekers and other migrants (Mayda, 2006; O'Rourke and Sinnott, 2006; Hatton, 2016). In Germany, a recent study shows that two-thirds of those polled agreed that accepting refugees was a national obligation (Purpose, 2017). Elsewhere, however, the picture is more mixed: a

2016 survey in 11 countries[4] found that, in many, there was majority support for compassion towards refugees, alongside anxieties about refugee intakes (TENT, 2016). In particular, connections have recently been made in public debate between refugees and security threats, which may be starting to erode refugees' more favoured status. Another 2016 survey, by the Pew Research Center (Pew), found that most respondents in Poland, Greece, Hungary, Italy and the UK agreed with the proposition that refugees posed a major threat to their country (Wike et al., 2016).

Mixed feelings may be linked to a dominant narrative that many of those arriving as refugees do not have a legitimate claim to asylum. Ipsos MORI global data from 2016 found that over half of those surveyed agreed with the statement that 'most foreigners who want to get into my country as a refugee really aren't refugees. They just want to come here for economic reasons, or to take advantage of our welfare services' (Ipsos MORI, 2016a). Although the proportion of those who agreed was as low as 30% in Spain and Sweden, more than six in ten respondents agreed in Turkey, Italy, Poland, Hungary, South Africa, India and Russia. The prevalence of these attitudes in opinion polling demonstrates the extent to which such narratives have gained traction, despite the fact that many of those who seek asylum do have a legitimate claim. For example, in Turkey the majority of new arrivals stem from the Syrian civil war, while the largest groups of Mediterranean sea arrivals into Europe in 2016 came from Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Iraq and Eritrea – all countries experiencing conflict, violence and human rights abuses (UNHCR, 2017b).

Legal versus irregular migration

Perspectives on refugees are also likely to be complicated by clear preferences against those who use irregular means to enter a country (i.e. crossing without appropriate papers or visas). Surveys from Europe, the United States and Australia consistently show higher concerns about these 'illegal' entrants (see Figure 2; Pew, 2006; Blinder et al., 2011; GMF, 2014; Duffy et al., 2014; Doherty, 2015). In Australia, the government's asylum strategy has consistently been framed as a battle against 'illegal' entrants by sea (Doherty, 2015).

'people tend to be more favourably disposed towards those recognised as refugees than they are towards asylum-seekers and other migrants'

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4. Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Serbia, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, the US and France.

Figure 2: The percentage of people worried about 'legal' versus 'illegal' immigration
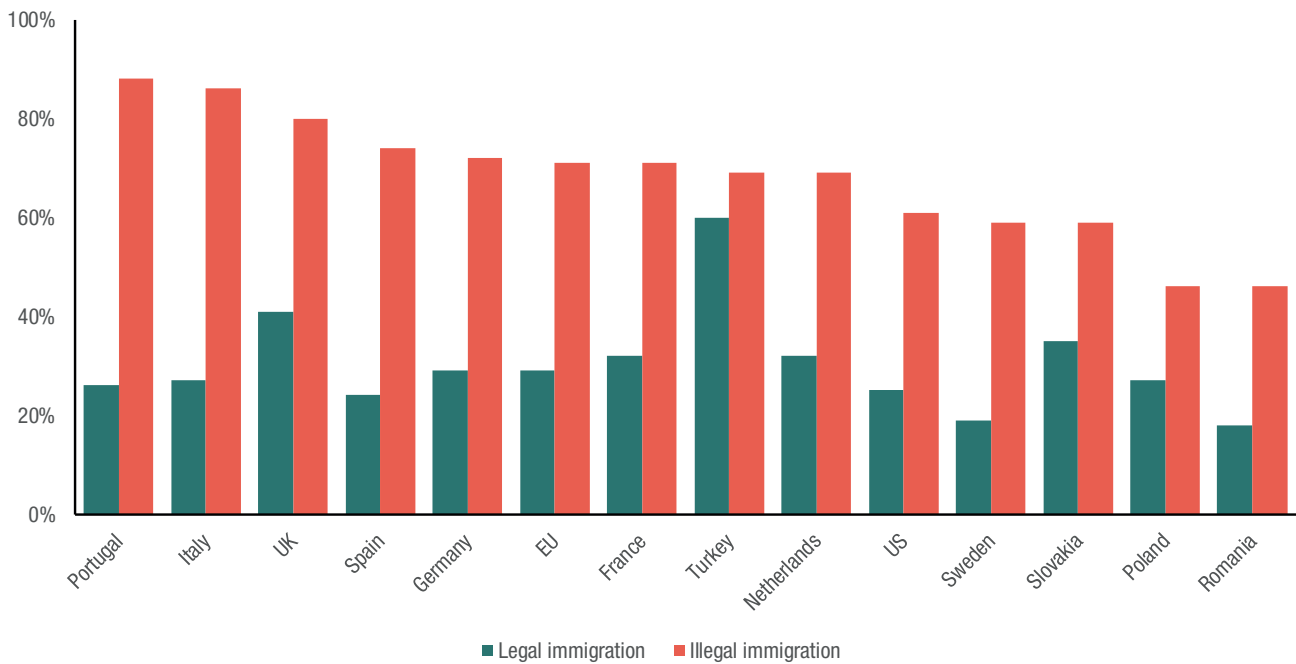
Source: Transatlantic Trends, 2013. Based on surveys with 1,000 people per country between 3 and 27 June 2013.

Skills and education

Studies in Europe consistently show that the public prefers refugees and migrants whose presence they judge to be economically beneficial to their country. In the UK, for instance, qualifications are seen as paramount (Ford et al., 2012). When asked about which groups they would like to reduce, most in the UK favour reducing the number of low-skilled workers and cases of extended family reunion, while polling shows greater public support towards high-skilled workers and students (Blinder et al., 2011). Data from the British Social Attitudes survey shows that this holds irrespective of the respondents' overall views of immigration (Ford and Heath, 2014). Similarly, across Europe, a study by Bansak et al. (2016) found that people tend to be more accepting of asylum-seekers from high-skilled categories, such as doctors and teachers, while preferring younger individuals given their potential economic contribution.

Culture, ethnicity and religion

Data from the European Social Survey shows a clear hierarchy of preferences towards different countries of origin (Heath and Richards, 2016). This is most likely an issue of cultural and ethnic difference; in the UK, for instance, people have consistently been more opposed to refugees and migrants who are non-white and more culturally distinct. The public also tends to expect greater

social and economic contributions from migrants coming from a different ethnic origin (OECD, 2011). Certain ethnic and religious groups fare particularly badly. Multiple studies show Roma to be the most unwelcome group across Europe (Heath and Richards, 2016; Wike et al., 2016), followed by Muslims (Heath and Richards, 2016; Bansak et al., 2016). A 2016 Chatham House survey of 10,000 people in ten European states found that 55% agreed with the statement that 'all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped', with particularly strong support for this sentiment in Austria, Poland, Hungary, France and Belgium (Goodwin et al., 2017). A 2016 poll by the Brookings Institution showed much less openness in the United States towards refugees from the Middle East, compared to other regions (Telhami, 2016).

2.3.   Demographic differences

Studies consistently find that hostility towards refugees and migrants is less prevalent among younger, politically liberal and more educated people (Crawley, 2009; IOM, 2015; Heath and Richards, 2016; TENT, 2016).[5] Winkler (2015), for example, shows that, in every European country except Sweden, over 40% of older respondents displayed negative attitudes towards immigrants; the rate was as high as 80% in Hungary, Greece and Cyprus. Schotte and

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5. Gender does not appear to have a substantial impact on attitudes, although greater gaps are noted in some countries, such as Greece and Germany, than others (TENT, 2016; Heath and Richards, 2016).

Winkler (2014) demonstrate that this is a generational effect: rather than people becoming more negative as they get older, these findings are indicative of different formative influences on different generations.

Although these demographic trends are well evidenced globally, their significance varies between different contexts. According to Mayda (2005), higher levels of education have a greater impact on attitudes in countries with a higher GDP per capita. Similarly, available evidence suggests that the level of educational attainment matters less in countries most negative towards immigration, for example Hungary, the Czech Republic and Lithuania (Heath and Richards, 2016).

2.4. Attitudinal segmentation

While these demographic splits are informative, it is likely that they tell only part of the story. In recent years, researchers have instead attempted to divide the public into different segments based not only on their attitudes towards migration, but also their attitudes towards a number of related issues, including multiculturalism, diversity, social change and optimism about the future. Research employing this method of 'attitudinal segmentation' aims to map out segments of the population based on interlinked attitudes, with the rationale that this approach is likely to provide more telling insights into how attitudes are formed than demographic data alone. Although this approach pays attention to the demographic characteristics of population segments where these are particularly notable, the unique aspect of this approach is the underlying notion that demographics are not the main predictor of public attitudes.

This approach can be seen most clearly in the UK. The Fear and HOPE report series, for example, has segmented the public into six distinct 'tribes': 'confident multiculturals', 'mainstream liberals', 'immigrant ambivalence', 'culturally concerned', 'latent hostiles' and 'active enmity' (Lowles and Painter, 2011; Ford and Lowles, 2016). This has allowed researchers to track how these segments of the population have grown or diminished in size over time, with the notable finding that the group most positive towards refugees and migrants ('confident multiculturals') more than doubled between 2011 and 2016, while the most hostile group has shrunk.

'the largest part of the public appears to fall within a "conflicted" or "anxious" middle'

A similar methodology in Germany has divided the German public into 'liberal cosmopolitans', 'radical opponents', 'economic pragmatists', 'humanitarian sceptics' and 'moderate opponents' (Purpose, 2017). This segmentation reveals distinctly 'German' features among these groups. In particular, the 'humanitarian sceptics' is a group of mainly older Germans who, although worried about refugees' ability to integrate, see accepting refugees as a national obligation. This feature is likely linked to Germany's history and constitution which, until 1993, enshrined an unqualified right of asylum for people who had suffered persecution.

Although a presently limited global evidence base renders cross-context comparisons of such segmentation difficult, there are indications that in most countries the largest part of the public appears to fall within a 'conflicted' or 'anxious' middle. They are less ideologically motivated than groups most confidently 'for' or 'against' immigration, and much more ambivalent towards refugees and migrants and their impacts on society (Purpose, 2017; Katwala et al., 2014). Individuals within this group tend to hold complex, and even conflicting, views, explaining notable inconsistencies and contradictions within polling data. For example, Bansak et al. (2016) have found that, while Europeans prioritise asylum-seekers' ability to contribute economically, they are also more accepting of asylum-seekers who are traumatised and vulnerable. In the UK, studies show that people are unlikely to agree that immigrants have made their area a better place to live, just as the vast majority recognise the sizeable contributions immigrants make to the National Health Service (Ashcroft, 2013). As discussed below, conflicting attitudes of this kind do not undermine the validity of these opinions, but instead underscore the complex web of concerns around which public attitudes towards refugees and migrants are formed.

3. Drivers: real world concerns, emotions and values

There is still significant debate in the literature surrounding the question of what drives public attitudes towards refugees and migrants. Our analysis highlights several key drivers. Most importantly these include real world concerns around economic, cultural and security issues. Available evidence suggests another key finding: that, beyond these concerns, attitudes are driven by a wide range of emotions and values that interact with, and colour, individuals' interpretation of real world impacts. People display a complex spectrum of emotions and values, some of them markedly positive, where pro-immigration sentiments may have more hope of gaining traction than one might think. For those wishing to engage with public attitudes, it is crucial to analyse the complex process through which opinions are formed on the individual level. This is essential to understand the lens through which any attempt to shift attitudes in either direction will inevitably be viewed.

3.1. The problems with myth-busting

In public debate, and by those working as advocates for refugees and migrants, it is sometimes assumed that negative attitudes are based mainly on poor levels of information about immigration flows, their consequences and corresponding government policies. There is plenty of evidence that people are ill-informed about migration, and surveys from numerous regions consistently show that people frequently overestimate the number of immigrants in their country (IOM, 2011). On this argument, it would seem to follow that people need only learn the facts about migration in order to be persuaded away from anti-immigration convictions, an idea which has led to a substantial focus on 'myth-busting' in public engagement strategies (Katwala et al., 2014).

Certainly, providing accurate information on migration flows and policies is important. However, evidence suggests that misinformation is not the only issue behind attitudes,

nor is providing accurate information the only (or best) answer. In the UK, Ipsos MORI found that those who overestimate immigrant populations are not always the most prone to concerns about immigration (Duffy et al., 2015). Studies from the UK also show a prominent tendency among respondents to reject official migration numbers when confronted with statistics, especially those emanating from government sources (Duffy et al., 2014; Katwala et al., 2014). While misinformation may interact with, and fuel, concerns about migration, analysis suggests that understanding and influencing public attitudes is an issue that goes far beyond correcting misinformation (Crawley, 2009).

3.2. Real world concerns

Public attitudes respond to real world impacts and experiences, both of migration itself, and of realities intimately connected in people's minds to refugees and migrants, such as globalisation and multiculturalism. Moreover, although attitudes towards refugees and migrants may be formed on the basis of personal experience, most studies agree that immigration is a 'state of the nation' issue, where attitudes are more likely to be shaped by concerns about one's country or community as a whole, as opposed to self-interested concerns about personal circumstances (Hatton, 2016; Katwala and Somerville, 2016). This finding is consistent in studies across North America and Western Europe (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2013; McLaren and Johnson, 2007).

'misinformation is not the only issue behind attitudes, nor is providing accurate information the only (or best) answer'

Economic concerns

Opinion polling from numerous regions around the world shows clear concerns about the economic consequences of admitting refugees and migrants. An International Organization for Migration (IOM) report presenting global Gallup data shows that people who rate their country's economic situation as 'fair' or 'poor' are almost twice as likely to say that migration should decrease than those who rate it 'good' or 'excellent' (IOM, 2015). Studies in 2016 by TENT in 11 countries worldwide, and by Pew in ten European nations, both found that approximately half of those surveyed worried about refugees imposing an economic burden on their country (TENT, 2016; Wikes et al., 2016).

Cultural concerns

Racial prejudice and other cultural factors also play a role in attitude formation (Ivarsflaten, 2005; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Dustmann and Preston, 2001). People who hold strong negative stereotypes of ethnic groups are more likely to favour restrictions on migration and to prefer migrants from culturally similar groups (Burns and Gimpel, 2000; Golebiowska, 2007; Pearson, 2010). Concerns about cultural impacts intersect with concerns over refugees' and migrants' integration. In 2016, Ipsos MORI found that, in 22 countries surveyed, only two-fifths of respondents agreed with the statement 'I'm

confident that most refugees who come to my country will successfully integrate into their new society' (Ipsos MORI, 2016a).[6] Recent analysis by Purpose found that almost half of German respondents lacked confidence that refugees would successfully integrate (Purpose, 2017), and a 2015 poll by Pew found that only a third of respondents agreed that immigrants wanted to adopt American customs (Pew, 2015). Research by the TENT Foundation in 2017 found that people felt they would be more empathetic if they knew refugees saw integration as important, knew refugees from similar countries who had integrated well and knew that refugees wanted to work (TENT, 2017).

Polling suggests that learning the language of the host country is one of the key yardsticks by which refugees' and migrants' integration 'success' is likely to be measured. As Figure 3 shows, three-quarters of respondents from ten European countries placed 'being able to speak our national language' as the primary determinant of national identity. This finding has a clear bearing on expectations concerning those refugees and migrants seeking to integrate. Seventy per cent of Americans and a similar proportion of Australians regard speaking English as very important to integration (Stokes, 2017; Sheppard, 2015). Other markers of 'successful' integration include sharing in local customs and traditions, respecting national political institutions and laws, and paying taxes and 'contributing' to the local economy.

Figure 3: Determinants of national identity in Europe
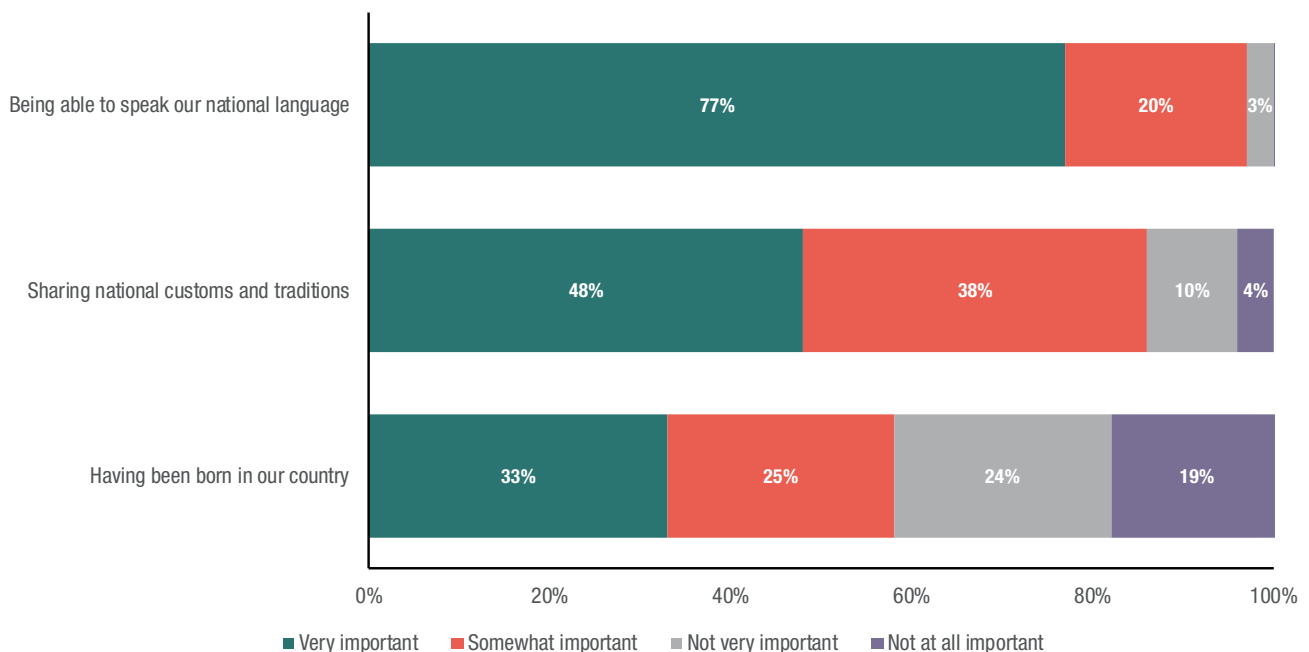
Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey Q85e-d, cited in Wike et al., 2016.
Note: Figures might not add up to 100% due to rounding.

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6. Notably, however, others were more confident: over 50% of respondents in Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Mexico, Saudi Arabia and India were positive about integration (Ipsos MORI, 2016a).

Security concerns

Concerns about security have emerged as another key factor driving attitudes towards refugees and migrants. A 2016 poll by Brookings showed that 46% of Americans who opposed accepting refugees were concerned about perceived links to terrorism (Telhami, 2016). In another US study, even one-third of those who supported accepting refugees nonetheless mentioned concerns about the security implications of doing so (Tolay, 2017). Similarly, Pew's 2016 survey of ten European countries showed that, in eight of the ten, over half of respondents were worried about the security implications of accepting refugees (Wike et al., 2016). Although there is little substantive evidence linking refugees to recent terror attacks in Europe and the United States, poll findings show the extent to which the connection has nonetheless been made in the public's mind between refugees and migrants and concerns over terrorism.

3.3.   Threat narratives, emotions and values

There is a substantial body of literature arguing that economic, cultural and security concerns about refugees and migrants gain significant traction in people's minds because they feed into a worldview where cultural outsiders are perceived as a threat (Esses et al., 2017). Such threats may be realistic, focusing on tangible issues such as the economy or personal well-being, or symbolic, forming around the maintenance of key values and beliefs. The intensity of threat felt, and defensive reactions employed, may be linked to an individual's feeling of control over life more generally, or even to low self-esteem and anxiety (Sniderman and Citrin, 1971; Esses et al., 2017).

This 'threat narrative' has been picked up by the political far right in numerous contexts, and has been used to depict refugees and migrants as a challenge to values and culture, a source of terrorism and crime, and a threat to living standards, jobs and public services (ODI, 2017). At the same time, however, it is important to remember that most people hold complex views towards refugees and migrants: attitudes are formed based on a complex

'attitudes are formed based on a complex web of concerns, through a process which relies as much on emotion and individual values as on rational analysis of evidence'

web of concerns, through a process which relies as much on emotion and individual values as on rational analysis of evidence. For example, Purpose's analysis of public attitudes towards refugees in Germany finds that attitudes are based on a complex combination of feelings including obligation, scepticism, fear, empathy and guilt (Purpose, 2017). Although perceptions of threat may be connected to deeply held fears, for most people this is only one part of an intricate range of emotions.

Attitudes towards refugees and migrants are also deeply connected to individual values. For instance, numerous studies talk about the prominent pull of narratives structured around the concept of 'fairness'. In Australia, people's aversion to arrivals by boat may be because they are perceived to have somehow unfairly 'queue-jumped' and avoided the proper resettlement channels (Doherty, 2015). This concept of fairness can also be linked with a desire that migrants 'contribute' to the country they are living in. This is particularly emphasised in studies from the UK, where traditionally Conservative voters typically favour an immigration system that prioritises competence and contribution (Shorthouse and Kirkby, 2015). An interesting forthcoming study from Bansak et al. (2017) shows that, in most countries, a majority support allocating asylum-seekers proportionate to a country's capacities (as defined by GDP, population size and other factors). Underscoring the importance of the idea of fairness in many individuals' worldviews, the study shows that this trend holds even when participants were made aware that their country would, on this basis, have to take more asylum-seekers than presently hosted.

4. Drivers: politics, the media and civil society

Public attitudes are also shaped by a number of other key influencers, notably politicians, government policy, media reporting, other members of the public, and refugees and migrants themselves. However, as above, understanding and ascribing causality to these relationships is difficult.

4.1. Policy and politics

Government policy

Government policy sets the context in which public attitudes towards migration are formed, whether in terms of immigration, asylum and integration policies, or broader economic and social policies. The former are primarily set at the national level – though subject to international and regional agreements – and govern the transit of people into the country. *Immigration policy* covers those intending to study, work and stay, and *asylum policy* regulates those seeking international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention or through regional frameworks. *Integration policy* governs the process by which immigrants become part of life in their host country, especially in schools, workplaces and communities.

Many voters appear to be unhappy with the way these policies are being formulated and implemented. In 2016, Ipsos MORI found that 62% of the UK population was dissatisfied with how the government was handling immigration (Ipsos MORI, 2016b), while a 2015 study by Pew found that 82% of respondents in the United States agreed that the immigration system needed a major overhaul (Pew, 2015). Public confidence in integration policy is also low: a 2014 Transatlantic Trends survey found that almost two-thirds of Europeans and Americans felt their governments were doing a poor job on integration (Transatlantic Trends, 2014).

Governments may adopt a restrictive approach to immigration in the belief that this will be popular among voters. However, setting unrealistic targets that cannot be met may in fact increase public unease by cementing a belief that migration is 'out of control'. This traps politicians in what Andreas (2009) calls an 'escalating performance' spiral – worried about appearing lax on immigration, while stoking the very fears that lead voters to doubt their government's ability to manage it.

'setting unrealistic targets that cannot be met may in fact increase public unease by cementing a belief that migration is "out of control"'

In the UK, the coalition government that came to power in 2010 pledged to drastically cut net migration to under 100,000 annually. Despite a raft of policies to reduce non-European migration, including restrictions on family reunion, student and work visas, this target has remained consistently out of reach. Currently, net migration into the UK stands at 248,000, the first time in three years that it has dropped below 250,000 (BBC, 2017). Research during the UK general election in 2015 showed that 60% of voters felt the original pledge was a mistake.

Political narratives

In recent years, many politicians, particularly on the far right but increasingly within the mainstream, have linked migration with economic, security and cultural concerns (Esses et al., 2017; Crawley and McMahon, 2016). In the United States, Donald Trump's successful presidential election campaign included references to Mexican immigrants bringing drugs and crime into the country, and in Poland President Andrzej Duda has asserted a need for the government to protect its citizens from possible 'epidemics' brought in by refugees. Shifting the focus onto immigration may be seen as a way of diverting attention from domestic political difficulties (Andreas, 2009). In Hungary, for example, Prime Minister Viktor Orban embarked on an 'anti-immigration' campaign in the belief that this would win back falling support for his party. At the time, the level of net migration to Hungary was low, and just 3% of Hungarians considered immigration a serious issue. Since the campaign began, xenophobia has increased, alongside an increase in support for Orban's party (Refugees Deeply, 2016).

Proving a causal connection between political narratives and public attitudes is difficult. It is possible that politicians

playing the 'immigration card' are not actually changing public attitudes but merely preaching to the converted. In a context of declining trust in the political 'establishment', there is also a broader question about whether mainstream politicians have much influence in general over public attitudes (Geddes, 2017). At the same time, however, the way migration is framed in political discourse is part of the backdrop against which public attitudes crystallise. The case of Hungary discussed above shows that a well-implemented negative government campaign can lead to an increase in xenophobia. In Australia, people use government catchphrases such as 'queue-jumper', 'illegal' and 'terrorist' when discussing migration (Doherty, 2015), suggesting that at least some parts of the narrative must be gaining traction.

Conversely, people seem to feel more positive about refugees and migrants when their political leaders frame migration in positive terms (Crawley and McMahon, 2016). The Canadian government, for instance, has implemented a number of large-scale initiatives to resettle refugees, coupled with programmes to tackle prejudice and improve public opinion, such as local festivals and ceremonies (Griffith and Chan-Kam, 2002). Esses et al. (2017) argue that this positive government front, both in terms of policy and narrative, has resulted in more favourable public opinion and a more welcoming attitude towards refugees. Similarly, Arango (2013) ascribes positive views in Spain to a political tradition that discourages statements that undermine equality and liberty.

It is beyond the scope of this paper, and perhaps even beyond the available evidence base, to precisely determine the nature of the causal links between political narratives and public attitudes towards refugees and migrants. However, the evidence discussed here suggests some support for the argument put forward by McHugh-Dillon (2015) that the relationship is most likely bi-directional: while political narratives are heavily influenced by what politicians think the public feels about these issues, they also set the backdrop against which public attitudes are formed.

4.2. The media

The media also has a prominent role to play in shaping public attitudes towards refugees and migrants. In this section, we focus primarily on news concerning refugees and migrants delivered via traditional broadcast, press and online news platforms. Although news delivered via social media is important, a full analysis of this factor was considered beyond the scope of this paper, given the small (though growing) evidence base on the topic. Despite this, much of the literature referred to in this section does not separate out news delivered via social media

from traditional news platforms. As such, some findings presented here may also shed some light on the role of non-traditional media sources.

The tone and content of reporting on migration varies from country to country (UNHCR, 2015; Crawley et al., 2016). For example, research suggests that the French media are more likely to report on social and cultural issues, and the US media on economic concerns (Benson and Saguy, 2005). The media in Brazil, China and India tend to focus on internal migration, and in South Africa the focus is primarily on instances of xenophobia and racism (Cooke and White, 2015). Coverage of refugees and migrants is more positive in Sweden and Germany, and generally more negative in Australia and the UK. The British press are more likely to frame refugees as potential threats to culture, welfare, security and the health system than any other country in Europe (Berry et al., 2015; Crawley and McMahon, 2016; Doherty, 2015; UNHCR, 2015).

Esses et al. (2017: 87) find that many media stories dehumanise refugees and migrants. In the UK, they have been portrayed as 'swarms', 'cockroaches' or a 'plague of feral humans'. There is a strong focus on numbers: 'floods' or 'invasions' of new migrants (Allen and Blinder, 2013), and governments' apparent lack of control (Threadgold, 2009). Reporting may use imprecise terminology, interchanging the terms 'migrant', 'asylum-seeker' and 'refugee'. It is rare for articles to quote refugees or migrants, focus on women and children or give information on migration histories or reasons for movement (Threagold, 2009; Crawley et al., 2016).[7]

Media outlets on both ends of the political spectrum appear to present issues in an un-nuanced way. It has been claimed that many liberal media outlets have under-reported negative stories, especially where they contradict liberal government policies, instead attempting to paint everything in a positive light (Baker et al., 2008). Other outlets have achieved a more nuanced editorial line, and some have paid particular attention to covering issues surrounding refugees and migration in extensive detail. For example, *The Guardian* (UK), *Der Spiegel* (Germany), *Le Monde* (France) and *El País* (Spain) recently teamed up to report from inside refugee communities (The Guardian, 2017).

Issues around polarised reporting and a lack of nuance in coverage should be situated within the rapidly changing context in which journalism is taking place. The rise of Internet-based news has fuelled competition for audience share and a push to publish quickly and in more sensationalist ways (Akdenizli et al., 2008; Asylum Corner, 2017). Journalists often have a short response timeframe and negative arguments tend to be easier to make (ODI, 2017). Finding migrant voices takes time and money

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7. Crawley et al. (2016) note that only 15% of the UK-based articles they reviewed referenced a migrant voice or perspective. Berry et al. (2015) report similar findings in Germany and Italy (9%) and Spain (12%).

(Crawley et al., 2016). Owners or editors may decide what issues they feel their readership, or intended readership, find important, and instruct their journalists to file accordingly. In the Czech Republic, for example, the editor of the country's largest newspaper decided to appeal to what he believed was a pre-existing underlying resentment towards asylum-seekers and refugees. He therefore instructed journalists that they 'were to present refugees and migrants as a threat' (Refugees Deeply, 2016).

As with the political narrative around immigration, tracing a link between media portrayals and public attitudes is difficult. As in politics, so with the media, it is possible that someone may subscribe to a certain newspaper or watch a certain TV station because they print or broadcast views and narratives they already support. That said, much literature concludes that how migration is covered in the media broadly determines the overall shape and content of public debate (OECD, 2011; Duffy et al., 2014). This includes more traditional media sources such as print, radio and TV, as well as news provided online and through social media. Essentially, 'the media does not dictate what its audience should think on particular issues, but it is influential in promoting about which issues its audience should think, and how it should think about them' (Doherty, 2015: 56).

4.3. Civil society

As discussed in Crawley and McMahon (2016), in many countries there is an interest from parts of civil society in countering anti-immigrant views, and an interest amongst the public in assisting them in this. For those working on refugee and migration issues, the term 'civil society' encompasses a range of organisations: providers of legal advice, initiatives that bring migrants and host communities together and organisations that provide research and advocacy services. These groups often involve, or are set up by, refugees and migrants themselves.

Among groups seeking to counter anti-immigrant views, some have stressed the importance of church groups and individuals who can speak to the 'anxious middle'. This could include media personalities and people who have themselves welcomed refugees and migrants into their communities (ODI, 2017). Public attitudes may also be influenced by other members of the public, including refugees and migrants themselves; a poll by TENT in 2017 found that 70% of people in 12 countries ranked 'talking with friends and family' as their main influence on refugee and migration issues.[8]

A scan of recent initiatives suggests two key ways in which civil society groups have attempted to engage with public opinion towards refugees and migrants: by encouraging contact between refugees, migrants and hosts, and by trying to promote migrant voices in public debates.

Encouraging contact

'Contact theory' was developed in the 1950s by US psychologist Gordon Allport as a means to reduce prejudice and conflict between members of majority and minority social groups. According to contact theory, if people have the opportunity to communicate with others they will be better able to understand and appreciate different points of view, leading to a reduction in prejudice (Allport, 1954). There is much evidence to support this in the literature; one review of 515 studies found that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice, regardless of the specific intention of the contact (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Applied to immigration, this suggests that public attitudes could be improved by encouraging contact between immigrants and host populations.

Box 3: Putting 'contact theory' into practice in the UK

A number of organisations and initiatives in the UK have attempted to put contact theory into practice.

Citizens UK is a community organising group mobilising people on a range of issues, including housing, public safety, employment and racism. In September 2015, it founded a new movement, Refugees Welcome. One goal of this movement is to bring together groups of refugees, migrants, and those in host communities to lobby for local resettlement programmes. Citizens UK helps these groups grow and develop, and engages with local councils on refugee policy.

The HOPE not hate campaign was founded in 2004 in the face of growing support for political parties that espoused anti-immigrant views. It has distributed information about anti-immigrant political parties and hate groups during local elections, and has offered support to, and run, initiatives with Muslim organisations. Its campaign, #MoreInCommon, puts into practice many of the elements highlighted in this paper as important to engendering positive public attitudes: emphasising commonalities and shared values between refugees, migrants and host communities. #MoreInCommon was founded after the murder of the British parliamentarian Jo Cox in 2016, and, one year later, its Great Get Together hosted a series of events across the country to celebrate commonalities among communities.

Sources: https://www.refugees-welcome.org.uk/, http://www. hopenothate.org.uk/who-we-are/ and https://www.greatgettogether. org/about/

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8. The survey was conducted online, with 12,527 respondents from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Serbia, Sweden, Turkey, the UK and the US.

'contact needs to have "friendship potential" or provide opportunities for longer-term engagement to result in positive change'

A number of civil society groups have been set up with the aim of creating opportunities for refugees, migrants and host populations to interact on a personal level, including volunteering, community organising and cooking and eating together. Two such UK-based examples are profiled in Box 3. The literature suggests that contact theory works best when it is applied in routine, everyday activities (Finney and Peach, 2004). Mixing at school appears to be particularly effective in encouraging integration (IPPR, 2014). However, opportunities for social contact have decreased in many communities as funding for free public spaces such as libraries, civic centres and other institutions has been cut following the 2008 financial crisis (Katwala and Somerville, 2016). The growth of electronic communication and at-home working has also led to a general decline in face-to-face communication and contact.

To be effective, the literature suggests contact must take place under certain conditions. In particular, if contact is short-term and/or negative it can have the effect of entrenching existing attitudes, rather than changing them. One study in Australia (McHugh-Dillon, 2015) found that, while for most people meeting refugees resulted in more positive and empathetic attitudes, particularly among women and educated professionals, for some, notably retired men, meeting refugees actually hardened their views. Similar results were found by Barlow et al. (2012) in contacts between host communities and refugees and migrants in the United States and Australia. This study concluded that negative contact with minorities was more likely to produce prejudice than positive contact was to decrease it. As a result, some suggest that such contact needs to have 'friendship potential' or provide opportunities for longer-term engagement to result in positive change (ICAR, 2005).

Migrant voices

Civil society groups have also tried to influence the way refugees and migrants are presented in the media (see Box 4). Individual human interest stories, such as the separation of families as a result of the US travel ban, have shown the impact of relatable imagery in engaging members of the public, particularly those in the 'anxious middle'. It has been suggested that ascribing a human element to policy choices makes people more positive (Katwala et al., 2016). Work in Germany shows that, while people support restrictive policies on deportation, they tend to oppose

those policies when they are confronted with their human cost (Ellerman, 2006).

Initiatives along these lines are relatively new, and there is little evidence yet as to whether they are effective. Even so, research suggests some important considerations for how such initiatives are framed. First, while many initiatives aim to promote awareness of the difficulties faced by refugees and migrants, this risks portraying them as victims. In doing so, this could perpetuate perceptions of refugees as an unrelatable 'other', particularly if stories play more on sympathy than on empathy. If playing on the former, stories may reinforce the idea that, while refugees and migrants are sympathetic figures, they are not 'contributing' or 'capable', characteristics prized by many who see this 'contribution' as key to successful integration (Bansak et al., 2017).

Second, attention has been paid to presenting refugees and migrants as role models, for example the Refugee Olympic Team, which was set up to highlight that 'anyone can contribute to society through their talent, skills and strength' (IOC, 2016). However, while messaging around refugees as role models could resonate with members of the public who value migrants' contribution to their society, there is a risk that such depictions could create unrealistic expectations of what a 'good immigrant' is, and what contribution they can make (Shukla, 2016). As such, if not considered carefully, strategies risk undermining efforts to move public attitudes in a more positive direction.

Box 4: Bringing migrant voices into the media

Migrant Voice is a migrant-led organisation working to strengthen the voice, participation and representation of migrants in the media. It works primarily on capacity-building, strengthening the skills and confidence of refugees and migrants to engage in public debate. It also acts as a bridge between its members and the media, and publishes a free newspaper directed at the British public. Migrant Voice also provides a platform for its members to discuss issues of concern to them.

Migration communications hub IMIX seeks to put forward the positive case for migration. It is primarily a membership body working to strengthen the communications capacity of small organisations working on refugee and migration issues. This includes supporting attempts to bring migrant voices into the media. IMIX also directly engages with the media, providing facts, information and contact points to ensure good coverage of migration and integration issues.

Sources: http://www.migrantvoice.org/about and http://global-dialogue.eu/migration-communications-hub/

Effective messaging

While the initiatives described above show promise in influencing attitudes in a positive direction (if pursued based on a careful analysis and strategy), others may be counterproductive. For example, campaigns framed around celebrating diversity may have antagonised people already predisposed to view migration as a cultural threat (Purpose, 2017). In Australia, a billboard promoting Australia Day celebrations featuring two girls in hijabs had to be taken down following abuse from far-right groups (ABC, 2017). Similarly – and this point goes beyond civil society initiatives to more general coverage of the issue – the language of 'crisis' used around recent movements of refugees and migrants into Europe may have projected a sense of vast scale and unmanageability, a message at odds with widespread concerns about gaining 'control' over migration (ODI, 2017). For initiatives to be successful, they must engage with how issues around refugees and migrants are framed, and tailor messaging based on the concerns of the segments of the population they are trying to influence.

Understanding public attitudes is crucial if civil society initiatives are to reach beyond people who are already supportive, and be able to engage with those in more conflicted groups. Some have argued that civil society efforts are most likely to gain traction if they are rooted in local contexts and national specificities (ODI, 2017). In Germany, Purpose suggests that the most convincing messages are likely to be built on a sense of common humanity, inclusive patriotism and a mutual compact of hospitality from the welcoming country and efforts to

'civil society efforts are most likely to gain traction if they are rooted in local contexts and national specificities'

integrate by refugees (Purpose, 2017). In the UK, British Future argues that stories should aim to talk about the shared history and shared future between refugees, migrants and host populations (ODI, 2017). For example, in 2014, British Future worked with Tabinda-Kauser Ishaq, a British Muslim student at the London College of Fashion, who designed a poppy hijab as a way of marking Remembrance Day and commemorating the 1.6 million Indian and Muslim soldiers who fought in the First World War (The Telegraph, 2015).

With attitudes influenced in various ways by politicians, the media and civil society, it is worth noting that some of the more effective civil society initiatives may be those that achieve buy-in from politicians and the media. For example, a new private sponsorship initiative in the UK pioneered by a number of NGOs was ultimately only made possible by their success in promoting changes in government policy (Howden, 2016). Similarly, the impact of any initiative in shaping public attitudes is likely to depend on how it is covered by the media. This cyclical relationship exemplifies how public attitudes can be shaped by the intersection of a number of different actors.

5. Implications and recommendations

The findings above suggest several clear implications for those working on refugee and migration issues. First, the picture is complex. **Some people are overwhelmingly hostile, others welcoming, but most are conflicted**. They feel empathetic towards refugees, while also experiencing real anxieties about issues such as job security, public services, cultural change and terrorism. While some of these concerns may be directly related to migration (such as the actual impact of migration and failures of integration policy), others may reflect a broader set of anxieties with which migration is inescapably connected in public attitudes, such as concerns about loss of community and globalisation.

Attempts to speak to public attitudes towards refugees and migrants are unlikely to succeed if they do not first engage with people's genuine real world concerns. In particular, an overly positive standpoint on migration – ignoring the real complexities, difficulties and concerns surrounding contemporary movements of people – may not be the most persuasive strategy. Instead, a **more effective approach may be one that acknowledges genuine difficulties, promotes an open discussion of solutions and initiates clear responses to real concerns**. Although organisations working on refugee and migration issues may not be best placed to address some of the broader concerns surrounding migration, progress might be made through partnerships and coalition-building.

Second, while some working on refugee and migration issues come from a global standpoint, it is crucial to acknowledge that **understanding and engaging with public attitudes works best when clearly rooted in national and local contexts**. Only by fully connecting with these contexts, and the nuances of public attitudes within them, can those working on refugee and migration issues understand how much space there is for them to find support and, concurrently, the kind of strategies that might be most effective. In particular, there is a clear need to reframe the 'migration issue' from an abstract global debate to something that resonates in people's lives – an effort that is likely to require different strategies in different local contexts. Attempts to bring people together within their communities look to be a promising step.

Third, there is a need for those working on refugee and migration issues to **rethink traditional approaches to public engagement**. Evidence shows that some traditional approaches to campaigns, such as 'myth-busting', are unlikely to resonate beyond those who are already supportive. Other approaches may even have increased negativity within public attitudes and deepened public concern. More successful strategies might stress the manageability of the situation, while emphasising shared values. Regarding manageability, there may be space for those working on refugee and migration issues to collaborate with governments to explore possibilities for well-managed, realistic, transparent and evaluated migration systems. This may succeed in moving public attitudes in a more positive direction by appealing to ideas of 'control' over migration and finding buy-in from the 'anxious middle'.

Those working on refugee and migration issues should also heed lessons learned from previous approaches to think more strategically about public engagement. This will involve not only rooting in a more detailed understanding of local contexts, but also **better defining goals and audiences**. For example, while some messages may be effective for fundraising purposes, mobilising an already supportive base, entirely different messages may be required if the aim is to engage with public attitudes more generally. Some NGOs have highlighted a dilemma between the depictions and messaging needed for fundraising (for example, presenting refugees and migrants as vulnerable and deserving) and the 'integration end goal' – that is, for host populations to see refugees and migrants as contributing and capable (ODI, 2017). Such strategic thinking should also **emphasise the importance of the messenger**. 'Elite' NGO representatives and politicians may be less effective in engaging with public attitudes. It may be more effective to focus on 'regular' people, media personalities and those who have themselves welcomed refugees and migrants into their communities.

Finally, the research discussed here poses an existential question for many working on refugee and migration issues, namely **the place of evidence in informing public attitudes**. As discussed above, research suggests that attitudes towards refugees and migrants are driven by a complex spectrum of emotions, where evidence plays a lesser role and is sometimes rejected outright. If the goal is to directly engage with attitudes, emotive and value-driven arguments may be more persuasive than facts and evidence. While evidence will remain important in

influencing policy debates, those working on refugee and migration issues should acknowledge its limitations as a tool of persuasion.

Given the several levels on which public attitudes are shaped, it is likely that strategies will be best employed along several different tracks, each with its own constraints and limitations. For example, although civil society appears a promising vehicle for bringing communities together, in many contexts, initiatives coming from a liberal point of reference must employ complex and targeted strategies to ensure that efforts go beyond those who are already supportive. The most effective strategies are likely to be those that work on several levels, from politicians and the media to civil society and the private sector.

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