

What do Europeans think about migration online and offline?

Report Presentation

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How is migration discussed across Europe? Has the 2015/2016 refugee “crisis” changed the attitudes of Europeans towards migration? What role do social media play? Are there pan-European debates? These questions are in the focus of two comparative research projects commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung which were presented and discussed at this roundtable event.

Migration Narratives in Europe – A Social Media Intelligence Study

First, Kata Füge and Daniel Fazekas from Bakamo Social presented their report, which is the first EU-wide social media analysis on migration. In all 28 member states, a total of 45 million comments on migration in social media were recorded and analysed over the course of a year.

One of the main findings showed there is no existing pan-European debate, but rather 28 parallel national debates, following different narratives separately. Five main narratives can be identified: (1) an economic one framing migration as a competition for limited resources, (2) a demographic one focusing on Europe’s shrinking population and migrants’ labour force, (3) a humanitarian one focusing on the moral obligation to help refugees, (4)

an identity narrative focusing on cultural cohesion and (5) a security narrative focusing on crime and terrorist attacks. None of them are completely in favour of or opposed to migration, but shape the discourse in a certain way.

The identity and security narratives dominate overall and highly influence the others. Conversations in countries like Hungary, but also Germany, Poland and Estonia mainly refer to the security narrative, whereas the humanitarian narrative is most prominent in Spain, but also in Portugal, France and Cyprus. The intensity of conversation varies between countries. It is not correlated to the number of refugees hosted.

The predominance of the security and identity narrative can be traced back to three main anxieties people feel the need to express, using migration as a scapegoat to be heard also in elite circles. These anxieties concern matters of personal, economic and cultural-communal safety. Therefore, references to migration do not always signalise anti-elitist sentiment, but also disrupted political communication as well as deficient political responses to citizens’ concerns.



Kata Füge and Daniel Fazekas (Bakamo Social)

This, said Daniel Fazekas, is what progressive politicians need to do: tackle the main anxieties within a positive narrative. Taking those fears seriously and not leaving them to right-wing populists would be crucial, as all other strategies like debunking myths with facts do not work when confronted with anti-elitist sentiments. The EU has to positively take ownership on migration and focus on the daily local challenges its citizens' experience.

Still divided but more open – mapping European attitudes towards migration before and after the migration crisis

Sociologists Vera Messing and Bence SÁgvári presented the second report, based on data from the European Social Survey covering 20 EU countries between 2002 and 2017. The results show the extent to which Europeans' attitudes to migration changed from 2002 to 2017, thus covering the period before and after the 2015/2016 'migration crisis'.

Surprisingly, Europeans have been consistently neutral about migration on average over time, seeing as many advantages as disadvantages. Only among Hungarians did negative perceptions of migration increase significantly, even changing social norms. However, cognitive perception is different from behavioural rejection, which is rather strong in Italy, for example. On the other

hand, public attitudes towards migration improved in Spain, Portugal, the UK and Ireland, which the authors attribute to an economic upswing and higher general confidence in those countries leading to stronger confidence in governments and in the future and therefore not falling back on the 'scapegoat' of migration. Overall, both public opinions and actions are quite stable, despite the recent financial and refugee crises.

The report authors also found that a relatively large proportion of people hold extreme views on migration: 8,7% in Italy, 8,5% in Hungary, 6% in Czech Republic and 5.2% in Austria. Factors that increase the likelihood of holding extreme views include personal financial difficulties, personal safety concerns, political alienation, low inter-personal trust, general unhappiness and age. Interestingly, anti-immigrant sentiment is strongest in places where there are the least migrants but highest feelings of insecurity. Therefore, people's feelings of control, both on a personal level as well as a societal one, explains a lot about attitudes towards migration. Furthermore, norms set by political discourses have a direct impact on people's behaviour. There is a clear relationship between left/right political orientation and attitudes toward migration.

These findings support the first study's recommendation for politicians not to counter the debate on migration with tough legislation in this area, but rather by focusing on the concrete local grievances people actually have to face in their daily lives.

I. Video records of both presentations:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwTXgSMkWE0>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIQ1EcY4wI>

II. Link to the first report:

<https://www.bakamosocial.com/2018-eu-migration-study>

III. Link to the second report:

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/15322.pdf>

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