



# From Fear to Solidarity

## The Difficulty in Shifting Public Narratives about Refugees

By Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan

INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM

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Migration Policy Institute

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## Executive Summary

Public narratives on humanitarian migrants are often pulled to the extremes: refugees and asylum seekers are depicted as heroes or security threats, victims or exceptional contributors, exemplary neighbors or opportunists, with little gray area in between. Policy stances toward humanitarian protection have similarly ping-ponged between greater openness and restriction, with access to protection narrowing during the global pandemic while at the same time expanding in important ways in response to high-profile displacement from Venezuela, Afghanistan, and most recently, Ukraine. While some leaders have leveraged fears around COVID-19 to push through more restrictive policies, others have shown incredible creativity in regularizing large displaced populations and creating new avenues for resettlement and private sponsorship of refugees.

Amid this fractured and ever-changing narrative landscape, big questions remain around how to harness emerging examples of solidarity toward refugees and asylum seekers and defuse anxieties before they become dominant, or even existential, fears. While public opinion on migration is sometimes depicted as a binary, in reality, people can hold multiple, competing beliefs and opinions about forced migration and its impacts on society. They can experience compassion toward refugees and asylum seekers and pride in their country's humanitarian response alongside fear, anxiety, and even panic over changing cultural norms or competition for scarce jobs. And the relative importance of these beliefs can shift over time, or be mediated by different external factors—whether a community crisis, media headlines, or political rhetoric. Understanding when and how these shifts occur is notoriously difficult but critically important, as public support during a displacement crisis can create or constrain the space needed for sensible and creative long-term policy responses.

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Measuring public opinion on refugees is complex, due to gaps in polling in the regions hosting most the world's refugees and to weaknesses in survey instruments themselves. But several (nonexhaustive) trends have emerged over the past decade that have a direct bearing on policy:

- ▶ **Refugees and asylum seekers do not always elicit more support and empathy than other immigrants.** While some forcibly displaced populations enjoy widespread public support, there is an increasing dichotomy between refugees perceived as “deserving” and “genuine” and those seen as abusing a country's humanitarian protection system to seek better economic opportunities (such as asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border).
- ▶ **Public attitudes are not necessarily becoming more negative overall, but perceptions of unfairness or chaos can ramp up anxiety.** In places where the risks and burdens of aiding forced migrants have fallen unequally (or seem to have no end in sight), or where arrivals appear chaotic and poorly managed, the public may be more likely to feel taken advantage of and express the view that refugees are “gaming the system” or taking more than they contribute.



- ▶ **Specific narratives of support are often not generalizable.** Support for refugees may coalesce around highly specific narratives—such as welcoming Afghan “allies” in the United States, Venezuelan “brothers” in Colombia, or Ukrainian neighbors in Europe—that may not translate to support for future arrivals or other groups.
- ▶ **Compassion in the abstract does not always translate to concrete support on the ground.** Polls show relatively widespread support for humanitarian protection in principle, but also that far fewer people are willing to allocate resources within their own communities to see this happen.
- ▶ **Support for displaced populations tends to wane over time, especially as crises wear on.** Waves of generosity and solidarity after a crisis can be short-lived and hard to sustain; in most refugee-hosting countries, there is a point at which generosity fatigue sets in, usually as crises become intractable and resources dwindle, which allows tensions to flare.

Many actors—from governments to international organizations to civil society—have attempted to counteract scapegoating and xenophobia toward refugees and asylum seekers and to tap into feelings of generosity instead. But allaying the fears of skeptical and anxious publics and developing a credible narrative that joins communities in common purpose is not always straightforward. Campaigns that seek to change people’s minds may fall flat or even backfire. Once beliefs are formed, they are highly resistant to corrections, and sometimes efforts to change these beliefs can actually further entrench them. This is partly because beliefs are inextricably tied to social cues and identity, and there can be a personal cost to changing these views (such as fear of losing one’s standing within a social group). Thus, when people encounter discordant information, they tend to either discredit it or rationalize it as an exception to the rule.

Facilitating positive contact between refugees and other members of a society may be a more promising approach to reduce prejudice and foster cooperation and trust within communities. But the *quality* and *context* of the contact between groups are critical determinants of success. Even when diverse groups come together, they may not do so on equal footing. Being in the same physical space does not guarantee *meaningful* contact or actual collaboration. Many programs may suffer from an innate power imbalance (e.g., mentor versus mentee) or contact may be tokenistic or transactional (refugees performing in a festival but not being involved in its design or planning).

Addressing negative perceptions of refugees and other forced migrants also cannot be done in a vacuum. Governments and advocates may need to move away from the narrow goal of changing narratives and focus instead on restoring confidence in migration and integration systems. And to do so, they may need to calibrate a wide range of policies—including housing, employment, and infrastructure investments—to address the underlying sources of tension in receiving communities, including resource and job scarcity, before they can shift narratives. The goal should not be to eradicate all fears about migration (which is both impractical and ineffective), but instead to address growing seeds of anxiety head on before they bloom into a perceived existential threat.

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This study recommends five strategies to promote solidarity and defuse tensions:

- 1 **Identify pockets of intense anxiety, and pay attention to what makes concerns more or less salient.** Efforts to curb xenophobic rhetoric will not be effective without a deep understanding of what drives and inflames these fears in the first place, how these concerns become more or less salient over time (and under changing circumstances), and how different populations or geographies within a country may have very different views.
- 2 **Move away from a narrow focus on trying to change people's attitudes.** Addressing public anxiety around migration requires striking at the root of people's concerns—like job losses or overburdened infrastructure—rather than curbing how these fears are expressed (combating xenophobic rhetoric on its own). This requires leveraging more than just immigration tools. Leaders must find ways to empower those left behind and signal that investments are for entire communities.
- 3 **Reinforce perceptions of fairness.** People are more likely to be generous if they feel there are safeguards in place to prevent abuse, and that migration is happening in an orderly manner. Perceptions that asylum seekers are breaking the rules or “gaming the system,” or that refugees are taking “more than their fair share,” can cause a crisis even when overall numbers are small. The symbolism of how resources are allocated is also critical: there may be more resistance to investing in newcomers at times of instability and relative insecurity for society writ large.
- 4 **Invoke pragmatism instead of compassion.** Powerful surges of solidarity in the wake of crisis may be short lived and difficult to artificially sustain; to maintain feelings of welcome over the long term, publics should feel that solidarity with newcomers is something that furthers their own goals—not something imposed upon them. Finding practical ways for communities to come together in common purpose can embed feelings of unity over the long term.
- 5 **Demonstrate that there is a plan for newcomers' long-term integration, not just short-term reception.** Governments need to make a case for investing in long-term integration, as anxieties around whether low-skilled refugees will be able to become gainfully employed, or whether religiously different newcomers are living “apart,” loom large in people's minds and play a critical role in shaping public tolerance for more generous humanitarian policies.

While public opinion is often perceived as rigid and durable, it ebbs and flows constantly as certain concerns dominate and others recede. Instead of investing scarce resources in trying to eradicate all fear and anxiety about refugees and asylum seekers, it may be more productive to better understand the conditions under which positive and negative sentiment flourish.

# 1 Introduction

At a time when global protection needs have hit an all-time peak, public support for refugees has zigzagged, surging in some places and waning in others. Various narratives have emerged around the responsibility to welcome displaced people and the role these newcomers play in society. Refugees and asylum seekers have been alternatively depicted as heroes or security threats, victims or exceptional workers, exemplary neighbors or opportunists—sometimes all at once. Such narratives around forced migration (as migration more broadly) are often reduced to a simple binary of “benefit” versus “threat” with little gray area in between. But despite these polarized narratives, most public sentiment on humanitarian migrants actually falls somewhere in the middle. People can experience both pride in their country’s humanitarian response and compassion for refugees alongside fear and anxiety over changing cultural norms or competition for scarce jobs, each of which can become more or less salient under different circumstances.

Both the global pandemic and high-profile migration and refugee “crises” driven by large-scale displacement from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, and most recently Ukraine exemplify this ambivalence in public narratives—and the influence it can have on humanitarian protection policies. Amid reports of scapegoating and xenophobia, many publics have shown tremendous solidarity toward refugees, which has been echoed in certain policy responses. In February 2021, the Colombian government launched a historic legalization of 1.7 million Venezuelans, and one year later the European Union decided to deploy the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time to give legal status to millions<sup>1</sup> of Ukrainians fleeing war. And during the pandemic, many countries created new legal pathways for migrants and refugees seen as contributing to the frontline emergency response. Canada offered a path to permanent residency for “guardian angel” asylum seekers who worked in health care during the public-health crisis,<sup>2</sup> and France fast-tracked citizenship for 12,000 pandemic frontline workers.<sup>3</sup>

But both the pandemic and recent forced migration crises have also created pockets of anxiety that some leaders have seized upon, in some cases leveraging fears around COVID-19 to push through restrictionist policies that might otherwise have generated legal challenges. The United States invoked a public-health statute to turn back asylum seekers and other migrants arriving at its borders; Greek officials invoked public-health concerns to call for the closing of detention centers for asylum seekers; and thousands of Mozambicans fleeing violence have been forcibly returned from Tanzania. And while new arrivals from Afghanistan have thus far enjoyed widespread public support in Europe and the United States—in large part due to the unique position many Afghans played as military allies—many analysts have noted Europe’s more welcoming response to Ukrainians (a culturally, religiously, and geographically proximate population) compared to refugee arrivals from Syria and previous cohorts of Afghans in 2015–16.

1 As of late April 2022, not quite two months after the start of the Russian invasion, more than 5 million Ukrainians had already left the country, exceeding the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)’s original estimate that a total of 4 million may be displaced overall. Nearly 90 percent of these Ukrainians have sought safety in the European Union, going (at least initially) to Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia. See UNHCR, “[Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation](#),” accessed April 20, 2022.

2 Government of Canada, “[Pathway to Permanent Residency Recognizes the Exceptional Services of Asylum Claimants on the Front Lines of COVID-19 Pandemic](#)” (news release, December 1, 2021).

3 Ellen Francis, “[They Risked Their Lives on the Covid Front Line. Now France Has Made 12,000 of Them Citizens](#),” *Washington Post*, September 10, 2021.

The tides of public opinion can thus play a role in nudging policy in more restrictive or open directions—although the relationship between the two is not always clear-cut. Public support, whether real or perceived, clearly influences decisions around, for example, whether to maintain access to asylum systems (which was further imperiled during the pandemic) or whether to expand refugee resettlement and private

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sponsorship (which gained new momentum after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and war in Ukraine).<sup>4</sup> Policymakers may tap into, or indeed stoke, public anxiety opportunistically to pursue a restrictive agenda, or they may take calculated political risks to overlook pockets of anxiety in order to pursue more permissive policies even where public opinion is mixed.

Because public attitudes can create or constrain the space needed for sensible and creative policy responses (as well as community cohesion), governments, international organizations, and advocates have invested in myriad programs and campaigns to bolster solidarity and defuse negative reactions to forced migrants. But changing people’s minds is not so straightforward—and some of the easiest things to invest in (such as information campaigns) may be the least effective. More sophisticated interventions that facilitate face-to-face contact have the potential to build bridges (and thus trust) between disparate groups, but these require not only intensive investment but also a granular understanding of what drives group dynamics in specific communities in order to move the needle on attitudes, and this is incredibly difficult to do at scale. Bringing people physically closer together without also giving them the tools to meaningfully collaborate and bridge differences can sometimes backfire—and even ingrain prejudice and misunderstanding. What is often overlooked is how to design policies that boost public confidence in how elected leaders are managing large-scale change, rather than standalone initiatives to ease tensions after the fact.

This report will first look at the different narratives that tend to emerge in communities welcoming forced migrants, looking at a variety of geographic, socioeconomic, and historical contexts, and at how these narratives may vary in response to different crises or triggers. Then, the report will examine two categories of interventions that have been deployed to try to address negative narratives about refugees and asylum seekers: digital and information campaigns that aim to defuse threat narratives, and “contact-building” initiatives that aim to build connections between refugees and host communities by bringing together different groups in common purpose. The report’s final section will examine policy tweaks to refugee and asylum systems themselves that can limit the power of threat narratives and encourage generosity.

4 The United States launched a Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans in October 2021, shortly after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, to build capacity to welcome Afghans throughout the country and accelerated efforts to launch its new private sponsorship pilot program to expand avenues to resettle refugees, with plans to officially start the latter in 2022. In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Canada announced plans for a special family reunification sponsorship pathway, and the United Kingdom announced plans to establish a new uncapped sponsored humanitarian visa route. See U.S. Department of State, “Launch of the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans” (press statement, October 25, 2021); Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, “Canada to Welcome Those Fleeing the War in Ukraine” (news release, March 3, 2022); UK Home Office, “Factsheet: Home Office Action on Ukraine,” updated February 25, 2022.



## 2 Public Opinion and Narratives on Refugees

It can be notoriously difficult to pin down public attitudes about migrants and refugees, which seem to fluctuate not just with changing events, but also with the use of different survey instruments (see Section 2.B). Yet the elusive task of understanding what members of a society need, fear, and desire has become even more important in a context in which public support informs how protection policies are designed and implemented, alternately creating or constraining the space for creativity and generosity.

Public opinion surveys on immigration typically include questions covering one or more of the following areas: beliefs and assumptions (do people think immigration has had a positive or negative impact on things such as jobs, culture, or crime); weight and salience (how important are people's concerns about immigration vis-à-vis other issues); and policy preferences (whether people want more or less immigration, or restrictions on particular types of immigration). Some surveys also try to gauge respondents' immigration knowledge (for example, asking people how many immigrants or refugees are in their country<sup>5</sup>) or ask about individual behavior (such as frequency and quality of interactions with immigrants and refugees).

These questions can give us a window into public attitudes at a specific point in time, and whether refugees and asylum seekers are a peripheral or primary concern to voters. Surveys can also break down (or segment) attitudes to better understand how characteristics such as age, sex, or political affiliation—or core values and political leanings on adjacent issues—are associated with more or less support for newcomers at any given time (see Section 2.A). They can also gauge public reactions to external events and crises, such as an unanticipated spike in the number of asylum seekers arriving at the border.

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What surveys do not always capture well is why people want to see more or less immigration, and what specific strands of fear or anxiety (or messages of opportunity) may be animating these reactions. Examining the different stories people create and absorb about refugees—which can be disseminated from the top down or take root from the bottom up—is therefore an important complement to public opinion polling, as it provides clues as to how people interpret disparate events and where they assign blame and responsibility. This section will examine these two in turn, looking first at what we know about public opinion and then exploring how different narratives on refugees complete the picture, and where there are gaps in our knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> The public's tendency to overestimate the share of migrants or refugees in their country is well documented. The scale of overestimation is often correlated with a lack of exposure to and/or negative attitudes toward migration. The 2018 Eurobarometer, for example, showed that respondents in Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland (countries that took relatively low shares of the Syrians who arrived in Europe in 2015–16) overestimated the immigrant proportion of their country's population by more than a factor of eight; in Slovakia, estimates were 14 times the actual figure. See European Commission, "[Special Barometer 469: Integration of Immigrants in the European Union](#)," updated April 2018.

## A. *How Are Immigration Attitudes Formed?*

It is generally accepted that attitudes about immigration are shaped by a combination of internal and external dynamics. A 2022 metareview by Lenka Dražanová points to a combination of individual-level indicators (such as age, gender, education, and political ideology) and macro-level indicators (such as the share of immigrants in the country and overall unemployment or GDP).<sup>6</sup> A 2020 metareview by Peter Thisted Dinesen and Frederik Hjorth similarly captures this push and pull between individual and contextual elements, pointing to four main factors that drive attitudes: predispositions (including values, inherent characteristics, and personality traits); spatial context (the volume and geographic distribution of immigration); how people get their information (including media cues); and how people weigh individual and societal threats (along mainly economic and cultural dimensions).<sup>7</sup>

What is less clear is which of these factors becomes dominant under different circumstances. Because people can hold multiple, competing beliefs and opinions about immigration and its impacts on society at once, it is critical to understand how the relative importance of these beliefs can shift over time or be mediated by different external factors—whether a community crisis, media headlines, or political rhetoric.

Building on these frameworks, this report proposes three categories of factors—individual, contextual, and mediating—to help inform the discussion of how attitudes shape policy and vice versa.

### **Individual Factors: Personal Characteristics, Predispositions, and Values**

Individual characteristics (e.g., age, sex, education level, ethnicity, and political ideology) as well as core values (how people prioritize things such as fairness and reciprocity versus loyalty and authority) inform beliefs about immigration's costs and benefits. These individual characteristics also shape how people weigh the importance of competing beliefs. A number of studies have correlated anti-immigration sentiment with factors such as older age and lower education, conservative political ideology, and attachment to core values such as social dominance and hierarchy, though it is important to note these correlations do not hold true everywhere. A newer strand of “audience segmentation” research (put into practice by organizations such as British Future and More in Common) distinguishes different segments of the population not just along demographic lines such as age or income bracket, but along worldviews and values systems (e.g., multiculturalist versus humanitarian versus economically insecure).<sup>8</sup> One of the benefits of this work is that it sheds light on attitudes that lie between the extremes, identifying what has been called the “movable middle” or the “exhausted majority” whose attitudes may still shift, as opposed to those at the poles whose views are deeply entrenched.

6 Lenka Dražanová, “Sometimes It Is the Little Things: A Meta-Analysis of Individual and Contextual Determinants of Attitudes toward Immigration (2009–2019),” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 87 (2022): 84–97.

7 Peter Thisted Dinesen and Frederik Hjorth, “Attitudes toward Immigration: Theories, Settings, and Approaches,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science*, eds. Alex Mintz and Lesley Terris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

8 One of the methodologies used is Moral Foundations Theory, pioneered by Jonathan Haidt, which identifies five psychological foundations (harm/care, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation) around which different groups and cultures construct their views of morality. His key insight related to political ideology was explaining that no one group has an absolute claim on morality; different groups (such as liberals and conservatives) simply prioritize different moral foundations. See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

## Contextual Factors: Formative Events, Intergroup Contact, and the Information Environment

Beliefs about immigration are also shaped by the context in which they are formed. People's formative life experiences, as well as the frequency and quality of their exposure to different groups during key moments in their lives,<sup>9</sup> can significantly inform their attitudes. External events or "crises," such as a rapid influx of newcomers (and how governments manage these arrivals), can also affect how people prioritize competing narratives. It is important to note that negative attitudes can arise both in places with high concentrations of migrants as well as in places where the native born have very little direct exposure to foreigners but receive most of their information through media or social media. While contact between groups is thought to be an important tool to reduce tensions and prejudice, it is clear that the *type* of contact and circumstances under which it occurs is critically important. In some cases, greater exposure to refugees and asylum seekers can create more openness, but a rapid influx in places ill prepared for their arrival (e.g., the Greek islands in 2015–16) can lead to hostility and backlash.

## Mediating Factors: Framing and Issue Salience

The two categories defined above—internally and externally driven beliefs—can also be mediated or reinforced by different factors. How issues are framed by politicians, the media, and even survey questions can shape how individuals give weight to different concerns and prioritize certain outcomes over others. The salience of different views (the weight assigned to immigration versus other societal concerns) is almost as important as the beliefs themselves.<sup>10</sup> While beliefs may be relatively stable after early adulthood, how people rank competing concerns may fluctuate (for instance, a person may believe simultaneously that immigrant workers displace natives *and* that immigrants bring innovation, but one belief may rise in importance over the other based on external circumstances or framing).

## B. *Reviewing the Data: Understanding the Limitations of Public Opinion Data on Refugees*

While public opinion polling on immigration has proliferated in recent years, comparatively little attention has been paid to refugees specifically. Available data are limited to either a handful of questions on refugees embedded within larger-scale polling on immigration more broadly, or one-off studies commissioned by specific actors when public attention is particularly attuned to refugees and asylum seekers (for example, the Tent Partnership for Refugees launched a multi-country survey after the Syrian crisis in 2015).<sup>11</sup> There is also a geographic imbalance. The vast majority of public opinion polling on immigration has been done in high-income countries—mostly the United States, Canada, and Europe—which leaves the largest gaps

<sup>9</sup> Dražanová's research argues that what we perceive as differences in attitudes due to age are actually better explained by cohort: in other words, that generational differences are not due to life cycle differences (as people age, they become more negative) but rather due to the formative events around immigration each generation has experienced.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Hatton explains the importance of distinguishing between individuals' preferences on immigration and the salience, or intensity, of their beliefs, arguing that "while public policy might deviate from what the average (or median) voter would want, such preferences will not gain political traction unless salience is sufficiently high to make it a political priority." See Timothy J. Hatton, "Public Opinion on Immigration in Europe: Preference versus Salience" (IZA discussion paper no. 10838, Institute of Labor Economics, Bonn, June 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Tent Partnership for Refugees, *Tent Tracker – Year 2: Global Report* (New York: Tent Partnership for Refugees, 2017).

in knowledge of public attitudes in the parts of the world where most refugees and other forced migrants live.<sup>12</sup>

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Surveys themselves are also limited in what they can tell us. First, because they generally only capture attitudes at one point in time, they may not be sensitive to cyclical ebbs and flows in public perceptions. Even well-funded longitudinal surveys done once per year can miss significant external events that may affect public opinion. In the 2021 Afrobarometer report on Ethiopia, for example, nearly two-thirds of respondents said they believed their country was “going in the right direction,” and “political

instability” barely registered on the list of most important problems facing the country.<sup>13</sup> But as research by the Overseas Development Institute points out, the survey concluded on January 26, 2020—entirely missing the pandemic and the subsequent worsening of violence in the country’s Tigray region.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, a July 2020 Gallup poll reported that Americans want more, not less, immigration for the first time since 1965.<sup>15</sup> Yet in May and June 2020, when the survey was conducted, nearly all immigration pathways and visa processing had been recently shut down or delayed following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these limitations, stakeholders often use one-off polling to extrapolate conclusions about general trends, and surveys are sometimes treated as if there is no expiration date on the sentiment they measured.

Some surveys may also be too narrow to be generalizable, or too decontextualized to provide a full picture. For example, questions about the economic impact of refugees are often divorced from general attitudes on how well the economy is performing or whether governments are delivering on things such as infrastructure and jobs. In many countries hosting large numbers of Venezuelans, for example, many of the concerns expressed by host communities reflect pre-existing anxieties around job shortages and scarce resources that may well have been exacerbated by the influx of refugee but were not created by it.<sup>16</sup>

Many surveys also aggregate answers across a geographic area and are not sensitive enough to pick up on pockets of concern in local areas. For instance, a national survey may show that concerns over job competition or crime are decreasing in a country, but this could miss a subset of low-wage workers in industrial towns who may feel displaced by immigrant workers or concerns about crime in border towns.<sup>17</sup> Averages, in other words, can artificially flatten significant peaks of concern. Geographic differences can be extremely important when looking at attitudes in and around refugee camps versus in cities, border

12 A metareview conducted by Dinesen and Hjorth found that 91 percent of academic papers on public opinion on refugees and migrants (N=100) exclusively covered the United States or Europe (especially the United Kingdom and Germany). Many of the remainder cover countries such as Australia and Canada. See Peter Thisted Dinesen and Frederik Hjorth, “Attitudes towards Immigration: Theories, Settings, Approaches,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioural Political Science*, eds. Alex Mintz and Lesley Terris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). See also Amy Leach and Karen Hargrave, “The Data Gap on Public Attitudes towards Migrants in Low- and Middle-Income Countries Needs Closing – Here’s How,” Overseas Development Institute, November 6, 2020.

13 Afrobarometer, *Summary of Results: Afrobarometer Round 8, Survey in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Afrobarometer, 2020).

14 For a more in-depth analysis, see Karen Hargrave, *Public Narratives and Attitudes towards Refugees and Other Migrants: Ethiopia Country Profile* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2021).

15 Mohamed Younis, “Americans Want More, Not Less, Immigration for the First Time,” Gallup, July 1, 2020.

16 Oxfam, *Yes, But Not Here: Perceptions of Xenophobia and Discrimination towards Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2019).

17 Dinesen and Hjorth, “Attitudes towards Immigration.”

regions versus capitals, or rural versus urban areas. In Colombia, attitudes regarding access to benefits and employment for Venezuelans tend to be more favorable on the Caribbean coast than in Bogotá, where economic competition has provoked more tensions.<sup>18</sup> If national policymakers are basing support for their decisions on aggregate polling, they should be aware that averages can obscure bursts of very intense feelings in specific parts of the country (for instance, smaller U.S. towns that have felt ill equipped to manage the fast pace of refugee resettlement) that can have a disproportionate political influence if left unaddressed.

Survey responses can also differ significantly based on how or in what order questions are asked. Respondents can be “primed” to think about issues through particular lenses based on word choice or the sequencing of questions. Seemingly insignificant word choices (for instance, switching between asking people if they “support an increase” or “oppose a decrease”) can affect the results. Even materially similar phrases (for instance, 10 percent unemployed versus 90 percent employed) can shape people’s responses.<sup>19</sup> And because people hold multiple interests and concerns at once, priming respondents with information on a particular topic can result in them seeing subsequent questions through that frame. The potential consequences of this are visible in an influential 2020 survey in Japan that found that 70 percent of respondents believed refugees to be a security risk.<sup>20</sup> However, questions on support for admitting refugees to the country directly followed a set of questions on violent crime in Japan and the use of the death penalty, potentially priming respondents to have security concerns at the front of their minds. Finally, under some circumstances, respondents may not feel comfortable responding candidly to questions on sensitive topics, for instance about unpopular political beliefs or experiences of discrimination.<sup>21</sup> For example, a 2017 survey in Italy found that seven in ten respondents felt “pressure to think and speak a certain way about refugees” and did not feel they could be completely honest in their responses.<sup>22</sup>

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*Many surveys may not be designed in a way that makes it possible to capture the crucial difference between abstract and concrete support for refugees.*

Finally, many surveys may not be designed in a way that makes it possible to capture the crucial difference between abstract and concrete support for refugees. As will be explored in the next section, there may be relatively widespread support for humanitarian protection *in principle*, but far fewer people willing to allocate resources within their *own* communities to see this happen. In a June 2021 Ipsos global survey, for

18 Proyecto Migración Venezuela, “Diferencias regionales en la percepción de los colombianos sobre la migración en el país” (Boletín 16, December 2020).

19 Dennis Chong and James Druckman have documented this “framing effect,” when even small changes in how an issue is presented can produce (sometimes large) changes of opinion. For example, in one survey from the 1980s, about 20 percent of the American public believed that too little was being spent on “welfare” but about 65 percent said too little was being spent on “assistance to the poor.” See Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, “Framing Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 103–26.

20 Government of Japan, “Public Opinion Survey on Basic Legal System,” accessed March 11, 2021.

21 Many researchers have documented this “social desirability bias,” which occurs when people refuse to answer (or supply false answers to) sensitive or controversial questions to avoid being seen as having socially undesirable attitudes (for example, being seen as racist). See Pamela E. Grimm, “Social Desirability Bias,” in *Wiley International Encyclopedia of Marketing*, eds Jagdish N. Sheth and Naresh K. Malhotra (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2010).

22 Tent Partnership for Refugees, *Tent Tracker: Public Perceptions of the Refugee Crisis, Italy, 2016/17* (New York: Tent Partnership for Refugees, 2017). In a broader survey of 12 countries, 6 in 10 respondents felt they could not be honest about their beliefs; see Tent Partnership for Refugees, *Tent Tracker – Year 2*.



example, 70 percent of respondents from Turkey agreed that people should be able to take refuge in other countries to escape war or persecution, yet 75 percent also agreed with the statement “we must close our borders to refugees entirely – we can’t accept any at this time.”<sup>23</sup> Surveys that do not distinguish between these levels of support may be capturing overly positive views that do not translate into support on the ground.<sup>24</sup> This may be especially true in places with very little experience with immigration, as the reality of new arrivals can be very different from hypotheticals. For example, in a 2018 Amnesty International global poll, the country that scored by far the highest on the question “would you personally accept people fleeing war or persecution into your home” was China—a country that according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in January 2021 had a total of 313 refugees.<sup>25</sup>

### C. *Current Trends in Public Opinion*

This section reviews a selection of global, regional, national, and issue-specific or privately commissioned public opinion polls conducted in the past five years that include specific questions on refugees or asylum seekers. It looks at the circumstances under which these populations are viewed positively or negatively at different times and in different parts of the world, how intensely people hold these beliefs, and whether (and how) public opinion may influence subsequent policy decisions.

#### **Refugees and Asylum Seekers Do Not Always Elicit More Support and Empathy than Other Immigrants**

When asked in the abstract, many people express more support for refugees than for other categories of migrants<sup>26</sup> and broadly agree that those fleeing persecution should be able to seek protection (though they do not always agree their *own* country should be the one to open its doors).<sup>27</sup> A series of UNHCR surveys conducted in Jordan in 2020–21, for example, found that respondents were consistently more sympathetic towards people “escaping conflict and persecution” versus those coming to seek better economic

23 Ipsos, “World Refugee Day: Global Attitudes Towards Refugees” (fact sheet, June 2021).

24 In a global survey commissioned by Amnesty International in 2016 and 2017, almost all German respondents (94 percent) agreed that individuals fleeing persecution have a right to seek refuge in other countries, yet only 10 percent said they would welcome them into their own homes—perhaps reflecting hospitality fatigue in a country that had recently welcomed more than 1 million asylum seekers and refugees. See Amnesty International, “Refugees Welcome Index Shows Government Refugee Policies Out of Touch with Public Opinion,” updated May 19, 2016.

25 UNHCR, “People’s Republic of China” (fact sheet, UNHCR, January 2021).

26 In a 2018 Global Attitudes survey of 18 countries conducted by Pew, 71 percent of respondents said they supported taking in people fleeing violence and war, while 50 percent said they supported “more” or “about the same” number of immigrants moving to their country. The gap was largest in Greece (69 percent favored taking in more refugees versus 19 percent for immigrants). Similarly, a 2018 Ipsos survey on human rights in 28 countries around the world found that when people were asked to select groups most in need of protection, 24 percent selected refugees compared to 19 percent who selected immigrants (versus 56 percent who selected children). And a 2017 survey conducted in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden found that participants expressed more negative attitudes toward immigrants than refugees. See Ana Gonzalez-Barrera and Phillip Connor, *Around the World, More Say Immigrants Are a Strength than a Burden* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2019); Ipsos, “Globally, Only Four in Ten People Say Everyone in Their Country Enjoys the Same Basic Human Rights” (press release, 2018); David De Coninck, “Migrant Categorizations and European Public Opinion: Diverging Attitudes towards Immigrants and Refugees,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 9 (2020): 1–20.

27 A June 2021 Ipsos survey of 28 countries found the majority of people surveyed (70 percent) support the principle of individuals seeking refuge from war and persecution, but few (14 percent) were open to letting more refugees into their country in practice after the pandemic. See Ipsos, “World Refugee Day.”

opportunities.<sup>28</sup> But not all societies view forced migrants as more deserving of support. In a survey done in Slovakia in 2018–19, respondents rated “refugees” less favorably than “migrants” or “foreigners.”<sup>29</sup> In Japan, more people favor the country’s admission of immigrants over refugees (81 percent versus 69 percent), with economic migrants potentially seen as more able to contribute in light of the country’s shrinking population.<sup>30</sup> And in the countries hosting the majority of displaced Venezuelans, the acknowledgment that most have left involuntarily (and in many cases, that they deserve solidarity) has not been enough to offset concerns around economic and security costs associated with the large influx of humanitarian migrants. For example, in a survey commissioned by UNHCR in Peru in 2021, the vast majority of Peruvians (90 percent) acknowledged that Venezuelans were forcibly displaced from their country of origin *and* that diversity is a benefit, but most (70 percent) also said that Venezuelan arrivals had a negative impact on the country (mostly due to concerns about competition for jobs and crime).<sup>31</sup>

There is also an increasing dichotomy between “genuine” and “deserving” refugees versus those seen as gaming the system. In Turkey, the world’s largest refugee-hosting nation, 81 percent of respondents in a 2021 survey expressed the belief that most people arriving as refugees “really aren’t refugees,” rather they are coming for economic reasons or “to take advantage of our welfare services.”<sup>32</sup> Leaders from some Central and Eastern European countries reluctant to accept Syrians in the wake of the 2015–16 crisis similarly reframed the narrative around refugees to depict them as “bogus” or taking advantage of the system, instead of victims or populations deserving of support.<sup>33</sup>

### **Attitudes toward Refugees Have Not Necessarily Become More Negative across the Board; Tensions Are Clustered around Specific Issues and Geographies**

While the COVID-19 pandemic may have kindled feelings of solidarity in many places—especially at the start of the public-health crisis, when many communities experienced surges in unity—it contributed to eroding support for migrants and refugees in others.<sup>34</sup> But public opinion is not trending negatively across the board. Ipsos global polls from 2019–21 show that in many countries *already* strongly opposed to welcoming more refugees (for instance, those that wanted to shut their borders entirely), negative attitudes

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- 28 In the first wave conducted in October 2020, 57 percent of respondents said they were “very sympathetic” toward people who come to Jordan to escape conflict and persecution, while 38 percent said they were “very sympathetic” toward those seeking better economic opportunities. See UNHCR, *Perception of Refugees in Jordan Survey (Wave III): Final Report* (Amman: UNHCR, 2021).
- 29 Andrej Findor, Matej Hruška, Petra Jankovská, and Michaela Pobudová, “Re-Examining Public Opinion Preferences for Migrant Categorizations: ‘Refugees’ Are Evaluated More Negatively than ‘Migrants’ and ‘Foreigners’ Related to Participants’ Direct, Extended, and Mass-Mediated Intergroup Contact Experiences,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 80 (2021): 262–273.
- 30 Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor, *Around the World, More Say Immigrants Are a Strength than a Burden*.
- 31 According to the survey, while most Peruvians (83 percent) say cultural diversity promotes the wealth and development of the country, 68 percent say that Venezuelans take too many jobs, and that Peruvian companies should hire Peruvian workers first before Venezuelans. Yet survey respondents also broadly acknowledge that Venezuelans are forced migrants. See Luisa Feline Freier et al., *Estudio de Opinión sobre la Población Extranjera en el Perú* (Lima: UNHCR Peru, 2021).
- 32 Ipsos, “World Refugee Day.”
- 33 Then Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico pinned his re-election campaign on anti-immigrant sentiment, using the slogan “Protect Slovakia,” and blocked attempts to allow the relocation of refugees within the European Union, despite Slovakia having welcomed only a couple hundred refugees. See Benjamin Cunningham, “‘We Protect Slovakia’: Voters Worry about Jobs and Health Care — but the PM Is Obsessed with Non-Existent Migrants,” *Politico*, February 10, 2016.
- 34 More in Common captured this surge in a March 2020 survey, in which almost half of Americans polled said that the United States felt more united than before the pandemic. But these feelings did not seem to last, as by July 2020 surveys showed a return to growing perceptions of division. See More in Common, “Polarization and the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Is Changing Us” (survey results, April 3, 2020); More in Common, “The New Normal? A 7-Country Comparative Study on the Impacts of COVID-19 on Trust, Social Cohesion, Democracy and Expectations for an Uncertain Future” (presentation, September 2020).

seem to have gained strength over the course of the pandemic (and the related economic fallout).<sup>35</sup> And the Gallup Migrant Acceptance Index, which compares public opinion between 2016 and 2019, reveals that negative attitudes are concentrated in countries shouldering a disproportionate burden for welcoming the world's migrants and refugees. For example, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador (the top three host countries of Venezuelans) showed the sharpest declines in migrant acceptance of all countries surveyed.<sup>36</sup> A Pew survey found similar evidence

of host fatigue in Lebanon and Jordan (which host the 2nd and 3rd largest populations of Syrian refugees, respectively); in 2018, 70 percent or more said their country had been made worse by increasing diversity.<sup>37</sup> Stories of broad negative trends, therefore, are often obscuring specific stories, including hospitality fatigue in initially welcoming places or an acceleration of restrictionist sentiment during the public-health crisis.

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Polls showing broad-brush trends of increasing positive support may also be misleading, in that they are capturing a sentiment that is more specific and potentially less durable than what is portrayed. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, positive polling during the pandemic made headlines, with surveys recording some of the most positive attitudes toward immigration seen in years. A Gallup poll found that 34 percent of Americans wanted to see immigration increase, which, while not a majority, was the highest level recorded since 1965.<sup>38</sup> In the United Kingdom, the proportion of those wanting to see immigration reduced dropped to 49 percent in November 2020, the lowest level since Ipsos began asking this question in 2015, even as people remained split on whether to maintain the country's commitment to refugee resettlement (40 percent supported it while 39 percent opposed it).<sup>39</sup> Yet both of these results may have been skewed by the fact that mobility of all kinds was severely constrained following the start of the public-health emergency, with resettlement essentially grinding to a halt. And indeed, a rapid spike in asylum seekers crossing the English Channel in early 2022 (despite relatively small absolute numbers) reinvigorated feelings of threat and anxiety, prompting the UK government to announce a controversial scheme in April 2022 to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda in order to "take back control of illegal immigration."<sup>40</sup>

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35 For example, in 2019 only two countries had strong majorities saying their country should close its borders to refugees (India at 64 percent and Turkey at 59 percent), and these countries were again in the top three for restrictionist attitudes in 2020 and 2021 (behind only Malaysia). See Ipsos, "World Refugee Day."

36 Neli Esipova, Julie Ray, and Anita Pugliese, "World Grows Less Accepting of Migrants," Gallup, September 23, 2020.

37 Views on increasing diversity varied widely among the 11 emerging economies surveyed by Pew. Clear majorities in India and Colombia, in fact, said an increasing number of people of many different races, ethnic groups, and nationalities in their country makes it a better place to live. See Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Tamir, *Attitudes toward Diversity in 11 Emerging Economies: Interacting with People of Different Backgrounds Is Related to More Positive Attitudes about Diversity* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2020).

38 Younis, "Americans Want More, Not Less, Immigration."

39 Ipsos, "Proportion of Britons Who Wants to See Immigration Reduced Falls to Lowest Levels since 2015," updated January 22, 2021.

40 As of April 2022, approximately 4,500 asylum seekers had crossed the Channel by boat, but the pace was significantly higher than in 2021, which saw a total of 28,526 crossings (up from 8,404 in 2020). This led Border Force officials to estimate that a total of 60,000 might cross in 2022. See BBC, "What Is the Rwanda Asylum Plan and How Many People Cross the English Channel?" BBC News, April 20, 2022; Hanne Beirens and Samuel Davidoff-Gore, "The UK-Rwanda Agreement Represents Another Blow to Territorial Asylum" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, April 2022).

Meanwhile, despite the potentially destabilizing pace and volume of arrivals from Ukraine,<sup>41</sup> both political and public responses have been overwhelmingly supportive. In March 2022, the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time (by unanimous vote), offering the right to live and work in any EU Members State for up to three years for people fleeing war in Ukraine, and non-neighboring countries including the United Kingdom and Canada quickly announced they would create new pathways for displaced Ukrainians.<sup>42</sup> Public opinion polls show high support for Ukrainians across the globe, with an April 2022 Ipsos poll finding that a majority in all 27 countries surveyed support taking in Ukrainian refugees.<sup>43</sup> Just two months out from the start of the crisis, it remains to be seen how long this level of support can be maintained.

### There Is Often a Threshold of Support beyond Which Hospitality Fatigue Sets in and Support Wanes

Intense feelings of solidarity cannot be sustained over the long term; in most refugee-hosting countries, generosity fatigue sets in as crises become intractable and resources dwindle. In 2016, amid the historic arrivals of asylum seekers in a divided Europe, there was a precipitous drop in the number of people who said their governments should be generous when judging refugee applications: this figure dropped by more than 12 percentage points in 12 out of 19 countries (including Germany and Sweden, which together welcomed the largest absolute numbers and per capita numbers of Syrians and other asylum seekers in Europe).<sup>44</sup> Low- and middle-income countries hosting large numbers of refugees are also showing signs of hospitality fatigue. Turkey, which has welcomed a historic 3.7 million refugees, has seen a backlash against Syrians. Initial generosity soured over time, especially as the country's economic situation worsened,<sup>45</sup> culminating in a 2019 forcible deportation campaign in which thousands of Syrians were sent back to so-called safe zones in Syria.<sup>46</sup>

Even if anxiety is not triggered immediately, a prolonged crisis with no end in sight can slowly sour feelings of hospitality in initially welcoming communities until a “tipping point” is reached and public opinion palpably shifts, especially during times of real or perceived scarcity. A study of host communities’ perceptions of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, for example, found an initial atmosphere of solidarity that hardened into resistance over time, especially as impoverished locals began to resent that they were not

41 The number of Ukrainians who fled to Poland within the first two weeks of the invasion (more than 2 million by March 18, 2022) surpassed the number of Venezuelans received by Colombia over a five-year period. The total number who have fled as of April 25, 2022 is more than 5.3 million. See UNHCR, “Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation.”

42 The United Kingdom expanded its family unification pathway and also announced a new, uncapped private sponsorship scheme “Homes for Ukraine,” though the plan has so far been criticized for excessive red tape limiting successful applications. Only 6,600 Ukrainians arrived in the five weeks since the plan was announced (10 percent of applicants). Canada launched a new visa category, the “Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET),” which allows Ukrainians fleeing the invasion to work or study in Canada for up to three years. See Government of Canada, “Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel,” accessed April 25, 2022; UK Visas and Immigration and UK Home Office, “UK Visa Support for Ukrainian Nationals” (guidance document, updated April 4, 2022); Josh Halliday, “‘Inhumane’ Homes for Ukraine Scheme Requests Security Scans for Baby Girl,” *The Guardian*, April 24, 2022.

43 Support was especially high in Poland (84 percent), the country that has taken in the largest number of Ukrainian refugees so far. The average was 72 percent. See Ipsos, “Global Public Opinion about the War in Ukraine,” updated April 19, 2022.

44 Sandra Bermudez, “Refugees Welcome? Cross-European Public Opinion on Asylum Seekers Following the 2015 Crisis,” Elcano Royal Institute, 27 October 2020.

45 Omer Karasapan, “Turkey’s Syrian Refugees – The Welcome Fades,” Brookings Institution, November 25, 2019.

46 Human Rights Watch, “Turkey: Syrians Being Deported in Danger,” updated October 24, 2019.

included in humanitarian assistance plans or opportunities.<sup>47</sup> It is important to recognize that the vast majority of the world's refugees live in low- and middle-income countries that may themselves be suffering from poverty, war, or state fragility, which can contribute to feelings that they are shouldering a disproportionate share of the “burden,” with the international humanitarian community not doing their part. In short, refugee-hosting communities may have a finite bucket of goodwill, and if that runs dry before conditions change or become more predictable, they may feel overburdened or taken advantage of.

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During the pandemic, well-documented surges in public solidarity toward refugees living within communities have been tempered by hardening attitudes around the prospect of bringing *more* refugees in. In Colombia, for example, there is widespread public support for integrating the 1.7 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees already in the country, but 87 percent of people polled in May 2020 said borders should be closed to future arrivals.<sup>48</sup> Ipsos global polls from 2019–21 show that in the countries most strongly opposed to welcoming more refugees, negative attitudes seem to have gained strength over the course of the pandemic.<sup>49</sup> Of the top five countries that wanted to shut their borders to refugees entirely, four had seen double-digit percentage point increases in support for closing borders since the same question was asked in 2019.<sup>50</sup> In many ways, this aligns with expectations, especially in countries hard hit by COVID-19 (and the subsequent economic ravages induced by lockdowns), and particularly at a time when closing borders has been equated with keeping an “outside threat” out (even as epidemiological evidence does not support this<sup>51</sup>). What remains to be seen is whether these restrictionist tendencies and “scarcity mindset” (the tendency to view resources as a zero-sum game, whereby generosity for newcomers means less for natives) will subside as the immediate public-health threat wanes and economies begin to recover.

As with all public opinion analysis, there is no one trend line that will explain highly specific local contexts and circumstances, but one conclusion that can be drawn is that while anti-immigration sentiment is not an automatic or enduring outcome of rapid change, the solidarity often seen in the immediate aftermath of crises can be fleeting in the face of prolonged hardship. Attempts to nail down whether public opinion

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47 Anas Ansar and Abu Faisal Md. Khaled, “From Solidarity to Resistance: Host Communities’ Evolving Response to the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 6, no. 16 (2021).

48 Proyecto Migración Venezuela, “Percepción de la integración de los migrantes en Colombia en tiempos de coronavirus” (Boletín 10, May 2020).

49 This echoes social psychology research on the arc of public reactions during crisis, which suggests that the longer the recovery period (how long it takes to “return to normal”), the more emotional needs (beyond basic survival) emerge. The early selfless responses to an emergency may fall away and be replaced by negative emotions and blame, including fault-finding and stigmatization. See U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *CERC: Psychology of a Crisis, 2019 Update* (Atlanta: CDC, 2019).

50 In 2021, the top five countries where strong majorities agreed their country should close its borders to refugees were Malaysia (82 percent), Turkey (75 percent), India (69 percent), South Africa (60 percent), and Peru (55 percent). All five saw a notable increase in restrictionist sentiment during the pandemic. Only 43 percent of Malaysian respondents and 39 percent of South African respondents agreed with the statement about closing borders in 2019. See Ipsos, “World Refugee Day.”

51 Meghan Benton, Jeanne Batalova, Samuel Davidoff-Gore and Timo Schmidt, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020* (Washington, DC, and Geneva: Migration Policy Institute and International Organization for Migration, 2021).



about refugees and asylum seekers is mostly positive or mostly negative may in fact be missing the point. The real story is that it fluctuates constantly and can change quickly. Instead of trying to discern patterns over specific periods of time, it may be more productive to pursue a better understanding of the conditions under which positive and negative sentiment flourish.

## D. *Benefit and Threat Narratives*

While public opinion polling can offer a snapshot of levels of support versus opposition at a specific moment in time, it does not paint a clear picture of the different messages people are absorbing about refugees and how these in turn interact with their predispositions and life experiences. The way stories are framed (by the media, government, business leaders, civil society, or community members themselves) gives important clues as to how challenges are defined and contextualized. Examining narratives around refugees and asylum seekers can therefore help put into context what polls reveal about public support for or opposition to humanitarian protection policies, as these stories shed light on how different stakeholders assign blame or articulate solutions.<sup>52</sup>

Narratives help individuals make sense of disparate pieces of information, creating a storyline on an issue (for instance, the narrative that refugees are grateful to be here and deserve compassion, or that refugees drive up housing prices). Narratives can be organic or orchestrated, spread from the grassroots or by political leaders, take root in government institutions or civil society, and can be accepted or contested by different people at different times. The existence of multiple narratives on forced migrants, even within the same society, reflects the fact that members of the public have to make sense of many competing pieces of information at once and decide which ones resonate more and how to prioritize among them.

Narratives about refugees and asylum seekers tend to fit into three predominant frames:<sup>53</sup>

- 1 **Victim frame:** Depictions of refugees and other forced migrants commonly highlight their humanitarian needs and vulnerability, portraying them as victims in need of compassion and support—for example, UNCHR’s 2012 “dilemmas” campaign or the 2016 BBC campaign #WhatWouldYouTake urging people to put themselves in refugees’ shoes.<sup>54</sup> This framing is designed to elicit empathy, but it can also reinforce stereotypes of refugees requiring more resources from a society than they contribute. In addition, some victim narratives portray refugees as actors with little or no agency. It is also worth noting that the narrative of refugees as “deserving” newcomers does not always extend to asylum seekers, who are sometimes portrayed as seeking to “game the system” in search of better opportunities rather than as individuals in genuine need of support.
- 2 **Benefit frame:** This frame emphasizes the contributions that refugees can make to the receiving society, whether economic, cultural, or political. For instance, citizens may take pride in how their

52 For a more complete discussion of how narratives on migration and refugees interact with policy, see Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, Haim Malka, and Shelly Culbertson, *How We Talk about Migration: The Link between Migration Narratives, Policy, and Power* (Washington: Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

53 Adapted from Banulescu-Bogdan, Malka, and Culbertson, *How We Talk about Migration*; Aliyyah Ahad and Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *Communicating Strategically about Immigrant Integration: Policymaker Perspectives* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2019).

54 Leo Dobbs, “Millions to Mark World Refugee Day as Displacement Crises Persist” (news release, UNHCR, June 13, 2012); BBC News, “Syrian Journey: What Would You Take with You?” BBC, March 31, 2015.

country has welcomed refugees and see this as improving their global standing. Other benefit narratives highlight exceptional talent (e.g., emergency room doctors, tech entrepreneurs, or national sports stars). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many campaigns have highlighted refugees on the front lines—such as doctors or nurses—who have exposed themselves to health risks to perform critical tasks.<sup>55</sup> This frame depicts refugees as deserving of being welcomed because of their actions and contributions; this “earned” welcome can be problematic, both because it can then be taken away and because it casts refugees who have not made this kind of measurable contribution as less deserving of support.

**3 Threat frame:** In this frame, refugees are depicted as a burden or a threat to the receiving society, whether along economic, security, cultural, political, or public-health axes. There are three main threat narratives:

- **Economic threat:** The common refrain that immigrants “steal” jobs from natives is often less pronounced for humanitarian migrants than for economic migrants. However, economic fears still manifest in different forms—for example, fear that refugees will become a burden on welfare systems, especially in situations of economic precarity (e.g., in an April 2020 survey, 64 percent of Colombians responded that Venezuelans were a burden on social services);<sup>56</sup> fear that forced migrants will compete for scarce resources or drive up prices in low- and middle-income countries; or concerns that refugees with little formal education will not be able to enter competitive labor markets in high-income countries (and thus remain dependent on public benefits). And in situations of mass humanitarian arrivals, as with Venezuelans in South America, fears that forced migrants will take jobs or undercut wages are prominent.
- **Security threat:** Fears that refugees are more likely to commit crimes and increase the risk of terrorism are widespread. For example, a 2016–17 Tent survey covering 12,527 respondents in 12 countries found that 65 percent believed new refugee arrivals brought an increased risk of terrorism.<sup>57</sup> The 2016 Global Advisor Immigration Tracker had similar findings, with the majority of the 16,000 people surveyed across 22 countries believing that terrorists were pretending to be refugees.<sup>58</sup> In the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015, more than half of all U.S. governors asked to halt the resettlement of Syrian refugees into the United States due to security concerns (despite the extensive vetting process).<sup>59</sup> Similarly, fears that forced migrants will increase rates of violent crime can spread even when data pointing to this connection are scarce.<sup>60</sup>

55 For example, UNHCR Romania promoted an exhibition of photographs and stories of refugee doctors living in Romania that was launched for World Refugee Day 2021. See UNHCR Romania, “*Refugiați Doctori în România – De Horia Manolache*,” accessed March 9, 2022.

56 Proyecto Migración Venezuela, “*Percepción de los colombianos acerca de la población migrante: incidencia en las políticas públicas*” (Boletín 21, August 2021).

57 Tent Partnerships for Refugees, *Tent Tracker – Year 2*.

58 Ipsos, “*Global Views on Immigration and the Refugee Crisis*” (fact sheet, July 2016).

59 Arnie Seipel, “30 Governors Call for Halt to US Resettlement of Syrian Refugees,” NPR, November 17, 2015.

60 Despite widespread public fears in Latin America that immigration is driving up crime rates, analysis of data from 2019 suggests that, for the most part, Venezuelan migrants and refugees commit substantially fewer crimes—and certainly fewer violent crimes—than the native born, relative to their share in the overall population. See Dany Bahar, Meagan Dooley, and Andrew Selee, *Venezuelan Migration, Crime, and Misperceptions: A Review of Data from Colombia, Peru, and Chile* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute and Brookings Institution, 2020).

- **Cultural threat:** This frame centers around fears that refugees threaten the fabric of a society or will not abide by the rules or customs of the country in which they settle, especially if coming from a different ethnic or religious background. In many Western democracies, Islam in particular has been associated with beliefs or practices seen as incompatible with core national values.<sup>61</sup> In some places, an influx of newcomers from a particular religious group can also become a political threat; for example, in Lebanon and Ethiopia, which have proportional power-sharing arrangements among the different ethnoreligious groups, this delicate balance can be altered by new arrivals.

The major threat narratives related to refugees and asylum seekers can be triggered at different times by economic, cultural, or security concerns, even if the changes people fear cannot be directly measured. For example, fear of job loss can exist in places with low unemployment, and fear of increased crime can exist even when overall rates of crime are low or decreasing. In other words, these threats are triggered by *relative* insecurity rather than measurable reality.

The most powerful benefit narratives around humanitarian migration may similarly be rooted in things that are not so easily measured. The role that values play can be particularly powerful, as support for refugees can often align with and affirm a country's core values (for example, the United States being a nation of immigrants, or Sweden's pride in its history of humanitarianism).<sup>62</sup> Positive attitudes toward refugees can also be tied to values of collective responsibility and solidarity, especially if natives and newcomers have shared cultural or other ties. For example, Colombians have drawn on their own history of cross-border displacement to welcome their Venezuelan "brothers," and in the United States there has been consistent bipartisan support for Afghans who aided in U.S. military operations.<sup>63</sup>

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However, even values-based benefit frames can have limits. In particular, support for certain groups may not translate into broader support for more welcoming humanitarian policies. In the United States, President Biden's decision to increase the refugee resettlement cap to 125,000 for fiscal year (FY) 2022 (up from 15,000 for FY 2021 under the Trump administration) ranked as the *least* supported executive order since Biden's

61 In a 2019 YouGov poll, nearly half of respondents in Germany and France (47 percent and 46 percent, respectively) agreed there was a fundamental clash between Islam and their country's values. See Joel Rogers de Waal, "[Western/MENA Attitudes to Religion Portray a Lack of Faith in Common Values](#)," YouGov, February 3, 2019.

62 Banulescu-Bogdan, Malka, and Culbertson, *How We Talk about Migration*.

63 In September 2021, nearly three-quarters of surveyed Americans (72 percent) said they support granting refugee status to people who worked with the U.S. or Afghan governments during the war in Afghanistan, provided they pass security checks. See AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, "[Bipartisan Support for Resettling Afghans Who Worked with U.S. Forces during the War](#)," updated September 2021.

inauguration, with only 39 percent of voters supporting it.<sup>64</sup> And even as most Americans express the desire to help Afghans coming to the United States, the public has frequently made a distinction between those who worked directly alongside U.S. troops (for instance, as translators) versus those who did not.<sup>65</sup>

## *E. The Connection between Public Opinion, Narratives, and Policy*

Data from public opinion polls and research on common immigration and refugee narratives, when considered together, can shed light on how opposition or support is triggered, and what the impact on policy may be.

### **Different Phases of a Crisis Can Activate Different Threat Frames**

Just as solidarity can ebb and flow—often peaking in the emergency phase of a crisis and then subsiding as hospitality fatigue sets in—so too can feelings of threat. Looking at changes in public opinion over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, reveals that different stages of the pandemic have triggered different types of threat frames. When COVID-19 was newly declared a pandemic, most countries turned to widespread border closures and travel restrictions designed to keep the threat out (even as this was later shown to be too little too late).<sup>66</sup> The narrative of an external threat coming in fueled increases in xenophobia and anti-Asian hate crimes,<sup>67</sup> as well as attempts to leverage the public-health threat to impose more restrictive migration policies. One year later, as the acute public-health emergency began to subside in many places and fears of economic decline became more prominent, the salience of migration as a top public concern also subsided—arguably because many societies were more focused on long-term economic recovery (and at a time of heightened travel restrictions, when few if any migrants and refugees had entered a country, feelings of competition with newcomers over jobs may have been less immediate). In Colombia, during the height of COVID-19 restrictions there was a clear spike in the number of people who believed Venezuelans posed an economic burden as well as a security threat, but by 2021, these fears had returned to the lower pre-pandemic levels.<sup>68</sup> In Jordan, a UNHCR survey conducted in three waves similarly captured a jump in concerns around refugees taking a disproportionate share of resources between October 2020 and May 2021, but then saw it subside somewhat by November 2021.<sup>69</sup>

64 For comparison, the same poll revealed that 59 percent of respondents supported President Biden's executive order denouncing anti-Asian discrimination and xenophobia during the pandemic. See Cameron Easley, "[Biden's Move to Expand Refugee Admissions Is His Most Unpopular Executive Action so Far](#)," Morning Consult, February 10, 2021.

65 A poll by Vox and Data for Progress conducted in September 2021 found that 74 percent of respondents favored resettling Afghans who were U.S. military allies (such as translators or special forces), while 58 percent supported resettling Afghans who fled violence and persecution from the Taliban as it implements its vision of religious law. See Nicole Narea, "[Americans Do Not See All Afghan Refugees as Equal](#)," Vox, September 30, 2021.

66 Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, Meghan Benton, and Susan Fratzke, "[Coronavirus Is Spreading across Borders, But It Is Not a Migration Problem](#)" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, March 2020).

67 The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism found that anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States increased by 339 percent in 2021. See Kimmy Yam, "[Anti-Asian Hate Crimes Increased 339 Percent Nationwide Last Year, Report Says](#)," NBC News, January 31, 2022.

68 Proyecto Migración Venezuela, "Percepción de la integración de los migrantes en Colombia"; Proyecto Migración Venezuela, "Percepción de los colombianos acerca de la población migrante."

69 For example, 29 percent of respondents "strongly agreed" with the statement "Jordan should focus on helping Jordanians not refugees" in October 2020; this jumped to 42 percent in May 2021, and then decreased to 35 percent in November 2021. See UNHCR, *Perception of Refugees in Jordan Survey (Wave III)*.

## Perceptions of Fairness and Deservedness, More So than the Volume of Arrivals, Can Shape Attitudes toward Refugees

Perceptions of fairness and deservedness are an important driver of tensions around forced migration. For example, concerns about refugees and immigrants more broadly abusing or using more than their “fair share” of public benefits have taken root in many receiving societies. The Trump administration implemented the so-called public-charge rule in 2020 that moved to make it more difficult for individuals to become legal permanent residents if they received or were deemed likely to receive any of an expanded list of public benefits.<sup>70</sup> And in the United Kingdom, the “no recourse to public funds” clause in the *Immigration and Asylum Act* bars most temporary migrants from accessing state support, such as welfare and school meal subsidies, with the stated aim of “reassuring the public that immigration brings real benefits to the UK and that its finite resources are protected for British citizens.”<sup>71</sup>

Public perceptions that asylum seekers are abusing or gaming the system have also increased in many places in recent years. A 28-country Ipsos poll conducted in June 2021 found that 62 percent of respondents believed that most foreigners entering their country as a refugee were not “genuine refugees.” The percentage was highest in Turkey (81 percent), and it hovered around half in the United States (49 percent).<sup>72</sup> In places where the risks and burdens associated with forced migration have fallen unequally, or where feelings of togetherness have been undermined by messages of division, solidarity may dissipate more quickly, and the public may be more likely to feel taken advantage of.

## Unanticipated or Poorly Managed Crises Can Trigger a Threat Mindset, Even When Numbers Are Low

One of the most destabilizing aspects of any migration crisis is when public expectations of how much—and what kind of—immigration should occur diverge dramatically from reality, and when the public believes the rule of law is not being respected. This can lead to perceptions that the system is “out of control.” In the United States, the increased number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the southern border in 2014 upended public debates on immigration and led to an outcry that border security was insufficient and needed renewed investment—despite the total number of arrivals being just 69,000.<sup>73</sup>

Sudden pressure on an asylum system is in some ways a perfect storm in terms of triggering a threat mindset, as it can perpetuate the narrative that the government has lost control and does not have the tools to ensure that systems are fair, regular, and orderly. Images of people crowding at border crossings or attempting to cross bodies of water in small boats make migration seem chaotic and out of control

70 Randy Capps, Michael Fix, and Jeanne Batalova, “Anticipated ‘Chilling Effects’ of the Public-Charge Rule Are Real: Census Data Reflect Steep Decline in Benefits Use by Immigrant Families” (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, December 2020).

71 UK Home Office, “Migrant Access to Public Funds, Including Social Housing, Homelessness Assistance and Social Care” (staff guidance document, August 2021), 9.

72 Ipsos, “World Refugee Day”

73 As noted by Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysts at the time, although overall apprehensions were at historical lows and border investments at historical highs, “the intense press coverage of recent months has re-energized the narrative that the border is out of control.” See Muzaffar Chishti, Faye Hipsman, and Bonnie Bui, “The Stalemate over Unaccompanied Minors Holds Far-Reaching Implications for Broader U.S. Immigration Debates,” *Migration Information Source*, August 15, 2014). See also U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), “Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children FY 2014,” updated November 14, 2015.



(regardless of the absolute volume), and the systems in place to manage them are often overwhelmed because even the most sophisticated asylum systems in the world are not set up well to “flex up and flex down” according to changing pressures at the border.<sup>74</sup>

## *F. What Does This Mean for Humanitarian Actors and Governments?*

Waning public support can sometimes constrain the space for generous humanitarian protection policies, especially when it comes to new arrivals or groups seen as not being well integrated or as competing with natives for scarce resources. The patterns described above point to the following lessons for humanitarian actors, governments, and others looking expand support for protection policies in line with a nation’s values and goals:

- ▶ **Public attention to refugees can be a double-edged sword.** On one hand, international crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the exodus from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover can spur feelings of solidarity and generosity—though these boosts may be short-lived and abstract, and they may not lead to concrete or broader support for forcibly displaced populations. But heightened (and often dramatic) media coverage of forced migrants can also trigger public anxiety and anti-immigration sentiment, making salient an issue that might not otherwise have risen to the top of public priorities. This is another reason why efforts to draw attention to the plight of forcibly displaced populations may not always have the intended effect.
- ▶ **How people say they feel in the abstract does not always translate into how they react in reality.** The public may support the idea of humanitarian protection in principle but simultaneously feel anxiety about welcoming refugees in their country or neighborhood, especially when communities are already grappling with scarce resources, displacement is prolonged, or they feel ill prepared for the arrival of newcomers.<sup>75</sup> The gap between hypothetical and concrete support can be especially large if certain destabilizing events are present, for example: (a) if humanitarian migration outpace the preparedness of local communities (even if relative numbers are small) or if there is no end in sight; (b) if there is perceived competition for scarce resources or refugees triggers security concerns; (c) if newcomers are seen as fundamentally altering the character of society; and (d) if elected leaders are seen as unwilling or unable to manage arrivals or their subsequent integration.<sup>76</sup> Thus, positive public opinion in the abstract can be undermined by poor policy responses, especially if these lead to higher societal costs than the public anticipated.
- ▶ **Solidarity may be highly context-specific and not always generalizable.** Favorable opinions of a certain group of refugees may not translate to support for other groups or generous protection policies writ large. In the United States, public support for taking in large numbers of Afghan evacuees has not translated into support for making it easier for asylum seekers at the U.S. southern border to enter and submit an application for protection. Similarly, in Turkey, the systems established to welcome the large influx of Syrian refugees, including via pathways to legal status and access to

<sup>74</sup> Hanne Beirens, *Chasing Efficiency: Can Operational Changes Fix European Asylum Systems?* (Brussels: MPI Europe, 2020).

<sup>75</sup> Cultural proximity to newcomers can also influence a community’s sense of preparedness. If newcomers are visibly, linguistically, or religiously different, this can trigger additional cultural and security threat narratives alongside economic or public-health fears.

<sup>76</sup> See Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *Understanding and Addressing Public Anxiety about Immigration* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2016).

benefits, have not been applied equally to other refugees in the country (such as Afghans who arrived in earlier periods). Sometimes, these different levels of welcome and support reflect the development of narratives around why countries support a specific population (such as Americans aiding Afghan “allies”)—narratives that may not be generalizable to different populations or even future arrivals with the same profile. This variability makes it even more important to understand exactly what is driving both support and opposition (and whether it differs among groups or regions) before making assumptions that drive policy changes.

- ▶ **Public opinion may diverge based on manner of entry.** Public opinion on forced migrants tends to favor those who entered a country in an orderly, regulated manner—with a clear dichotomy between “deserving” and “genuine” refugees who came through proper resettlement channels versus chaotic, mixed arrivals of asylum seekers and migrants seen as abusing the protection system to seek better economic opportunities. Newcomers who are selected and screened by a government in advance garner more support than spontaneous arrivals, over which the public may feel they have no say or control. The United States’ announcement in April 2022 of a new humanitarian parole program for Ukrainians mirrors this cleavage in public opinion, as it opens a pathway for those applying from abroad who have a sponsor in the United States, and closes the door to Ukrainians seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>77</sup> More in Common has previously found that support for the U.S. resettlement program rises when it is tied to the prospect of private sponsorship<sup>78</sup>—again suggesting that feelings of agency on the part of the receiving society can boost public acceptance.
- ▶ **Geographic differences within countries can be significant, and these are rarely picked up by public opinion polling.** Challenges can differ dramatically across a country, from rural areas with inadequate infrastructure that host enclosed refugee camps to urban areas where natives are competing with refugees for low-wage or informal jobs to border areas experiencing sudden influxes in arrivals. For instance, refugees living in camps and native-born residents alike struggle with insufficient infrastructure and electricity in southern Turkey,<sup>79</sup> while in Istanbul and other large cities there has been increased friction and even violence due to competition over jobs and housing.<sup>80</sup> Each context requires a different response from public authorities. The solutions that may work in some areas (such as investing in refugees’ long-term integration) may trigger anxiety in others, including front-line regions where tensions between newly arrived refugees and host community members are more acute.

77 As of April 2022, approximately 15,000 Ukrainians had arrived at a U.S. port of entry, mostly at the U.S.-Mexico border. The announcement of the new “Uniting for Ukraine” program by the Department of Homeland Security specifically states that: “Ukrainians should not travel to Mexico to pursue entry into the United States. Following the launch of Uniting for Ukraine, Ukrainians who present at land U.S. ports of entry without a valid visa or without preauthorization to travel to the United States through Uniting for Ukraine will be denied entry and referred to apply through this program.” See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “President Biden to Announce Uniting for Ukraine, a New Streamlined Process to Welcome Ukrainians Fleeing Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine” (press release, April 21, 2022).

78 In a YouGov poll commissioned by More in Common and conducted in February 2021, public support for rebuilding the U.S. refugee program increases to 55 percent (up from 49 percent) and opposition decreases to 33 percent (down from 39 percent) when resettlement is linked to the opportunity for direct involvement through sponsoring refugees. More in Common notes that the margin of support doubles, from a 10-point to a 22-point margin. See More in Common, “Strong Public Support for Rebuilding America’s Refugee Program” (research release, February 17, 2021).

79 World Bank, “10 Years on: Turkey Continues Its Support for an Ever-Growing Number of Syrian Refugees,” updated June 22, 2021.

80 International Crisis Group, *Turkey’s Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018).

While governments cannot prevent sudden and unanticipated asylum pressures at their borders, nor can the international community solve situations of prolonged displacement overnight, governments *can* engage directly with public fears and anxieties around these situations and show that these concerns are being taken seriously. Governments can also proactively communicate their response to border pressures and address community concerns about the (real or perceived) lack of adequate support to manage sudden arrivals. Restoring public confidence in government's ability to manage migration can create the space for countries to be more generous and creative, as well as more willing to comply with their international obligations to provide humanitarian protection to those in need.

### 3 Policies and Interventions that Can Promote Solidarity

Concerns about increased scapegoating of forced migrants and eroding support for generous protections systems around the world have spurred national governments, civil society, and international organizations to invest in campaigns and programs that aim to shape public opinion on asylum and refugees, and ultimately to create space to enact policies in line with international protection norms. This section will look at two types of interventions in particular: digital information and media campaigns to counter negative narratives and promote empathy and solidarity, and programs that facilitate face-to-face contact among groups to promote social cohesion—the paragon of which is community sponsorship of refugees.

#### A. *Campaigns to Counter Negative Narratives and Promote Solidarity*

Governments, advocates, and international organizations around the world have crafted sophisticated media and information campaigns to counter negative narratives about refugees and other migrants (and dispel rumors). These messages often attempt to promote solidarity, boost compassion, and/or elevate the contributions of newcomers.<sup>81</sup> In recent years, dozens if not hundreds of messaging campaigns have been launched to tackle xenophobia and present a more positive view of migration, from the United Nations' "I Am a Migrant" and "#StandUp4Migrants" campaigns to national campaigns from Colombia to Canada.<sup>82</sup> This type of intervention has proliferated during the pandemic, and some messages have highlighted the contributions that refugee and migrant "essential workers," including those in health care and agricultural, have made to the emergency COVID-19 response in their communities.<sup>83</sup> Others, such as UNHCR's "Somos Panas" ("We Are Buddies") campaign in Colombia, have explicitly tried to combat xenophobia by promoting a more positive view of an immigrant population, in this case Venezuelans.<sup>84</sup>

81 See, for example, Government of Canada, "Immigration Matters," accessed April 7, 2021; International Organization for Migration (IOM), "I Am a Migrant," accessed April 7, 2021.

82 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "How Best to Communicate on Migration and Integration in the Context of COVID-19?" (policy brief, OECD Publishing, Paris, December 21, 2020).

83 See, for example, National Immigration Law Center (NILC), "Immigrants Are Essential," accessed April 7, 2021; Overseas Development Institute, "Key Workers: Migrants' Contribution to the COVID-19 Response," accessed March 14, 2022.

84 UNHCR, "Somos Panas Colombia," accessed April 7, 2021.

However, allaying the fears of a skeptical and anxious public and tapping into feelings of generosity instead has been difficult to achieve in practice. While these campaigns serve a critical goal of signaling a country's values vis-à-vis newcomers—and establishing a baseline of support onto which other initiatives can build—they may not *on their own* be able to achieve their stated goals of countering negative attitudes and bridging differences.

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*Allaying the fears of a skeptical and anxious public and tapping into feelings of generosity instead has been difficult to achieve in practice.*

There are four main challenges that campaigns need to overcome in order to make progress changing people's attitudes or shifting a prevailing narrative once it is already formed:

- ▶ **Echo chambers may prevent skeptics from coming into contact with information that challenges their beliefs.** Because people have more information at their fingertips than ever before, it is easier than ever for them to curate their information environment and cherry-pick news, media, and facts to consume. This selection bias means that even the most well-crafted campaigns may fail to reach (all of) their intended audiences, and may instead simply “preach to the converted.”
- ▶ **Once beliefs are formed, they are highly resistant to corrections.** Inconvenient truths or information that challenges existing beliefs on migration are easily dismissed or discounted, and efforts to change these beliefs can sometimes further entrench them.<sup>85</sup> People do not like to be told what to think and may begrudge general, positive messages that conflict with their lived experiences, especially if these come from a messenger seen as having an ulterior motive.
- ▶ **People often rationalize new evidence as the “exception to the rule.”** Even when people accept a factual correction, this rarely changes their attitude.<sup>86</sup> Thus, positive campaigns showing refugees as “heroes” or attempting to correct misinformation may not result in more positive perceptions of refugees as a whole, because people may categorize the remarkable achievements the campaign highlights as an exception to the rule rather than the norm.
- ▶ **Beliefs are tied more to social cues and identity than to a process of scientific inquiry.** People will look to social cues<sup>87</sup> for what they should believe and default to listening to familiar voices in times

85 See Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *When Facts Don't Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration's Costs and Benefits* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018).

86 See, for example, Brendan Nyhan and Thomas Zeitzoff, “Fighting the Past: Perceptions of Control, Historical Misperceptions, and Corrective Information in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Political Psychology* 39, no. 3 (2018).

87 David Roberts describes the concept of “tribal epistemology,” in which knowledge formation is not based on a process of scientific inquiry but rather on a set of social processes. Instead of a quest for “truth,” individuals strive to seek information that benefits their social position. Other social scientists point out that a process based on reasoning alone would mean calculating one's own interests, figuring out the likelihood of the consequences of available actions, and choosing the action that delivers the highest expected utility. But in reality, this is tempered by two additional, interdependent factors: affective reasoning (emotions) and cultural cues. See Steven A. Sloman and Nathaniel Rabb, “Thought as a Determinant of Political Opinion,” *Cognition* 188 (July 2019): 1–7; NBC News, “Assessing America's Information Crisis with David Roberts” (Why Is This Happening? podcast and transcript, December 4, 2018).

of uncertainty (and against the backdrop of a more general collapse in trust in science and experts).<sup>88</sup> The strong connection between belief and belonging implies that in order to change minds, you need to first change community and social norms, and recognize that there may be a social cost to people changing their mind.<sup>89</sup>

Because of these cognitive biases, policymakers and advocates need to manage expectations around what information campaigns are able to achieve on their own. Campaigns can serve important symbolic functions (and critically, get members of government or key international stakeholders working toward a common mission), but they also risk being ignored or dismissed by anxious publics, or worse, potentially ratcheting up grievances by shining a spotlight on differences. And even if they are successful in the moment, much more evidence is needed to understand whether such campaigns have an enduring effect or whether positive feelings toward one group spill over into broader support for more welcoming migration policies as a whole.

*Messages that aim to convey compassion, for example, could be effective in early stages of a crisis but subsequently backfire when crisis fatigue sets in or when host-community members' individual circumstances worsen.*

Communications and social psychology research suggests two considerations for organizations embarking on media and information campaigns. The first is to consider the audiences for these messages. Not all members of the public may be receptive to stories designed to spark compassion or empathy for minority groups or newcomers at a time of rapid social upheaval when a large swath of society is feeling insecure and uncertain about their future. An evaluation of the “Somos Panas” campaign, for example, found that the project’s

strong focus on making the vulnerability of Venezuelans more visible may have fallen flat at a time when the Colombian host community was also facing acute challenges from COVID-19; parts of the project that talked about *shared* vulnerabilities were more successful.<sup>90</sup> Receptivity can also change as the salience of different values shifts at different stages of a crisis, or as conflicts lose their “novelty.” Messages that aim to convey compassion, for example, could be effective in early stages of a crisis but subsequently backfire when crisis fatigue sets in or when host-community members’ individual circumstances worsen. For example, messages

88 In the United States, following public-health advice has become intertwined with identity politics. According to a June 2020 Pew survey, Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents were about twice as likely as Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents to say that masks should be worn always (63 percent versus 29 percent), though this partisan divide narrowed as the crisis worsened in Summer 2020 and more Americans began to wear masks. See Pew Research Center, “[Republicans, Democrats Move Even Further Apart in Coronavirus Concerns](#),” updated June 25, 2020.

89 As Sloman and Rabb write, “normally minds change because communities as a whole adopt a new position, not because people are persuaded one by one.” See Sloman and Rabb, “Thought as a Determinant of Political Opinion.”

90 One of the success stories of the initiative was developing solidarity among Colombian and Venezuelan women; activities that focused on their shared challenges as women “regardless of nationality” were seen as successful in bridging differences. UNHCR, *Evaluation of the Somos Panas Colombia Communication Campaign* (UNHCR: Geneva, 2022).



about the need to fast-track the hiring of refugee doctors to aid in the emergency COVID-19 response may have come across to some as tone deaf at a time of mass layoffs from hospitals.<sup>91</sup>

Second, messages designed to draw attention to the contributions or accomplishments of a minority group may counterintuitively reinforce divisions, especially when people already feel under threat, or they may not be generalizable to the broader population. Even when messages are given a positive framing, putting a spotlight on the behavior of refugees or asylum seekers can make the boundaries between groups *more* salient, which can work against the goal of building social cohesion and even increase discrimination.<sup>92</sup> In addition, stories of exceptional refugees may not resonate for ordinary people, and thus can create more distance rather than spurring empathy. When these stories do land, they may be interpreted as an exception to the rule, and thus promote positive feelings toward the individuals in question (or their actions) but fail to shift behaviors about the group as a whole. Finally, there is a concern that exceptionalizing refugees sets up an artificial distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” humanitarian migrants. An evaluation of a Refugees International and Refugee Council USA Facebook campaign, for example, found that while narratives of refugees as heroes may increase engagement (generating more likes or clicks) “they may also create or sharpen the distinction between refugees with the capabilities to contribute and those who may not have such capabilities.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, singling out an individual or group—even to elevate their contributions—can inadvertently reinforce an “us versus them” dichotomy, which could be weaponized by those seeking to exploit division.

Instead of pointing out the unique actions or characteristics of a specific group (and inadvertently kindling feelings of competition), it may be more effective to emphasize actions that show cooperation between groups and highlight initiatives undertaken by a broad “we.” Some refugee resettlement organizations and advocates have long taken a similar approach to accentuate the common good. In the United States, for example, campaigns around refugees working in a plastic plant in Erie, Pennsylvania, have highlighted how they are working for the whole community and have been integral to the local economic development plan and population growth;<sup>94</sup> such messages may be more relatable than stories of heroism that seem more out of reach. The evaluation of the Facebook campaign mentioned above similarly noted that Facebook users were more likely to “like” or click on ads when refugee doctors were described as helping their local

91 For example, in the spring of 2020, many governments actively sought to engage foreign-trained health-care workers to contribute to the COVID-19 emergency response, including by speeding up the licensing or certification process or creating provisional permits for certain qualified workers. Such initiatives were seen in Chile, Colombia, France, Ireland, and Spain, as well as in U.S. states such as California, New Jersey, and New York. Yet in parallel to recruiting new workers, there were also reports of mass layoffs, especially during the lockdown period when many elective surgeries and nonemergency services were cancelled. See Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, “As U.S. Health-Care System Buckles under Pandemic, Immigrant & Refugee Professionals Could Represent a Critical Resource” (commentary, MPI, Washington, DC, April 2020); Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and José Ramón Fernández-Peña, *The Integration of Immigrant Health Professionals: Looking beyond the COVID-19 Crisis* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021); Shane Harris, Justin Sondel, and Gregory S. Schneider, “Cash-Starved Hospitals and Doctor Groups Cut Staff amid Pandemic,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 2020.

92 For example, campaigns singling out groups not complying with public-health guidelines can cause intergroup tensions and discrimination. See Laura G.E. Smith, “Social Psychological Theory and Research on the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic: Introduction to the Rapid Response Special Section,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59 (2020): 571–583.

93 The study concluded that “such narratives may create an expectation of refugees as heroes and deserving of American altruism and support.” See Claire L. Adida, Adeline Lo, Lauren Prather, and Scott Williamson, “Refugees to the Rescue? Motivating Pro-Refugee Public Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Experimental Science* (2021): 1–15.

94 Tim Henderson, “Immigrants Prevented or Minimized Population Loss in a Fifth of U.S. Counties,” Stateline, Pew Charitable Trusts, April 24, 2019.

communities.<sup>95</sup> And many campaigns have mobilized private-sector companies to spread the message that employing and training refugees is not a matter of charity—it can actually strengthen a business. For example, UNCHR’s #WithRefugees campaign showcases how “employing refugees makes good business sense for Allianz Germany,” and that many European businesses are investing in training and integrating refugees because it benefits the companies.<sup>96</sup>

Some groups have already applied these principles to social cohesion campaigns. A 2019 campaign called “Together Human” sought to change the perception of Muslims in Germany not by showing the exceptional achievements of Muslims, but by showing “normal people” side by side in scenes of daily life (playing sports, working, and learning) in interactions designed to evoke teamwork, humanity, and responsibility.<sup>97</sup> An evaluation showed that while the campaign had limited reach, it succeeded in significantly boosting positive views of Muslims among those who saw the content (even among self-identified voters for the right-wing Alternative for Germany [AfD] party, which has often taken anti-immigration and anti-Islam positions).<sup>98</sup> Part of the campaign’s success was that it was seen as authentic. The content was developed by a nongovernmental organization representing young German Muslims, rather than a government agency. It also did not explicitly push a certain message (such as “Islam is compatible with German values”). Instead, it chose to show, not tell: the posters and videos illustrate these values through individual stories that allow audiences to come to their own conclusions.

Ultimately, more research and evaluations are needed to understand why and how certain campaigns work. While most campaigns are based on a strong theory of change around why certain messages *should* work, their actual outcomes are rarely robustly evaluated—including whether they resulted in any shift in individual attitudes or had any broader spillover effects (the latter being even more difficult to measure). Smart ways to evaluate these information campaigns need to be built into their design and funding, including asking not just what messages but what *messengers* resonate, and what the longer-term effects may be. Do messages that resonate have an enduring impact? And can the messages of small-scale, local campaigns can be scaled up and amplified?

## B. *Contact Interventions to Strengthen Social Cohesion*

For decades, a vast body of research has suggested that increasing contact between different groups can unearth common ground and reduce prejudice.<sup>99</sup> Nongovernmental and government leaders around the world have invested in many different types of “social mixing” programs to build bridges between groups. These range from leisure and community-building activities to initiatives that facilitate interactions among

95 Adida, Lo, Prather, and Williamson, “Refugees to the Rescue?” 2021.

96 UNHCR, “Coalition Members Standing #WithRefugees,” accessed November 29, 2021.

97 The campaign consisted of six posters and three videos featuring images of Muslim protagonists interacting with all members of society, which ran from November 26 to December 9, 2019. In addition, 1,000 posters were put up on the streets of three German cities (Berlin, Stuttgart, and Leipzig), and both the posters and videos were disseminated via Facebook and Instagram. The campaign was developed and tested in the Narrative Lab at the International Centre for Policy Advocacy (ICPA) by the Young Muslim Activists Association (JUMA). See JUMA, “#gemeinsammenschlich,” accessed April 7, 2021.

98 Roxane Cassehgari, *Influencing Attitudes towards Muslims in Germany: Gemeinsam menschlich (Together Human): A Public Campaign to Move the Middle* (Belfast: Social Change Initiative, 2020).

99 Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–783.

groups as part of livelihood or economic recovery programs (intergroup cooperation on infrastructure projects, for example) to community sponsorship of refugees, which gives community members a direct role in welcoming and integrating newcomers.

These programs can be grouped into three broad categories:

- 1 Intergroup contact for leisure, sports, or building shared spaces, designed to build trust and promote positive interactions.** These range from intergroup sports teams, bringing different groups together for neighborhood cleanups or beautification, co-housing initiatives, or community-building activities such as shared meals or festivals. Many of these programs are time-bound or one-off events, rather than enduring initiatives built into the structural fabric of communities. And there is often a tradeoff between community events that are easy to organize (such as food festivals) but that may only catalyze casual or superficial contact, versus those that may promote the most meaningful interactions and potentially have ripple effects beyond the event itself. Evidence shows that sports and leisure activities, under certain circumstances, can foster tolerant views among participants but may not necessarily change broader beliefs about the other group involved.<sup>100</sup>
- 2 Intergroup contact for livelihood or economic recovery interventions that benefit entire communities.** Many programs designed to raise overall living standards in low- and middle-income countries (e.g., by creating jobs or improving infrastructure) also build bridges between groups. And as opposed to leisure activities, they can have the added benefit of showing refugees as economic contributors rather than passive beneficiaries of support. A 2014 intervention in Lebanon, which brought together Syrian refugees with Lebanese nationals to do short-term, public infrastructure jobs, found that working collaboratively on public works programs lowered threat perceptions among refugees and host-community members, and increased positive attitudes towards the out-group.<sup>101</sup> A United Nations Development Program project in Maicao, Colombia, called “Banco Amable” (Friendly Bank) piloted a cash-for-work and cash-for-volunteering program whereby Venezuelans (as well as local Colombians) could earn money doing neighborhood cleanup and beautification projects—not only contributing to community development, but also shifting the perception of newcomers receiving handouts.<sup>102</sup> There can be an inverse relationship between quality of contact and quality of output in programs that are not necessarily created with social cohesion as their primary goal, however. For example, a Cash, Food, and Voucher program in Ecuador targeted both migrant and host communities but only fostered contact between groups during monthly joint nutrition trainings. While both groups benefited from livelihood improvements through the program, neither group reported increased feelings of trust.<sup>103</sup>
- 3 Engaging communities in designing and delivering services, such as community sponsorship or refugee cohousing initiatives.** The practice of ordinary citizens or groups of citizens “sponsoring”

100 Salma Mousa, “Building Tolerance: Intergroup Contact and Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq” (Program on Governance and Local Development Working Paper No. 26, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden, January 19, 2021).

101 Charles Harb and Rim Saab, “Social Cohesion and Intergroup Relations: Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Nationals in the Bekaa and Akkar,” Save the Children, January 1, 2014.

102 United Nations Development Program, “Banco Amable,” accessed November 30, 2021.

103 Elsa Valli, Amber Peterman, and Melissa Hidrobo, “Economic Transfers and Social Cohesion in a Refugee-Hosting Setting,” *Journal of Development Studies* 55, no. 5 (2019): 128–146.

refugees and thus directly participating in every aspect of their reception and integration over the course of their first year in a country is perhaps the ultimate contact intervention and has been shown to improve integration outcomes for refugees while also forging durable ties between them and the communities in which they settle.<sup>104</sup> Sponsorship programs have a clear advantage over other programs in terms of their ability to facilitate significant, long-lasting relationships with friendship potential—but because of their high barrier to entry (not just the time commitment required, but often a financial obligation as well), they are more likely to engage “the usual suspects” (i.e., subsections of the public who are already strong supporters of refugee resettlement), rather than those who are more skeptical of resettlement’s benefits. A co-housing project in Antwerp that matched unaccompanied young refugees with local “buddies” similarly found that intense, close contact—in this case via communal living—increased refugees’ access to both tangible and emotional integration support and improved both groups’ intercultural competencies. But as with private sponsorship, these programs require extremely hands-on case management to be successful,<sup>105</sup> which could be a barrier to scaling them up.

While many promising contact initiatives have proliferated around the globe, there is much that is still unknown about what works—and under what conditions—to boost feelings of trust and cooperation, not just in the context of the intervention itself but over the long term and ideally with broader spillover effects. However, experiences to date point to certain principles for success (and things to avoid) under each category of programs.

First, one of the fatal flaws of many of these programs is simply that they are voluntary and thus face selection bias.<sup>106</sup> People who hold strongly anti-immigration views are the least likely to interact with initiatives designed to dislodge those views, even when it comes to one-off community-building events. For example, people opposed to a country admitting Muslim refugees are unlikely to choose to spend their time at an Iraqi music or food festival. This selection bias is even stronger for interventions that require time-intensive volunteering or financial commitments, such as community sponsorship of refugees.

Second, the quality and context of the contact between groups is a critical determinant of success. Even when diverse groups do come together, they may not do so on equal footing. Being in the same physical space does not guarantee *meaningful* contact or actual collaboration. Many programs may suffer from

104 For example, an evaluation of the Dutch pilot project Samen Hier found that 98 percent of refugees and 77 percent of hosts felt trust with each other. At the same time, 81 percent of refugees reported a decrease in cultural distances with their hosts. See Craig Damian Smith et al., *Midterm Review Pilot Samen Hier: December 2020* (The Hague: Samen Hier, 2020).

105 It is important to also note that even with strong oversight and support, success is not guaranteed. The evaluation found that despite living under one roof, social contact between matched refugee-buddy duos were often limited in frequency and depth, and did not typically lead to close friendships that endured after the end of the project. One explanation was that locals and refugees often began the project with different expectations around mutual social contact: locals often expected more social contact, while refugees were often motivated by practical goals (learning Dutch and benefiting from affordable housing). See Rilke Mahieu, Laura Van Raemdonck, and Noel Clycq, *Cohousing and Case Management for Unaccompanied Young Adult Refugees in Antwerp (CURANT): Second Evaluation Report* (Antwerp: University of Antwerp, Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies, 2019).

106 For example, in an initiative in Lebanon that brought together Syrian refugees and members of host communities in dialogue groups, more than 70 percent of host-community participants already had more than three friends from a different nationality or background (meaning that individuals with high concerns about refugees and diversity were less likely to have participated than those with some existing level of exposure to diversity). See Maxwell Saungweme and Storm Lawrence, *Fostering Social Stability through Strategic Communications* (Beirut: Search for Common Ground, 2021).

an innate power imbalance (e.g., mentor versus mentee)<sup>107</sup> or contact may be tokenistic or transactional (refugees performing in a festival but not being involved in its design or planning). Interventions may not be effective if there is a status differential (or competition) between groups.<sup>108</sup> For example, participants in the Casual Labour Initiative in Lebanon felt there was bias in the recruitment process and that Syrian refugees did not have equal access to leadership opportunities.<sup>109</sup> And if programs designed to facilitate intensive contact (such as community sponsorship) do not adequately train or prepare people for some of the inevitable challenges they will encounter, these initiatives could backfire. Thus, ambitious programs only work if they are well executed.

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Third, even if programs generate goodwill in the short term, they often have difficulty sustaining this over time or spreading the learning (or new relationships of trust) beyond the immediate beneficiaries of the project. Some contact may be too brief or episodic for any positive feelings to endure, or for positive effects to organically spill over into other parts of society.<sup>110</sup> In other cases (as with co-housing or sponsorship), facilitating positive interactions is only possible through careful project design (often involving an algorithm for creating appropriate matches between natives and refugees), hands-on management during the life of the project, and ideally follow-up after participants have left the program, which not all programs are designed to do. This level of curation may also make programs feel like artificial social environments, disconnected from spontaneous interactions in the real world.<sup>111</sup>

Finally, face-to-face contact designed to reduce prejudice and intergroup tensions may be constrained in what they can accomplish if the root cause of tensions is left unaddressed. For example, if groups are in a position of competing over scarce resources or economic opportunities, bridge-building activities alone will not be enough to ease those tensions.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, programs in low- and middle-income countries that can marry intergroup contact with efforts to collaboratively improve standards of living (such as bringing different groups together to improve infrastructure rather than engage in leisure activities) may be highly promising—especially because these sidestep the problem of voluntariness and self-selection bias. Such investments may be able to address some of the root causes of tension, while also fostering economic empowerment for those who participate in making these improvements.<sup>113</sup>

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107 Even with community sponsorship—which facilitates meaningful contact over a long period of time, and thus has high friendship potential—the Samen Hier evaluation found that sponsors were more reluctant to describe their relationship with refugees as “friendship” (only 45 percent of sponsors indicated they had become friends, compared to 80 percent of participating refugees) and thought of themselves more as volunteers, mentors, or coaches. See Smith et al., *Midterm Review Pilot Samen Hier*.

108 IOM, *The Power of Contact: Designing, Facilitating and Evaluating Social Mixing Activities to Strengthen Migrant Integration and Social Cohesion between Migrants and Local Communities* (Geneva: IOM, 2021).

109 Harb and Saab, “Social Cohesion and Intergroup Relations.”

110 Mousa, “Building Tolerance.”

111 Mahieu, Van Raemdonck, and Clycq, *CURANT: Second Evaluation Report*.

112 An evaluation of Mercy Corps’ social cohesion programs in Jordan found an improvement in the attitudes and behaviors of Jordanian hosts towards Syrian refugees and vice versa due to so-called “software” interventions (conflict management and increasing contact between groups) but that the effects were strongest when these were accompanied by “hardware” investments (infrastructure projects to improve basic services and reduce competition). See Mercy Corps, *What Works and What’s Next for Social Stability in Jordan? Evidence from Mercy Corps’ Host-Refugee Social Cohesion Program* (Portland: Mercy Corps, 2019).

113 See, for example, CARE International, *Beyond Four Walls and a Roof: Reflections on the Multi-Sectoral One Neighbourhood Approach to Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Tripoli, Lebanon* (London: CARE International, 2021).



As these examples illustrate, not all contact may be equally positive, and what works in one setting could potentially backfire under a slightly different set of social, political, and historical circumstances. In some contexts, low-quality or superficial contact can actually increase negative attitudes.<sup>114</sup> Lack of communication or preparedness, and perceived unfairness or arbitrariness of programs, particularly those that distribute cash and services to refugees in places with high levels of inequality and poverty within the broader population, can lead to increased tensions and negative feelings both within and between refugee and host communities.<sup>115</sup>

These questions are further complicated by the fact that very few initiatives are rigorously evaluated, particularly over a longer time horizon. And even when evaluations exist, many rely on metrics that capture *reach* (such as the number of views or downloads) rather than *impact* (such as behavioral or attitudinal change). The forms of impact that are often most desired, such as increases in trust or belonging, are also by their nature notoriously difficult to assess, particularly using one-off survey instruments or polls. While we can point to certain principles of success, more research is needed to pinpoint the precise conditions under which intergroup contact can boost social cohesion in different contexts (and for different groups), and how this in turn might trigger broader, structural changes in communities.

## 4 Conclusions and Recommendations

Refugee crises often give rise to feelings of empathy and solidarity, but these feelings are unlikely to last indefinitely. In fact, they can sour quickly if a crisis is prolonged or if people perceive unfair treatment or mismanagement in governments' response and recovery plans. Policy approaches, campaigns, and interventions need to take into account where people are along this continuum. Asking members of the public facing great precarity and uncertainty to have compassion for even more vulnerable groups of refugees and asylum seekers (or even to make sacrifices for those groups) may be counterproductive or backfire in the long run. Instead, leaders should seek to harness feelings of solidarity by giving people a way to act in their own best interest that *also* serves the interests of the wider community and the nation (including a country's economic interests as well as its humanitarian interests).

Addressing negative perceptions of refugees and other forced migrants also cannot be done in a vacuum. Governments and humanitarian actors may need to calibrate a wide range of policies—including housing, employment, and infrastructure investments—to address the underlying sources of tension in receiving

communities, including resource and job scarcity, before they can shift narratives. Different approaches will be needed depending on whether a country is newer to immigration or has a long history of welcoming

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114 Beint Magnus Aamodt Bentsen, "Intergroup Contact and Negative Attitudes towards Immigrants among Youth in Sweden: Individual and Contextual Factors," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 23 (2021): 243–266.

115 Fiona Samuels, Francesca Bastagli, Maria Stavropoulou, and Georgia Plank, *World Food Programme Cash Assistance in Lebanon: Social Cohesion between Syrian Refugees and Host Communities* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2020).

newcomers (and a corresponding policy infrastructure); whether newcomers are ethnically, religiously, or linguistically similar to the host population or have a shared history; whether new migration flows represent a deliberate policy decision or happened suddenly and against the will of the government (as is the case with spontaneous, mixed migration); and whether there are existing prejudices or underlying tensions between groups or rather an absence of information about the “other.” Importantly, policymakers must recognize that public sentiment is not set in stone, and can shift over time and in reaction to both external events and how governments *manage* these events.

There will always be both positive and negative narratives in a community. The goal is not to eradicate all anxieties around refugees and asylum seekers—which would be an impossible task—but instead to make sure they do not escalate to the point where fear narratives become dominant. To do so, it may be helpful to adopt the following five guiding principles:

- 1 **Identify pockets of intense anxiety, and pay attention to what makes concerns more or less salient.** Most societies have ambivalent views on immigration. They may feel solidarity with refugees but still fear high unemployment or rapid cultural change, and the strength of both fears and solidarity naturally ebbs and flows. Therefore, looking at broad averages (and assuming these views are static) can be a distraction; instead, it is critical to understand what triggers and accelerates these peaks and valleys in public opinion and how they relate to external circumstances (including events such as a public-health crisis, a sudden spike in spontaneous arrivals, or a reduction in international aid during a prolonged conflict) in order to develop more carefully calibrated policy responses.
- 2 **Move away from a narrow focus on trying to change people’s attitudes.** Governments and humanitarian organizations should focus more on targeting the roots of people’s concerns, rather than just the outward manifestations of their anxiety. People are more likely to be generous if they feel a sense of hope for their own future, and that opportunities are equally available to natives and newcomers (and no one is taking advantage of the system). This can mean first addressing concerns over job losses or overburdened infrastructure rather than focusing on curbing xenophobic rhetoric—for instance, announcing new affordable housing or rehabilitating critical infrastructure for both locals and newcomers in need. This requires a different scale of investment—and thinking about the signaling power of how resources are allocated—in efforts to support *entire communities* rather than granting preference to certain groups over others.
- 3 **Invoke pragmatism instead of compassion.** Instead of trying to “sell” the benefits of welcoming and supporting humanitarian migrants and downplaying the costs, community initiatives should aim to help people see solidarity with newcomers as something that furthers their own goals—both economic and humanitarian—not something imposed upon them. While it may be unrealistic to eradicate fear and anxiety about immigration, it may be possible to defang or de-emphasize it to the point that it is not the most pressing concern. Messages that show diverse societies working toward common goals (and that instill pride in this unity) may be more effective. This has a way of knitting together different groups under one umbrella, rather than creating “us versus them” categorizations. The most enduring positive narratives, in other words, are the ones borne out of shared challenges and working toward common solutions.

- 4 **Reinforce perceptions of fairness.** Perceptions of (un)fairness are an important driver of tensions around forced migration, both in terms of how people enter the country as well as how resources are allocated to support them once they arrive. There may be fierce resistance to allocating specific resources to refugees and asylum seekers at a time when every corner of society is feeling the impacts of the pandemic and most are feeling relative insecurity. The public will want to see governments enforcing the rules around asylum (which includes returning those found not to qualify for protection), as well as greater transparency in terms of how resources are allocated. In addition, the public is more likely to invest in refugee protection and integration if it is framed not as something we do “for them,” but for the benefit of the whole society.
- 5 **Demonstrate that there is a plan for newcomers’ long-term integration, not just short-term reception.** While it is important to invest in reception and legal status adjudication systems to reduce the perception of chaos and disorder at a country’s borders, it is equally important to invest in systems that can ensure newcomers succeed over the long term. After the emergency phase of a crisis, practical concerns about the future begin to dominate—including whether newcomers are able to find jobs and become self-sufficient, and whether refugees are integrating or living parallel lives. And these concerns can become prominent even in places that have seen immense short-term solidarity on cultural or political grounds. It is often the bread-and-butter investments, such as investing in labor market integration and supporting the educational achievement of the children of refugees, that can yield significant returns in shaping attitudes and behavior between groups in the long run.

For those seeking to curtail knee-jerk restrictive policies and boost empathy with refugees and asylum seekers, it is tempting to focus on amplifying positive messages. But in this ecosystem of overlapping and competing stories, it is not enough. Instead, political and community leaders need to create ways for societies to come together in common purpose. Messages should not try to “sell” the benefits of welcoming and supporting humanitarian migrants, but rather to help people see solidarity with newcomers as something that furthers their own goals—not something imposed upon them.

## About the Author

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**NATALIA BANULESCU-BOGDAN**

[!\[\]\(e78f798d4ea5c530c9db49e7d26e6b95\_img.jpg\) @nataliabbogdan](https://twitter.com/nataliabbogdan)

Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan is Associate Director of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) International Program and a Nonresident Fellow with MPI Europe. Her areas of expertise include social cohesion and identity, values and civic engagement, and the intersection of nationalism and migration.

Since she joined MPI in 2008, Ms. Banulescu-Bogdan has primarily worked with the Transatlantic Council on Migration, through which she has helped advise participating governments on various aspects of migration management. She has provided technical support to countries holding the rotating presidency of the European Union and to the annual Global Forum on Migration and Development.

Previously, she worked at the Brookings Institution. Ms. Banulescu-Bogdan obtained her master's degree in nationalism studies from the Central European University in Budapest and her bachelor's degree in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania.

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1275 K St NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20005  
202-266-1940

