



## **Working Group on Media and Narratives**

**Bratislava, 17<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2019**

### **1. Introduction**

Under the banner of 'A World of Neighbors', the Church of Sweden is seeking to strengthen and envision the work of religious communities – as receiving communities – with refugees and migrants, and to enhance the interreligious infrastructure of Europe in service to the journeys and aspirations of 'people on the move'. As a result of over 150 site visits this past year to receiving communities, their affiliated humanitarian organizations, and partners in the broader civil society in nine countries, a variety of critical challenges and promising opportunities have emerged. Drawing on what has been learned, seven working groups will be convened during the years 2019-2020 to strategize about how to enhance and further this crucial work, on topics such as: strengthening receiving communities, refugee and migrant policy, the role of youth, the role of practitioners, social cohesion, media and narratives, and a vision for Europe.

Reflections and recommendations from these working groups will form the basis for a European strategy to be drafted at a pre-summit early 2020. This strategy will then be presented to a wider European audience of political religious leaders at a summit, called by the Archbishop Antje Jackélen in February of 2021, associated with receiving communities somewhere in Europe. The Church of Sweden is committed to cultivating the evolving network of communities and practitioners growing out of the initiative process, and supporting the efforts and partnerships associated with the strategy emerging out of the 2021 summit.

The working group in Bratislava convened between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2019 focused on narratives and the role of media in the coverage of the

refugee issues. These four days of intense work were organized in response to the challenges highlighted both during the site visits, and the first two working groups of the projects. Narratives proved to be problematic for all parts of the reception process: from migrants to receiving communities; from policy-makers to practitioners. These struggles were formulated into three main areas of interest which were set as the agenda of the meeting:

- **How do we counter negative narratives?** What are the common tropes of the demagogue? How do we re-frame the premises of hate speech? How do we identify and address genuine sources of anxiety and fear in receiving societies?
- **How do we craft positive narratives?** What are credible and evocative messages of welcome and hope? How do we frame the public discourse in pro-active and constructive ways? How can we call forth the best in receiving societies?
- **What are effective strategies for mainstream and social media?** What are the dynamics at work in various forms of media? How can we equip religious and civil society leaders, and grassroots receiving communities and practitioners, to engage with local, national, inter-communion mainstream and social media? What specific media outlets and networks should these actors engage?

The following report gathers the most important inputs provided by the participants who had different types of expertise in media and communication work. The participants considered what types of problems negative narratives bring with themselves, how to counter them, how to build constructive narratives in their place, and how to come up with efficient communication strategies.

## **2. Negative Narratives – from their roots to their uprooting**

The workshop provided ample opportunities for brainstorming around the negative coverage of migration and the ways of its countering. A number of problems emerged, and possible ways of solving them were highlighted. Out of these, four primary areas of negative narratives emerged. These included: (1) original framing and representation, (2) political potency, misinformation and misunderstanding, (3) pejorativization and criminalization, (4) impossibilism and othering.

### 2.1. *Original framing and representation*

The control over narrative is one of the key aspects of the negative framing of the migration issues. The stories that are told often precede the encounter with any people on the move, especially in those places where the number of them is the lowest. Created in that way “original framing” tends to stick much stronger than any subsequent efforts at retelling the story. Moreover, any simplifications made at the beginning overpower the attempts of complexification, introducing the danger of a “single story”. The negative original framing deprives the actual people of agency, unifying them into an abstract mass of similar “migrants”.

This leads to problems with adequate representation. As the report on the “Refugees Reporting” prepared by WACC (presented by Francesca Pierigh and available at <http://www.wacceurope.org/projects/refugees-reporting/>) shows, less than one third of the stories on migration talk about individual people, and even in those cases there is a risk of tokenism – portrayal of a specific individual as representative of the group. An overwhelming majority of people on the move are presented without specifying any occupation whatsoever or, simply, as migrants. Women are highly underrepresented in most countries, and significant national groups, like Nigerians who constitute the biggest group, are nearly absent from the media coverage (less than 2%). The reductive and repetitive coverage, combined with the prolonged and ongoing character of the migration issues creates “media fatigue”. Due to high number of media stories in 2015 and 2016, from 2017 onwards it is increasingly harder to convince editors to run a story on people on the move, which provides even higher level of the deficiency in representation, and further hinders the countering of the previously introduced negative narratives.

### 2.2. *Political potency, misinformation and misunderstanding*

The negative framing of migration issues, with inflated notions of threat they bring, provides extreme political potency – often the higher, the smaller number of actual people on the move enters the country (as exemplified in a presentation by Miroslav Janák on political situation in Slovakia, where the biggest political gains were made on the migration issues when the number of refugees and asylum seekers was among the lowest in two decades).

This is why the negative narratives are purposefully introduced and spread, and people showing solidarity and the approach of open arms are presented as naïve, and, in extreme cases, danger to their own society. On the one hand, people on the move are portrayed as a risk to life, due to terrorism, crime and illnesses they bring. On the other, they are presented as a cultural and demographic risk, due to incompatible values and religion that they want to impose, big families and high number of children that they have. These are

*I find it difficult to accept innocence of those who create so much suffering.* further supported by the inadequate narratives of historical purity, devoid of its inherent diversity.  
Zachary Gallant

They also reject the claims of the refugees and asylum seekers. These claims are presented as fraudulent, because “those who really need help are the ones in the country where there is war, not those who arrived in Europe”. Finally, even if these claims are accepted, in an exercise of political prioritization, migrants are presented as a problem of second degree – the current needs of “our own” are presented with the claim, that we have to help ourselves first, whether on local, regional or national level, before we will be able to do that for the others.

### 2.3. *Pejorativization and criminalization*

All of the above creates two types of negative outcomes: pejorativization of the terminology connected to migration and criminalization of any help provided to the people on the move

The first process shifts the meaning of the terms such as refugee or asylum seeker, from descriptive to pejorative. This may go as far as e.g. in Italy, where the expression “economic migrant” is a near swear word. The terms are also used in a dehumanizing context, e.g. “wave of refugees” or “invasion of migrants”, while people on the move are presented as a “problem to be solved”.

*We should not simply reject people on the other side – many of them truly believe that they are doing good.*

Karol Wilczyński

Criminalization is an advancing process which uses legal tools to penalize increasingly broader categories of behavior of people on the move and those who want to help them, as well as portray them as social outcasts. Humanitarian efforts are put in one basket with trafficking and prosecuted under laws intended for international criminal organizations, while

*Other branches of law are also used to penalize solidarity with migrants – Erin Ersson, who refused to sit down on a plane to stop the extradition of an Afghan man was punished for a breach of aviation regulations.*

humanitarian organizations are presented as dangerous, disloyal and acting against the interest of the society as a whole. Migrants are presented as criminals “by default”, that is, until proven otherwise, while spaces for legalization of their status are shrinking at a fast pace.

#### 2.4. *Impossibilism and othering*

Finally, negative framing creates impossibilism – creation of conditions in which a positive outcome for people on the move is not possible and their every move is framed as wrong. In case of work, the narratives often play on the fears of the audience - some coverage presents migrants as those who do not want to work and come for social benefits, while other media stories present them as those “coming to get our jobs”. Unaccompanied minors are always deceitful – they probably lie about their age, and even if not – they would if they could. People are accused of not assimilating, and if they do assimilate, they are accused of doing that in order to overthrow the society at some point in the future.

Moreover, othering creates radical conditions of “us” vs “them”, which provides no place for any cooperation or accommodation. Moreover, the status of people on the move is eternally temporary - no amount of time, no change in legal status, no degree of settlement, no investment or effort are able to pave the way to belonging. Migrants are stuck as “the other”.

*In Germany, for example, Germans have to be thanked, treated as saviours, refugees are not allowed to have any sorrows, you cannot complain, without gratitude story will not sell.*

Zachary Gallant

This is, however, a wider problem coming from all sides of the – while those opposing migration create othering narratives as exemplified by the abovementioned examples, liberal media tend to deepen polarization to a similar extent, by too easily portraying those with reservations towards

migration as fascist. These conditions make it extremely hard to communicate about the biases and fears, enforcing and petrifying them on all sides.

### 3. Countering Narratives

For people on the move, receiving communities, and everyone else involved in the migration issues, the negative narratives and the arguments of the opponents of migration provide a point of frustration and significant obstacle in making things work. But they may be countered, and many ways of doing so were proposed during the working group. Possible strategies included:

- a) Reversing the argument – e.g. responding to the notion of national purity with increasing awareness of diverse heritage;
- b) Exposing double standards – e.g. responding to the idea of “no-go zones” by showing the “no-go zones” on the other side: nightclubs, political events, or jobs;  
*It takes an immigrant 9 years on average to get a job in Sweden.*  
Omar Al Zankah
- c) Exposing the real threat – e.g. by responding to the threat to security with the actual numbers concerning harm done by refugees vs. those opposed to migration;
- d) Staying descriptive – not contributing to polarization by refraining from portraying the other side in negative ways;
- e) Turning descriptive into positive – e.g. “burger park” in Germany as a description of inclusive park for everyone;
- f) Providing points of encounter to emphasize the particular character of individual people on the move;
- g) Exposing the fallacies – e.g. for those scared for “their own”, showing that they harm their own community, as in the case of Chinese Christians who were refused asylum on anti-refugee sentiment;
- h) Exposing discriminatory character – e.g. showing that the seeming tolerance and “colorblindness” to race is projected onto religion;
- i) Countering fear by creating information campaigns.

Participants also considered the ways to counter some of the specific narratives, with specific counterpoints and questions to be posed.

#### 3.1. *Too many of migrants are coming - we are losing control*

Ways to counter:

- Referring to the data – in many cases numbers do not support that;
- Referring to the needs of economy – how many people are needed;
- Showing domestic problems as the true place of losing control.

Questions to ask:

- Where do you get your data?
- “Too many” relates to what?
- Who constitutes “we”? Who is losing control?

### 3.2. *They threaten our traditions*

Ways to counter:

- Contrasting size of ‘voices’;
- Showing the levels of integration – e.g. refugee girls getting better grades in Danish than the Danish girls;
- Showing the ascriptions of belonging – e.g. referring to the Pew Research Center data showing that people in Pakistan identify themselves more often as Muslim than Pakistani, while Pakistani migrants in Britain identify themselves as British more often than Muslim.

Questions to ask:

- How much of integration is enough?
- Which tradition?
- What about us?
- How do we care for traditions?
- What our traditions, e.g. of hospitality, require from us?

### 3.3. *They come here to enforce their religion*

Ways to counter:

- Showcasing the religious diversity of the people on the move;
- Showing that observance rates differ radically between the individuals;
- Pointing to commonalities;

- Referring to the numbers – how many of them are coming vs. how many of us are here.

Questions to ask:

- Would we try to impose our religion in their situation?

### 3.4. *They will take our jobs*

Ways to counter:

- Referring to the economic data and the needs of economy;
- Showcasing successful workers and making interviews with managers;
- Showcasing that migration created more jobs than it takes;
- Showing that long term unemployment is a separate problem, which is not dependent on migration.

Questions to ask:

- Who is responsible for not enough jobs?
- Who wants to do those jobs?
- What kind of jobs?

### 3.5. *They are going to abuse our social system*

Ways to counter:

- Showing that living off the social system is extremely basic;
- Showcasing the economic efficiency of getting fully educated adults ready to work, instead of having to provide for them throughout their childhood;
- Showing that more often the people on the move are the one's abused, not abusing.

Question to ask:

- Who destroyed their social system?

## **4. Building constructive narratives and creating effective strategies**

While negative narratives are a significant stumbling block for coming up with productive ways of accommodating people on the move, participants in the working group shared a number of ways in which constructive narratives might be built, which highlighted also possible risks and ways to avoid them.

#### 4.1. *Creating agency*

One of the most significant aspects of such narratives was engagement with actual people and avoidance of tokenism. In coverage about migration, people should be approached in their particularities, with “deep stories” highlighting their diverse characters, needs and ideas. Intersectionality among migrants should be emphasized, which would introduce complexification of the picture of migrants as a uniform mass of people and show that not only Europeans wear multiple hats. The stories should be complexified as much as possible, while still staying accessible.

Moreover, people on the move should be presented as capable of self-determination. Instead of presenting them as victims, constructive narratives should strength their dignity, showing their particular challenges, and them as people bravely and courageously meeting them and building a new life. We should show people as people – having friends and family, and living their regular lives despite the everyday hardships. Finally, we should seek ways of

*People know what their needs are, and they usually know best themselves how and what to ask for.*

Albin Hillert

empowering them by providing them with means to act – not only speaking for them, and telling their stories ourselves, but also providing them with means and platforms to speak for themselves.

#### 4.2. *Journalism under pressure*

Many of the participants underlined an especially important aspect of good stories – that they take a lot of time. And yet, for many journalists, that kind of time is simply not possibly due to extreme pressure they operate under.

*Many times, we would want to follow up on particular stories after few months, but there is simply no funding available for that.*

Amloud AlAmir

Even if there is a will, in conditions were most journalists are paid per story, it is rarely possible to cover deep stories with many participants and comprehensive understanding of the background.

That is why journalists need support from those already “on the ground”. Everyone, who wants to improve the narratives should build relationships with journalists in order to streamline their work. Humanitarian and faith-based communities may provide access and information, shortening the amount of time required to write a story and improving its content. Those with a story to tell may pitch ideas, and, in some cases, whole stories, to the journalists for editing and publishing. NGOs may also provide resources for writing stories for journalists – grants, invitations for field trips etc., although with a provision, that they should not have any strings attached. Special informational media packages could be released, containing information, pictures and videos, telephone numbers to potential interviewees and others.

*The growing importance of entertainment-oriented news means that we are moving away from established media to alternative media channels, e.g. SoMe.*

Christina Byström

Because of the changing character of media channels, alternative story-telling routes should be also considered, such as social media or personal letters left in the mailboxes, with a strategic choice in mind. These channels may help to spread the news more accurately and quickly than the traditional media, and may also help counter narratives already present in those alternative routes. In connection to the previous point, people on the move should also be encouraged, empowered, and provided with means to tell their own stories, as in the case of “Amal, Berlin!”, supported by the Evangelical School of Journalism (EJS) in Berlin and run by people with migration experience themselves.

#### 4.3. *How to reach diverse audiences?*

Constructive stories, to be effective, need to reach the audiences they are aimed for. “One-size-fits-all” stories are rarely effective because society is too broad of a category. A good story needs to find identification points, which can provide interest and engagement. They need to bridge the gap between the parallel streams of living. Similar environmental tropes may be used – e.g. “if you want to go down to the river, where I live, it does not necessarily mean that you will find water”. Similar life activities may also provide such a point – e.g. “learn to do a bee hive like an Ethiopian”. Using people’s interest can also provide a bridge between to realities, e.g. the life of dogs in Berlin vs the

life of dogs in Syria. Creation of “success stories” also helps, as in the case of Integrationswerkstatt Unkel.