CHATHAM HOUSE
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Public perceptions of refugees and migrants: the role of politicians, the media and civil society

Roundtable summary

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Introduction

This note summarises the key points to emerge from a roundtable discussion bringing together a diverse group of experts from international organisations, civil society, research institutes, communications agencies and the media.

The event, held under the Chatham House Rule, was co-hosted by Chatham House and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) under the Forum on Refugee and Migration Policy initiative.

The context

The purpose of this meeting was to examine public perceptions of refugees and migrants, and the role of politicians, the media and civil society in shaping them. The roundtable was organised around three key topics: the current state of public opinion, the role of the media and politicians in shaping that opinion and, finally, finding better ways to engage with public opinion.

Understanding the current state of public opinion

The day began with a discussion of the current state of public opinion towards refugees and migrants. Numerous polls have been conducted on this topic, including Ipsos MORI, the Pew Research Center and the TENT Foundation. Discussions emphasised the importance of situating analysis of public opinion within the specificities of national context. Participants paid particular attention to polling data from the UK, Germany and France, where research has indicated similar findings across contexts. People in these countries can roughly be divided into three segments: pro-migration liberal cosmopolitans, anti-migration hostile nationalists and an 'anxious middle'. The 'anxious middle' – the biggest population segment

in the contexts discussed – is characterised by mixed and conflicted points of view.

Discussions raised a new piece of TENT Foundation research which finds widespread support worldwide for a humanitarian duty to take in refugees. It was emphasised that this belief is supported by many in the 'anxious middle', but that this segment's feelings around obligations towards refugees are counterbalanced by concerns in three categories:

- **Culture:** Feelings like 'my country is disappearing', a threat to belonging and identity.
- **Security:** This was especially high in countries which have suffered attacks.
- **Economy:** Views on this varied from country to country, showing the importance of national context. For example, in France people were worried about jobs due to high unemployment rates; in the UK it is the National Health Service (NHS), transport and pressure on local services that attract the greatest concern.

Evidence shows that concerns also vary with wealth. For example, one participant highlighted that, in the UK, the most well-off are most worried about benefits and public services, while the least well-off are more worried about labour market competition.

Participants highlighted that concerns about refugees and migrants may often be based on misperceptions. For example, people in the UK have been consistently shown to overestimate the percentage of migrants in the population, a finding linked to the notion of 'emotional innumeracy', where people overestimate what they worry most about. However, discussions emphasised that worries about migration are not just an artificially created concern. For example, in the UK a rise in net migration preceded an increase in concern. It was also highlighted that, in some cases, as in France, concerns about impacts of migration

have been exacerbated by genuine failures of government integration policy.

Although participants emphasised that there is evidence to support 'contact theory' – that those who have more contact with migrants are likely to be positive – they also highlighted that this is a more complex picture. Participants discussed a so-called 'halo effect', where the greatest concern is found in more homogeneous areas surrounding diverse locations, given that people from homogeneous areas are likely to travel to areas that are more diverse, and correspondingly develop worries about diversity spreading to their own locality.

Participants raised the issue that concerns about refugees and migrants have been effectively exploited by the far right, which was described as well-networked and -funded and tech-savvy, and set on devising strategies that use fear of refugees and migrants as a campaigning tool to gain power. Participants suggested that, to date, the far right has done a better job than pro-migration campaigners in connecting with the 'anxious middle'.

Discussions revealed some consensus that **the demographics of respondents are no longer considered the most useful way** of understanding attitudes. In particular, participants cautioned against relying on socioeconomic determinants, as used in analysis focusing on those 'left behind'. Instead, studies are beginning to look at segmenting populations into groupings based not only on their attitudes to migration but also on a number of related attitudes, such as attitudes to globalisation and political correctness, providing a much more detailed and nuanced picture of public opinion and concerns. For example, research in **Germany** divides the 'anxious middle' into two categories: economic pragmatists and humanitarian sceptics. The former understand the positive impact of migrants on the economy, and understand that younger migrants are needed to support an ageing population. The latter want Germany to take in refugees, but are sceptical about whether integration will work. Both are primarily concerned with whether migrants will 'learn our language, work hard and contribute to society'. Research in **France** finds that the French are far more pessimistic. For example, no segment of the population thinks that immigration has had a positive impact. It was suggested that it would be useful to extend this kind of segmentation analysis beyond Europe, to countries such as Turkey.

The question was also raised whether people move in and out of segments. It was discussed that in Germany, France and the UK, studies have found that, while people do move, aggregate figures remain constant; in particular, the most pro-migration 'liberal' group is particularly prone to flux, undermining the idea of a clear liberal core. However, given the relatively pro-migration attitudes of younger people, discussions suggested that society overall is becoming more positive over time.

The group discussed how proponents of liberal refugee and migration policies might more effectively engage with the 'anxious middle', considering this the key to messaging that goes beyond those already supportive; participants raised the point that, for NGOs, a distinction should be made between fundraising strategies (targeting those already supportive) and attempts to shift public opinion (targeting the 'anxious middle'). It was highlighted that to date liberal cosmopolitans have been poor vehicles for attempts to engage the 'anxious middle', being seen as looking down on the rest of the population and using messages celebrating diversity that have antagonised middle groupings.

Participants discussed that pro-migration messages would be more likely to succeed by **targeting people's values and emotions**. While it was acknowledged that the messaging of fear is easier than the messaging of inclusion, participants suggested some strategies that appear more likely to work, in particular moving away from celebrating diversity to celebrating what we have in common.

The discussion highlighted the importance of considering the vehicles for conveying this idea. It was suggested that politicians and NGO spokespeople are not the best messengers, with low levels of trust in politicians and 'elites'. Instead, we need 'ordinary people' ('someone like me') to tell the 'welcoming message'. In particular, participants noted the importance of working with actors already influential among anxious groups, for example churches.

The media, politicians and public opinion

This session focused on whether the media and/or politicians influence public opinion, or whether the way they convey messages reflects already-held opinions.

Firstly, there was consideration of **the way in which journalists report on refugee issues**. It was argued that, especially as recent inflows of refugees and migrants into Europe reached their peak, journalists did not have a 'frame' for understanding the issues, and instead reached for familiar frames that did not match the complexities of the situation. It was highlighted that, although there was some excellent and detailed reporting on refugees' and migrants' journeys through Europe, and also good policy-level reporting in Germany and Brussels, the two rarely came together. Not every news outlet managed to come up with a nuanced narrative, instead conflating issues (for example mixing up 'migrants' and 'refugees') and missing subtleties in their haste to respond. This was sometimes exacerbated by a profound mismatch between media resources and the scale of the refugee story.

Discussions suggested that some right-wing media outlets used this opportunity to promote 'fake news', for example crimes allegedly committed by refugees. On the other hand, liberal media have also been guilty of oversimplification, pretending that everything is 'rosy' and under-reporting negative stories. Overall, it was emphasised that reporting has become more polarised,

with journalists from different sides of the debate losing interest in persuading the other, and little space for 'middle ground' reporting.

Participants also spent some time discussing the **pressures on the media**, particularly resourcing constraints. It was emphasised that understanding issues surrounding refugees and migrants takes time and money, yet a reduction in advertising revenue has left many without this capacity. Journalists have a short response timeframe, and often do not have the space for strategic thinking. Even those with an investigative budget cannot look into every story, and specialised media focusing on migration and refugees issues usually have very little capacity to do more in-depth research. It was suggested that funders are supportive of encouraging migrant voices within the media, yet there is still a struggle to find those voices. Discussions highlighted that, in **Australia**, 70% of the media is controlled by one individual, showing the importance of media structure in shaping narratives.

Participants also discussed a range of issues around **politicians and policy**. Discussions highlighted the link between public attitudes and perceptions of government control over migration policy. It was argued that, if the public is convinced that the government is controlling migration, as in Canada and Australia, there is less negative opinion, and the issue carries less intensity. Discussions also covered the new European Union (EU) policy of putting money into source countries in an attempt to induce migrants to stay. It was acknowledged that criticising this policy is difficult without undermining genuine needs for aid. However, it was also highlighted that evidence suggests that, at least in the short term, such investment may in fact increase migration.

To put these issues into context, the discussion broached **causal relationships** – do public perceptions influence the media/politicians, or is it the other way around? To add to these examples, the session highlighted recent work by [Refugees Deeply](). This work looked at the four European countries holding the most negative views towards refugees, concentrating on the Czech Republic and Hungary.

According to this research, in **Hungary** the ruling party (Fidesz) deliberately aimed to consolidate its electoral position through campaigns that painted refugees and migrants in a negative light, a position replicated in news coverage. The party sampled large sections of the population and tested different messaging, finding an anti-refugee frame that suited its cause. It then put money and capacity behind this messaging, leading to record high levels of xenophobia and support for the party. This worked, in part, because of the predominance of state-controlled media and messaging. Meanwhile, in the **Czech Republic**, the editor of the largest newspaper declared that it would take an anti-migrant position. Unlike in Hungary this stance did not come from the government, but instead seemed to come from the newspaper's analysis that this

position would be reflective of the views of its audience. Both strategies led to deepening negativity within public opinion, but through very different routes.

The session closed with participants emphasising that, although flows into Europe have declined (or perhaps become less visible) due to EU policies, it is likely that large, visible movements will happen again. Participants raised the question of what, in this context, could be done to influence the media to approach the story in a more productive manner than last time. Discussions highlighted the importance of critical evaluation from all sides of policy responses to refugees and migrants, and transparent reporting that emphasises both successes and failures.

Engaging with public opinion

Given the discussion above, the final session of the day looked at different strategies that could be used when engaging with public opinion on refugees and migrants.

Firstly, participants discussed the importance of **coalition-building**. It was suggested that influencing the 'anxious middle' may involve working with like-minded groups in unusual areas, for example the military or centre-right politicians who support refugees. In general, participants highlighted the need for collaboration, including between volunteers, NGOs and the media.

Participants discussed the importance of bringing people together. However, it was emphasised that attempts to bring people together must be broached in a way that is meaningful in national and local conversations, tapping into key national moments. Discussions also emphasised that messaging should explore the use of non-traditional platforms. The expansion of social media has created a unique platform to share stories and messages, in a way that reaches large sections of the population. For example, the [World Wide Tribe]() has recently coupled positive messaging about refugees with Pokémon Go players. This is part of a broader campaign to tap into issues that people care about, and then bring in the refugee 'frame'.

Discussions emphasised that any strategies to engage with public opinion should be locally rooted. [British Future]() research has identified four core themes that often emerge in discussions with those concerned about migration: issues around numbers, resources, identity and culture and democracy/freedom of expression.

Discussions indicated that attitudes towards refugees and migrants are profoundly shaped by how individuals feel integration is going, has gone and the impact it has had on them and their country. The failure of 'liberal' campaigners to engage with local concerns was highlighted, emphasising that messaging needs to use mainstream language, and that academic/policy terms are not necessarily conducive. It was also emphasised that the 'anxious middle' feel that they are not being listened to, and that messaging must acknowledge the negatives from migration and seek to allay people's fears. Any messaging

campaign *must* be local, and grounded in local concerns. For example, in the **UK** messages that work tend to focus on those migrants who are doing the 'right' things: working hard, paying taxes, learning the language and being part of the community.

Participants discussed how the **way in which migrants are framed** is important – there is a difference between 'othering' sympathy (using disempowering photos and stories) and a 'people like us' empathy (people integrating, being empowered). While the media do cover positive stories, they need to be newsworthy, emphasising the need to frame stories in a way which will pass the 'newsdesk' test. In particular, discussions highlighted the importance of bringing the 'welcomer' into the frame and localising the case for 'doing our bit'.

Part of the debate centred on NGOs, and **the messaging of fundraising organisations**. On the one hand, it was considered that the notion of a 'refugee crisis' has been employed to mobilise public support and funding. On the other, it was emphasised that this message may have exacerbated public perceptions that issues surrounding refugees and migrants are of a huge magnitude beyond control. It was suggested that more effective messaging would emphasise the manageability of the situation, showing that **the system, and policy, is working**, and that migration is being managed. Questions were also raised about the role of evidence, with discussions suggesting that, while valuable for informing political options on an elite level, evidence is not a good public engagement strategy.

The session concluded with a discussion on the polarisation of the debate. Participants highlighted an instinct among entrenched positions to fight back and polarise even further when their views are threatened. Discussions emphasised the importance of de-polarising the debate, and that this could be done without conceding values but by meeting people half-way, with messages that take their concerns into account.

Conclusion

The discussion concluded with four general comments:

1. The importance of distinguishing between global aspirations and actual strategies, which need to be local, targeted and personal.
2. The need for those starting from the 'liberal' side of the debate to genuinely take people's concerns on board.
3. The importance of emphasising the manageability of the situation, avoiding the big statistics and trying to restore faith in migration policy.
4. Coalitions are important, however unusual, but greater attention needs to be paid to how this can be achieved in practice, in particular the need to be more strategic in creating collaborative space.

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