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TEN POINTERS TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE ON MIGRATION

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How do we speak about immigration in a context of growing polarisation? What can we say to prevent far-right assumptions from hijacking the discourse? How can we go beyond merely reactive arguments? How do we explain the complexity of migration without getting lost along the way?

Offering ten "pointers", based on ten statements, this Nota Internacional tackles all these questions. While it offers no recipes, it does gather reflections, highlight dilemmas and point to possible alternatives. And all with the goal of thinking together about an issue as fundamental – for everyone and for our democracies – as the way in which we wish to continue talking about immigration.

Everybody talks about the importance of narratives. They not only determine how we describe the world, but also how we respond to it. On one side are the non-hegemonic groups, which challenge the prevailing narratives as the basis for building an alternative world. We find, for example, feminist or post-colonial movements, which try to replace androcentric assumptions or Global North ontologies with other forms of knowledge. On the other are governments and other influential actors, which seek to use narratives to justify their actions and thus consolidate their power.

In the realm of migration, this narrative turn runs parallel to another trend: while some speak a great deal, others say very little. There is no question that far-right parties have hijacked the immigration issue. Their messages are simple but insistent, and they are everywhere: on social media and traditional outlets. The far right takes many forms, within Europe and inside each country. But if there is something on which they all agree, it is their anti-immigration narrative. It is what unites them and, according to Cas Mudde, what constitutes their main lever of success.

While the far right dominates the conversation, dragging parties from the centre and traditional right with them, everyone else tends to remain silent. Immigration has long been an uncomfortable issue. Gary Freeman was saying it in the late 1970s: to accept differences in treatment and rights, as well as episodes of racial conflict, is contrary to the very essence of liberal democracies. At that time, the silence was buried under broad consensus. But when this consensus was blown apart, that silence became deafening. It is a silence composed of what goes unsaid, of reactive responses or empty slogans.

Ultimately, the sensation is one of disorientation and if there is a consensus on anything, it is on the need to come up with new words for a new world. How do we speak about immigration without ending up accepting assumptions of the far right? In a polarised world, where confrontation is all that people understand, how do we tackle the complexity without getting lost along the way? What can we say so as not to end up reproducing the negative and often bleak discourse on a world that appears to be moving by inertia, driven by forces far more powerful than states themselves? How do we offer facts and try to contextualise without dehumanising the lives behind those facts?

This *Nota Internacional* seeks to tackle all these questions. What makes it necessary is this sense of general confusion. What make it possible are three

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years of research and intense debate in the framework of BRIDGES (2021-24), a European Commission funded project that brought together 13 institutions (of which ten academic) from eight European countries. BRIDGES sought to understand why certain narratives ultimately prove more convincing than others. Particularly, we wanted to find out to what extent and how the success of a narrative depends on what is said and how, by whom and to whom, where and when.

While it draws on the BRIDGES project, this article is not a summary of its findings, which were published at the time. Nor does it comprise a list of ten recipes, still less a list of ten commandments. That would be an impossible task. Based on ten statements, it gathers reflections, identifies limitations, highlights dilemmas and points to where the alternative might lead. They are thoughts for sharing, with the goal of continuing to reflect together on an issue as fundamental – for everyone and for our democracies – as the way in which we wish to continue talking about immigration.

Convincing narratives are those that resonate in one way or another with one's own experience. But to be convincing, first we must listen to those we are addressing.

1. The content of the narrative must be consistent with reality

Convincing narratives are those that resonate in one way or another with one's own experience. It is pointless to insist that the economy is doing well if many people are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. Nor does it make any sense to repeat that immigration is synonymous with opportunities and wealth in places where precariousness and exclusion have become the order of the day. To be convincing, first you must listen. This means taking account of the perspective of those we are addressing, including them as fundamental stakeholders in the discussion.

The BRIDGES project bears out this need for consistency with reality in a study coordinated by Trauner and Brekke on European Union (EU) funded information campaigns in The Gambia and Turkey. The purpose of these campaigns is to deter immigration into Europe via three arguments: first, there are opportunities in the countries of origin too; second, the journey is dangerous; and three, life in Europe is much harder than they imagine. Even though the funding for these campaigns has increased, they have had limited impact, precisely because these messages do not chime with the personal experience of the potential migrants in the countries of origin, or with what their friends and acquaintances who have emigrated to Europe tell them, either in person or on social media. This lack of consistency and, ultimately, capacity to listen is the fundamental reason for their failure.

But why then do the narratives of the far-right parties resonate? Because they identify real sources of discontent which often go unrecognised by the rest of the political forces. They flag problems accessing public services or they speak to those who feel abandoned by the state, for example. Their success lies precisely in appealing to that experience. Yet any consistency with the real world crumbles in the moment they put forward an explanation. They offer simple solutions to complex problems. Whether what they say is true or not, or whether their policies achieve what they set out to do, is irrelevant. As Krastev and Leonard point out, far-right voters – when compared to voters of parties on the left – tend to be far more impervious to the disparity between proposals and results. For these parties, the issue is not to seek consistency with reality, rather – and above all – appear to do so.

2. We should talk about immigration, but not all the time

There is a dearth of explanations about immigration related issues. This relates to that discomfort and silence we mentioned earlier. It is also a result of the immediacy of the debates, which appear and disappear from the agenda at the pace of events or participation on the part of certain actors. The problem is that without explanations it is easy to end up getting confused about the causes. At the end of the 1970s, for example, many workers with a migrant background in northern Europe lost their jobs. The reason was simple: they were working in an industrial sector that had delocalised years earlier in the wake of the economic crisis of 1973. They were not unemployed because they were immigrants, then, but because they were industrial workers from an industry that was no longer there.

But in order to explain, one has to know. In this respect, it is important that the political and social actors involved speak from thorough and enduring knowledge. It does not help matters that political representatives often land in this field from one day to the next, with little prior knowledge and no

continuity afterwards. The role (or lack thereof) that academia plays is also an important issue. As Hein de Hass states in his book on the myths of immigration, it is striking that there is a tremendous and growing number of studies on immigration – most of them funded by public money – and a systematic failure to transfer all this knowledge to the political and public arena.

While we should speak more about immigration, it is not always advisable or necessary. Drawing on an analysis of European narratives, in the framework of the BRIDGES project, Barana, Vigneri and Daga conclude that the most convincing narratives are often those that do not speak about immigration. This became clear in 2022, with the arrival of millions of Ukrainian refugees in the EU. Unlike in 2015, there was no talk of a "migration crisis"; instead, their arrival was portrayed as the result of a war that concerned us all. Moving things to another level, it is sometimes easier to agree when we speak about social exclusion, child poverty or access to housing than when we speak about immigration, since the term itself ends up turning the spotlight and the problem on those who are perceived as "others".

Appealing to emotions and using testimonial narratives also has its risks: it can be misinterpreted, reinforce certain stereotypes and exclude fundamental contextual explanations.

3. Narratives also have an emotional component

It is generally recognised that narratives contain both causal reasoning and emotional and normative elements. Accordingly, their capacity to convince people depends not only on their consistency with experience and perceptions, but also on their capacity to appeal to emotions and feelings. There is increasing talk about the transformative power of testimonial narratives or storytelling. Based on experimental methodologies and from a social psychology standpoint, the study by Pizarro, Igartua and Benet-Martínez, also in the framework of BRIDGES, bears this premise out. Personal accounts that describe situations of discrimination or adversity, but also overcoming such obstacles, prompt listeners to identify and empathise and, in doing so, they can ultimately change attitudes and behaviour.

With that in mind, the PorCausa organisation developed a toolkit for the BRIDGES project on how to build alternative narratives on immigration, targeted at civil society organisations. PorCausa proposes to step outside the dominant narrative framework and avoid reactive arguments; stop making the almost ubiquitous distinction between "us" and "them"; and move beyond the discourses that speak of the causes of immigration in the abstract or of human rights as the greater good. In the organisation's view, these discourses no longer work. The way they see it, the alternative involves appealing directly to emotions, to what unites us, while also addressing fears so that everyone can feel heard, and proposing alternatives based on specifics and the local environment, which is from where each of us can shoulder their responsibility.

While there is no doubt all that is fundamental, appealing to emotions and using testimonial narratives also has its risks. First, a personal account can also be misinterpreted. As Caracciolo points out in the Opportunities project, the anecdotal can be turned into a norm, manipulating first-person experience, which could also be reversed by another personal story. Second, personal accounts can also ultimately reinforce certain stereotypes: for example, identifying some as victims (they tend to be women) others as heroes (normally men) and the rest, in contrast, as undeserving of our compassion or admiration and, therefore, our consideration. Third, staying at the level of testimonial narrative hinders those more contextual accounts which – as we said earlier – are also fundamental to understanding where we are and why.

4. The how is as important as the what

No one doubts that the form of the message is as important as its content. The academic literature from different disciplines says that the most successful narratives are those which maintain a certain ambiguity to facilitate their appeal to diverse audiences; which can circulate in different environments (traditional media outlets, social media platforms, the political sphere); which develop the argument from stories rather than with data; or which are capable of maintaining a certain consistency and repetition over time.

On this issue and in the same vein, the study by Maneri, as part of the BRIDGES project, found that far-right parties' strategies are far more successful than those of the rest precisely because of their organisational capacity and funding, and because of their persistence and consistency in the message, their speed in jumping on certain events or news stories and turning them into a window of opportunity to shape the debate and transform the dominant narratives. At the other end of the scale are the social movements and civil society organisations, which often lack the resources required

to stay in the debate. The alternative, as Rheindorf and Vollmer state in BRIDGES, is to team up with similar organisations or other actors and by doing so secure that consistency and persistency they often lack.

Leaving aside the academic evidence, the sociologist and human rights activist William Du Bois said in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)[1] that a way of obtaining freedom and equality for African Americans was to "speak and write" to "attempt to convince others". It was fundamental, he said, to use a language that both groups (Blacks and Whites) understood, sometimes with distinct but converging messages that appealed to different patterns of thought and emotion: sympathy and consistency with their own principles in the case of the Whites; struggle and emancipation in the case of the Blacks. In short, it was a matter of persuading both, but without indulging or manipulating, activating reflective agency, in search of a shared political identity (being an American) on a horizon of a single humanity. A century and a quarter later, these words could not be more topical.

Notably absent from the prevailing narratives on immigration (in the public and political debate , but also in the media) are the actual people who migrate or who are racialised.

5. It is not all disintermediation and disinformation

Added to the complexity of the migration phenomenon is the complexity of processes of disintermediation and disinformation. For some time now, there has been talk of a "crisis of credibility" of traditional storytellers: politicians, media and experts, primarily. This is compounded by the digitalisation of the public space and the disruptive effect of social media, which have multiplied the production of content and, in many cases, led to information overload rife with fake news or conspiracy theories. As Innerarity and Colomina state, the result has been twofold: for one thing, a difficulty in differentiating between what is true and what is false and, for another, an undermining of shared information and narratives, which are the essential prerequisite of all democratic debate.

Despite these trends, Maneri concludes that rather than introduce new narratives social media replicate the narratives generated previously in the traditional media. It is these media, then, which set the agenda, that is, what is spoken about. At the same, they are shaped by their own operating logics. The first is the logic of the click, which requires them to attract attention, often overinflating the controversy and those most polarising actors (such as the far right). The second logic relates to the way newsrooms work: they have ever fewer resources and, therefore, are ever further from the terrain. The third, partly a consequence of the previous one, is their tendency to overstate the voices of political actors. As Smellie and Boswell show, also in the BRIDGES project, the greater the polarisation, the greater their presence.

This latter point leads us to the conclusion that political actors too bear great responsibility for how we speak about immigration. During the race riots in the United Kingdom in the summer of 2024 no one doubted that social media had played a key role. Far-right activists such as Tommy Robinson (with over 800,000 followers on X) had issued a rallying call, pointing to "invaders who slaughter our daughters" as the culprits, or branding Islam "a mental health issue". Yet, as Daniel Trilling pointed out at the time, the "ideological fuel" of the disturbances also came from "more respectable sources". Slogans like "stop the boats" or proposals such as deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda – all the work of Conservative governments – were also responsible for the normalisation of the xenophobic discourses and attitudes that fuelled the riots.

6. Those perceived as "others" must also form part of the debate

Notably absent from the prevailing narratives on immigration (in the public and political debate , but also in the media) are the actual people who migrate or who are racialised. This has a twofold effect: first, the view of the phenomenon is only partial because it fails to include all the parties involved; second, regardless of whether the narrative is favourable or contrary to immigration, it is usually distant and dehumanising, meaning that it rarely speaks to the human dimension behind the migration phenomenon.

Including migrants' voices means moving beyond decontextualised quotes or histories rewritten by an external narrator. As the Ithaca and Opportunities projects have stated, first-person testimonies are essential to put their experience on record, but also to re-examine hegemonic narratives on immigration from their perspective. In other words, what counts is not just their stories but also their necessarily diverse view of a world that can be nothing but diverse. This is not to say that only immigrants can talk about immigration. Immigration is a phenomenon that affects us all and

1. For a more in-depth analysis see the article by Cachón.

therefore it can only be reconsidered jointly, reflecting collectively too on what kind of world we want for tomorrow.

7. We must look beyond those who think like we do

We convince no one by speaking only to those who think like us. We bring people round by addressing those who are not convinced but could be. This may seem obvious, but it is striking how little it is practised: most of us preach to the choir. Yet if we analyse public opinion, most of European society is ambivalent. This means that most people are receptive to being convinced by one side or other. For example, the polls show that only 25% of European citizens express negative attitudes towards immigration. As Dennison states, most do not see immigration as a problem, rather the issue is one of a perceived lack of control, which is very directly linked to the political climate and often to the (mal) functioning of policies, both of migration management and in areas impacted by migration (housing, health or education, for instance).

Convincing the "others", those who do not already think like us, means rethinking the language we use. Technocratic, academic or activist jargon proves alienating: it serves to build inwardly indulgent communities, but ones that are closed-off and therefore outwardly irrelevant. Convincing others also means listening and engaging in dialogue. As we said earlier, only by seeing where the "others" are coming from can we manage to craft a narrative that resonates with their experience and values, and which can therefore be convincing. Lastly, looking beyond also requires a presence in different worlds with different languages, from literature to art to social media, audiovisual production or alternative media outlets.

Listening to and acknowledging the "other" is not only important for convincing them; it is also a basic precondition for the dialogue to be genuine. As Gebauer and Sommer recall in the framework of the Opportunities project, dialogue in democratic societies implies equal recognition of all sides and, consequently, the possibility of an uncertain result where we may convince and/or be convinced. Phrasing it differently, the American sociologist Richard Sennett said that a "civilised society" is one where people feel they can coexist and engage in dialogue with those who think differently. There is no doubt that the bubbles created by social media and processes of disintermediation, of which we all form part, push us in precisely the opposite direction.

8. Being visible is not the same as being convincing

The most persuasive narratives are not necessarily the most visible. It all depends on the purpose. For media outlets and social media platforms, visibility certainly is important, since they compete with one another to attract the public's attention. Their business model, what's more, depends on it. It is also important for political parties, particularly in election periods, when it is all about winning votes. Visibility and public policy, in contrast, do not always make good bedfellows. Given a certain problem, slow, deliberate analysis, behind closed doors, with no major public debate and, therefore, not too much exposure, may prove far more effective in striking a consensus and thus designing and implementing certain public policies.

It is widely acknowledged, in fact, that politicisation impacts our responsiveness. The study by Smellie and Boswell for the BRIDGES project bears this out. When an issue becomes politicised, in the sense that it becomes central, and at the same time it engenders increasingly polarised positions, the narratives tend to increasingly lose touch with reality. In such a context, the confrontation between sides in search of attention becomes the central issue. Whether what they say is true or not, or whether what is being proposed is capable of changing the situation, is irrelevant. Thus, debates end up becoming mere noise and policy becomes simple gesturing. By way of example, European policy on the distribution of responsibility for asylum applications (under the Dublin system, first, and now as part of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum) owes more to electoral mindsets in each of the member states than a firm resolve to make it work.

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It is hard to say what the recipe for a responsible narrative would be in a context of growing polarisation. With no empirical evidence on the matter, I would venture that the alternative involves trying to change the starting point and, if that is not possible, letting the noise die down or staying in a parallel world from which to forge alliances and build consensuses that will one day enable grounding the debate in evidence and slow, careful dialogue among the stakeholders involved. Even in a climate of increasing noise, certain policies sometimes manage to fly under the radar. One

example of that are regularisation policies in Spain: despite the far right occupying an increasingly central space, in late 2024 regularisation conditions were relaxed with no great debate or challenge.

9. There are moments that change everything

Narratives do not come out of nothing; they are fuelled by our way of looking at the world and explaining it. Given facts that need to be told, narratives deploy old arguments, but introduce new ones too. In fact, the academic literature is clear that it is at times of crisis when our way of describing the world is most susceptible to change. Given facts that require urgent explanations, at first conflicting narratives appear and compete with one another. As the crisis subsides and the issue no longer occupies centre stage, the range of explanations shrinks until new consensuses are reached. They may be consensuses that follow previous narratives or, on the other hand, ones that represent a paradigm shift.

Over the last few years, the debates to have emerged in the wake of jihadist attacks in Europe are an example of how narratives operate in moments of shock. In France, the attacks led the state to declare war on terrorism, with new military operations abroad and the declaration (and institutionalisation via new laws) of a state of emergency at home. In Spain, the interpretation and, therefore, the response was radically different. The Madrid bombings of 2004 triggered condemnation of the government's participation in the Iraq war and the Barcelona attacks of 2017 prompted an endless discussion over powers (and responsibilities) between the central and autonomous regional governments. Here, the narratives merely followed the course of previous debates. In Germany, on the other hand, the recent attacks have led to a radical paradigm shift: the conversation is no longer about refugees, but about the need to put a stop to irregular immigration. Even though in many cases the attacks were perpetrated individually by persons with serious mental health problems, the debate ended up taking another turn.

If crises can be foundational moments for new narratives, that initial moment of a proliferation of explanations is crucial. Failure to take part in it or coming late may mean missing out on the opportunity. Once a new consensus has been established – which determines the basic questions, the terms to use and the definition of the problem (for example, making an individual attack a problem of irregular immigration, not one of mental health) – the chances of reversing it and shifting the focus of the discussion are slim. This leads to another fundamental conclusion: in order to be convincing, when to speak or when to remain silent is crucial. In moments of shock, when explanations are urgent and our perception of reality may change from one moment to the next, one cannot remain on the sidelines.

10. Moving past narratives, we must transform reality

Narratives appear to have become the great hope. Faced with an increasingly complex world , traversed by multiple crises, where neither ideology nor expert knowledge appear to serve as a guide anymore, narratives have emerged as the best alternative. The more complex the world, the greater the need to put a name to it. The harder it is to change it, the greater the search for narratives to at least change our view of it. However, narratives are not everything nor can they act as a refuge. In the realm of immigration, this is clear. The best way to address the discontent regarding immigration is not just by changing our view of it, but by tackling the causes of this discontent with public policies.

Changing narratives is important, but it will be for naught if the reality does not change with them.

We mentioned earlier that most of European society is sympathetic to immigration, but what troubles them is the sense of a lack of control. Apart from convincing them otherwise, the fundamental issue would be to stop using immigration as a political football and get down to policymaking. Putting on a show of control with narratives and token policies only to then lose oneself in endless discussions that paralyse any measure to regulate migration and provide decent reception conditions is the worst way to go about it. The same could be said of public services and the welfare state. We can highlight the positive aspects of immigration, but nor must we forget to adapt public services, provide universal access to decent housing or attend to those who feel increasingly overlooked by the state. Simply put, and by way of a conclusion, changing narratives is important, but it will be for naught if the reality does not change with them.