

Responding to Right-Wing Populist Stories of Migration

A pragmatic approach

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TELLING STORIES OF MIGRATION

According to the Migration Data Portal of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), foreign-born residents now make up 10.5 percent of the total population in European countries. Meanwhile, the [UN predicts](#) that northward migration pressures are likely to increase. The global population is expected to reach 9.8 billion people by 2050. Most of this growth will happen in Africa and Asia, while the population in Europe and elsewhere in the West is [expected to age](#) and shrink. In light of this dynamic, the promotion of a fair, well-informed public debate about migrants and migration is at the top of the political agenda in Europe.

More often than not, the recipe for informed dialogue includes but two ingredients: reliable, consistent, and comprehensive data on migrants and migration movements, and accessible ways of communicating this data to the public. Underlying this approach is the belief that effective storytelling relies on facts, and that we can (and should) clearly separate reality and rationality from myths and emotions.

Accordingly, the value that right-wing populist parties and movements attach to intuition, spontaneity, and enthusiasm, and their appeal to a loosely defined 'common sense' directed against the rationality embodied by political institutions are seen as a challenge to fact-based storytelling and, potentially, to democratic discourse and policymaking as a whole.

But what do right-wing populist stories of migration look like in practice, and how do they differ from other, presumably more democratic, forms of storytelling? In recent years, there has been an increase in projects, reports, and events addressing the question of how to talk about migration that evoke the terms 'story' and 'narrative'. However, rather than address the integrative, transformative, and dynamic process of storytelling in everyday

KEY INSIGHTS

IT IS IMPORTANT TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE TECHNICAL FEATURES OF RIGHT-WING POPULIST STORIES, AND HOW THEY ARE RECEIVED BY AUDIENCES.

POLICYMAKERS CAN COUNTER RIGHT-WING POPULIST NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION BY LEVERAGING THE STORY STRUCTURES POPULISTS HAVE PROMOTED.

RESPONDING TO RIGHT-WING POPULIST STORIES OF MIGRATION MEANS RECOGNISING NUANCE, ACKNOWLEDGING AMBIGUITIES, AND BEING REALISTIC ABOUT POSSIBLE FUTURES.

political communication, these initiatives tend to focus on identifying relevant audiences (the ‘moveable middle’), problematic terminology (‘illegal migrants’), and rules for engaging in ‘authentic’ dialogue (‘listening, not lecturing’).

The importance of these contributions notwithstanding, this Commentary offers a different perspective by explaining the most important textual features of right-wing populist stories of migration and offering recommendations for how political competitors can challenge them.

STORIES, FRAMES, AND NARRATIVES: EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCE

When it comes to analyses of the dynamics of political communication, the terms ‘story’, ‘narrative’, and ‘frame’ are often used interchangeably. However, distinguishing between them is an important step toward identifying

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the appropriate level of debate and developing relevant tools to improve the democratic quality of that debate.

To start with, narratives, stories, and frames have one important thing in common: they are all rooted in a certain degree of selectivity based on the values, norms, and identity of an individual or group. Through selecting and emphasising some elements and ignoring or

downplaying others, the framer or storyteller can create a coherent account of social reality. Narratives, stories, and frames—and the dynamic processes of framing and storytelling that give rise to them—are meant to appeal to our personal beliefs and emotions. They are never neutral.

There are also subtle but important differences between these phenomena. Frames are thematic and result from a process that makes some elements of our perceived reality more salient vis-à-vis others to highlight a certain definition or evaluation of a social issue or problem. Frames, therefore, correspond to different categories, schemes, and perspectives. For example, migration is often examined through humanitarian or security frames.

Stories are relational rather than thematic because they establish temporal, spatial, and causal links between isolated elements (including agents, means, and events) with the aim of creating coherent plots; this is how individual elements acquire meaning in the first place. Depending on their arrangement in the plot, the same elements can lead to very different stories. For instance, they may be part of the beginning (which defines a situation and/or problem), the middle (a key event or series of events that changes this situation), or the end, which resolves the issue set out at the beginning.

A set of related stories can give rise to a thematic frame, while dominant frames can, over time, limit what kind of stories can be told by predetermining how elements are arranged within the plot. Storytelling and framing processes are thus not mutually exclusive, but complement each other.

Narrative, finally, is best understood as a shorthand for a story or a set of related stories that ‘swallow’ their relationality to express a core message. This allows us to talk about stories without having to recite them in full every time. This is particularly important in the fast-paced environment of political debate—but it also means that we often reduce complexity and lose nuances in the process.

To illustrate the observations above, consider the EU Factsheet [‘Debunking Myths about Migration’](#) published in March 2019. The story told in the factsheet can be summarised as follows: A high number of refugees and migrants **arrived in the EU in the past few years**. The **EU was unable** to control its borders and register all persons crossing them. But **since then**, the **EU has implemented a number of measures**, including increased cooperation with third countries, additional border guards, and financial support for EU border states. **As a result**, the number of new arrivals is on a low level. **Therefore**, Europe **is no longer** in crisis mode.

Note how the different elements—Europe, migrants, borders, measures—are connected in a particular way to explain what happened, when, where, and why: there was a problematic situation, but something was done about it, and this has led to a new (and better) situation.

Narrative shortcuts for the story above could be ‘the refugee crisis is over’, or ‘external border control in the EU works’. The story also evokes a frame of migration as a security issue. This frame is also often supported by the use of metaphors as an innovative use of language that

combines elements from very different, often opposing, dimensions of human experience. The metaphor of migration flows as a ‘wave’ and hence as a natural threat, in particular, has become commonplace in political discourses.

Talking about migration in the EU in this way legitimises certain policy positions. In relation to the example above, it may imply an intensification of external border controls, but perhaps with more limited resources than would be the case if a narrative of crisis had prevailed. Indeed, in a debate in April 2019, the European Parliament criticised the lack of progress in expanding the capacities and powers of Frontex, the EU’s Border and Coast Guard Agency, due to member states’ unwillingness to surrender sovereignty in this area.

RIGHT-WING POPULIST STORIES OF MIGRATION

If political storytelling is about the integration of diverse elements into coherent plots to legitimise certain political decisions and policy positions, what makes stories ‘right-wing populist’?

Current research on populism helps to clarify this question. In a nutshell, right-wing populism is a way of doing politics that puts emphasis on the (im)balance of power between the (imaginary mass of the) ‘people’ as the ruled and the ‘elites’ as the rulers in a democratic system. More specifically, this imbalance may be understood as an opposition:

- between the democratic sovereign and its representatives;
- between the ‘ordinary people’ on the ground and those on the top who are ‘out of touch’ with basic realities; or
- between the nation as an ethno-cultural community and the ‘globalists’ who are less, if at all, attached to this community.

The democratic will of ‘the people’, so the logic goes, also needs to be defended against other groups residing both inside and outside of the (national) political community—whether it is NGOs, international organisations, immigrants, or progressive movements.

Based on this scheme, the different meanings of ‘the people’, ‘the elite’, and ‘outgroups’ intentionally overlap in right-wing populist discourse. This allows political actors to direct messages at different audiences through

calculated ambiguity. Migration policy lends itself particularly well to this project because it is closely connected to the organisation of nations and (nation-) states as bounded political communities, and the rights and responsibilities assigned to individuals through membership in these communities.

Right-wing populist stories of migration, then, include ‘the people’, ‘the elites’, and various outgroups and their adversarial relationships as key elements. More specifically, they pit ‘the people’ as the protagonist—the leading figure who champions a good cause—against ‘the elites’/outgroups as the antagonist(s) who oppose that cause. Democratic politics becomes a drama whose course is determined by the interaction between these opposing forces.

The opposition between protagonist and antagonist is further underlined with spatial (relating to the ‘here and there’) and temporal (concerning the ‘then and now’) elements to offer audiences a specific understanding of their position in the world vis-à-vis others.

Finally, right-wing populist stories of migration guide the reader or listener to a particular conclusion. A well-designed conclusion makes the rest of the story plausible in hindsight by underlining that particular events necessarily had to lead to that specific outcome.

AN EXAMPLE FROM HUNGARY

As an example of what this kind of storytelling can look like in practice, consider the following excerpt from a [speech given by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán](#) on 23 March 2019 at the Budapest Summit on Migration organised by the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, a private education institute based in Hungary.

This leads us ... to the philosophical question of a community which is a sovereign state, which has borders, a population, a constitution and laws, and which has a certain cultural quality, and of whether that community has the right to insist on that

A SET OF RELATED STORIES CAN GIVE RISE TO A THEMATIC FRAME, AND DOMINANT FRAMES CAN, OVER TIME, LIMIT WHAT KIND OF STORIES CAN BE TOLD.

cultural quality. Or must it accept the teaching of Westerners that the Western multicultural social structure is superior to our homogeneous structure, and that therefore we must make ourselves multicultural through migration? ...

Those sitting here will live to see what Europe is like in 20, 30 or 40 years' time, and in 20, 30 or 40 years' time you'll be talking about the actions that today's European decision-makers failed to take. ... [W]e must make decisions now. Otherwise in 20, 30 or 40 years' time our descendants—and perhaps even we ourselves—will have to face consequences which we'll regret.

... In the next 10 or so years Africa's population will increase by a little less than the EU's current population. And meanwhile, dear friends, the gap in living standards between Africa and Europe will not decrease but ... it is in fact much more likely to increase. Consequently, I can tell you that it is as certain as a law of nature that the pressure from Africa towards Europe—meaning that they'll want to come here from there—will intensify. And this will flood Europe. ...

Four years have passed since 2015 and ... we have to admit that the leaders of the European Union and the current structures of the EU are unable to solve the issue of migration and border defence. And if they haven't been able to do that over the last four or five years, there's no reason to believe that they'll be able to do so tomorrow. ... We must change the system. ... Powers related to migration and border protection must be taken away from the Commission, those powers must be restored to the Member States. ...

Note how Orbán defines 'the people' as both a sovereign and a national community. In doing so, he legitimises his own nationalist views by appealing to basic democratic rules, claiming they belong to 'the people' and he is merely their representative. He also links the local context and the situation of 'the Hungarians' in the present to scenarios of what may be happening elsewhere in the world in the foreseeable future in order to strengthen the opposition between the failures of the EU elites and the democratic sovereignty of the Hungarian nation state (spatial and temporal elements and people/ elite opposition). This also allows him to offer a clear

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conclusion: unless power is transferred back to EU member states, migration will destroy them.

This Hungary-specific example shows how right-wing populist stories of migration contrast the concrete, time- and place-bound situation of their primary target audiences with that of more distant, less tangible events and developments outside their immediate local and national surroundings. This structure helps to insert order into the story, and establishes closeness between the storyteller and their followers. It also appeals to people's imagination—not by encouraging them to take the perspective of others, but by reaffirming their own.

TELLING BETTER STORIES OF MIGRATION

What follows from the above discussion for how we may respond to right-wing populist stories of migration? Three points in particular should be emphasised.

1. WHAT STORY IS BEING TOLD?

To respond effectively to right-wing populist stories of migration and reach those to whom they appeal, it is important to pay attention to the stories' basic structure and key elements, the most important of which I have described above. All too often, right-wing populist stories are simply equated with nationalist narratives. This disregards the ambivalent and ambiguous relationship between nation, democracy, and 'ordinary' people that these stories deliberately create.

Orbán's story, for example, is directed against a certain group ('immigrants') while speaking in favour of others (the 'Hungarians' and European nations more generally). It also appeals both to the place of the Hungarian nation within Europe and to its position vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Depending on the attitudes and beliefs of the reader or listener, Orbán's words will be perceived differently. They may be translated, for example, into a narrative of 'cultural racism' (which proposes the incompatibility of different cultures), of 'anti-humanitarianism' (denying refugees the human right to claim asylum), or of responsibility towards one's own (imagined) community as part of a conservative value agenda.

Bringing out these nuances is important to understanding how right-wing populist stories are received. They may,

on the face of it, offer a simplified interpretation of social reality, but this does not mean that they are, in fact, simple.

2. DEMOCRATISE THE PROTAGONIST/ANTAGONIST STRUCTURE

A clear opposition between protagonists and antagonists makes it easier to follow a story and appeals to the human moral intuition to separate the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’. It also aligns well with our state-centred international system, which continues to rely on inclusion and exclusion, conferral and denial of belongingness and rights, based on citizenship and other legal frameworks.

Rather than denying the existence of such a protagonist/antagonist structure in political debate altogether, it is therefore more expedient to democratise it: simply put, not ‘us vs. them’ but ‘us and them’. One key step to this democratisation is to extend the experiences of temporal and spatial disruptions among people in Europe (which right-wing populist stories highlight exclusively) to those of people living elsewhere. The key here is not to oppose the ‘here and there’ and the ‘then and now’ of one group to that of another, but to emphasise the dynamic interactions between them, without denying the existence of individuals and communities with different histories, traditions, beliefs, etc. In other words, make sure the story has an elaborate, relatable middle.

3. THINK THE STORY THROUGH TO ITS CONCLUSION

The importance of a clear conclusion becomes apparent when we consider the following accusation that is often levelled against right-wing populist actors: despite

the absence of large numbers of (extra-EU) migrants, especially in eastern European countries, they stoke citizens’ fears of increased migration by drawing unrealistic, apocalyptic scenarios of how migration will change people’s lives. This would be facilitated by the fact that many people simply lack first-hand encounters with members of these groups to judge for themselves.

However, anticipating possible futures, regardless of how likely or unlikely, is an essential part of telling stories of migration in a global context. Worldwide migration numbers that go into the millions and predictions of what may be happening in 30 or 50 years’ time are difficult to grasp, so they need to be made relatable by offering a practical idea of what this means for individuals’ lives, not just (or even primarily) in material terms.

Migration movements of the scale we have witnessed in recent years in Europe and (to a much bigger degree) elsewhere will inevitably have an impact on the organisation of societies, and these changes need to be made part of the stories we tell. The popular claim that no European citizen will ‘have less’ because their country takes in asylum seekers or Chancellor Merkel’s slogan ‘we can do it’, for example, fail to recognise the role that migration plays in people’s everyday stories. This is because most of these are not actually concerned with global migration dynamics themselves, but with local experiences of change, loss, and insecurity. It also does not suffice to simply say that the ‘refugee crisis’ is over, because the story of global migration and its effects on life realities in Europe is not over. Not current status, but future prospects – for themselves and their children – are what guide people in their view of migration. Our stories need to reflect this. ■

FURTHER READING

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Some of the ideas included in this brief were presented at the event “Perceptions of Migration in Europe: Implications for Policy-Making” on 15 November 2018 in Brussels. The event was co-organised by the Dahrendorf Forum and the Mercator Dialogue on Asylum and Migration (MEDAM) and hosted by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS).

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