

# **STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATING CONTENT ON MIGRATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

**COMMUNICATION ON MIGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS  
- ANALYSIS, OVERVIEW, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**



 Federal Ministry  
Republic of Austria  
Interior



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PLATFORM



**Project: Strengthening Migration Management, Asylum and Return Processes in the Western Balkans**

This project is co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)  
and the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior

## Key Terms and Definitions

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a migrant as “a person who moves, generally across international borders, to join family abroad, in search of better living conditions, fleeing natural disasters, or for other reasons.”

**A migrant** differs from **a refugee**; however, both generally use the same routes, transport, and networks. According to the UN, “an international migrant is any person who changes their country of usual residence.”

Terms frequently used in public discourse include asylum seekers and refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “**an asylum seeker** is a person seeking international protection whose claim has not yet been decided by the country where it was submitted.”

In the context of the European Union, “an asylum seeker is a third-country national or stateless person who has applied for protection under the Geneva Convention and Protocol and whose final decision is still pending.”

# Migration: A Contemporary Challenge and Responsibility

## Term and Definition

The term migration derives from the Latin *migrare* (meaning movement or relocation) and generally refers to any temporary or permanent movement of living beings across space. There is no universally accepted global definition of migration, though it is commonly described as a change of residence from one place to another.

In the context of the EU, migration refers to a person establishing their usual residence

in an EU Member State for a period that is, or is expected to be, at least 12 months, after previously residing in another EU country or a third country; or ceasing to have their usual residence in an EU Member State for a period of at least 12 months.

The Western Balkans holds an important geostrategic position as a transit route for migration flows toward the EU. The complexity of migration challenges in the region requires coordinated regional cooperation and effective communication, as both are essential for sustainable migration management and the protection of all involved.

Migration is one of the most complex and

sensitive processes facing countries in the Western Balkans, with a significant impact on social stability, the economy, and human rights.

Effective, strategically guided, and ethically grounded communication is essential for understanding, acceptance, and sound migration management, as well as for protecting the rights and dignity of all people involved.

## Challenges for Western Balkan Countries in Communicating Migration-Related Content

Countries in the Western Balkans play a specific role as a transit and, increasingly, destination region. Although the so-called Western Balkan route was formally closed in 2016, migration through the region has not stopped – its structure has changed. It now includes entire families, women, children, and other vulnerable groups, not just individuals.

In communication terms, the WB countries do not address migration issues effectively, neither in reporting by competent institutions nor in professional media coverage.

These challenges may also arise from

shared regional issues in migration management, including:

- *difficulties in managing borders and asylum systems due to limited human resources*
- *challenges in understanding the broader concept of human rights protection*
- *difficulties and tensions within local communities arising from the integration of foreigners*
- *insufficient coordination between institutions*

## Why are communication recommendations important?

- to reduce the spread of misinformation and panic
- to strengthen public trust in institutions
- to support social cohesion
- to protect the dignity of migrants

## Key Communication Challenges (On-the-Ground Reality)

- slow or untimely
- reactive (reporting only after a crisis)
- uncoordinated among institutions dealing with the same issue

## As a result, the following consequences arise:

- contradictory or inconsistent messages are sent
- declining public trust in institutions
- space left for the spread of misinformation

**The way migration is communicated in the public space becomes a key factor in shaping public attitudes and perceptions on this important issue.**

## Media Communication

### Sensationalism vs. Ethical Reporting

The media play a key role in shaping public narratives on migration, often using dramatic headlines (“crisis,” “invasion”), simplifying complex migration and security issues, and overlooking the human dimension.

Due to limited or delayed communication between media and institutions, journalists often rely on unverified sources or report on migration without full context.

### Consequences of such communication may include:

#### For migrants:

- *stigmatization and discrimination*
- *hindered integration into a new environment*
- *increased vulnerability or exposure to adverse situations*

#### For society:

- *spread of fear, prejudice, and stereotypes*
- *community polarization*

#### For institutions:

- *loss of credibility and public trust*
- *weakened intra-sector and inter-sector cooperation*
- *reduced effectiveness of policies and measures*

## Common Narratives and Frequent Communication Challenges

### • **Sensationalist reporting:**

*Media often use headlines with terms such as “crisis,” “invasion,” or “wave” in relation to migration. This approach does not always reflect the real situation in terms of data and contributes to raising fear and panic among the local population.*

### • **Inaccurate and incomplete information:**

*Due to speed and lack of source verification, inaccurate data on migrants, numbers, or events is often spread, undermining credibility and understanding.*

### • **Discriminatory and stigmatizing language:**

*Situations are often generalized to all migrants, portraying them as a threat, while positive examples are overlooked, leading to dehumanization and risk of exclusion and discrimination.*

### • **Inconsistent messaging:**

*The number of actors and institutions involved can result in contradictory information, confusing the public and making it harder to follow migration policies. This undermines credibility and complicates inter-institutional cooperation.*

### • **Insufficient inclusion of migrants and their organizations:**

*The voices of migrants and supporting organizations are often minimal and marginalized, resulting in one-way communication without adequate representation of diverse experiences and needs.*

## Conclusions from Workshops and Recommendations for Improvement

The successful implementation of trainings and regional workshops, bringing together representatives of institutions, media, and civil society within the project “Strengthening Migration, Asylum and Return Management in the Western Balkans”, resulted in key conclusions and confirmed the need for:

- **Stronger coordination and consistency:**  
*Institutions must align communication to provide clear, timely, and reliable information.*
- **Training for media professionals:**  
*Continuous education on ethical reporting, migration issues, and human rights to reduce sensationalism and inaccuracies.*
- **Promotion of inclusive narratives:**  
*Include migrant voices and civil society to ensure representation, objectivity, and diverse perspectives.*
- **Development of communication strategies:**  
*Establish clear guidelines for crisis and long-term communication, with a focus on human rights, protection of vulnerable groups, and regional cooperation.*

## Key Recommendations

### For institutions:

- *Establish clear communication protocols defining responsibilities, information flows, and crisis standards.*
- *Ensure continuous training for spokespersons and communication staff on human rights and ethics in reporting.*
- *Strengthen coordination of key messages across institutions to avoid confusion and contradictions.*
- *Be more transparent and proactive in communication with media and the public, especially during crises.*
- *Involve professional communication experts in decision-making and strategic communication.*

### For media:

- *Consistently apply ethical reporting standards, with a focus on protecting migrants’ identity and dignity.*
- *Invest in journalists’ specialization on migration and human rights through training and expert collaboration.*
- *Avoid sensationalism and use accurate, contextualized information.*
- *Develop internal editorial guidelines, including verification of sensitive visuals and inclusive language.*

### For joint cooperation:

- *Foster dialogue and knowledge exchange between institutions, media, civil society, and academia.*
- *Support the development of crisis communication resources in line with international standards.*
- *Promote good practices from the region and beyond that demonstrate responsible and effective communication.*

## Additional Communication Challenge

A key challenge in the Western Balkans is the tendency to frame migration through polarized narratives.

On one side, negative narratives are often alarmist, focusing on **“security threats,” “uncontrolled waves,” “pressure on public resources,”** or **“cultural tensions”** which can fuel xenophobia and stigmatization, especially when reinforced by uncensored visuals of conflict or chaos.

On the other side, overly simplified narratives portray migrants only as victims or heroes, overlooking the broader context and challenges for institutions, communities, and migrants themselves.

While intended to emphasize human rights, both approaches fail to reflect the complexity of migration dynamics, legal frameworks, and shared responsibilities.

## Key Practical Challenges

### Institutional challenges:

- *limited training for officials*
- *political instrumentalization of migration*
- *lack of strategic communication*
- *weak inter-institutional coordination*

### Media challenges

- *sensationalist reporting*
- *limited time and resources for verification*
- *ethical dilemmas*
- *insufficient training of journalists*

Responsible migration communication requires a balanced approach, acknowledging challenges while respecting human rights and avoiding dramatization.

### Legal and Ethical Framework

Migration must be viewed through a human rights lens, guided by key international standards:

- *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*
- *Convention on the Rights of the Child*
- *1951 Refugee Convention*
- *European Convention on Human Rights*

The core principle is that every person, regardless of status, has guaranteed rights and dignity.

### Ethical Principles of Communication and Journalism

- *accuracy and verification*
- *impartiality*
- *respect for dignity*
- *accountability to the public*
- *transparency*



## Terminology: Why Words Matter

The way we talk about migration shapes public perception. Understanding key terms: **migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, economic migrant** is essential and requires continuous learning.

### PRECISE LANGUAGE = RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATION

#### Guidelines to Prevent Hate Speech

Avoid sensationalist headlines and clickbait that reinforce negative stereotypes.

Do not quote hate speech without full context and clear condemnation.

Where possible, include multiple perspectives - institutions, migrants, civil society, and human rights experts.

#### Implementation: Turning Recommendations into Practice

Effective implementation requires:

- *political will*
- *clear responsibility*
- *continuous training*
- *cross-sector cooperation*

Key tools:

- *training*
- *guidelines*
- *media monitoring*
- *impact evaluation*

#### Good Practices (What Works)

Examples from the region and the world show that:

- *proactive communication builds trust*
- *personal stories reduce prejudice*
- *cross-sector cooperation delivers the best results*

Most effective campaigns:

- *humanize migration*
- *include migrant voices*
- *use visual and emotional narratives*

Migration has become a key issue today, on the agendas of many governments, from security, readmission, and return, to the link between migration and development, refugee protection, and human rights.

In all migration-related communication, it must be remembered that it concerns human beings, often vulnerable and without protection; therefore, ethics and a humane approach are fundamental to any narrative from media, civil society, or institutions, in order to preserve human dignity.

The document **“Strategic Recommendations for Communicating Migration-Related Content in the Public Sphere”** was developed in 2025/2026 within the project **“Strengthening Migration Management, Asylum and Return Processes in the Western Balkans”**, implemented by Hilfswerk International in cooperation with the Joint Coordination Platform (JCP). The project is funded by the **Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the Federal Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Austria.**



**THE FULL DOCUMENT OF THE STRATEGIC  
RECOMMENDATIONS IS AVAILABLE AT**

