

Moving people's mindsets in the matter of migration

July 22 2022, by Anthony King



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Data scientists and social scientists are examining the perceptions and expectations of migrants to the EU, as well as the attitudes of Europeans towards them.

In 2015, more than a million people arriving in Europe applied for asylum, the biggest annual total since the Second World War. With the Syrian war forcing many families to seek refuge, this was an exceptional year for people who arrived without documentation. Their harrowing

and sometimes tragic journeys attracted widespread media coverage, yet net immigration to the European Union through regular channels in 2020 was also around a million people.

Regular, documented migration is an everyday phenomenon for EU countries and goes largely unremarked upon. Without migrants, the EU population as a whole would have contracted by half a million in 2019.

Whatever way migration happens, the large numbers in play disguise personal stories. Now, a European research project into the attitudes of migrants to Europe is set to release a feature film based on the undocumented migrant experience. *Dystopia* will center on an African migrant woman in Spain and her experience of poverty, homelessness and exploitation.

We often have little knowledge or understanding about how migrants perceive Europe and how they are viewed by Europeans. This can lead to misunderstandings, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic when some migrants feared going to health authorities for a vaccination. The new film—due to be released in November—will tell the story from the [migrant](#)'s point of view.

Perceived behavior

For all the media attention and heated political debate that migration generates, policymakers often operate without fully comprehending the behavior of migrants themselves. "We wanted to understand the influence that narratives and perceptions of Europe have on migration and why people move and how," said Diotima Bertel, social scientist at Vienna, Austria-based research company SYNYO and coordinator of a project called PERCEPTIONS.

PERCEPTIONS conducted more than 100 in-person interviews with

migrants, refugees and [asylum seekers](#) about the sources of information they used and their views of Europe. It also investigated mass media and [social media](#) that migrants relied on.

"Migrants can have a more positive idea about the situation in Europe than reality and can be disappointed by harsh realities such as not being welcomed by the society or having difficulty finding a job," said Bertel. They might also present a rosier picture to those back home so as not to worry relatives, she said.

Nonetheless, migrants have "a fairly realistic understanding of the journey to Europe, in particular the dangers that await them," said Bertel. "There is a misperception from the European side about this, though not the organizations that work directly with migrants."

The project found that when there are no family connections or diaspora, most migrants make little distinction between possible destinations in Europe. To the extent that there is a general tendency, it leans towards larger, better-known countries such as the UK and Germany.

Possible destinations

A twin project of PERCEPTION, called MIRROR, also looked at migrants' perceptions to get a better understanding of how migrants perceive Europe as a destination.

Using freely available information, while paying particular attention to influential social and [mass media](#), the project developed a set of tools to inform policymakers, border-control agencies and others to help improve their policies.

The database that the project built can be used by humanitarian

organizations or governmental agencies to draw links between beliefs and types of behavior. For example, MIRROR found that sometimes migrants have a tendency to be wary of European countries' pandemic-related health measures, including quarantines.

This sort of information would complement existing border-control practices, according to Dr. Aitana Radu, project researcher and expert in information policy and governance at the University of Malta.

The project has provided recommendations on, for example, how to improve communication with migrants.

Migration predictions

A third project—ITFLOWS—focuses on producing accurate predictions and forecasts of migration and asylum flows, and developing workable approaches to the phenomenon by creating a deeper understanding of it.

"There is a need to improve the management of arrivals to the European Union and, once they arrive, improve their integration into different Member States," said Professor Cristina Basi Casagran at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain, ITFLOWS coordinator.

The project is developing the EUMigraTool (EMT) to predict or forecast migration and asylum flows and spotlight any possible migration-related tensions. This includes analysis of content from TV, web news and social media.

While all the data it uses draws from publicly available sources, the EMT collects them for the first time in a single resource for those who work with migrants, and for policymakers.

"We also conducted interviews with over 90 migrants, asylum seekers

and refugees in Greece, Italy and Spain," said Dr. Colleen Boland at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. In addition, the project is tapping into data from Google Trends to better understand the intentions and views of migrants, and Twitter to learn about sentiment and attitudes towards migrants.

The EMT website "will contain various dashboards and interfaces to look at different sections. You could see, for example, displacement caused by conflict at the countries of origin, like Nigeria, Mali or Venezuela," said Dr. Boland.

"You can also see [historical data](#) on movement, as well as our predictions on asylum-seeker arrivals based on applications in different Member States."

In addition to assessing the movement of people, the website will highlight the perspectives of European citizens. "We will have a section looking at attitudes towards immigration in different Member States, to see attitudes based on different variables such as age, unemployment and education," said Dr. Boland. This, she said, may flag issues such as barriers to integration.

Changing migration patterns

Dr. Boland said the interviews with migrants helped tell the story of why and how they traveled to Europe, be it along Mediterranean land and sea routes, via the Canary Islands from West Africa or across the Atlantic from Latin America.

Project officials stress that there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for migration to Europe. "People are highly individual at the end of the day," said Dr. Katja Prinz, EU research manager at HENSOLDT Analytics, responsible for communications with MIRROR.

One thing is certain: migration drivers and patterns will keep changing, as evidenced by the movement of Ukrainians to EU countries following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, largely to Poland but also other territories.

"This is not a fixed situation, but instead is something that continually evolves," said Bertel.

More information: MIRROR tools: h2020mirror.eu/toolkit/

Provided by Horizon: The EU Research & Innovation Magazine

Citation: Moving people's mindsets in the matter of migration (2022, July 22) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-people-mindsets-migration.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
