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DOI:

[10.1007/978-3-031-13694-8_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13694-8_8)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Brändle, VK 2022, Claiming Authority Over 'Truths' and 'Facts': Information Risk Campaigns to Prevent Irregular Migration. in C Maximilian, G Hálfdanarson, A Michailidou, C Galpin & N Pyrhönen (eds), *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere*. 1 edn, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 151-176. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13694-8_8

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Claiming Authority Over ‘Truths’ and ‘Facts’: Information Risk Campaigns to Prevent Irregular Migration

Verena K. Brändle

INTRODUCTION

Immigration has become a popular topic for concerted disinformation efforts and ‘fake news’ in European public and political debates. Such domestic discourse is often detached from migrants themselves, and the respective literature has so far paid less attention to the discourses in the field of international migration governance when migrants themselves are being addressed. Migration governance today involves a multitude of different actors, not only state actors and international or supranational entities, but also non-state actors, such as civil society and the private sector, and migrants themselves. Information plays a vital role for migrants before and during their journey where they must navigate a flow of messages from a variety of senders, often with contrasting

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input from support networks and governmental actors. Social media and mobile devices have considerably changed the ways in which people on the move today migrate and with whom they engage (Borkert et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

Unsurprisingly, rumours, disinformation, and ‘fake news’ also circulate in international migration discourses between migrants and actors of migration management, often owed to high levels of uncertainty, risks, and vulnerability, and complex migration and asylum policies (including deterrence tools). Since the so-called ‘migration crisis’ in 2015/2016, governments have recognised this information need and “information precarity” (Wall et al., 2017). Despite a lack of systematic evidence concerning their effectiveness and reach (Tjaden et al., 2018), several European governments have launched information risk campaigns (on social and online media) that target migrants before their arrival. Seemingly informative about the risks of irregular pathways and about obstacles people might face in destination countries, respective research has shown that these campaigns are often dissuasive, and in some cases even aim to deter (potential) migrants (see FitzGerald, 2020; Musarò, 2019; Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007). What is more, those information campaigns that involve government actors also raise questions about standards of ethical communication, for example, in relation to transparency and neutrality (Brändle, 2022; Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2020). At the same time, increased political awareness about disinformation, rumours, and fake news circulating online might also have shaped governmental perceptions about migrants’ information levels.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the ways in which such campaigns claim authority over the ‘truths’ of irregular migration. I argue that the post-truth condition is not only characterised by populist right-wing actors, but that to understand it, we equally need to critically engage with the communication of democratic governmental actors. By launching or supporting information campaigns against irregular migration, governments effectively enter discourses about rumours and disinformation and position themselves in the ongoing struggle to define what is truth, what is reliable, trustworthy information, and who has the prerogative to disseminate them. This is particularly critical since governments themselves contribute largely towards what constitutes regular and irregular migration, therefore remaining central and powerful actors in the field of migration governance. After a discussion of the respective literature and

its theoretical implications, the chapter will present a qualitative analysis of several campaigns to provide an empirical overview of such information campaigns and the theoretical considerations therein.

THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

Policy Narratives as Justifications for Information Campaigns about Irregular Migration

Policymaking is strongly influenced by normative assumptions, power, and stakeholders’ interests (Goodin et al., 2006). The field of migration policy is particularly contested, especially since the ‘migration crisis’ in the EU, and is characterised by debates about knowledge claims and policy interests (Boswell et al., 2011; Hadj Abdou, 2020, p. 646). One major assumption that policymakers and international organisations express is that migrants are misinformed, unaware of the risks of travelling towards Europe, and unable to obtain reliable information about the dangers of ‘smuggling’. This assumption might be among the main justifications for why we are witnessing an increase in information campaigns since the ‘migration crisis’ since 2015. In reaction to the increasing movement of people towards the EU, the European Commission (2015, p. 1) has announced “the fight against migrant smuggling as a priority”. Countermeasures in the form of messages in specific online campaigns to inform or raise awareness among (potential) migrants about smugglers and human trafficking have become popular (see Bankston, 2021). The EU Action Plan against migrant smuggling (2015–2020) emphasised the need “to develop a **counter-narrative in the media**, including social media, to uncover their [smugglers’] lies [...]” (European Commission, 2015, p. 6, original emphasis). In reaction to the ‘migration crisis’ in 2015/2016, at least 130 information campaigns have been implemented from 2015 to 2019, of which at least 104 were by EU governments, while 23 million euros have been allocated for these purposes following the EU Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling (Dempster & Tjaden, 2021; European Commission, 2018; National Contact Point in the European Migration Network, 2019). The Commission has further funded (research) initiatives for the design of information and awareness-raising campaigns for (potential) migrants in the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. On the national level, counter-narratives and information

provision present one of many policy initiatives to minimise irregular migration, as illustrated, for example, by the German government attempting “to inform about the risks of irregular migration” (Federal Government of Germany, 2020, p. 11).

As of today, however, the assumption that potential migrants lack information or awareness about the risks of choosing irregular pathways, which is put forward by EU and government officials, is regarded as unnuanced (Alpes & Sørensen, 2015). Research shows that migrants are well aware of the risks of their journey and even a lack of information about the presence of camps and detention centres would not have kept them from migrating (Vammen et al., 2021, p. 35).

Moreover, over the last decade, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other platforms, have become important tools for migrants to access information, to navigate through citizenship and border regulations, and to build-up support networks or connect with family and friends at home (Borkert et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2016). At the same time, social media facilitate the spreading of dangerous misinformation (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Despite evidence suggesting the mushrooming of disinformation and rumours among migrants (Carlson et al., 2018a; Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019), social media enable people to cope with these issues but also contribute to the circulation of overly optimistic rumours about living conditions in EU countries and exploitative messages by traffickers and organised smugglers (see Vammen et al., 2021 for a more nuanced account of smugglers as information providers). Furthermore, mishandled information provision by government officials can, in turn, spread misinformation, cause unrest, and lead to mistrust among migrants, as suggested by research about the Greek governments’ information management (Carlson et al., 2018b). This means that official communication can also be misleading (Brekke, 2004). In the context of migration management, it is therefore safe to say that online and social media provide migration governance actors with the tools to circulate and reaffirm dominant policy discourses about irregular migration. The launching of online campaigns to dissuade irregular migration is one form of doing so.

At the same time, a massive increase in engagement with disinformation unrelated to migration has occurred since 2016, a critical juncture that some consider as the beginning of a new era of post-truth politics or post-factual politics (see Suiter, 2016). This development, which

is characterised by people's decreasing trust in scientific and democratic institutions, is therefore also associated with a state of crisis, for which policy solutions have been demanded. In the EU context, various policy initiatives now actively engage in countering disinformation, especially since the mid-2010s as a reaction to the increasing frequency with which foreign and domestic actors attempt to destabilise political systems and democratic debates through online disinformation and 'fake news' (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020, p. 820). In 2018, the European Commission put a high-level group of experts in place to advise policymakers on effective responses to disinformation, differentiating intentional disinformation from unintentional misinformation (European Commission/Directorate-General for Communications Networks/Content and Technology, 2018).

The 'fight' against rumours and dis-/misinformation is therefore based on the justification that democratic governments are able to discern truth from misleading information. From a normative perspective, democratic institutions are to be protected by their governments, such as the rule of law, elections, and political accountability. The maintenance of stability is one of the main functions of democratic government (Carugati, 2020), especially in times of (perceived) crisis. Government communication is therefore hardly ever used to trigger social change but to inform the public about political decisions, legitimise these decisions, and to enable mechanisms of political accountability (see Warren, 2014).

Government communication is thereby said to fulfil a specific function: democratic government communication is subject to ethical standards of communication such as neutrality, transparency, and the absence of party-political interests (Bowen & Zhu, 2019; Busch-Janser & Köhler, 2007; Gebauer, 1998). In this way, it informs and explains about political decisions, and not only supports public political opinion formation, but also enables political accountability (Warren, 2014). Initially, social media communication promised to affirm such principles and increase civic and social participation (Dahlgren, 2013) and today's governments and international organisations have become avid users of social media. However, demands for transparency have become more poignant (DePaula et al., 2018), and the reality of governments' social media communication is more complex: research suggests that it pursues rather symbolic and representational purposes instead of interactivity and participation, and blurs the lines between information and political party interests (DePaula et al., 2018; Russmann et al., 2020; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014).

Information Campaigns in the Post-Truth Context

Against this background, to understand the phenomenon of disinformation and misinformation, we need not only consider its loudest voices, such as populists, but also look at how established institutions, such as democratic governments, frame their own political agendas within the current post-truth context. The main reason for emphasising this focus is that the post-truth condition also describes a challenging of the democratic status-quo narrative, what Newman (2019, p. 95) describes as “‘establishment’ narrative”, and a challenge to the ways in which societies agree on an establishment narrative (through debates, mainstream media, scientific evidence, elections). The focus is thereby not on determining what is ‘true’, but what the accepted status-quo is. This chapter highlights that, from the perspective of mainstream or established institutions, one of the conditions of post-truth politics is that the establishment narrative has become more difficult to control, to disseminate, and to appear trustworthy. The post-truth condition is therefore not only characterised by populist claims from the fringes transforming to traditional politics, but also by the attempts of mainstream political actors to reinforce and control their establishment narrative(s) against counter-claims. Given the scope and reach that social media provide to spread information beyond their control, mainstream institutions/actors are more aware of the influences of rumours, disinformation, but also of unintended misinformation, and crucially, of information in conflict with their policy goals. In this sense, post-truth has less to do with the content of truth(s), but with the ways in which diverse actors try to control and disseminate their own ‘truths’.

Information campaigns for (irregular) potential migrants support established policy narratives: first, they reaffirm that irregular migration, especially smuggling, is ‘bad’ and immoral.¹ In order to do away with irregular migration, information campaigns therefore deter and dissuade. Existing research suggests that the content of such governmental campaigns is dissuasive and ethically questionable (Brändle, 2022; Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2020; Musarò, 2019). Gärtner (2020), for example, finds that they are based on the construction of “institutional

¹ For further information on the contested term of ‘smuggling’, its normative assumptions, and crucial differences to trafficking, please see, for example, Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) and Zhang et al. (2018).

counter-narratives” to the often overly optimistic hopes of potential migrants by focusing on the risks of the journey. At the same time, irregular migration is generalised and linked to human trafficking and other forms of organised crime (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007). Voices of migrants are visible, but mainly subject to “conditional recognition” (Georgiou, 2018, p. 54). Moreover, Oeppen (2016) shows how such campaigns serve as impression management for involved institutions so as to present themselves as humanitarian actors. Bishop (2020) finds that migration campaigns omit information about rights, such as the right to apply for asylum. Vammen (2021) and Williams (2020) find that the campaign messages are often emotionally charged, framing the decision to migrate irregularly as immoral and egoistic towards other family members.

Second, such campaigns maintain the assumption that through authoritative information from democratic, ‘good’ governments, migrants’ supposed unawareness, rumours, and disinformation can be ‘fought’. Therefore, campaigns are being launched in reference to the context of dis- and misinformation about migration, domestically and internationally. For example, the issue of immigration was the subject of several domestic disinformation campaigns from actors on the extreme right. National governments and the EU are therefore acutely aware of the dangers of disinformation about migration domestically, but also in international migration discourses.

Considering the public salience and contestation of migration (Castles, 2017), governments are likely to react with measures to control migration in ways that enable them to maintain a ‘humanitarian’ image while restricting migration. They consider irregular migration to be in part driven by misinformation and migrant’s unawareness, as well as countries making an impression of welcoming migrants as a pull factor (Hadj Abdou, 2020, pp. 649–650). In this view, irregular migration constitutes a risk to the dominant discourses in international migration about control and regularity, and thus, stability. Governmental information campaigns therefore present counter-narratives to maintain or reinstate a certain type of stability that they, in turn, have defined and now seemingly need to defend against dis- and misinformation among migrants.

The respective literature therefore remains sceptical of the publicly declared aim of information campaigns to ‘inform’, ‘raise-awareness’, and so ‘empower’ people to make decisions regarding migration. Instead, European policy approaches to (irregular) migration are dominated by notions of deterrence as a means to control irregular migration

(Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017; Geddes, 2018, p. 133). Through information campaigns, official communication enters a mix of messages about irregular migration that (potential) migrants must navigate. Behind the publicly declared humanitarian objectives of campaigns (informing, empowering, supporting), campaigns circulate “hegemonic discourses” (see Triandafyllidou, 2020, p. 3) of international migration governance regarding deterrence, security issues, conditional humanitarian care, irregularity, and management (see Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017). It is therefore evident that information campaigns aim to present the dominant discourse about irregular migration as ‘truths’ and ‘realities’. The current “hegemonic” discourse clearly distinguishes regular migration (Triandafyllidou, 2020, p. 2), that is migration defined and controlled mostly by states and international organisations—as well as impossible for many people—as something ‘good’, from irregular migration associated with smuggling, risk, and framed through crime and illegality. These findings therefore suggest that migrants are faced with information from a variety of actors who position their claims as ‘facts’ or ‘the truth’ about irregular migration, and so justify their specific interests. Information campaigns against irregular migration are thus less informative than dissuasive, aiming to minimise irregular migration by circulating the dominating discourse about ir-/regularity as countermeasures against perceived misinformation. In this way, they communicate counter-narratives by claiming authority over the ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ of irregular migration.

In this way, government communication in the form of information risk campaigns about irregular migration neglects that “normative claims and assumptions are central to policy making” (see Tenove, 2020, p. 520). I argue that by aiming to maintain the political status-quo, such campaigns contribute to undermining constructive social and political change, the development of novel ideas that could bring a new perspective to irregular migration, and the social realities of people considering irregular pathways. Such an improvement and paradigm shift in European migration governance is a pressing issue as social and political instability around the world forces people to flee, often, on irregular pathways.

If we consider that governments today have a multitude of tools, such as online media, to affirm and disseminate their authority, counter-narratives against irregular migration in the form of information campaigns require our attention. In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to illustrate these theoretical considerations with a short empirical analysis

of information campaigns from European governments to migrants. In particular, I will show how information campaigns present their messages as ‘truths’ or ‘facts’, how they reiterate hegemonic discourses, and by doing so, de-emphasise aspects of rights and protection. In this way, they stand in the way of social change that can make irregular migration safer.

A FEW WORDS ON METHODOLOGY

Information campaigns are implemented by a multitude of different actors, such as NGOs, international organisations, right-wing political parties, and governments. In this chapter, I focus on information campaigns that are authored and/or implemented or funded with governmental involvement and that are explicitly aimed at migrants in order to assess them within the context of government communication (see also Brändle, 2022). Governmental information campaigns emerged in the 1990s when officials’ concerns about irregular migration from Central and Eastern Europe, in combination with human trafficking, became more pressing (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007). While campaign content varies, their function is “preventing undesirable migration. The purpose of this new strategy is to discourage potential migrants from leaving” (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007, p. 1675).

Although the formats of the campaigns differ, much of their content today is also circulated on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Some campaigns host a main website only. Others come in the form of a single document that is then shared online in meme-like posters or as printed newspaper ads that are shared online. In order to capture the diversity of such governmental campaigns from Europe, I mostly discuss well-known campaigns that have gained popularity among practitioners, as well as heavily criticised campaigns. Within the scope of this chapter, the aim is not to analyse the campaigns systematically or compare them as case studies—they are too diverse in terms of content and context, which would require more space. However, the analysis purposefully selects and highlights their specific and individual features to provide an overview and to contextualise them within the setting of post-truth politics, government communication, and the role of (mis-)information in international migration discourses.

To understand how information campaigns attempt to counter irregular migration on the basis of responding to misinformation, the chapter qualitatively analyses campaign content, press releases, parliamentary

questions and replies, and public debates. Qualitative analysis allows the drawing out of in-depth insights from the material and the uncovering of common themes and patterns (Schofield, 1993). Using the software MAXQDA, a mix of inductive coding and close reading has been applied to detect common themes and patterns. Instead of following specific discourse analytic approaches, the analysis rather applies a “pragmatic” approach, presenting the material to make the most plausible interpretations (see Saldaña, 2011, p. 177). I paid specific attention to the publicly declared goals of the campaigns, their assumptions about migrants, as well as their justifications. These aspects did not so much serve as coding categories but as overall dimensions to make sense of the material. They were often overlapping and usually uncovered the policy narratives that would then ‘snowball’ to other documents and texts, as well as specific themes in the campaigns themselves. This continuing process of re-creating overviews, inductive coding, snowballing, description and meaning-making, allowed for “thick description” of the political intentions and communication behind the campaigns (see Geertz, 1973). In this way, the analysis could draw out examples and discuss how campaigns claim authority over the ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ about irregular migration from a European governmental perspective.

ANALYSIS

I. Strategies of Information Provision

Information campaigns are considered to be part of a toolbox of other instruments for migration management, such as deportation and border control (FitzGerald, 2020). As this chapter looks at online information campaigns explicitly, we can broadly differentiate between two ways in which campaigns provide information: one-way communication and interactive. One-way communication refers, for example, to posters, social media ads, leaflets, or articles on websites. In September 2015, the then Minister of Immigration and Integration of the Danish government, Inger Støjberg, placed printed ads in Lebanese newspapers and paid social media ads to inform potential migrants about tightened immigration laws in Denmark. Around March 2016, the Austrian Interior Ministry had launched TV clips, posters, and Facebook posts stating ‘Smugglers lie’ or ‘No asylum in Austria for economic migrants’.

Interactive ways can concern campaigners’ encouragement of migrants to get in touch with them or aiming to create online communities on social media through engaging returned migrants in telling their stories. For example, on the—now taken down—website of the project called ‘On the Move’, in which the UK Home Office was involved, migrants were encouraged to get in touch with the campaigners, providing an email address to which people could direct questions to receive information about migration (“Want to know more about the risks of continuing your migration journey or safe and legal alternatives?”²). Some, such as the IOM and Italian government’s Aware Migrants campaign, specifically focus on personal accounts, especially video material of returnees and family members of migrants. In this way, peer networks are built, and an image of trustworthy experiences might be created. In this example, governmental or organisational engagement has only a minor role. Peer-to-peer events have been shown to reduce the decision to choose irregular pathways and increase awareness about risk (Tjaden & Dunsch, 2021). Nevertheless, this strategy has been considered problematic due to its focus on tragedy and portraying migrants as “non-political agents”, passive, and “vulnerable” (Georgiou, 2018, p. 52).

Other campaigns encourage people to use the interactivity and participation features of online/social media, such as the similar campaigns by the German and the Belgian governments. Interactivity features on social and online media facilitate opportunities to participate, and so, under certain conditions, can increase democratic engagement (see Mossberger et al., 2007). Participation is particularly conducive to increasing trust and credibility. Through participation, people can engage with governmental actors. Information campaigns provide information for people in order to make them reconsider irregular pathways. Some campaigns explicitly enable migrants to get in touch via a contact form on the campaign website, though this kind of contact is not related to social media accounts. In some cases, the campaigns offer the possibility to “fact-check a rumour” about migration³ or “check whether it [news] is true or false”.⁴ In cases of ‘fact-checking’ services, these are not offered directly to individual migrants but might be summed up in a post or

² The ‘On the move’ website has been taken down recently.

³ <https://www.factsaboutbelgium.be/contact/>.

⁴ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/fact-checker/>.

article on the respective websites “[i]f it is relevant information for other refugees and migrants”.⁵ The impression of fact-checking as a service to migrants portrays the campaign as a helpful tool for them. Fact-checking as a practice is then linked to a trust relationship, especially when it comes to communication of risks and misinformation (Krause et al., 2020). In the case of information campaigns for migrants, trust might lead to credibility that the campaigners, including the governments behind them, have migrants’ interests at heart.

Notwithstanding the different strategies of information provision, the common denominator of the campaigns is that they claim to be (the only) reliable providers of information and are dominantly based on the assumptions that migrants lack information about risks. Their declared aim is “empowerment”⁶ of migrants or to support potential migrants in their process of decision-making, for instance, “[t]he goal of the website is not to deter, but to inform”.⁷ Furthermore, some suggest that the information they obtain from others, especially smugglers, but in one case also the media or peers, might be misleading:

[...] Reliable and trustworthy information on migration is very difficult to find. The media, smugglers, and even people from your community who have already migrated can give a false impression of the journey and life in a new country. [...] (Previous ‘On the move’ campaign).⁸

Others have announced the campaigns to the domestic public in the form of a publicity event that would be provocative and, at the same time, present the government’s spin on migration. In a post to her Facebook followers on 7 September 2015, Danish Minister Inger Støjberg wrote, “The goal is to inform neutrally and factually about the situation [meaning ‘stricter immigration policies’] in Denmark, which the Danish government is currently tightening” (author’s own translation). The Danish ad campaign was justified by the Danish minister based on the statement that “travel patterns are steered by smugglers”, that “Denmark is high up on the smugglers list”, and that Denmark “cannot

⁵ <https://www.factsaboutbelgium.be/contact/>.

⁶ <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-italy-launch-aware-migrants-campaign>.

⁷ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/about/>.

⁸ <https://www.migrantsonthemove.org/homepage/about/>, accessible via ‘Wayback Machine’.

keep up with the current inflow” (Støjberg, 2015). However, also the notion of responsibility is evoked, for example, in the campaign by the Austrian government in 2016. Here, the Minister describes the information provision as “‘an act of fairness’ toward economic migrants” (Republik Österreich Parlament, 2016). At the same time, the campaign is justified in avoiding a perceived loss of national sovereignty and control, thus requiring a stricter border regime (ÖVP Bundesparteileitung, 2016).

Through such statements, governments position themselves as actors who have authoritative information about irregular migration. They can provide information about the ‘real dangers’ that await people on their irregular pathways to Europe. Such claims are portrayed as facts that reaffirm smuggling as an illegal act and portrays migrants as irrational and uninformed. At the same time, governmental actors and the organisations that implement the campaigns, enter the flow of messages about irregular migration that people already must navigate. They might further be steered by political party interests.

II. Reproducing the Dominant Narrative of European Migration Policies⁹

Turning towards the content messages of the campaigns, a focus on risk, deportation, and voluntary return emerges, a typical pattern in dominant discourses in international migration management. Aware Migrants, particularly, portrays these issues through emotive and personal storytelling. People often narrate their experiences in short video clips or are quoted in articles, for instance, “We saw some of us drowning and die in the sea”¹⁰; “We saw several friends die in the desert”.¹¹ To raise awareness about the dangers of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, one campaign story explains that rescue on “rubber boats” is unlikely and smugglers telling otherwise is wrong.¹² In other cases, returnees are interviewed about the horrors of irregular migration, “They always tell you it’s a good

⁹ The analysis in this section draws from Brändle (2022) where more detailed accounts can be found.

¹⁰ <https://www.awaremigrants.org/news/returning-migrants-cote-divoire-ibrahim-recalls-libyan-hell>.

¹¹ <https://www.awaremigrants.org/talking-migrants-families/story-kone>.

¹² Post “Will you be rescued after two hours in a rubber boat?”, <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/>.

boat. But it's never so. It's always a bad boat".¹³ The risk focus does not only centre around life-threatening experiences, but also warnings about crimes by smugglers and about migrants engaging in criminal activity. As an illustration, the 'On the Move' campaign states that "by steering the boat or helping to get other people to pay smugglers, then you will have criminal action taken against you",¹⁴ thus reiterating the legal provisions that states have adopted to prevent 'people smuggling'. These laws are highly contested since they are also designed to deter support for migrants (on irregular pathways), also criminalising this support. Laws against 'migrant smuggling' have, in this way, become a means to manage migration (Ben-Arieh & Heins, 2021).

While many people on irregular pathways face risks and dangers, these risks are presented as almost 'natural' consequences and inevitable facts. In many cases, governmental campaigns claim to inform about 'the real dangers' of choosing irregular pathways. This "truth about the journey"¹⁵ is described as hopeless. Such claims, again, ignore that governments themselves define the regularity and irregularity of migration and so contribute towards the risks to a considerable degree (see Triandafyllidou, 2020). In other words, the concepts smuggling, irregularity, or support, are to a large extent defined by those actors who now warn about their associated risks. Policies and laws are under constant construction and based on normative assumptions (Goodin et al., 2006; Tenove, 2020, p. 520), but are communicated as a matter of fact and as an unchangeable state.

Another focus is put on deportations and voluntary return. Hands-on support and advice are mostly offered to persuade people to return after their arrival in the EU or on their way towards (e.g., "Going back to Somalia? Now there is help"¹⁶). In other instances, governments inform, "[t]hat all rejected asylum seekers must be returned quickly from Denmark" (Danish ad). Voluntary return is often presented as a morally superior option, referring especially to high-skilled people who have returned to their families and then economically contributed to their

¹³ <https://www.awaremigrants.org/testimonies-italy/story-ebou>.

¹⁴ <https://www.migrantsonthemove.org/homepage/migration-info/life-in-destination-countries/life-in-the-uk/legal-risks-of-irregular-migration-to-the-uk/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.migrantsonthemove.org/homepage/migration-info/life-in-destination-countries/life-in-the-uk/reality-of-irregular-entry-into-the-uk/>.

¹⁶ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/facts/going-back-to-somalia-now-is-the-time/>.

communities with start-ups or social initiatives, exemplified by “I am a good example of one such African scientist who was empowered by the opportunities I have been given”.¹⁷

On the one hand, the findings about such campaigns are in line with research on major European policy narratives about irregular migration, often combining notions of security with migrant protection (Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011). These narratives create what Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2017, p. 160) have described as an “ambivalent moral order” in international migration discourse between international care and security. On the other hand, democratic principles of government communication to inform comprehensively, transparently, and neutrally stand against European governments’ invested interest to reduce migration and gain control over irregular pathways. The organisations behind the campaigns (financially and/or in terms of content) are part of the policies that define ‘irregularity’ in the first place. Information for migrants and policies that restrict migration, especially irregular migration, therefore blend into each other and reiterate the dominant policy narratives. They also report about the restrictions and difficulties ‘irregular’ migrants will face in the host country or on their journeys. The conditionality of issues of rights and entry requirements is highlighted often: “Even if granted protection, and thus the right to stay, many face difficulties finding work in Germany”¹⁸; or one of the main slogans of the Austrian campaign “No Asylum in Austria for Economic Migrants”; or:

There are four forms of protection that grant people a right to stay in Germany. Many migrants who have entered Germany irregularly in search for work and a better life are surprised to learn that none of these forms of protection apply to them.¹⁹

There is consequently an “inherent ambiguity *within* EU border security and migration management policies and practices that (re)produces the ‘irregular’ migrant as potentially *both* a life to be protected *and* a security threat to protect against” (Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 3). Together,

¹⁷ <https://www.awaremigrants.org/news/glasgow-university-student-empowers-african-scientists-tech-training-0>.

¹⁸ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/rumours/will-your-life-in-europe-be-easy/>.

¹⁹ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/facts/who-is-allowed-to-stay-in-germany-and-who-is-not/>.

the campaigns reflect the “hegemonic discourse” of international migration management (Triandafyllidou, 2020), while actual information that provides new, helpful information for migrants on irregular pathways, falls short (see Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011). Countering dis-/misinformation, however, would require not to repeat the basis on which rumours developed in the first place. Instead of informing and developing new ways of conceiving of irregular pathways, campaigns reiterate old news by employing the dominant discourses of international migration management (see Pécoud, 2021). By presenting their messages as facts, campaigns simplify irregular migration and people’s experiences. Countering rumours with more information is therefore not only an insufficient strategy to persuade and change people’s behaviour (Stray, 2019), but in the case of migration information campaigns, government communication walks a thin line between neutral and political communication.

III. The Contestation of Authoritative Truth

While the campaigns are presented as reliable, trustworthy, and factual/neutral information to migrants, they are often disputed by domestic actors (besides scholars). Most recently, *The Independent* reported that with the campaign ‘On the Move’, the UK Home Office has been running a “fake website” with questionable contents to deter migrants from crossing over to the UK from Calais (Dearden, 2021b). Since the website encourages migrants to contact the campaign to ask about the risks about migration, it was initially unclear who would be the receiver of such questions. Up until a certain point, ‘On the Move’ did not show any indication of the organisation behind it, nor a usually required imprint on the website that provides address details. On 29 August 2021, the website declared that “the information on this website has [*sic*] provided by the Home Office on behalf of the UK Government” and gives further information on visa entry.²⁰ The article by *The Independent* was followed by a longer Twitter thread²¹ which uncovered that ‘On the Move’ was likely the product of the connection between

²⁰ <https://www.migrantsonthemove.org/homepage/about/>, now accessible via Wayback Machine.

²¹ The connection between the two projects has, to my knowledge, first been made by Dan Barker on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/danbarker/status/1421645085150744576>.

the organisation Seefar, an important campaigner for governments and the EU in the field of irregular migration, especially through its project ‘The Migrant Project’ and the UK government’s Home Office. Following the publishing of the article at the end of July 2021, several journalists, activists, volunteers, academics, and NGO workers have submitted Freedom of Information Requests. In a response to one of these requests, the Home Office has now confirmed that it had commissioned Seefar (Home Office, 2021). Furthermore, the UK’s Information Commissioner is probing a complaint about the website (Dearden, 2021a).

Such domestic contestation is no exception. The Danish ads received considerable attention from both proponents and harsh critics, and were picked up by domestic and international news media outlets, often opposing the initiative as cynical and unethical (see Taylor, 2015). In a statement, the Ombudsman of the Danish Parliament (Folketingets Ombudsman, 2015, p. 16) considered the Danish ministry’s information campaign as potentially leaving Syrian asylum seekers with an understanding of the Danish asylum law that “is not accurate/appropriate” and “not in accordance with existing laws and principles in this field”. There were further issues regarding the initial clarity of the English translations of the content.

In another example of domestic contestation, the Minister of the Interior in Austria was criticised for the layout of the campaign: several opposition politicians questioned her, one about whether the colouring of the contents had been intentionally designed in collaboration with the FPÖ due to its similarity (Scherak, 2016), which the Minister rejected (Mikl-Leitner, 2016). Another example is the Rumours About Germany campaign: MPs from both left-wing (Die Linke) and right-wing parties (AfD) filed parliamentary questions about the campaigns (Friesen et al., 2021; Jelpke et al., 2018).

While domestically political accountability can be established in this way, the campaigns are directed at (potential) migrants who have only very limited access to the debates and contestation. Migrants might not be aware that many of the campaigns have been criticised or questioned by parliamentary actors due to potential violations of principles of ethical government communication, such as transparency and neutrality.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have problematised and discussed how governmental actors claim authority over the ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ of irregular migration. Special attention has been paid to embedding the campaigns within the contexts of domestic pressure to appear ‘tough’ on immigration, especially in the current climate of disinformation about migration, while maintaining a humanitarian image and communicating ethically on social and online media. The analysis focused on three aspects of the campaigns: the strategies of information provision, the reaffirmations of the dominant discourse about irregularity, and the contestation of the information campaigns and their claims. The first aspect illustrated that the campaigns are launched and justified based on the assumptions that migrants are, generally, unaware of the risk of irregular pathways. The ways of presenting information vary and are either focused on engagement through fact-checking styles and emotionality through a focus on personal experiences or one-way communication in the form of leaflets or ads. All of the campaigns reiterate the dominant discourses about irregularity as a means to counter assumed unawareness among migrants. Contested policies and claims are thereby presented as “truths” and “facts” about migration, keeping the dominant understanding of irregularity as an immoral, sometimes criminal act. Life-threatening situations are portrayed as unavoidable, questioning the ethics of such communication given that governments themselves have considerably contributed to creating irregular pathways through restrictive immigration and asylum policies. The analysis has also provided insights into the domestic contestation that takes place. In particular, through parliamentary questions, freedom of information requests, and news reporting, some of the campaigns have had to be justified and adapted. This domestic contestation, however, hardly reaches migrants themselves, which sheds doubt on the campaigns’ declared goals to inform, empower, and provide fair options to choose between regular and irregular pathways.

In general, the campaigns raise important questions about the authority and reliability of government communication that addresses migrants directly, especially when it draws on assumptions formulated in reference to a post-truth context. Looking at the current migration and asylum policy regime, deterrence has become particularly dominant and so contradicts the announced goals of the campaigns. Possibly also

reacting to increased pressures from populist right-wing actors, governments have recognised the affordances of social media to reach migrants directly. While it is highly improbable that migrants trust such messages and follow their advice, the campaigns can nevertheless reaffirm the current European approaches to controlling and managing migration. In this way, they contribute to maintaining the current status-quo and thus hinder constructive social and political change towards an improvement of the current situation around the EU’s external borders.

Verena K. Brändle’s research for this chapter was supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark under Grant No. 9570-00009.

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