Katja Lihtenvalner

Anti-Migrant, Far-Right and Populist Mobilisation Along the Balkan Route

Resonant Voices Initiative

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Introduction

Some 1.2 million refugees and migrants arrived in Greece since 2014, most intending to continue their journey further north[1]. For people fleeing war, poverty, and repression in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, the Western Balkan route has become one of the main paths into Europe. This sudden influx of migrants and refugees generally found Balkan countries unprepared.

In response, Slovenia, Croatia and North Macedonia closed off their borders in early 2016[2], severely limiting the options for further travel deeper into Europe for the 50,000 plus refugees in Greece[3]. These people found themselves stranded in Greece, approximately a third of them on islands, but many continue to make the perilous journey via this route. Since then, Slovenia has continued to tighten control at its borders with Croatia. It is gradually extending its fence along the border[4] and mobilising additional police units[5], which increased the pressure on Croatia, especially with regard to its borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia. Subsequently, a bottleneck was created, leaving the authorities in BiH's North-western Una-Sana Canton (which borders Croatia) to cope with the majority of the 7,000-8,000 migrants who are in the country at any given time, according to an IOM estimate[6]. A similar situation now exists in Serbia's northern province of Vojvodina, resulting from Hungary's much larger fence along its southern border and its heavy-handed treatment of refugees.

1   Greece sea and land arrivals monthly: Operational Portal/Refugee Situations. (2020). UNHCR.

2   Balkan countries shut borders as attention turns to new refugee routes. (09/03/2016). The Guardian.

3   Greece Country Facts. (2020). International Rescue Committee.

4   Fighting over the Slovenian Border Barrier (27/08/2020). Deutsche Welle.

5   Slovenia sends 1,000 police to Croatian border to halt migrant wave. (03/06/2020). Remix.

The current impasse creates unsustainable and often inhumane conditions for everyone trapped behind these fences. Whilst the migrants are bearing the brunt of the consequences of this reality and the failures of the migration and asylum policy in Europe, the situation has also been poisoning public opinion in the transit countries along the Balkan route, and further. There are two main competing narratives in the media and public discourse, centred around what are often perceived as irreconcilable, zero sum agendas: one that focuses primarily on the incidents of human rights violations and violence against refugees and migrants, the other consisting of concerns about safety and security of local populations and their property. While media, humanitarian organisations and human rights watchdogs are attempting to raise awareness about the alarming situation on the borders and in refugee camps and reception centres, far-right extremists and populists are using it to create a spectacle that allows them to cast themselves in role of Europe's defenders.

This impasse is evolving into a 'perfect storm', in which a failing policy and inability to address the root causes of the problem, are creating opportunities for populists and extremists to advance their agendas, enabling criticism of political opponents and mobilisation of supporters.

This advisory brief presents an analysis of the efforts to influence public opinion, and the impact these have had on citizen mobilisation in the region.

Border Pushback: The Ugly Face of the EU's Migration Policy

Disturbing reports about the levels of excessive force used against migrants and brutality by the Croatian police at the country's external border began to appear in public from 2016 onwards.

In 2019-2020, various Croatian and international human rights organizations, such as the Human Rights Watch[7], Amnesty International[8], the Centre for Peace Studies and Are You Syrious (AYS)[9] drew attention to the Croatian border police's excessive use of violence.

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6   IOM's Migration Response. (2020). IOM Bosnia and Herzegovina.
7   Croatia: Asylum Seekers Forced Back to Serbia. (20/01/2017).
          Croatia: Migrants Pushed Back to Bosnia and Herzegovina. (11/12/2018).
          Human Rights Watch.
8   Croatia: Fresh evidence of police abuse and torture of migrants and
          asylum seekers. (11/06/2020) Amnesty International.
9   5th Report on Pushbacks and Violence From the Republic of Croatia:
          Illegal Practices and Systemic Human Rights Violations at EU Borders.
          (03/04/2019). Center for Peace Studies.

Countless international media including; Radio Free Europe[10], Al Jazeera Balkans[11], Deutsche Welle[12], and the Swiss public broadcaster SRF[13] have also documented asylum seekers' testimonies of their treatment in Croatia. These reports, often corroborated by aid workers and physicians, reveal an unprecedented level of brutality used by the Croatian border police in their treatment of migrants and refugees near the border with BiH. Croatian outlet Dnevnik was further able to obtain a testimony by a local police officer, largely confirming the wrongdoing of the border police[14].

The Croatian police's track record of torture, humiliation, and abuse of asylum seekers[15], using practices such as spray-painting the heads of those caught attempting to cross the border with red crosses[16], or shooting at migrants[17] is mounting. Unfortunately, the Croatian police are not an exception, they are rather the rule.

In its latest report from September 2020, The Border Violence Monitoring Network, which since 2016 has consistently monitored human rights violations at the external borders of the European Union, documented 40 cases of pushbacks, affecting 1548 people in Greece and along the Balkan Route, implicating Romanian, Austrian and international (primarily Czech) police units in North Macedonia[18].

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10   Hrvatska policija negira da je migrantima na glavama iscrtala križeve. (15/05/2020) Radio Free Europe.

11   Migranti prijavljuju nove slučajeve nasilja hrvatske policije. (18/12/2019). Al Jazeera Balkans.

12   Izbjeglica: „Hrvatski policajci su me tjerali da plivam nazad u Bosnu, a ne znam!". (17/07/2019). Deutsche Welle.

13   Prügel an der EU-Grenze: Wie Kroatien Migranten abschiebt. (15/05/2019). SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen.

14   Policajac priznao za DNEVNIK.hr da uhvaćene migrante po naredbi šefova vraćaju na granicu. (21/10/2019). Dnevnik.ba.

15   Croatia: Fresh evidence of police abuse and torture of migrants and asylum-seekers. (11/06/2020). Amnesty International.

16   Crosses on our heads to 'cure' Covid-19: refugees report abuse by Croatian police. (28/05/2020).The Guardian.

17   Migrant shot by Croatian police in mountains near Slovenian border. (18/11/2019). EuroNews & Reuters.

18   Illegal Push-backs and Border Violence Reports: Balkan Region. (2020). Border Violence Monitoring Network.

On 22 October, the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson tweeted that after reviewing the Danish Refugee Council's report[19] on the pushbacks by the Croatian police, she is planning to discuss the matter with the Croatian authorities.

Reviewing the comments, which speakers of the local languages (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian) have left on the media websites and their social media accounts under the reports about border police violence, it becomes evident that opinions are divided along the two main narratives.

A sizeable portion seemingly enjoy the stories and cheer on the police violence, with comments such as "Go Croatia!", "Bravo, Croatian police!" in reaction to reports on abusive practices. They often refer to the migrants using hateful and dehumanising language, branding them as ISIS terrorists or comparing them to a zombie invasion.

A sub-category of this group justifies the violent pushback on administrative grounds, using the (flawed) arguments of reciprocity and equivalence. These commenters find it unfair that people are attempting to cross borders without documents when they similarly would not be allowed to enter other countries without valid travel documents.

Finally, those who show empathy for migrants are also represented in these discussions and often confront the arguments of the first group.

While refugees and migrants have to bear the brunt of the harassment by authorities and by public, those attempting to help, advocate on their behalf, or report about the abuse become secondary targets.

Both international and local journalists covering these stories were threatened or fined by the police while documenting the situation along the Balkan route[20]. Nidzara Ahmetasevic, a Sarajevo-based journalist, in one incident saw police officers knocking down several migrants and refugees to the sidewalk and then taking them into a police vehicle. Police officers threatened Ahmetasevic with a fine, even after she identified herself as a journalist[21].

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19 Refugees allege physical, sexual abuse by Croatian authorities. (22/10/2020). Al Jazeera.
20 Kazna od 500 KM i zabrana snimanja: Policijaci spriječili novinara Ajdina Kambera u obavljanju posla (24/04/2020). eTrafika.
21 Policajci u Sarajevu napali novinarku. (17/06/2020). Oslobodjenje.

Another account of how authorities prevent access for journalists and obstruct their work was described by Deutsche Welle journalist Ajdin Kamber. He describes the experiences of being ejected from government buildings and being harassed by the police as he tried to do his job[22].

Human rights defenders and journalists who report on the situation in Una-Sana canton and migration issues in the region are also viciously targeted online. Vanja Stokic, an editor-in-chief of the eTrafika.net portal, was threatened in the comments under a photo she posted on her Facebook profile. The commenter explicitly mentions "cutting off heads," using numerous expletives for both the migrants and those who help them. Stokic reported it to the police and the suspect was arrested[23], but the prosecutor later dropped the case on the grounds that it does not meet the criteria of criminal offence - either of endangering security or of incitement to hate and violence[24].

Media Stunts, Border Patrols, and Parliamentary Debates of Far-Right Extremists and Populists

The European far-right media also regularly report on the desperate situation in Greek refugee camps and tensions along the migration routes, weaponising the refugees'/migrants' suffering to spread their anti-migration propaganda. After Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan opened the country's borders with eastern Greece[25], Austrian and German far-right extremists revisited their media stunts playbook and in March, shortly before Greece went into coronavirus lock-down, they travelled to Greece to "report" about the situation at the Turkish/Greek border.

22   Zašto je novinar DW-a nepoželjan u vladi USK-a? (06/11/2019). Deutsche Welle.

23   Uhapšen osumnjičeni za prijetnje Vanji Stokić. (24/05/2020). Nezavisne Novine.

24   Društvo novinara BiH osudilo prijetnje smrću Vanji Stokić. (28/05/2020). eTrafika.

25   Turkey opens borders with Europe as tensions rise with Syria and Russia. (29/02/2020). ABC News.

The CovertAction Magazine reported that the first group of eight to ten people, most of them members of far-right Identitarian Movement from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, arrived at the Greek border with Turkey on the Evros river in early March[26], followed by a trickle of several other individuals and groups, visiting Lesbos and the camp Moria, which continued up until August.

According to one of the activists, the purpose of these trips was to meet with Greek patriots, to show solidarity and support[27]. In reality, the images and footage from the trips were used to promote hateful propaganda, portraying refugees as invaders, "dangerous soldiers of Islam" who came to destroy Europe[28]. The far-right activists used different social media platforms for the promotion of these materials, creating videos and articles, using hashtags such as #IstandWithGreece[29] and #niewieder2015[30] to mobilise wider audiences.

In Slovenia, a group of anti-migration activists, consisting of assorted far-right extremists and ex-convicts, formed a paramilitary unit in 2018, named 'Stajerska Varda' (Styrian Guard)[31]. Presenting itself as a civil initiative and a voluntary defence community, the group patrols the borders with Croatia and Italy with an objective to intercept migrants attempting to cross the border illegally. In September, the amendments to the State Border Control Law and the Law on the Protection of Public Order were adopted, prohibiting individuals and groups from "controlling the state's borders similar to police duties"[32] but other than that, authorities did little to prevent the activities of these anti-migration vigilante patrols. As of today, Stajerska Varda continues their border interventions and is consistently promoting its anti-migration views and military-like activities on their Facebook page.

26   European Far Right and Identitarians Exploit Greek Immigration Crisis. (29/04/2020). Covert Action Magazine.
27   An der Grenze Europas. (19/03/2020). Sezession.
28   Schützen wir Griechenlands Grenzen! (03/03/2020). Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland.
29   #IStandWithGreece hashtag gathers waves of support for Greece on refugee crisis. (03/03/2020). Neos Kosmos.
30   Schützt unsere Grenzen. Nie wieder 2015! (2020). Die Oesterreicher.
31   Patriot games: Slovenian paramilitaries face down migrant 'threat' on border. (11/11/2019). Reuters.
32   Poslanci podprli zakonska predloga za omejitev delovanja t. i. vard. (24/09/2020). Slovenske Novice.

Groups with similar missions are also self-organising in Serbia. An informal group calling itself 'Narodne Patrole' (People's Patrols) was recently handing out leaflets to migrants in the center of Belgrade, "informing" them that their freedom of movement is restricted due to frequent attacks on Serbian girls and women[33]. The group has a very active Facebook presence and also uses other social media platforms for organizing public events, such as the recent "Let's clean the park" rally, advertised with a picture of a park with migrants in it. Another group engaging in similar activities is 'Nacio-nalna obrana Levijatan' (National Defence Levijatan), a part of the wider Levijatan movement in Serbia that unsuccessfully ran in recent parliamentary elections. According to its leader, their goal is "to put migrants on notice when they are misbehaving, without using violence or harassing anyone."[34]

The far-right and populist anti-immigration activists visiting Greece's borders and refugee camps for a photo opportunity, patrolling the forests of Slovenia and streets of Serbia, exploit the current humanitarian crisis as an opportunity for self-promotion. They create a spectacle, using misleading and manipulative content to amplify their message, hoping to gain new supporters.

While the groups patrolling the borders or the streets in the countries along the Balkan route can be dismissed as fringe and most are, at least declaratively, disavowed by government representatives, in recent years several parties in the EU countries have won seats in the national parliaments on vociferous anti-migration platforms. They have been normalising the narratives of migrant pushback and repressions, while preventing a humane, sustainable, EU-wide solution to migration.

33   Narodne patrole u centru Beograda - pogledajte njihov razgovor sa emigrantima. (22/02/2020). Srbin.info.

34   Lider Levijatana iznosi svoju stranu priče: Koji to fašisti grade kuću Romima? (13/07/2020). IndexHR.

The Austrian Freedom Party (FPO), a junior partner in the government between 2017 and 2019, regularly stirs domestic anti-migrant sentiment, running controversial ads in print media and online. The party leadership commonly refers to migration as "creeping Islamisation" and "population displacement."

In Germany, the anti-migration, racist, and xenophobic rhetoric has helped the political party, Alternative for Germany (AfD) enter the Bundestag in 2017 and become the largest opposition party. It appealed to voters with an overtly Islamophobic campaign and fear-mongering around migration[35], although it recently fired a prominent figure, Christian Lueth, after he was recorded saying that migrants coming to the country could be shot or gassed[36].

In Croatia, the newly formed populist ethno-nationalist Homeland Movement, formed around the unsuccessful presidential candidate and popular singer Miroslav Skoro, entered the parliament in July this year, finishing third. Even though migration was not the dominant theme of the campaign, they are generally in favour of tough, restrictive migration policies.

In Slovenia, where politicians are likelwise distancing themselves from openly anti-migration rethoric, their most important media mouthpieces are not. Specifically, most influential media around the leading conservative SDS party, such as online portals 'Democracy', the tabloid 'Škandal24.si,' and the TV channel Nova24.tv, have been publishing Islamophobic content, with the aim of stirring outrage. They, for example, report about covered children spotted in a park in the center of Ljubljana[37], warn against dangers to democracy by electing politicians with immigrant backgrounds[38], or argue that the Muslim immigrants' contribution to the society are "third world diseases, danger of terrorist attacks, and sexual assaults on women."[39]

Dominik Nepp, a Viennese city councilor and the leader of FPO in Vienna, ran an ad in September this year, ahead of the State elections in Vienna,[40] depicting a dark, masked figure with a knife in the background and a (white) woman screaming in fear in the forefront, accompanied by the message stating that "it is a fact that with the mass migration of 2015, Vienna became an absolute stronghold of crime."

He spent between 300-400 EUR on this particular message to reach between 80,000-90,000 people in Vienna. Between 28 March 2019 and 26 October 2020, his page spent over 200,000 EUR on Facebook ads.

In May, he ran a series of ads targeting the entire Austria. **According to the data provided by Facebook, his campaign spent between 15,800 to 22,295 EUR on only eight ads, each containing clear anti-migration and Islamophobic messages**.

One of the ads depicts a crowded inflatable raft boat, with a slogan "Sea rescue is human smuggling"[41].

Another shows a young couple, the woman wearing a headscarf. The message on this ad reads simply "stop the immigration"[42].

35   The German far right is running Islamophobic ads starring women in bikinis. (31/08/2017). Vox.
36   Far-right German politician sacked for reportedly suggesting migrants could be killed. (28/09/2020). The Guardian.
37   V Ljubljani v rjuho zavite že majhne punčke! (30/08/2018). Skandal24.
38   Muslimani na Švedskem želijo prevzeti državo: "Vi imate ure, mi pa imamo čas". (19/09/2018) Demokracija.
39   NE, HVALA! Društvo slovenskih pisateljev vam ponuja možnost: "Spoznajte muslimana!". (12/04/2018). NovaTV24.
40   Dominik Nepp Ads (15/09/2020) Facebook Ad Library.
41   Dominik Nepp Ads (18/05/2020) Facebook Ad Library.
42   Dominik Nepp Ads (18/05/2020) Facebook Ad Library.

The public reacts: online mobilisation and protests around migration issues

Many migrants stranded in the Una-Sana Canton, right outside the EU's external border between BiH and Croatia, have to live outside of officially designated reception centres, in appalling conditions, without electricity and water.[43] The humanitarian crisis escalates periodically with worsening weather conditions and was this year further compounded by the COVID19 pandemic. To make matters worse, the reception centres were forcibly emptied at the end of September, ahead of elections in November, ostensibly due to public pressure[44]. The action was strongly condemned by the EU, which provides funding for these facilities[45].

Desperate, with nowhere to go, the migrants are locked into a vicious cycle of mistrust, fear, and increasing violence with the local populations. The unmet and mismanaged public safety concerns of the local population on the one hand, and the basic needs of the migrant population on the other, are inevitably leading to friction between residents and people in transit, all of which is fueled by misinformation and propaganda by extremists and populists. Fear, in combination with anger towards authorities for not being able to solve the problem, contributes to the appeal of the anti-migration narrative. Public gatherings against migrants and refugees, are sometimes organized by the local politicians, who use trumped up numbers related to reported crimes committed by migrants[46].

In Bihac in August hundreds of citizens gathered in the town square and demanded that the authorities solve the problem of "irregular migrants and the prevention of the influx of new migrants in the region"[47].

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43   Kamp iz Noćne More: Migranti u BiH žive u teškim uslovima i nemaju šta da jedu! Organizacije upozoravaju da im preti humanitarna katastrofa! (VIDEO). (24/10/2019). Kurir.rs.

44   Bosnia: Authorities evict hundreds from UN-run migrant camp. (01/10/2020). Deutsche Welle.

45   EU statement – Transfer of refugees and migrants from Bira.(01/10/2020). IOM Bosnia and Herzegovina.

46   Antimigrantski narativ: Manipulacije brojem krivičnih djela u USK. (01/09/2020). Istinomjer.ba.

47   Hiljade Ljudi Na Protestima U Bihaću: Očistite Naš Grad, Ulice I Mjesne Zajednice Od Migranata, Lopova, Narkomana… (29/08/2020) Crna Hronika.

Protests against migrants also happened in Velika Kladusa, a town about 10 kilometres from the Croatian border. Citizens also began to organise online, where closed Facebook groups with titles like "Stop the invasion of migrants" or "Stop illegal migrants" proliferate, created for and by local citizens to share information, news updates, and personal experiences related to the migrant crisis.

For example, a piece of news published by a local portal about 30 migrants arriving by bus from Sarajevo in late August, violating the cantonal government's movement restrictions[48], was shared to a public page followed by over 50,000 people, where it inspired not only calls for violence and online hate speech, but also offline action.

Self-appointed vigilantes and groups are increasingly taking matters in their own hands, under the pretext of protecting safety of other and public order. Following news such as the one about new migrants' arrival circulating online, the situation in Velika Kladusa escalated.

Locals began blocking traffic, intercepting buses, and dragging out migrants they found among the passengers[49]. Bus and taxi drivers transporting migrants, as well as volunteers and aid workers were targeted after their personal details and photos were published in these private groups.

A man who was filmed as he assaulted a bus with migrants in Velika Kladusa[50] was celebrated as a hero among anti-migrant activists, both at public gatherings and online.[51]

Media report on violent incidents and a pervasive atmosphere of fear in town[52]. Near Velika Kladusa, as a result of an arson attack with Molotov cocktails on a makeshift accommodation, five migrants were almost burned alive[53]. Another migrant was seriously wounded with knife in Sarajevo in September and local man was arrested for attempted murder[54].

48   Uprkos mjerama USK: Autobus iz Sarajeva dovezao 30 migranata u Krajinu. (21/08/2020). MojCazin.ba.

49   Kod Velike Kladuše mještani ponovo izašli na ulicu, čekaju autobuse s migrantima. (18/08/2020). Klix.ba.

50   MUŠKARAC DASKOM POLUPAO PROZORE AUTOBUSA KOJI JE PREVOZIO MIGRANTE: Snimljen incident u Velikoj Kladuši. (16/08/2020). Kurir.rs.

51   "SVI SMO MI BAJKIN!": Pogledajte kako je u Velikoj Kladuši dočekan Sead Karajić koji je vratio autobus s migrantima. (17/08/2020). USN.

52   LOV NA MIGRANTE U KRAJINI (FOTO): Nikada nije bilo gore, tuku ih gdje stignu! (21/08/2020). Žurnal.info.

53   Bosnia, shocking attempt to burn asylum seekers alive. AYS Weekend Digest 8–9/8/2020. (10/08/2020). Medium @Are You Syrious.

54   Sarajevo: Migrant teško ranjen nožem, uhapšen bh. državljanin (03/09/2020). Klix.ba.

After the Europe's largest refugee camp, Moria[55] (on the Greek island of Lesbos), burned to the ground in early September, thousands of people marched in the streets, of Berlin[56], Vienna[57], but also in other German cities such as Cologne, Munich, and Leipzig, as well as in Paris[58], calling on authorities to take in more of the over 12,000 who were left without a shelter since the fire. Protesters held up signs saying "Wir haben platz" (We have room), or "EU-Politik tötet" (EU Politics kills).

Conclusion

Public discourse and narratives around migration develop in the context of government action. **The anti-migration public discourse and narratives thrive in a situation of government inaction and policy failure.**

While propaganda and misinformation contribute to fueling resentment and mobilising action, civic engagement – both vigilante justice and acts of solidarity and altruism – is usually motivated by what the public perceives as lacking.

The complexity of the migration-related problems and the tainted history of attempts to solve them in Europe puts far-right activists and populist politicians at a distinct advantage. As the ousted AfD spokesperson Christian Lueth aptly put it in an interview that cost him his position, the worse off Germany is, the better for his party[59].

55   Moria migrants: Fire destroys Greek camp leaving 13,000 without shelter. (10/09/2020). BBC.

56   "Wir haben Platz" - Tausende fordern Aufnahme von mehr Geflüchteten aus Moria. (21/09/2020). Euronews.

57   "Wir haben Platz" in Wien: Demo für Flüchtlinge aus Moria. (03/10/2020). Vienna Online.

58   Thousands march in Berlin to demand Germany take in Moria refugees. (21/09/2020). Deutsche Welle.

59   "Je schlechter es Deutschland geht, desto besser für die AfD". (28/08/2020) Zeit Online.

As for the complicity of social media and content platform companies, the story is complicated. On the one hand, the far-right parliamentary parties spend money on anti-immigrant ads on Facebook, spreading misinformation and propaganda. Many alt-media outlets, are systematically pushing out stories to incite hate and violence, often using the infrastructure of the platforms and taking advantage of their algorithms favouring outrage and sensationalism. Citizens using private groups are then sharing these stories, fostering atmosphere in which calls to defend the communities have led to violence against migrants trapped in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

On the other hand, initiatives, which are attempting to bring people from the burnt down Moria to safety in Austria, use crowdfunding and online organising to provide sustainable accommodation and care, and show the existing capacity and the good will of ordinary citizens, as well as the potential of the internet as force for good.[60]

But while policies to address the incitement of hate and violence on the social media platforms have to be improved, they will do little to curb the migration-related violence as long as flashpoints and bottlenecks like Moria or camps in Una-Sana Canton in Bosnia Herzegovina continue to exist. The festering of humanitarian crisis at and outside of Europe's borders, the normalisation of the status-quo of squalid, inhumane conditions in refugee camps and the EU's collective failure to effectively respond to the migration crisis have far reaching consequences.

With the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum,[61] announced on 23 of September, as the Commission's new approach to migration, in addition to solving technical hurdles of the asylum process, the EU leaders have to make a serious attempt to shift the narrative around migration, thus far dominated by the far-right and populist messages, in the direction of solidarity.

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60   COURAGE - Mut zur Menschlichkeit. (2020). Respekt.net.
61   New Pact on Migration and Asylum: A fresh start on migration in Europe.
(2020). European Commission.

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