



PERCEPTIONS

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF NARRATIVES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE ON MIGRATION AND PROVIDING PRACTICES, TOOLS AND GUIDES FOR PRACTITIONERS

D2.7 Update Baseline Report



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Executive Summary

The deliverable D2.7 updates the Baseline Report (D2.6) as part of WP2 - RESEARCH: Literature, studies, projects, stakeholders, solutions, tools and practices. This deliverable is a brief document that can be read as an extra section of the Baseline Report; however, it also stands on its own and can be read independently from D2.6.

The update of the Baseline Report consists of three sections. First, it goes back to the key concepts of the PERCEPTIONS project, refining them where necessary based on the project outcomes. Next, it provides a brief historic reflection on migration research, contextualising the PERCEPTIONS project within a broader research tradition. Finally, it briefly touches upon the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on migration, policies, border issues and perceptions of Europe.

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1 Introduction

The **PERCEPTIONS Baseline Report** (D2.6) (Van Praag & Van Caudenberg, 2020) brought together insights from the different deliverables produced in the context of the project's Work Package 2 and provided a concise overview of:

- (1) Relevant stakeholders (Ilcheva & Bertel, 2019);
- (2) Existing academic literature on narratives, perceptions and discourses on Europe and how this impacts migration (Bayerl, Pannocchia & Hough, 2019);
- (3) Policies on migration and security issues (Ben Brahim & Rogoz, 2020);
- (4) Threats perceived by security practitioners, policymakers and civil society organisations (Bermejo et al., 2020);
- (5) Good practices (Kampas, Papadaki & Spathi, 2020).

The Baseline Report also provided a brief overview of the migration context, including the institutional setting, migration history, and key policy development since 2015 in the 13 countries where research was conducted (Algeria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia, and the UK), including countries of origin, transit and destination.

The Baseline Report served as a starting point for the empirical research and other work conducted in the PERCEPTIONS project. Its purpose was to **help analyse existing biases, views and trends in perceptions, narratives and discourses on migration to Europe, perceived threats related to migration, and securitisation issues**, and to **contextualize and interpret findings** by taking into account the different local contexts and broader debates on migration.

The **current deliverable (D2.7) updates the Baseline Report** by addressing two issues that were not included in the first version of the Baseline Report:

- (1) The contextualisation of the PERCEPTIONS project and its focus on the post-2015 era within a broader tradition of research on migration;
- (2) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration, policies, border issues and perceptions of Europe.

Before embedding the PERCEPTIONS project in the larger historic and current COVID-19 context, we **recapitulate the project's key concepts**, refining them where necessary based on PERCEPTIONS outcomes.

2 Recapitulating PERCEPTIONS' key concepts

A red thread throughout the PERCEPTIONS project has been **how to define, conceptualise and empirically study perceptions, narratives and discourses of (potential) migrants** - referring to a broad category of people who migrated to Europe or want to do so, including asylum seekers, recognized refugees, family re-unifiers and others. In the context of the project, "perceptions" have been conceptualised as ideas, information and knowledge migrants have about Europe, or a specific country in Europe. As such, the project has focused on **"geographic imaginations"**, following Coppola's (2018) work in defining these as "the subjectivity of the human conception of locations, spaces, countries and the people inhabiting these physical spaces", acknowledging that these "geographic imaginations" are cultural constructions which are influenced by narratives and discourses, be it popular discourses,

policy discourses or through social networks (see Ben Brahim & Rogoz, 2020). These narratives and discourses are sometimes based on or inspired by **hopes and dreams** (Mandic, 2017; McMahon & Sigona, 2018) or are **shaped by information and remittances** sent within migrant networks and communities and family networks in the country of origin (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021; Boccagni, 2017; Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Bakewell & Jolivet, 2015; Uberti, 2014). Moreover, **Europe's colonial past and the present reproduction of unequal power dynamics at a global scale** based on the hierarchisation of different ethnicities, epistemologies, philosophies, cultures, languages, etc. – cf. “coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2020) – is considered to have an impact on migrants' perceptions often manifested through idealising Europe and aspirations to lead a “European life” (Ben Brahim & Rogoz, 2020; Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021).

A systematic literature review at the early stage of the project (Bayerl, Pannocchia and Hough, 2019), as well as the project's empirical work (see Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021), identified a wide range of information sources and channels for the transmission of narratives and discourses about life in Europe. In particular, **interpersonal networks and personal communication – both offline and online** – are found to be important for the flow of information within migrant communities and are vital sources to shape perceptions of Europe and/or specific countries within Europe (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021; Fiedler, 2019; Kuschminder, 2017).

Given the importance of “word of mouth” in the creation of perceptions about (life in) Europe and the decision to migrate, the **truthfulness of the information migrants receive is sometimes questioned** (e.g., Fiedler, 2019). Consequently, some information is considered to cause “**misperceptions**” about (life in) Europe. However, it is important to note here that perceptions or other representations that are assessed as “true” or “accurate” from one perspective may be assessed as “false” or “inaccurate” from another perspective, and that such assessments may also shift over time. Also, regardless whether certain “perceptions” have some truth in it or not, they may be **real in their consequences**, a phenomenon that has come to be known as the **Thomas theorem** (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). As such, the main objective was to gain insight in the development of perceptions, narratives and discourses, rather than evaluate their “truthfulness”. When looking at the literature concerning “misperceptions”, most research seems to struggle with the conceptualisation of this term and to set out a fitting definition. Authors using the concept seem to surpass the Thomas theorem as they seem to suggest that there exists something like “true” or “false” perceptions without acknowledging that the assessments of “truth” or “accuracy” of specific perceptions are often subjective. As such, **perceptions that go beyond established facts are always “right”, as they relate to how a particular individual perceives something** (i.e., migration patterns, opportunities, abilities, Europe, etc.). Moreover, the idea of “false” perceptions often reflects the concerns of those in positions of power who can influence dominant discourses on what is considered an “accurate” perception of Europe.

The PERCEPTIONS project has avoided this binary categorisation of perceptions as “accurate” or “inaccurate” without reflecting on who is defining them as such. Rather than studying so-called “misperceptions” or “skewed images” of Europe, the focus switched to **unravelling the role of specific information and disinformation in the construction of perceptions**, as well as to **identifying a potential mismatch between migrants' perceptions on the one hand and their experiences on the other hand**. The PERCEPTIONS project's outcomes highlight that among migrants **overly positive perceptions co-exist with negative perceptions of (life in) Europe** (e.g. the difficulties to find a job), which are confirmed through lived experiences (see e.g., Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021). Moreover,

migrants are usually aware of the risks involved in migration journeys, including those of irregular migration (ibid.)

Another central issue throughout the PERCEPTIONS project is to investigate **whether certain perceptions lead to security threats to migrants and/or host societies**. The use of the concept “threat” in migration-related policies seems to be increasingly shaped by the growing entry of **securitisation ideologies and discourses**, set up by some policymakers and politicians. A review of existing policy measures shows, for instance, that in migration-related official documents a lot of attention is paid to “threats” for host societies, and especially to the threat of radicalisation and violent extremism (Ben Brahim & Rogoz, 2020). This is also referred to as the **“securitisation of migration” – a process of repositioning areas of regular politics into the realm of security by increasingly using narratives of threat and danger aimed at justifying the adoption of extraordinary measures** (ibid; Mixed Migration Centre, 2019). At the same time, although mentioned by civil society and NGOs and in the academic literature, migration policies pay little attention to **“threats” posed to migrants**.

The PERCEPTIONS project has adopted a **broader understanding of “security threats”** and conceptualised it as **real or perceived risks migration processes pose to host countries, as well as and to migrants**. Moreover, the project’s **multi-perspective approach**, including the voices of migrants as well as those of policymakers and first-line practitioners, allowed unravelling the views and perceptions of multiple actors from disparate levels, thus bridging a gap in the literature (Bayerl, Pannocchia & Hough, 2019). This allowed us to include those who design the policies, those who have to implement them, and those who are subject to them, in our research. PERCEPTIONS results indicate that, when it comes to understanding “security threats”, **a gap exists between government representatives, and particularly LEA stakeholders on the one hand, and first-line practitioners from civil society organisations working closely and directly with or advocating on behalf of migrants on the other hand** (Ben Brahim & Hendow, 2021). While the former tend to emphasise **threats to the state**, the latter highlight **threats to migrants** that could emerge (ibid.). In that sense, first-line practitioners tend to consider migrants to be the “referent object” – i.e. **what is under threat** – rather than the “referent subject” – i.e. **the cause of the threat** – (García-Carmona et al., 2021). Overall, and contrary to mainstream political discourse, our findings suggest that **misinformation or unmet expectations among (prospective) migrants are generally not considered to have any relationship with crime, radicalisation or violent extremism** (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021; García-Carmona et al., 2021). However, increasing securitisation of migration-related policies can **exacerbate vulnerabilities for migrant communities**, as many states increase border control and limit legal pathways of immigration and access to social and economic rights (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021).

As a final note, when discussing the effect of perceptions on migration behaviour, it is important to be aware of the **(limited) impact of perceptions, narratives and discourses on the decisions, aspirations and abilities to migrate** (Carling & Schewel, 2018), and of the **interplay between economic, political or safety-related, cultural, social, familial, environmental, and humanitarian migration drivers**, as well as the **opportunities to migrate** to destination countries (Castles, De Haas & Miller, 2014). In migrants’ first decision to migrate, Europe is not always conceived as the final destination (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Crawley & Jones, 2021). Furthermore, the relationship between perceptions of Europe and migration to Europe may differ across migrant groups (e.g. people fleeing conflict and persecution or people migrating for family reasons, people who travel with visas or via irregular means, people who became victims of human trafficking, etc.) and may depend on specific features of these migrant groups (e.g., specific migrant demographics such as minors, people with disabilities or from

LGBTQ+ communities), (e.g., Bayramoğlu & Lünenborg, 2018). Moreover, perceptions of Europe may change along their migration trajectories (Belloni, 2016; 2019a; 2019b). The PERCEPTIONS systematic literature review revealed how **many studies continue to explain reasons for migration through “push” and “pull” factors** (Bayerl, Pannocchia & Hough, 2019). Despite the fact that this binary view on migration decisions is criticized for being overly simplistic (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014; de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020; de Haas, 2021), the push-pull model remains prevalent in migration theories and in people’s ideas about migration-related decisions. The predominance of this push-pull model has led the PERCEPTIONS project to analyse its empirical data and organise its finding by “push” and “pull” factors, taking into account and addressing the limitations of this model (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021). Indeed, while the push-pull model can make it seem as though migration decisions can be understood as being driven by either “push” or “pull” related factors, PERCEPTIONS findings highlight the **interconnectedness of different kind of push and pull factors** (ibid). At the same time, **push factors seem to have more weight as the focus is often on leaving**, rather than where to migrate. As such, a specific destination country or continent may not be in the migrants’ mind until after they have begun their migratory journey. In that sense **perceptions of Europe or a specific destination country do not always seem to play an important role in the decision-making process**, as often it is simply seen as a place that represents e.g. “the absence of conflict” (ibid). Moreover, the decision of what specific country to migrate to may also be **affected by information acquired along the journey**, and by **treatment and perceptions formed in countries of transit**. For instance, the disillusionment migrants sometimes face reception centres in transit countries may become a driver for aspiring or undertaking secondary movements to countries where human rights are perceived to be protected (Ben Brahim and Hendow, 2021; Syed Zwick, 2022).

3 Historic reflection on migration research

The PERCEPTIONS project focuses on the **post-2015 period**, meaning that academic literature, official documents, policy measures, and good practices that have been analysed in the context of the project all date from 2015 or later, and the migrants that have been interviewed all arrived to Europe in 2015 or later. Taking 2015 as a starting point was motivated by the fact that the **so-called “migration crisis” or “refugee crisis” of 2015**, when high numbers of refugees arrived in the EU via the Mediterranean Sea or overland, **marked a change in the political discourse and policy measures across many European countries**. Even though the large majority of refugees were and continue to be received by countries outside of the EU (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021), since this so-called “crisis”, **fears of mass migration peaked** (de Haas, Castles and Miller, 2020) and **the need to reconsider migration policies became a priority for many governments and institutions**. Since then, such policies have increasingly expanded in scope, reflecting security concerns stemming from migration movements, and more directly addressing arising threats, both potential and present (Ben Brahim & Rogoz, 2020). Many of these reforms also have had an **effect on third countries**, such as Algeria and Morocco, that set-in place more legal, structural, economic and security measures (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021). Furthermore, since the so-called “migration crisis” of 2015, there has been a **change in bordering practices** across the EU due to an increase in the perceived security threats related to migrants’ presence (Ben Brahim & Rogoz, 2020). Simultaneously, scholars increasingly studied a variety of migration-related issues (e.g., humanitarian disasters, information campaigns, ICT use in migration, media representations of migration, nationalists and anti-migratory rhetoric, etc.).

Even though the PERCEPTIONS project zooms in on the post-2015 era, the project acknowledges that **migration is not a new phenomenon**. Many of the 2015 policy reforms studied in the project were in fact also inspired by pre-existing perceived threats related to asylum, irregular migration, migrant integration, return, border management, human smuggling and human trafficking, etc. (Ben Brahim & Rogoz, 2020). People have always moved, and today, **old migration patterns persist alongside new migratory movements**. These result from economic, political, cultural and environmental change, violent conflicts, and **migrant populations becoming more diverse** (de Haas, Castles and Miller, 2020).

Even though the share of international migrants in the overall global population has remained relatively stable since the 1960s, the issue of migration has become **increasingly politically salient across the EU**, which is reflected in a general move to securitisation approaches on migration and diversity-related issues. Since the end of the Cold War, the politicization of migration has also been growing alongside the above-discussed **securitisation of migration** (ibid). Within this line of thought explicit attention is given to the **securitisation of borders** (Buzan et al., 1998), considering border management a fundamental element of an integrated migration management strategy (Ben Brahim & Rogoz, 2020). In the EU, bordering practices became institutionalised as a security issue at the supra-national level with the foundation of FRONTEX in 2005. As such, the construction of the EU as space of free movement went together with measures to protect its borders and consolidate ‘fortress Europe’. Since then, FRONTEX has been playing an increasingly important role in the EU’s migration management strategy (Pollak & Slominski, 2009).

Attempts to study, understand and theorize processes that drive migration are also not new but date back to the late nineteenth century. According to de Haas et al. (2021) early migration theories were developed either within a **functionalist paradigm** (e.g. neoclassical equilibrium models, push–pull models, migration systems theories) that sees migration as primarily the result of cost-benefit calculations made by individuals or families, or within a **historical-structural paradigm** (e.g. dependency theory, world systems theory, critical globalisation theory) otherwise known as ‘conflict theory’. More recently, **symbolic interactionism** led to theories that focus on **migrants’ everyday experiences, perceptions and identity**, while more **meso-level theories** (e.g. network theories, migration system theories) were also developed (de Haas, 2021). Most recently, scholars introduced the **aspirations-capabilities model** that conceptualises migration as a function of people’s capabilities and aspirations to move (ibid; Carling & Schewel, 2018; de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). In this model, human mobility is understood to enhance “people’s capabilities and therefore, wellbeing for 1) *instrumental* (means to an end) and 2) *intrinsic* (directly wellbeing-enhancing) reasons” (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020: 62, emphasis in original) (see also Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021).

These research paradigms cannot be seen separately from societal changes, which is also reflected in the focus on specific **research topics** and the development of concrete **migration policies**. As pointed out by De Haas (2010), until 1973, migration was often seen as part of **developmental debates**, and approached in an optimistic way. This changed from 1973 onwards, and turned into a **growing scepticism**. Researchers focused more on brain drain and return migration, and policies in destination countries shifted towards integration issues. Policy makers in the countries of origin, on the other hand, expressed their concerns on brain drain. From 1990s onwards, more empirical research was conducted (ibid.) which focus evolved from “**geographies of migration**” (i.e. studies related to specific migration flows, origins and destinations) to issues of “**mobilities**”, **transnationalism and diasporas** (Pisareyskaya et al., 2020). This was accompanied with a continuation of political scepticism towards migration and further tightening of immigration policies (De Haas, 2010). At the same time, the rise of

ICT technologies and (social) media in the 1990s also attracted the attention of migration researchers who became interested in the relationship between these new phenomena and migration issues. With the turn of the century came an increased interest in **“identity narratives”** and the subjective experiences of migrants, as well as in **(national) borders and policies** (Pisareyskaya et al., 2020). As such, the PERCEPTIONS project’s interest in migrants’ perceptions and the role of (social) media in the distribution of these perceptions, as well as in security policies and physical and symbolic border issues lies in line with broader developments within the field of migration studies and policies.

In the early 2000’s, there also was a **resurgence of migration and development optimism** under the influence of remittance boom. This led to a turnaround of views, as policy makers suddenly focused on brain gain and diaspora involvement. This relative optimism suddenly came to an end after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, after which irregular migration became increasingly linked with **terrorism**. Rising global unemployment, the emergence of a financial crisis, widening inequalities and new migratory movements of displaced people and refugees led to more **protectionist policies**. Migration issues were increasingly framed in terms of security issues, where terrorism and an overburdening of the national welfare-system were depicted as main threats (cf. securitisation of migration). Nonetheless, these issues were also contrasted against an increasing **cosmopolitanism** and striving for **“No Borders”** (Jinkang, 2020). In a similar line, numerous NGOs and civil society organisations on the ground are trying to challenge securitisation policies and are left to fill the gap of the states in terms of migrants’ access to rights.

4 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The PERCEPTIONS project and its empirical work developed in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most acute global health crisis since the so-called “Spanish flu” over a century ago. While the theoretical work of the project in the context of WP2 happened in 2019 and therefore did not cover this issue, the pandemic has had an important impact on the empirical work. Not only did the vast majority of data collection happen online due to all kinds of COVID-19 restrictions and stay-at-home orders, but the effect of COVID-19 on migration, policies, border issues and perceptions of Europe also became an additional topic that was included in the interviews and focus group discussions. While it is still early to fully capture the impact of the pandemic, especially in the long-run, given the fact that many different factors may play a role, early evidence shows that **migrants are disproportionately affected by the pandemic** (see e.g., McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021; OECD, 2020; Chetail, 2020).

Overall, PERCEPTIONS’ outcomes paint a **complex and multifaceted** picture when it comes to COVID-19, but also reveal the **myriad, pervasive and at times extreme negative effect** of the pandemic on migrants and their families (see Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021). Among the most significant measures to contain the virus have been the mobility lockdowns and closing of borders, which led to **disruptions of international migration, forcing immobility or pushing people to take irregular routes often facilitated by migrant smugglers** (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021; Sarrica et al., 2020). Evidence has demonstrated that both regular and irregular migration has not played a large factor in spreading the virus (compared to e.g. domestic and international travel). However, border closing had a **huge impact on asylum seekers, refugees and other displaced people** because it complicated international movements (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Moreover, the pandemic was used to **further legitimize the push-back of migrants along the EU’s coastline** (ibid; Horwood, 2020). At the same time,

PERCEPTIONS' findings highlight that while mobility restrictions may have caused aspiring migrants to postpone their migration, it is not considered to have a significant impact on migration flows in the long run, since **migration drivers are still present or may even have become worse due to economic recession** (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021). Some stakeholders interviewed expect a **'boomerang effect'**, with the number of migrants increasing once the situation goes back to normal (Ben Brahim & Hendow, 2021). So far, this is not supported by statistical data as migration movements in 2021 have remained relatively low compared to the previous two years (IOM, 2021). The geographic spreading and location of the COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected mobility behaviour and migration management, but is also **changing existing ideas about Europe**. PERCEPTIONS' findings reveal that, while there is a general perception that the situation in Europe is still better than in some other places – both in terms of how the pandemic is handled as in terms of the overall situation, COVID-19 has had a **negative impact on the perception of Europe as a place of economic security and job opportunities** (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021). Moreover, the (temporary) suspension of services for migrants in some host countries contributed to **feelings of loneliness and isolation, and of being left unprotected by the government**. At the same time, the **xenophobic representation of migrants** has been exacerbated by COVID-19, as they erroneously came to be associated with carriers of the virus (Ben Brahim & Hendow, 2021; McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021); an association that is not founded on facts but on fear, which contributed to an increase in discrimination and an overall more negative reaction to all migrants (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

5 Conclusion

The concepts of perceptions, aspirations and expectations of migrants received increasing attention since the so-called “migration crisis” of 2015. The large numbers of refugees crossing EU borders through the Mediterranean Sea or overland sparked the debate on migration within the EU as well as within its individual member states. The changes in the prevailing political discourses increased fears related to migration and led to a reconsideration of migration policies. Hence, this opened the pathway to see migration as a security issue, and to discuss European approaches to migration (including the spreading of migrants across EU countries, protection of the EU external borders and the support of the member states situated at those borders). This change also affected third countries, especially EU bordering countries, and bordering practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic also put additional pressure on these bordering practices, especially given the fact that countries aimed to reduce travel and mobilities as much as possible, introducing mobility restrictions and the closing of borders. While further research is needed to understand the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration policy, migration behaviour and perceptions of Europe, the global health crisis seems to have great repercussions for migrants as a result of disrupted mobility and intensified vulnerabilities.

As this report is written in March 2022, it is important to also mention the current situation in Ukraine. According to data from UNHCR, more than 2.5 million Ukrainians – almost all women and children – have fled Ukraine since February 24, 2022. The vast majority of them are going to the neighbouring EU countries of Poland, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, as well as to Moldova. Many also go to countries with a larger Ukrainian diaspora, such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy and Spain. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has called this new refugee movement “the fastest growing

refugee crisis in Europe since World War II” (Grandi, 2022). While the political focus on migration in the EU may have become overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past 2 years, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees has reawakened this issue. Yet – for now – the debate seems to differ significantly from the one in 2015 as, in contrast to 2015, Ukrainian refugees seem to be welcomed by Europeans across the political spectrum. A clear example of this is the EU’s decision to use its Temporary Protection Directive that allows Ukrainians to legally stay in its 27-member countries for up to three years without first applying for asylum, providing them with residence permits that allow immediate access to the labour market, health care and education. While this more welcoming response is multifaceted and complex (Pettrachin & Hadj Abdou, 2022) and may be partially due to the different demographic of the refugees (mainly women and children), racism towards non-Europeans and the perception of Ukrainians as culturally and ethnically similar to “us” seems to also play a crucial role (ibid; Global Detention Project, 2022). While it remains to be seen how the situation will develop further, it is clear that this conflict brings new levels of complexity in the relationship between perceptions of Europe and migration movements. How a population’s desire to become part of the EU indirectly led to a new geopolitical configuration which resulted in war, how the EU is reacting to these new refugee movements with a generally more positive narrative in the media and in political discourses and how this is shaping migration policy responses, are questions that bring new dimensions to the topics that we have investigated in PERCEPTIONS that will require further research in future research projects.

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