

A group of children are sitting on the ground, drawing a map of Europe on asphalt using colorful chalk. The map is drawn in various colors like blue, green, yellow, and purple. The children are wearing casual clothing, and the scene is outdoors.

“NEXT TO US” A New Narrative on Migration in Europe

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Green European Foundation asbl

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December 2016

*With the financial support of the European Parliament to the Green European Foundation.
The European Parliament is not responsible for the content of this publication.*



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About this report

In 2016, the Green European Foundation (GEF), together with Fundació Nous Horitzons (Catalonia), Green Institute Greece, Fundación EQUO (Spain), Green Economics Institute (UK) and Institute for Political Ecology (Croatia) developed a transnational project to highlight the status quo of migration policies at local level, while considering the national and European dimensions.

The project consisted of a set of events, organised by the above-mentioned institutions, aimed at identifying the main challenges in ensuring the wellbeing of migrants and asylum seekers in Europe. This report, which included the participation of the author in the 6 events organised in 5 countries between May and September 2016 in Spain (Barcelona and Madrid), Germany (Berlin and Munich), United Kingdom (Oxford) and Greece (Athens), was developed as part of this project with a twofold objective:

Firstly, it summarises **the main findings from debates** held within the GEF transnational migration project involving a wide range of actors, from policy-makers, civil society and refugees themselves.

Secondly, it **provides an analytical view of the divergent trajectories of the debate** to identify a solid common ground and to build a narrative that would precede new policy proposals offered by the Green political family.



PART 1:

European values at risk

Fundamental values at risk

Although the number of refugees arriving in the European Union is currently in decline, no end of the humanitarian catastrophe, which is the daily reality of refugees on their way to or already residing in Europe, is in sight. Considering the shortcomings of the EU foreign policy, which are influencing the MENA-Region, the Syrian civil war and the moral dubiety of the agreement between the European Union and Turkey, we are currently in danger of human rights violations:

- firstly, thousands of refugees are still detained in the countries of their arrival and are not allowed to continue their journeys and many minors are unable to reunite with their families. Families are separated and people are stripped of their right to free movement and their freedom to choose a country of residence;
- secondly, the number of testimonies by refugees of exploitation, trafficking, torture or illegal deportations experienced both on the way to Europe, but also in Europe, has been increasing;
- Thirdly, recent cases of discriminatory and hateful speech adopted by anti-immigration movements and xenophobic, populist forces pose concerns with regards to the wellbeing of refugees in Europe.

Instead of focusing on safeguarding human rights and ensuring the wellbeing and smooth integration of its migrants, the European Union seems to rather be driven by a negative discourse, with policy proposals focused on security measures. This brings about the criminalisation of migration, causing a backlash for fundamental values within the European Union. These tendencies need to be urgently addressed and reversed, not only in the light of the forthcoming European Parliament elections in 2019, but also to secure a sustainable Europe.

The emergence of a “new normality”

The EU has been challenged in its attempt to put forward asylum policy proposals that engage member states in a shared commitment to ensure the wellbeing of those fleeing from their homes. **Two fundamental European values - solidarity and shared respon-**

sibility – need to be restored. The southern Member States, mainly Greece and Italy, whose national borders constitute at the same time the EU’s external border towards the Mediterranean, bear the main and disproportionate burden of an inefficient and inhumane ‘hotspot system’. Only Germany and Sweden have yet shown willingness to share responsibility, but have since then backpedalled due to massive domestic political pressure. Most of the leaders of western and central EU Member States remain, just as their colleagues from Eastern Europe, silent or even articulate vocal resistance – thereby compromising the European project and returning to politics focused on national interests. The lack of response and shared responsibility in welcoming refugees and asylum seekers has contributed to the development of a “new normality”, one that is based on politics of fear. Discussions about security start to overshadow freedoms and rights. This “new normality” needs to be countered, by helping refugees and expressing one’s solidarity. Besides national governments’ and local authorities’ obligation to commit to this objective, this constitutes a window of opportunity for green parties and foundations to act and demonstrate that **European freedoms and rights are the answer, not the threat, to our security.**

We need to act NOW

We are currently facing an urgent need to place human rights and freedoms back at the top of the European political agenda, together with fundamental asylum principles, as a driving force of Europe’s commitment towards an open society and a resilient ‘welcoming culture’. After the financial crisis in 2008, the current situation is yet another opportunity to test if European values are ‘fear-proof’, as opposed to being functional only in times of stability and prosperity.

Europe cannot afford to postpone its work on refugees and asylum policies due to an internal identity crisis - there are millions of lives at stake. **There is no excuse for building walls and installing fences.** EU policy should be framed by the European Union’s constitutional values. **Europe needs to activate its financial resources to adapt to this new situation, invest in new institutions and build effective asylum agencies** providing appropriate reception conditions, fair asylum procedures and opportunities for integration.



PART 2:

Integration and solidarity: a project for Greens in Europe

1. European level

At the moment, migration policy in the EU is not only controversial and sensitive, but also shows serious absence of convergence, which is misused by disintegrative political forces. In this context, European Greens need to be on the front-line, safeguarding the non-negotiable principles of international and humanitarian law, promoting the positive aspects of migration and protecting refugees from human rights violations anywhere, including throughout Europe.

At European level, Greens strongly advocate for:

- 1 further harmonisation of asylum regulations (including substantial integration measures);
- 2 taking asylum seekers' destination preference into account;
- 3 defining a fair allocation system within the EU that would be legally binding for all Member States;
- 4 guaranteeing safe and legal access to the EU.

2. National and local level

At a national level, Greens can be pioneers of framing new and progressive integration policies. Three infallible main tasks for the Green movement at local level can be derived from an analysis as part of the GEF transnational project:

- 1 being prepared for immigration on the ground, with progressive integration policies at a local level;
- 2 recognising the political dimension of the social life of refugees;
- 3 developing a new, positive narrative on migration.

These tasks are in line with Green values, as they rely on the political empowerment of vulnerable groups, on the idea of active citizenship and participation and the idea of the EU being capable to survive and overcome different crises. They are intertwined and can be mutually supportive, thus neutralising the toxic narrative of the right-wing populism that creates fear, insecurity, doubt and confusion.

Greens have a chance to be the frontrunners of a distinctive migration and asylum policy which counteracts the dehumanising impact of migration and takes a bold stance in recognising refugees as new and equal citizens of Europe. It is an opportunity for Greens to influence the debate towards making a U-turn in order to refrain from discussions on external borders, and to place the focus on citizens and movements, providing a good quality of refugees' lives in the future.



PART 3:

Pathways for integration

1. Integration 2.0: an obligation and opportunity for the Greens

Now, that many refugees have entered the EU, questions around inclusion and integration of refugees in societies are back on the political agenda. Greens have both the responsibility and the opportunity to put forward a distinct policy proposals which offer a clear political position and constructive solutions that out-compete politics of fear and exclusion promoted by right wing populists.

One of the potential directions is moving away from the discourse of safety, criminalisation and further militarisation, while focusing on demands to increase resources for inclusion and integration policies. Such **“integration policy 2.0” process, could create a new and positive momentum that could help dismantling sentiments of fear.** This can lead to the creation of different, more constructive attitudes towards refugees and migration.

2. Political participation of refugees

Apart from being in a very uncomfortable and vulnerable position in hosting countries and apart from being under pressure from xenophobic movements, refugees are also people who lost their political and civil rights emigrating. **It is an opportunity and the responsibility of Greens to support their political empowerment and give them a voice in their hosting society.** This is particularly important, as many refugees might not be able to return to their home-countries in the foreseeable future.

There is strong empirical evidence **that urban and local environments are the most important terrains of everyday exchanges between refugees, citizens and institutions.** Refugee policies therefore rely on the capacity of these environments to host refugees with dignity, provide access to all vital needs (health, housing, education, employment) and enable their integration. Best-practices of progressive policies at a local level are therefore crucial to make a substantial shift and provide examples to other cities.

This can lead to the creation of a decentralised alliance of cities which would be hospitable to refugees

and effectively balance out shortcomings of asylum and integration policies while advocating reform. Such a bottom-up initiative would also be a way to democratise Europe and to guard the human rights of deprived and vulnerable groups.

3. Creating the NEW narrative

Europe is in need for a **new, positive narrative around topics such as migration, refugees and asylum. A narrative focused on real people and their stories.**

A discourse around words such as *crisis, insecurity or fear* is only creating a false sense of danger, when Europe has the means to welcome migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and provide them with conditions for a smooth and mutually-beneficial integration. This new narrative should counteract the idea of refugees being ‘the others’, to avoid that parts of the society identify refugees or immigrants as those who should be blamed for their despair and exclude them. Furthermore, the new, positive narrative should also include a focus on the economic benefits of migration in Europe.

Ahead of the national elections in France and Germany, as well as the elections for the European Parliament in 2019, it is **crucial to invest in the development of a positive narrative that is co-created with refugees.**

To introduce a new narrative it is first and foremost necessary to consider refugees as individual human beings, and refrain from defining them as a homogenous group whose traits can be generalized. This approach can be an attempt to thwart the ‘divide et impera’ tactics of right wing parties and thus normalise migration as opposed to criminalising it.

Next, the new narrative needs to **include those who are at the center of the debate,** the refugees themselves. Green parties and organisations can seize this window of opportunity and provide them with this voice so that refugees can communicate their experience and opinion.

Thirdly, a new narrative of course also needs to **involve those that are suspicious or unsettled** due to the arrivals of refugees as well as those that have been instrumentalized or influenced by rhetorics of fear. **The new narrative should therefore be based on a factual point of view and incorporate success stories and examples of best-practices.**

Finally, the media is a key partner in creating this new narrative as it can use the relevant channels to counteract hate-speech and rhetorics of fear. This is furthermore relevant as many people who are dismissive towards receiving refugees are at the same time neither politically active nor interested, but obtain their information mainly from media reports and form their opinion accordingly.



PART 4: Elements of the NEW Narrative

In December 2016, the Green European Foundation hosted a workshop on the topic of a *NEW narrative on migration and refugees in Europe*, during the upcoming 25th Council Meeting of the European Greens. The workshop addressed the need to develop a new and positive narrative on migration and refugees to create public interest and counter the anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric in European countries. The following elements around building the new discourse:

Storytelling:

The first step to improving our discourse is to understand the current narrative. Subsequently, we can start sharing positive results, examples and stories around the topic, focusing more on **communicating answers and solutions**.

Today, the way in which the discourse around topics such as migration, refugees and asylum regulations is constructed can have an impact on the actual integration of refugees in Europe. Even with the best intentions, we are tempted to use words such as “crisis”, “threat”, “fear”, etc. This happens not only at the level of narrative, but also in policy-making. The word detention, for instance, is increasingly used in the European Commission’s communications.

Despite the importance of assessing the impact of negative language, our discourse needs to eschew dehumanising vocabulary and focus less on ‘the problems’ but more on the solutions.

Out-of-the-box

When creating a new narrative, we need to get out of our usual thinking patterns. **We need to think creatively, unconventionally and use a new perspective.**

The current stalemate of migration and asylum policy at the European level, prolonging the precarious situation of the refugees while fueling right-wing discourse, depicts a typical “9 dot challenge” and thereby highlights that the current conventional perspectives set limiting boundaries that we need to overcome in order to formulate sustainable solutions.

The nine dots puzzle, introduced by Sam Loyd’s 1914 Cyclopaedia of Puzzles, requires the player to link 9 dots using four straight lines or fewer, without lifting the pen and without tracing the same line more than once.



The puzzle can be easily resolved, but only by drawing the lines outside the area of the nine dots themselves. The puzzle only seems difficult because people commonly imagine boundaries which are in fact not real. The phrase “thinking outside the box” is a re-statement of the solution strategy.

Reconcile perspective and reality

When talking about narratives, we talk a lot about perception. Often it is perceptions shaping policies, instead of reality. Recent policy proposals of the European Commission demonstrate precisely that. Decisions have not been based on available data or impact assessments but were rather driven by perception. The institutions are thus unable to prove how their policies will improve the current situation. Misleading perceptions therefore need to be confronted with the truth. This means reacting to false perceptions with data and **explaining the distinct and different meanings between asylum seekers and migrants – both of which both have the right to enter the European Union, whereby the former are protected by international law and the latter are subject to national law.**

Joining forces

Integration of refugees is the work of a group of people, who have been sensitized and who understand what refugees are experiencing once they arrive in a new country. We are not alone: there have been a lot of initiatives that are considering this issue. We can get inspiration from them, work with them in joining forces to show the real faces of refugees. To name just a few:

iamamigrant.org is a campaign and platform which creates a place for the personal stories of migrants and challenges the anti migrant stereotypes and hate speech in politics and society;

refugees-welcome.net is a non-profit organisation which creates a liaison between the local community and refugees by encouraging flatshares. This prevents refugees from having to live in camps, while creating the opportunity for local communities to learn more about refugees’ background, culture and ultimately their story;

Amnesty International has initiated a number of campaigns based on storytelling, such as “Look Beyond Borders”, a video experiment during which refugees and Europeans sat across from each other and looked each other in the eyes. The human encounters were recorded in a video showing basic human emotions between people from different continents who have never set eyes on each other before.





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