



# PERCEPTIONS

## Policy Brief

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# The Role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in shaping perceptions

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## ● Executive Summary

CSOs provide a number of activities and services aimed at fostering the integration of migrants<sup>1</sup> into society and are a main actor in the organisation of events designed to raise awareness about migrants' situation and struggles. But does their work play a relevant role in shaping images and narratives of Europe which can influence migrants and people who intend to migrate? And if so, to what extent? Should they have more relevance in this field? What emerges from the study conducted is that CSOs already play an active role in this field, but it is limited due to several reasons mostly linked to the fact that a lack of cooperation and exchange of information between civil society organisations, governments and EU institutions exists. In order to overcome these obstacles, and ensure that CSOs' work is more effective in shaping images and narratives about Europe, it appears necessary to undertake some actions, which include: deepening the cooperation between CSOs and European governments; improve the capacities of CSOs; and increase their involvement in migration policy-making, also at EU level.

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<sup>1</sup> Migrant integration may be broadly defined as: 'The process by which migrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups. Integration refers to a two-way process of adaptation by migrants and host societies, and implies consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and host societies, of access to different kinds of services and the labour market, and of identification and respect for a core set of values that bind migrants and host communities in a common purpose.', International Organisation for Migration (IOM), *Labour Migration and Migrant Integration*, 2011.

## ● Introduction

In recent years it has become increasingly clear that migration-related problems and challenges cannot be addressed by a single actor in isolation. The state isn't the lone player in migration anymore: its connections with civil society organisations (CSOs) and the private sector have increased. State collaborations with civil society organisations, which include a wide range of actors (non-governmental organisations, diaspora groups, religious organisations, trade unions, advocacy groups, etc.) play an important role, because they can inject policy discussions with new perspectives and crucial first-hand knowledge of what migrants may need and want.

In fact, since CSOs operate outside the government and in close contact with civil society, they are in a special position, which allows them to provide expertise on the conditions under which migrants work and live, and help shaping and monitoring migration policymaking.

But what role do they play in the migrants' choice to migrate to a European country? Where and how people choose to move is influenced by a variety of factors including: economic attractiveness, generosity of welfare provisions, deterrent policy measures, hostility towards foreigners and asylum seekers, existing asylum communities, etc. The way all these factors are represented and perceived by the outside world depends on the narratives associated with them.

Narratives are, indeed, in the field of migration policymaking, among the most important determinants of public attitudes and behaviour: they are the origin of perceptions held by the public. Narratives can be defined as 'selective representation of reality across at least two points in time that include a causal claim'.<sup>2</sup> They are fundamental to explain and simplify complex realities. Migration narratives are shaped by many different actors, and at different levels of governance, from the international level to the local, and they can influence not only the perceptions that European citizens have of migrants, but also the other way around, so how migrants and people who intend to migrate perceive the European countries.

The aim of this policy brief is to analyse which role CSOs play in the construction of such narratives: is their role relevant in influencing images of Europe, and if so, to what extent? Should they have more relevance in this field?

The study was conducted using a qualitative method, through the analysis of responses to a questionnaire on the engagement of civil society organisations in shaping images and perceptions of Europe, which was sent to several of ALDA's

### Key Issues:

- Narratives are essential to shape perceptions of Europe, but to what extent can CSOs work contribute?

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<sup>2</sup> Ricorda M. (2022), *Migration narratives across three levels of governance*, ICMPD.

partners involved in other migration-related projects (Epic, Shape and 3 Steps), and to some of the organisations and CSOs that participated in the 7th Migration Forum.

In this way it was possible to investigate the views of CSOs working with migrants on their own engagement in shaping images of Europe, i.e. whether or not they felt that their work had enough space within the construction of narratives about Europe that can influence the perceptions of migrants and those intending to migrate.

## ● The role of CSOs in shaping narratives and images of Europe

Understanding what perceptions migrants and those intending to migrate have of Europe is one of the key objectives of the PERCEPTIONS project. To do so, it is fundamental to identify who are the actors which shape such images of Europe: in particular, our research focused on the role that civil society organisations (CSOs) play in this field.

According to our findings, CSOs play an active role in building narratives and images of European countries which can influence migrants' perceptions. CSOs are, indeed, one of the main supporters of migrants' integration within the society, they provide services and activities aimed at making them aware of the legislation, key rights, economic and political issues, and culture of the host country where they arrive and settle. Moreover, civil society organisations often organise events and activities designed to raise awareness about migrants' situation and struggles.

The work carried out by CSOs can therefore contribute to the creation of narratives about Europe. However, some people involved in the study, and precisely 20% of the respondents, argue that the role of CSOs in this field is rather limited, and this is mainly for two reasons:

1. CSOs usually only have contact with migrants once they have already arrived in the host country. So, they cannot directly shape the perceptions of Europe migrants have before they actually migrate. Thus, this task is mainly left to those who have already migrated into a European country, who through their testimonies can influence the image of Europe of those who intend to migrate but have not yet done so.
2. The communication and cooperation between CSOs and institutional actors are not sufficient, and this weakens any attempt of civil society organisations to participate in the creation of narratives of Europe, as the

### Key Findings:

- CSOs, through their activities, already play an active role in shaping images and narratives about Europe
- Some of the respondents think that CSOs' work in the field is still too limited, due to the fact that CSOs only meet migrants once they have already arrived in Europe; and because of the lack of cooperation between them and institutional actors



activities they carry out, since they do not benefit from the necessary support from state and European actors, fail to achieve enough resonance.

These two issues pose great risks with respect to migrants' perception of Europe. First of all, migrants' main information sources risk to be primarily informal, and therefore coming from family, friends, and social media, for instance Facebook and WhatsApp. However, practitioners perceive a lack of fact-checking linked to informal sources and channels. And as such, they observe a high risk of migrants falling into the hands of migrant smugglers and human traffickers. Moreover, if the action of CSOs and institutional actors is not well coordinated and integrated, the risk is to create contradictory messages that may be perceived from the outside as unreliable, and so make migrants or people who intend to migrate suspicious of formal channels of information (governments, NGOs, mass media).<sup>3</sup>

## ○ **Construction of new narratives: which role CSOs should play and how can it be more effective?**

As mentioned, CSOs already play an active role in shaping narratives and images of Europe: they promote activities aimed at introducing migrants to European culture, social, economic and political organisations and institutions; they help migrants to integrate into society, i.e. by ensuring that they receive appropriate education or by supporting them to enter the labour market; they promote events to raise public awareness of migrants' situation; and a range of other activities that can contribute to the creation of images and narratives about Europe. However, what emerges from the results of our survey is that the actions carried out by CSOs in this field are not enough, and this for a number of reasons:

1. Lack of cooperation between CSOs and European Governments
2. Lack of funds and capacities
3. Lack of involvement of CSOs in migration policy-making

### **1. Lack of cooperation between CSOs and European Governments**

First of all, civil society organisations should act as a bridge between the state and the society. This means that, thanks to their unique position in close contact with citizens, CSOs should play an active role in connecting the state and its constituents, providing useful information about migrants' situation and struggles to which governments would not otherwise have access, and in making sure to maintain close contact with the communities' policymakers seek to engage. This is necessary in order to create an information exchange channel between the state and marginalised segments of the population, who might lack information and otherwise would not be directly represented in policymaking. However, simply establishing channels for communication between the government and civil

- These two factors can lead to the creation of disinformation and misperceptions about Europe

- A range of activities conducted by CSOs can influence the construction of images of Europe, but they can be more effective

- Different issues related to the insufficient cooperation of CSOs with States and institutional actors, and their lack of capacities, often prevent them from playing a more effective role in shaping narratives about Europe that can influence those who wish to migrate.

<sup>3</sup>Jinkang A. (May 2022), *Practitioners' perceptions for improving migration management and services*, University of Bologna.

society (for instance consultation forums or annual conferences) does not ensure in itself that the objective of infusing policy with ideas from the ground will be met. The strength of the connection between governments and CSOs depends on the investments made on both sides.<sup>4</sup> Deepening this relationship, thus becomes crucial not only to increase the political legitimacy of governments, which by including the voice of civil society in decision-making processes can gain more credibility, but also to shape narratives about Europe that are the result of concerted work between CSOs and governments, and that are based on the most direct and truthful sources possible, namely the very experiences of migrants with whom CSOs work.

## 2. Lack of funds and capacities

CSOs often have insufficient capacity to engage with government bureaucracies, and they are often not informed about ongoing policy processes, or they are informed too late, when the window to engage in consultations has already passed. What emerges is, therefore, the need to increase CSOs' capacity building, which means making a planned comprehensive effort to increase CSOs' effectiveness and viability. Such work implies a long-term examination of all the organisations' aspects that would influence their performance. This includes the CSO's resources, structure, relationships, processes, procedures and culture. This kind of action is thus necessary in order to understand which aspects of the civil society organisation need to be improved and to what extent. The aim is to make its work more effective and provide the information needed to be able to deal effectively with the government.

According to the results of our survey, an important action to be taken in this direction is to increase the funds allocated to CSOs so that they can develop a more professional, informed and trained staff, who knows how to obtain information policymakers may need, and deliver it in the right time frame. Being better informed about current policies, and thus being able to participate in policy making, can, as a consequence, greatly increase the role CSOs play in shaping narratives and images of Europe.

## 3. Lack of involvement of CSOs in migration policy-making

Finally, CSOs are often not properly consulted during policymaking processes. Democratic governments may formally include civil society in debates in an effort to seem open and transparent, but this does not imply that the proposals made by the group are taken into consideration or applied to policy. The know-how and resources that civil-society actors bring with them should be taken into account by policy makers as they often do not have access to this information.<sup>5</sup>

- Strengthen the cooperation between CSOs and governments is essential in order to increase the political legitimacy of governments, and create more truthful and coherent images of Europe

- Increasing CSOs' capacity building can help improving their effectiveness and viability, and enhance their ability to provide the government with useful information

- According to our findings, lack of funding is one of the main factors preventing CSOs from improving their efficiency and effectiveness.

- CSOs can provide pertinent information about migrants' situation to which governments and institutions would not otherwise have access.

<sup>4</sup> Banulescu-Bogdan N. (2011), *The Role of Civil Society in EU Migration Policy: Perspectives on the European Union's Engagement in its Neighbourhood*, Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Banulescu-Bogdan N. (2011), *The Role of Civil Society in EU Migration Policy: Perspectives on the European Union's Engagement in its Neighbourhood*, Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

Moreover, also at the European level, the involvement of civil society organisations in the migration policy making process is often limited to 'consultation' by the Commission, and put in place only after a proposal has been already drafted (on the contrary, consultation with member states takes place also before proposals are drafted).<sup>6</sup>

It appears, therefore, necessary to improve the effectiveness and viability of the work of CSOs, in order to make them relevant actors in migration-related decision-making processes. As already mentioned, a process of capacity building of CSOs improvement should be undertaken, in order to shape organisations with a more informed and competent staff, able to provide expertise to governments and EU institutions that is useful for shaping new policies in the field of migration.

Greater involvement of CSOs in policy-making processes, due to their position outside the government and close to the population, would also help to create laws that better meet the actual needs of migrants, and thus contribute greatly to the creation of narratives and images of Europe that can influence migrants, but especially those who intend to migrate and have not yet done so.

Finally, if CSOs play an active role in shaping migration laws, the work they carry out, through awareness-raising events and information campaigns about the situation and struggles of migrants, would have a more effective impact on the population. Knowing that such events are not an end in themselves, but also have an impact on the institutional level, would increase citizens' trust and conviction in the work of CSOs and in the institutions and governments themselves, and would help shape a better image of Europe.

## Conclusions

The research conducted shows that CSOs already play an active role in building narratives and images of European countries which can influence the perceptions of migrants and of people who intend to migrate. They are, indeed, one of the main supporters of migrants' integration within the society, providing services aimed at making them aware of the legislation, key rights, economic and political issues, and culture of the host country where they arrive; promoting events and activities designed to raise awareness about migrants' situation and struggles; and, therefore, contributing to the creation of narratives about Europe. However, what emerges is that CSOs' engagement in the sector is still limited due to several reasons, for the most part linked to the fact that a lack of cooperation and exchange of information between civil society organisations, governments and EU institutions exists. CSOs are, indeed, often excluded from policy making processes or barely consulted, and sometimes they do not even possess the necessary expertise to contribute effectively, often due to a lack of funds. All this weakens any attempt of civil society organisations to participate effectively in the creation of narratives of Europe. To ensure that CSOs have a clearer and more active role

- CSOs are often excluded from policy making processes

- Increasing the involvement of CSOs in migration-related decision-making processes can help shape policies that better represent migrants' needs, and more truthful narratives and images of Europe.

<sup>6</sup> Singleton A. (2015), *Speaking Truth to Power? Why Civil Society, Beyond Academia, Remains Marginal in EU Migration Policy*, in *Integrating Immigrants in Europe: Research-Policy Dialogues*, Scholten P., Entzinger H., Penninx R., Verbeek S., IMISCOE Research Series.

in this field, it appears, therefore, necessary to undertake some actions in order to improve the collaboration and information exchange between CSOs, governments and EU institutions, and the capacity building of CSOs themselves, so that their work can be more effective and coherent.

## ● Recommendations

### Recommendation 1.

**Increase the cooperation and exchange of information among authorities and CSOs:** CSOs should play an active role in connecting the state and its constituents, providing useful information about migrants' situation and struggles to which governments would not otherwise have access. Deepening this relationship, thus becomes crucial to increase the political legitimacy of governments, and also to shape narratives about Europe that are the result of concerted work between CSOs and governments.

### Recommendation 2.

**Increase the capacity building of CSOs through access to training and allocation of funds:** this kind of action is necessary to increase CSOs' effectiveness and viability. Developing a more professional, informed and trained staff, can increase the knowledge of CSOs about current policies, and thus make them able to participate in policy making processes.

### Best practice example - SHAPE project:

The SHAPE project (SHaring Actions for Participation and Empowerment of migrant communities and LA's), which ALDA is co-leading, includes activities aimed at increasing the capacity of CSOs and local authority practitioners, officials and managers to build an active and fruitful dialogue with migrant citizens and communities, to foster participatory processes in local policy-making and improve integration in the main areas of concern (health care, education, housing, employment, gender equality).

### Recommendation 3.

**CSOs should implement more initiatives to increase exchanges between migrants and local host communities:** according to survey participants, with more funds at disposal, CSOs can develop more effective information campaigns which can further involve the local community in their work, and greatly increase the role they play in shaping narratives and images of Europe.

### Key recommendations:

- Increase the cooperation between CSOs and governments
- Increase the capacity building of CSOs
- Improve the exchange between migrants and host communities



## Recommendation 4.

**Fight against hate speech and anti-migrants' public discourse:** CSOs should help in building an appropriate reporting of migration narratives, discourses and images in policy, legislation and media, aimed at weakening the image of the migrant as a “threat” for the local population.

### Best practice example - EPIC project:

One of the main objectives of the EPIC project - European Platform of Integrating Cities ([www.epicamif.eu](http://www.epicamif.eu)), led by ALDA, is to address issues of media and negative narratives on migration, and develop the capacities of LAs and CSOs to counter them with evidence-based and impactful discourses. The commitment to fight prejudice towards the migrant population also resulted in the organisation of three International Networking Paths, i.e. public events involving the project partners, stakeholders and civil society, in order to continue to raise awareness on the topic, to combat hate speech and to take further steps in shaping new narratives.

## Recommendation 5.

**Involvement of CSOs in policy making processes:** greater involvement of CSOs in policy-making processes, due to their position outside the government and close to the population, would help to create laws that better meet the actual needs of migrants, and thus contribute to the creation of narratives and images of Europe that can influence migrants and who intends to migrate; and would also increase citizens' trust in the effectiveness of CSOs' work.

## Recommendation 6.

**Continuous rather than on-and-off engagement of CSOs in EU migration-related policy making process:** to guarantee an integrated and coherent approach and accomplish its goals the European Union should maintain a constant relation with its partners. CSOs should, therefore, be involved at every stage of the policy making process, and not only sporadically or after the policy has already been drafted.

- Initiatives to increase exchange of information between stakeholders and to fight against hate speech

- Involvement and engagement of CSOs in policy making processes both at local and European level



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<https://www.alda-europe.eu/progetto/shape-amif-migrant/>

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