



# PERCEPTIONS



## Policy Brief

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# Social media narratives on Europe and migration - seen from an outside Europe point of view

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## ● Executive Summary

In recent years, the advent of the Internet, smartphones and social media have had a deep impact on all the phases of the migration process. With regards to a **prior-to-migration phase**, besides allowing direct information retrieval, an aspect to consider is **the influence of online narratives about life and migration** in the destination countries, which can shape perceptions of what is outside one's own country and thus the ambitions and aspirations of future migrants.

In this report, we outline results from an investigation of **the narratives conveyed online about Europe and migration**. Noteworthy, and for the first time, the study relies on the collection of **a large amount of public data from social media** (Twitter), rather than field interviews. This methodology allowed the analysis of new aspects such as the magnitude and dynamics of narratives diffusion, as perceived outside Europe. The analysis of the social media data shows how the online flow of information (on Twitter) is strongly **unbalanced**, with content mainly produced in Europe and amplified outside, and Africa being especially receptive to Europe-related content. These insights can help in outlying strategies to address online communication and building appropriate narratives (or counter-narratives).

## ● Introduction

Conventional ‘push-pull’ models predict that while external ‘push’ factors, such as natural disasters, poverty, conflicts, unemployment, etc. **influence people’s decision to leave their country**, also the pull factors, such as the abundance of jobs, widespread prosperity or political stability, act as attractors. Although these factors undoubtedly play an important role, they are not sufficient to fully explain migration phenomena; people migrate if they also have **ambitions and aspirations**.

In recent years, Europe has become the largest destination for international migrants (87 million migrants, 30.9% of the international migrant population according to the World Migration Report 20221 of IOM [7]) with the motivation of improving standards of living, finding safety, freedom, and security. However, often these “impressions” are based more **on general hopes rather than on actual knowledge about life in Europe**. Results from field interviews with migrants show for instance how, while some groups of migrants might view Europe as a more welcoming [4] and tolerant place [9], others will share their concerns about homelessness, economic crisis [2], difficulties in reaching Europe due to strict border controls [3], discrimination [1] etc. These narratives have also been spread more widely thanks to the increased use of the Internet and social media.

## ● Methodology

Twitter data have been increasingly used to estimate, understand, and predict the spread of diseases, misinformation, political polarisation, natural disasters, and population movements.

Within the PERCEPTIONS project, a study has been conducted on Twitter, a global social media platform (320 million active users), actively and widely used by international migrant communities. The study aims to analyse how discourse around **Europe and migration** is shaped by collecting a **32 million tweets** dataset. To build the dataset, a list of around 70 keywords, translated into 5 languages, related to Europe and migration has been compiled by field experts. During a monitoring period of three months (Apr-Jun 2021), each public tweet produced that contained at least one of the keywords was downloaded. Several analyses were conducted by applying graph network analysis to understand the main hubs and topics of the online communities of users within the dataset. Network analysis was combined with **the geo-location of user accounts** within the dataset to obtain new insights into the **users’ point of view from “outside Europe”**, as well as into online narratives

### Key Issues:

- *Europe has hosted around 87 million international migrants, respectively – comprising 30.9% of the global international migrant stock.*
- *The immigrants’ impressions and perceptions on Europe are based more on general hopes rather than on actual knowledge about life in Europe*

and the mechanisms that contribute to forming perceptions and aspirations about Europe and migration, in a phase that **potentially precedes migration**.

## ● Research and Analysis

Well in line with previous research, most of the discussions on Twitter captured by the collected dataset occur at a national level, with 63% of retweets, the main form of interaction on Twitter, **between two users localised in the same country**. Interestingly, this percentage changes depending on the topic: retweets of content related to migration tend to happen more at a national level than tweets discussing “Europe”.

Analysing the subset of interactions (retweets) that occurs between users located in different nations and that thus contributes to shaping the imagination of what is outside one’s own country, the following findings emerged:

- When the subject of discussion is Europe, as expected, the main producers of content are users located in Europe itself. Interestingly, although Africa-based accounts represent only 9% of localised users in the research dataset, **they represent one of the most numerous groups of receivers of European-related tweets**, highlighting their interest in European events.
- Conversely, transnational exchanges about migration are more homogenously distributed at the global level because users in almost every country produce content on this subject. However, the situation is still unbalanced with the majority of content produced in Europe.
- The most important factor that triggers transnational exchanges is **the language of the tweet** (by far the majority of transnational tweets are in English, followed by French and Spanish).
- Moreover, users prefer to give visibility **to trusted users** (verified accounts) and spread content that is unlikely to contain wrong information or **fake news**. However, it cannot be excluded that verified accounts have usually a higher number of followers and thus are more likely to be retweeted.
- Another strong piece of evidence that emerged is that the most relevant topic discussed by Europe-based users but gaining high visibility all over the world and especially in African countries through retweets is **football**. Football-related content is mostly posted by accounts of football players and clubs as well as accounts of sports news. These accounts are very influential and they are followed and retweeted by millions of users worldwide. Figure 1 shows the four tweets in the dataset that gained the most visibility in Africa: interestingly, they all present successful images of

### Key Findings:

- *Africa-based accounts represent one of the most numerous groups of receivers of European-related tweets.*
- *The most critical factor for a tweet to become transnational and reach far is **language** (English followed by French and Spanish), but also trustworthiness of the publishing account (e.g. if an account is recognized as “verified” by Twitter).*
- *Football is the most exported topic from Europe worldwide. Accounts of football teams, football players, football news are massively followed and retweeted and thus very influential.*
- *Discussions about migration and Europe are spread outside Europe through official institutions and international agencies channels, especially*

immigrated players. This result is in line with the fact that narratives related to successful football players with African origins seem to be quite popular in African countries, presenting a positive example of migrants, as found in field interviews studies [5] and shown by the magnitude of the phenomenon of irregular migration of young African footballers that led FIFA to take action and regulate the process [8].



**Figure 1.** Tweet with high visibility in Africa on immigrated football players

- Besides football, discussions about migration and Europe develop around keywords such as human rights, covid, policies, etc. The main hubs of diffusion online are official institutions and international agencies, and **especially their representatives**, for instance Ursula von der Leyen or Josep Borrell for the EU community, or UNHCR representatives in the human rights community. This highlights the importance of the online presence of individual representatives, not only of official institutions. It suggests that online users are more likely to engage in a conversation or give visibility to real people, even if they have professional accounts. Other important hubs of diffusion are **journalists, news, commentators, and activists** that together with official institutions and agency accounts form online communities around which the discussion develops.
- Moreover, online bonds emerge between countries that **have linguistic and historical cultural bonds** such as France and Morocco, Senegal, Togo, etc.
- A topic that emerged is **Eurovision**, i.e. the European music festival, which seems to be a very powerful topic discussed worldwide, especially in Asia, and thus contributes to forging the image of Europe abroad.
- Interestingly, populist discussions (e.g. the #Refugeenotwelcome campaign) seem to concern only users located in countries that are usually a destination of migration phenomena.
- As a side observation, our analysis shows that European users are not very interested in information stemming from African users, limiting this information to a few topics such as Palestinian territories or the Western Sahara situation.

*through the accounts of their representatives*

- *A special online bond is found between countries that are historically (and linguistically) tied, such as between France and Senegal, Togo etc.*
- *Eurovision song contest has emerged as a new topic that is discussed from users located outside Europe (especially Asia) thus contributing to the image of Europe.*

## ● Conclusion

What emerges from all the analyses is an unbalanced picture of migration-related information flow, with a strong predominance of producers located in first-world countries. For example, African countries are mostly receivers and content amplifiers from other continents, **suggesting a lack of own independent “content producers” for messages related to Europe and migration. The role of football emerged as one of the principal narratives contributing to the idea of Europe.** Football clubs, football players, football news and football journalists are very influential accounts that convey messages resonating all around the globe and play a primary role in transmitting football-related migration narratives and successful stories.

Moreover, besides football, in both networks, the most influential accounts are represented by official accounts of governments, institutions and agencies, especially official accounts of their representatives (e.g., Ursula Von Der Leyen was more pivotal in the network than the official account of EU). Together with journalists, politicians, commentators, activists, and news outlets, they build heterogeneous communities, suggesting **the intertwining of different types of accounts as a successful structure to gain visibility.**

Finally, it is interesting to note that narratives spread by “anti-migrants” accounts, as well as of “pro-migrants”, (for example, the ones containing the hashtag #refugeesnotwelcome but also #refugeeswelcome) seem to be marginal and tend to involve users located in the destination countries, suggesting that these campaigns are purely directed to influence their public opinion and not potential migrants.

## ● Recommendations

This research has demonstrated that Twitter data can be a useful resource to complement traditional data sources to monitor the perceptions of migrants:

- Although Twitter users are generally not representative of the population at large, Twitter data can contribute to developing effective strategies to communicate online and counter the spread of misinformation on migration and migrants’ perceptions of the destination countries.
- Football players, public figures, and events (like Eurovision, the Champions League, and the European League) might all be leveraged

### Key recommendations:

- *Twitter data can contribute to developing effective strategies to communicate online and counter the spread of misinformation on migration and migrants’*

to communicate the appropriate information to the intended audience.

- More generally, there should be incentives for **independent "content producers"** located outside Europe to communicate their point of view on Europe and migration. This would significantly contribute to improving the unbalanced narratives on the topic, whose main content producers are based in first-world nations.

The results presented in this report are summarised in a scientific publication currently under revision.

*perceptions of destination country.*

- *Independent "content producers" located outside Europe should be incentivised and given more visibility.*

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## ○ Websites

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