



# PERCEPTIONS

## Policy Brief

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## Messaging on migration-related risks

### Recommendations from the field of crisis and risk communication

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- **Executive Summary**

Crisis, risk, and human mobility are deeply intertwined. Societal crises (such as war and economic collapse) and group and individual-level risks (such as crime and exploitation) are all significant drivers of migration. Further risks can arise in the course of migrant journeys: these include dangerous routes, exposure to criminal and/or state violence, psychological stressors, sickness, and generally unsafe or unfavourable conditions in countries of transit and/or arrival. This policy brief offers recommendations for communicating to current and potential migrants about risks they might encounter in the course of migration. It draws on interviews with migrants to Europe conducted during the European Commission-funded PERCEPTIONS project, situating key findings within a framework drawn from the field of crisis and risk communication (the Protective Action Decision Model).



## ● Introduction

The keywords “**migration**”, “**crisis**”, and “**risk**” seem inextricably bound together in European discourse. Politicians and the media consistently refer to a “migration crisis”, often without reference to actual mobility statistics in a given country at a given time. Likewise, some types of migrants are repeatedly portrayed as a “risk” to Europe, despite the fact that numerous studies have shown in-migration to correlate with economic growth and other positive outcomes.

The PERCEPTIONS project and many other studies demonstrate that in fact, it is *migrants themselves* who often face crises and risks before, during, and after their journeys. Regardless of European policymakers’ political orientation, they are ethically obliged to address such risks. Recently, EU politicians have called for strengthening **campaigns to deter (forced and irregular) migration** as a means of mitigating both the risks that confront many migrants on their journeys and the ostensible risk posed by migrants themselves to the EU. However, prior evidence suggests that such campaigns are unlikely to achieve either objective (Browne, 2015; see also below).

This policy brief advocates an alternative model of risk communication that focuses on **enhancing migrants’ capability for protective action**, rather than simply discouraging migration. It draws on the findings of interviews conducted during the PERCEPTIONS project with migrants to the EU. Situating these findings within the Protective Action Decision Model (PADM) of risk communication, it offers strategic recommendations and urges cooperation between migration policymakers and specialists in the field of crisis and risk communication.

### Key Issues:

- *The topics of migration, crisis, and risk are deeply interconnected.*
- *Deterrence campaigns claim to prevent migration-related risks, but this is questionable.*
- *This policy brief advocates an alternative model of risk communication focused on enhancing migrants’ capability for protective action.*

## ● Research and Analysis

### ○ Migration, crisis, and risk

Oxford Languages defines “migrant” as “a person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions”. This definition itself points to a bias in the discourse on migration. In reality, “push factors” – namely, **crises and risks in countries of origin** – are more significant migration drivers than “pull factors” like perceived work opportunities<sup>1</sup>. Societal crises that have driven mass transnational migration in recent years include wars in Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine, genocide in Myanmar, state failure in South America, etc. (not to mention the multifaceted climate crisis). Individual-level risks that drive migration include abuse, discrimination, exploitation, poverty, and state and criminal violence – all of which are often

### Key Findings:

- *Migrants often face crises and risks in their countries of origin, during their journeys, and/or in their countries of arrival.*
- *Risk communication is a tool with which policymakers can seek to*

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that the relationship between so-called “push” and “pull” factors in migration is complex and multidimensional rather than simply dichotomous (Van Hear et al., 2018).



linked to both local societal crises and global inequalities (Migration Data Portal, 2021).

The PERCEPTIONS research confirms that many migrants also face **crises and risks during migratory journeys**. With regard to macro-level crises, some migrants traverse areas hit by war or environmental disaster, while some spend interim periods in countries of transit in which state violence is common. Individual-level risks include choosing or being compelled to take dangerous routes, being subject to violence or exploitation, and any of the myriad other hazards that accompany transience: e.g., material and social deprivation, sickness, and stress, to name a few. Unfortunately, many migrants also face heightened **risks in countries of arrival**, such as alienation, discrimination, legal insecurity, and precarity. Forced and irregular migrants are often particularly vulnerable to such risks, both during their journeys and after arrival.

**Risk communication** is defined by the WHO as “the real-time exchange of information, advice and opinions between experts or officials and people who face a threat (from a hazard) to their survival, health or economic or social wellbeing” (World Health Organization, 2023). Officials in Europe have long attempted to communicate to potential (forced and irregular) migrants about the above-mentioned spectrum of risks. However, few information campaigns have been evaluated in a systematic way (Seefar, 2021; Tjaden et al., 2018; Browne, 2015; Pécoud, 2011). The ethical foundations of such campaigns have also been rightfully questioned: “there seems to be a mismatch between what such campaigns declare as their intention (to inform, to empower, to achieve humanitarian objectives) and governments’ actual policies”, which prioritise deterrence (Brändle, 2022). Even relatively balanced campaigns often show bias against potential migrants from some regions as opposed to others<sup>2</sup>.

Certain EU politicians have recently called for even more spending on **campaigns that focus explicitly on deterrence**: e.g., which echo the Australian strategy of targeting diasporic communities with messages such as “you have ‘zero chance’ of making it, and if you enter illegally, you will be ‘banned for life’” (European Parliament, 2021; Szumski, 2023; cf. Bishop 2020). Such messages foreground the risks of forced and irregular migration and frame the decision to stay put as a protective action. However, there are good grounds to doubt the effectiveness of deterrence campaigns: “while the EU and European member states have invested in information campaigns aimed at discouraging migration for more than two decades, migrants generally do not consider them useful” (Vammen et al. 2021, p. 59). Deterrence campaigns furthermore frame some migrants as themselves a threat to countries of arrival (Bishop, 2020). This connects to the assumption that migration constitutes a security threat, not only insofar as some kinds of migration violate the sanctity of borders, but also because migrants might be more likely

*reduce the harm that migrants face.*

- *Many current risk communications aimed at potential migrants are neither effective nor ethical.*
- *The Protective Action Decision Model (PADM) is one of several models that could help policymakers plan more effective and ethical risk communication strategies.*
- *Interviews conducted during the PERCEPTIONS project lend empirical weight to this model in a migration risk context.*

<sup>2</sup> The federally-funded “Rumours about Germany” website (<https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/>), for instance, posts information about migration-related risks in English, French, Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, Russian, and Tigrinya, whereas the federally-funded “Make it in Germany” website posts information exclusively about opportunities in German, English, Spanish, and French (<https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/de/>).

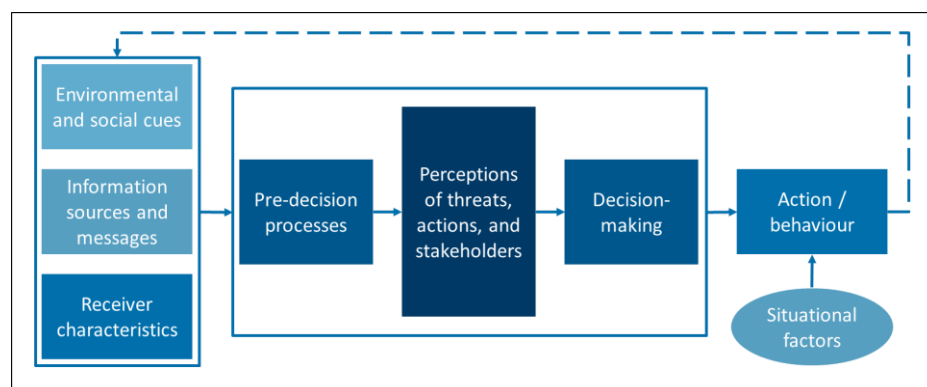


to engage in crime or terrorism (Givens et al., 2009). Studies of the “migration-terrorism nexus” show that this assumption is not just dubious, but harmful: “there is little evidence that stricter migration policies actually result in less terrorism. Rather, certain policies that alienate the migrant population appear to incite terrorism” (Helbling and Meierriks, 2022, p. 992).

Having interviewed N=100 recent or potential migrants, N=137 first-line practitioners, N=18 representatives of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), N=45 policymakers in governmental organisations (GOs), N=26 law enforcement agents (LEAs), and N=33 experts in academia and civil society organisations (CSOs), the PERCEPTIONS researchers have reached a similar conclusion: campaigns that focus on deterrence are not just unethical, but are unlikely to prove effective. Based on clear evidence, the PERCEPTIONS consortium advises European communications policymakers and professionals to focus on **harm reduction rather than deterrence**. A promising starting point would be a review of empirically grounded models of how messages about risks from diverse sources are received, understood, and used in situated decision-making processes. The following section summarises one among many validated models of this process: the Protective Action Decision Model.

## ○ Reframing crisis and risk communication

One aim of risk communication is to promote risk aversion and harm reduction on an individual level. In a migration context, this can mean convincing people to choose less risky pathways to their mobility goals, and/or to forego risky goals altogether. It can also mean informing people as to how to best avoid severe threats (like violence, including gender-based violence) and effectively deal with more manageable risks that arise during journeys (like sickness and stress). This is easier said than done. Planning interventions in this complex decision-making process requires an understanding of the process itself. Here, models based on the systematic evaluation of crisis and risk communication in non-migration contexts may be helpful: for instance, the **Protective Action Decision Model (PADM)**, summarised in Figure 1 (Lindell and Perry, 2021).



**Figure 1.** Simplified version of the Protective Action Decision Model (adapted from Lindell and Perry, 2021)

Though developed in the context of crisis and disaster response, the PADM is flexible enough to merit application to other risk contexts, including migration



decision-making<sup>3</sup>. The PADM visualises the stages in risk communication and decision-making from a receiver standpoint: how a subject receives information (environmental and social cues, information sources and messages, and receiver characteristics); how a subject makes sense of information and formulates decisions (pre-decision processes, perceptions of relevant factors, and decision-making); and the protective actions a subject actually takes, which are constrained by situational factors. The outcomes of actions then feed back to influence future decision processes. The following section situates key PERCEPTIONS research findings within the PADM model.

## ○ Insights from the PERCEPTIONS research

### ▪ Information sources, cues, and receiver characteristics

The PADM hypothesises that assessments of risk are based on a very broad spectrum of information: not only messages from official channels, but also messages passed along informal networks, together with observations of the environment and other people. Information and cues alike are filtered through the receiver's own aspirations, capabilities, orientations, and experiences (de Haas, 2021). This is equally a matter of access and of preference.

Current and potential migrants interviewed by the PERCEPTIONS researchers confirmed that they took numerous information sources and cues into account when making mobility decisions. They often emphasised the importance of informal networks and social media over official channels, including when it came to learning about and dealing with migration-related risks:

*"I noticed that there were some groups in Facebook. Yeah, so, for help. Sometimes because people died or something. Sometimes they need help and so on."<sup>4</sup>*

*"All the help I received was, let's say, during the journey. I met people from my own country, or who were going in the same direction."*

While some interviewees stated a preference for official channels or NGOs when searching for specific facts such as entry requirements, most leaned toward unofficial sources for general information prior to and during their journeys. Interviewees with multi-stage journeys sometimes described how in addition to conversing with others taking the same routes, they took implicit cues from others' actions and attitudes.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that Lindell and Perry have applied the Protective Action Decision Model specifically to risk communication in multi-ethnic communities (2004). The author and colleagues have also used the PADM to analyse risk communication to vulnerable groups, including migration-background and minority populations, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anson et al. 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Interviewee quotes cited in this policy brief were taken from pseudonymised and translated transcripts of interviews with 1) recent migrants to Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, or the UK; and 2) persons who hope or intend to migrate to the EU or UK, currently residing in Algeria, Egypt, Kosovo, or Morocco. For details, see the PERCEPTIONS Handbook (<https://www.perceptions.eu/handbook/>).



In addition to preferences, individuals' capabilities and other attributes inevitably impact their access to information and cues: one example mentioned by interviewees was the need for messages in languages and formats they understood. Finally, with information as with material support, structural factors – such as infrastructural conditions and interference by various bad actors – can play a decisive role (cf. Vammen et al. 2021).

- **Pre-decision processes, perceptions of relevant factors, and decision-making strategies**

In addition to attributes like linguistic fluency, information behaviour is influenced by so-called pre-decision processes (like attentiveness) and perceptions of the risks, actions, and stakeholders in play. The perceived credibility of different information sources is especially critical in mobility decision-making. A number of PERCEPTIONS interviewees expressed more trust in first-hand sources as opposed to mediated sources. Some furthermore explicitly questioned the credibility of official channels:

*“I try to trust the experience of someone I know, more than what I can read or what I can see on TV.”*

*“Information is trustworthy, I think, when it is based on many real life experiences.”*

*“I do not trust [official sources] much. Some private media give a more realistic picture, but I can not say this about official institutions.”*

*“Many governments are corrupt; I don't think they would say the truth.”*

This being said, interviewees acknowledged the risk of receiving inaccurate information from unofficial sources as well:

*“You know, there are some Cameroonians who have travelled to Europe [...] Some of them who are open will always give true information. And some give false information.”*

Among information sources discussed by interviewees, smugglers garnered the most polarising assessments. On the one hand, some interviewees were deceived and led into threatening situations; on the other, some expressed thanks for smugglers' services. Most forced and irregular migrants interviewed fell between these extremes. Despite not trusting smugglers, they turned to them for information and help because they lacked other options:

*“It wasn't that we trusted [the smugglers], we knew that everything can go wrong, but [...] it was our only choice, so we said, we will risk it. Luckily, for us it didn't go bad.”*

Assessments of the credibility of different stakeholders invariably intersect with assessments of the severity of risks. As mentioned, many forced and irregular migration journeys are driven by threats in countries of origin. This is a glaring blind spot of deterrence campaigns: in many cases, potential migrants must weigh the *possible risks* of a dangerous journey against the *clear and present risks* of staying in the country of origin. Likewise, those who have already started their journeys may face risks in transit countries, in addition to



having already invested significant money and energy in getting underway (i.e., sunk cost bias). In such cases, taking action to avoid or mitigate one risk can mean exposing oneself to other risks and losses.

## ▪ **Actions and situational factors**

Even in the face of unambiguous risks, the decision to take a given protective action is complex. The range of actions available to a subject is furthermore constrained by situational factors, including access to resources and the emergence of new hazards (“proximate drivers”) (Van Hear et al., 2018). As numerous studies including PERCEPTIONS have found, affective factors can be as decisive as material factors in shaping migration decisions. Interviewees often described how hope and despair can play into decision-making:

*“[I came] by boat, and that’s dangerous. Yes, but sometimes, we have only one life and only one chance.”*

*“France 24 showed a lot of corpses in the water... I knew everything, I knew everything... but, it depends on... There are situations that you are put into... life is like that.”*

*“When you hear the story [about Europe] from one perspective and you don’t have any other options, sometimes you have to push yourself to believe that this is the right story.”*

Such actions should not be disparaged as irrational merely because they have an affective component. Rather, they exemplify situated rationality – and can be interpreted as protective, with the referent risk being an intolerable living condition that is unlikely to change on its own.

## ● **Recommendations**

Drawing on key findings of the PERCEPTIONS project, as well as prior research, this policy brief argues that migrants’ decisions on how to face risks can be analysed using tools from the field of risk and crisis communication, such as the Protective Action Decision Model. A top-level recommendation based on this analysis – which is well-supported by prior research – is that campaigns based on simple deterrence are unlikely to prevent would-be migrants from taking risky journeys or facing other threats, no matter how harsh the message or tone. Three more specific recommendations follow, all of which could be synthesised in a model of risk communication to migrants based on **harm reduction rather than deterrence**.

### ▪ **Recommendation: Set achievable and ethical goals.**

PERCEPTIONS confirms the prior finding that deterring migration is an unrealistic goal for official risk communication. Even when the risks of migration are made clear, any attempt to frame staying in the country of origin as a “protective action” will run up against psychological and contextual blocks. These include the preference for non-official information sources, the

### **Key recommendations:**

- *Set achievable and ethically sound goals. Simple deterrence is unrealistic; instead, focus on specific, avertable dangers and challenges.*
- *Amplify migrants’ own voices. Information based on first-hand experience is most likely to be trusted.*
- *Build coalitions and leverage existing networks. Migrants, NGOs, and public institutions all bring*



complex dynamics of trust, the severity of risks in the country of origin, the intensity of affective factors, and the sudden emergence of proximate drivers:

*“Sometimes when you're going through a situation, ‘I just can't take it anymore’ – you don't think about it, you make the decision and you go.”*

In light of this, we argue that information campaigns aimed at deterrence are wasteful. Dedicating EU funds to hostile, Australian-style campaigns would not only burn communicational bridges with migrant-background communities, but also contribute to anti-migrant sentiment in countries of arrival. This has been shown to increase the risk of radicalisation both *by and against* migrants (Helbling and Meierriks, 2022). Such campaigns are thus likely to achieve exactly the opposite of what their proponents claim.

A wiser use of funds would be campaigns that refrain from trying to influence the decision to migrate, and instead aim to enhance migrants' capability for contextually appropriate protective action, e.g., by ensuring they “are properly informed about the concrete dangers and challenges en route” (Vammen et al. 2021, p. 35). Examples could include objective, up-to-date information on:

- Preparing for travel and arrival;
- Hazards (environmental, health, security, etc.) along routes;
- No-questions-asked service providers along routes;
- Safe places to shelter or resupply;
- Rescue and emergency assistance; and
- Legal migration pathways and requirements.

Such information should be provided in a straightforward manner; active measures to counter misinformation should also be considered. However, a deterrent subtext should be avoided, and careful attention paid to emotionally-charged visuals and other elements that could be interpreted as covert attempts at persuasion. As detailed below, governmental organisations planning such campaigns should act in cooperation with other stakeholders, including local actors when possible.

#### ▪ **Recommendation: Amplify migrants' own voices.**

Risk perception and decision-making are largely determined by access to, and attitudes toward, various information sources and cues. It is well established that (forced and irregular) migrants often turn to informal networks for information about conditions along routes and in countries of transit and arrival, sometimes to the exclusion of official sources; this is partly a matter of access, and partly of trust.

In the PERCEPTIONS project, we closed our interviews with migrants by asking them what advice they themselves would give to organisations planning information campaigns. The interviewees made it clear that engaging people with migration experiences and/or people in their social circles was key:

*“There will always be someone who has already gone there and will say ‘Look, look’ [...] this will always be the most valuable and reliable information, which generates trust in people.”*

*resources necessary for a risk communication campaign to succeed.*





Note that “community engagement” in this context does not mean using migrants as mouthpieces for messages crafted by institutions. Rather, migrants (and members of relevant communities) should be invited to consensually participate in multiple stages of the campaigning process: e.g., planning, implementation, assessment, and iterative redesign. In addition to conducting research, the PERCEPTIONS project sought to put its interviewees’ advice into practice by planning and co-creating arts-based information initiatives with migrants and members of impacted communities. The results and lessons learned are available on our Open Information Hub<sup>5</sup>.

- **Recommendation: Build coalitions and leverage existing networks.**

In addition to migrants, the PERCEPTIONS team conducted research and consultation with numerous stakeholders: first-line practitioners, law enforcement agents, policymakers, and CSO decision-makers. Most agreed that good information campaigns require cooperation between stakeholders (preferably with migrants themselves at the centre). As one migrant interviewee emphasised, this is because each stakeholder group brings different resources to the table:

*“We normal people, we have the experience [...] and the government has more ability, and more power, and also organizations, to make these campaigns [...] if it's both together, it works better.”*

For governmental risk communicators, direct engagement with migrants and their communities may be hindered by histories of discrimination, exclusion, and mistrust. Civil society organisations that have established connections within relevant communities in countries of origin, transit, and/or arrival can help bridge this divide. Such “bridging organisations” can leverage the influence of existing networks based on solidarity and trust (Folke et al. 2005; cf. Edwards 2022).

However, because EU migration policies often (by intention or not) result in harm to migrants, CSOs may also be wary of cooperation with GOs<sup>6</sup>. Before attempting to engage migrants, their communities, or the CSOs that work with them, official risk communicators must critically examine their planned campaigns’ aims, means of implementation, and policy contexts. Campaigns that implicitly contravene their target groups’ interests should be reconsidered from the ground up (Le Louvier et al., 2022). Pushing ahead with such campaigns in the absence of stakeholder buy-in would be ineffective, while attempting to win buy-in through ‘spin’ would be unethical – and in the end, equally ineffective.

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<sup>5</sup> See the individual initiatives at <https://www.perceptions.eu/campaigning-tools/>, as well as the PERCEPTIONS Handbook for more details (<https://www.perceptions.eu/handbook/>).

<sup>6</sup> Some CSO interviewees within the PERCEPTIONS project even expressed hesitation about participating in a European Union-funded research project, due to both fundamental disagreements with EU migration policy and specific negative experiences with EU-level stakeholders.



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## ○ Websites

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