

The role of narratives in migratory decision- making:

The role of narratives in onward migration
of Afghan nationals from Istanbul to
Europe

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Abstract

Information is a key element in the decision-making process for refugees and migrants considering moving on from a transit situation. This report explores how personal experiences of Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Turkey and their access to networked information sources, together form their dominant narrative of onward migration. Further, the report investigates how Afghan migrants' narrative of migration relates to and contrasts with the main messages of EU-funded government information campaigns targeting potential migrants. The report is based on qualitative interviews with 46 Afghan refugees and migrants from all social strata. Most of these had left Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

Explored through the lens of the migrants' local narratives, the report presents central factors that influence migrants' decisions to stay in Turkey versus move on to Europe, including their access to resources and networks, specificity of destination, and access to smugglers. The report also discusses the alternatives to moving on.

The main narrative emanating from the informants depicts the situation in Istanbul and Turkey more generally as unpredictable, ever-changing, and deteriorating, pointing to a declining economy and labor market and unpredictable and diminishing access to residency. Living in an irregular situation meant lack of access to schools, education, regular housing, and health services. All informants pointed to an increasingly hostile discourse on refugees and migrants in Turkey, relating the following stigma and prejudice to Turkish party politics and the spread of toxic content on social media. Selected findings include:

The dominant narrative of migration for the Afghan refugees and migrants includes elements such as "we had to leave Afghanistan, and there is no future there," "Turkey could have been a destination, but conditions are deteriorating," and "Europe can provide stability, rights, and a future for our families."

There were no active EU-sponsored migration information campaigns targeting migrants and refugees residing in Turkey at the time of study. However, when asked, the Afghan interviewees were not susceptible for the standard messaging of such campaigns: they should explore opportunities in their home country; the route is dangerous; and life in Europe can be tough.

All informants had access to, and relied on information from smartphones, including a range of social media platforms. Other key sources of information included family and friends in Turkey and the EU. Smugglers provided details for those choosing to cross the border.

Based on the material in this study, we recommend that Turkish immigration authorities, together with EU governments work to increase the predictability of the practice of issuing residence permits to refugees and migrants in Turkey. Further, that EU countries speed up the processing of pending visa applications from Afghans residing in Turkey. We also recommend that future EU-campaigns take into consideration the precarities of the target group, are based on transparency, and adhere to the information needs of the refugees and migrants.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research interest and research design

European governments have an interest in understanding the role that narratives and directed information campaigns play in the decision-making processes of refugees and other migrants contemplating migrating to Europe. Refugees and migrants in transit, for their part, have an interest in displaying the challenging nature of their situation and the full context of their decision-making. This report combines these sets of interests by studying the role played by information in the decision-making of Afghan refugees and migrants who are currently residing in Istanbul but considering moving on to the EU or the USA. The report provides an in-depth understanding of the personal stories of this group, how they are informed by, and relate to, narratives on migration in the Turkish public sphere, and the relevance and impact of the central messages of EU-funded information campaigns.

Although several EU information campaigns did target potential Afghan migrants before the Taliban takeover in August 2021, no EU information campaigns have been actively conducted in Turkey in 2022 (Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2017). Our focus is therefore on the new, and thus under-researched, situation faced by forced migrants fleeing the new Afghan regime. It is within this context that the relevance of EU-promoted messaging will be discussed. In other words, we look at the (mis)match between the dominant narrative(s) among the Afghan group in Turkey and the messages and narratives typically pushed in EU campaigns, on the one hand, and the dominant Turkish discourse on Afghan migration, on the other.

We study the specific situation of Afghans residing in Istanbul during times of severe instability and precarious living conditions in Afghanistan; however, we seek knowledge and insights which have general applicability.

This research is part of the BRIDGES project funded by the EU's H2020 program. Our objective is to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicization and polarization.¹ While most studies within the BRIDGES project focus on dynamics and processes within Europe, we investigate the issue of migration narratives in countries of origin and transit. In the project's work package 6, two case studies were selected: the Gambia, as a country of migrant origin, and Turkey, which hosts a large number of transit migrants.²

Originally, the plan was to combine the Gambia study with a field study of migrants residing in transit in Khartoum, Sudan, as part of studying secondary migration toward Europe. Due to the military coup in Sudan in 2021, fieldwork there was no longer feasible. At the same time, the dramatic change in Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover induced thousands of Afghan citizens to flee the country, with many crossing the borders of neighboring countries into Turkey, which was already hosting millions of refugees. Noting the potential impact of Afghans aiming to move forward from Turkey to Europe, the increased tensions and restrictive immigration policies of Turkey, the lack of focus on the conditions for Afghans in transit in a

¹ For more information on the BRIDGES project, please see <https://www.bridges-migration.eu>

² This report may therefore be read in conjunction with the second BRIDGES report on the role of narratives in the onward migration of Afghan nationals from Istanbul to Europe and the USA written by Jan-Paul Brekke and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud (2022).

European public discourse, and the study of the narratives of Afghan refugees residing in the main immigrant hub of Istanbul all emerged as timely, relevant, and important, filling an important knowledge gap.

The current report is to be read and understood in tandem with the parallel report on the role of information, narratives, and campaigns for potential migrants in the Gambia. While the current report studies the effects on predominantly forced migrants residing in transit and considering secondary migration, the Gambia report discusses the impact on migration from a country of origin. A separate third report will compare the two cases, identifying similarities and differences.

The study is based on qualitative interviews with 46 Afghan migrants and refugees residing in Istanbul. The interviews were conducted in May 2022, eight months after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Research ethics, including securing informed consent from all informants, was a prime consideration in the preparation and data gathering in Istanbul. The group of informants covered all social strata and different Afghan ethnic groups, and about half of the informants were women. The inclusion of the latter group enabled analyses of gendered aspects of life in transit, information susceptibility, and migration decision-making.

The situation is challenging for Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey.³ Most of our informants had fled following the Taliban takeover and could not return home. While many had pending visa applications to EU countries and the USA at the time of interview, they were all experiencing the downturn in the Turkish economy and increased stigma. Those who had residence permits gained access to schools and services. Those who had arrived irregularly, or who were denied renewal of their permits, risked losing all access to services, including to health and education. To many, moving on seemed the only solution.

PICTURE 1. Afghan man collecting paper in mid-town Istanbul



Source: Jan Paul Brekke and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud

³ Rights in Turkey - <https://www.mhd.org.tr/images/yayinlar/MHM-14.pdf>

Turkey and Istanbul are particularly sensitive contexts in which to study onward migration to Europe. The country is host to the largest population of refugees in the world,⁴ many of whom are residing in Istanbul.

In May 2022, the Minister of the Interior announced that Istanbul was one of the areas to be considered closed to asylum seekers, shutting down opportunities to register applications for protection.⁵ In 2021, Turkish immigration authorities intensified the fortification and control of the Iranian–Turkish border.⁶ During the first eight months of 2022, more than 43,000 Afghan nationals were reportedly deported from Turkey to Afghanistan.⁷ In addition, a fragile EU–Turkey agreement on migration requires Turkey to control and limit onward irregular migration by sea to Greece and Italy and overland into Greece and Bulgaria. However, reaching Europe has become an even more attractive solution for Afghans in transit. Since the Taliban takeover, deportations of Afghans from European countries have come to a halt, and Afghan refugees are given temporary protection in EU countries, with many being entitled to permanent protection due to the regime change in Afghanistan (European Asylum Support Office, 2021)

This report responds to the EU Commission’s questions regarding the role of information and narratives in the decision-making process of potential refugees and migrants considering entering the EU region irregularly (Call: MIGRATION (H2020-SC6-MIGRATION-2018-2019-2020; Topic: MIGRATION-09-2020)). These questions pertain to the sources of information, identification of relevant narratives (dominant and counternarratives), refugees’ and migrants’ perception of the messaging in government information campaigns, and potential impact of such campaigns on decision-making processes.

1.2 Turkey – a leading host country

Turkey currently hosts around 4 million refugees, according to the UNHCR.⁸ The majority have fled the war in Syria. Estimates of the number of Afghan asylum seekers vary, but most sources put the total number of Afghan nationals residing in Turkey at around 300,000. However, more than ten years of hosting around 3.6 million Syrian refugees has put a strain on Turkey’s willingness to host refugees, such as those fleeing Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover.

⁴ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/refugees-by-country>

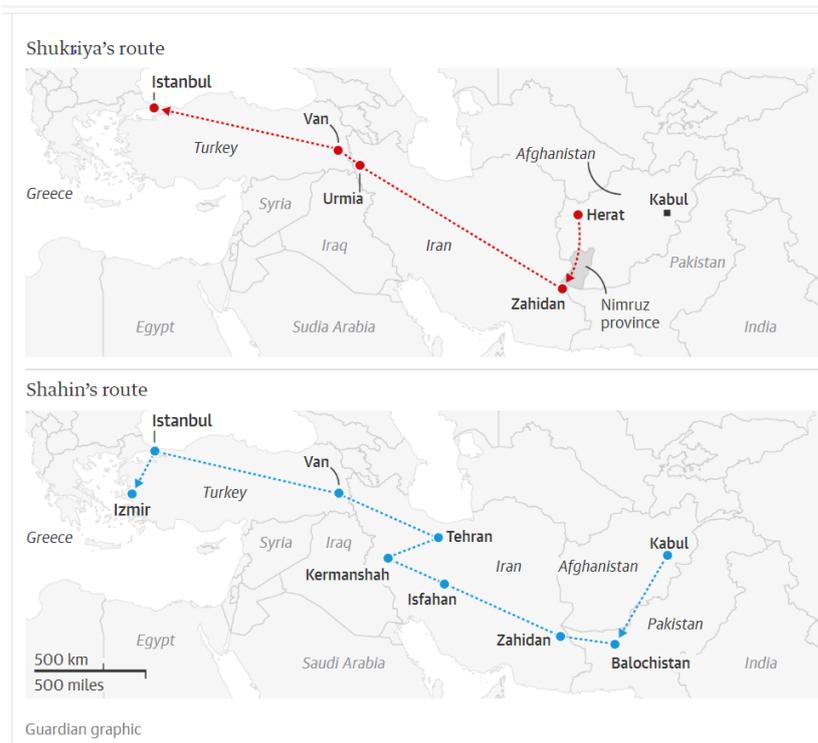
⁵ <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-closes-istanbul-for-new-asylum-seekers-minister-says-173576>, <https://ecre.org/aida-2021-update-turkiye/>

⁶ <https://youtu.be/kai8Kmkx1eg?t=378>

⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-deports-thousands-to-taliban-controlled-afghanistan/6620683.html>, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-refugees-turkey-violence-persecution-taliban/32019218.html>

⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey>

FIGURE 1. Two examples of routes from Afghanistan to Turkey



Source: The Guardian

When the International Security Assistance Force pulled out of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Turkish authorities expected a substantial increase in arrivals fleeing the new regime. Prime Minister Erdogan famously announced that Turkey would not serve as Europe's "warehouse for refugees."⁹ He also noted that the population was skeptical (i.e., it felt uneasy) faced with new arrivals.¹⁰

The experience of Istanbul is singular, even within Turkey. The situation in the city highlights the challenges felt elsewhere in Turkey of hosting refugee and migrant populations. Around ten percent of the estimated 15 million population are refugees and asylum seekers.¹¹ The concentration of refugee populations in metropolitan areas, such as certain sections of Istanbul, has posed a challenge to municipal infrastructure and services.¹² This pressure has contributed to the strictness practiced by local authorities regarding residency permits and access to services for refugees and migrants and the termination of new arrivals in May. Our informants distinguished sharply between those with a residence permit covering Istanbul and those without.

⁹ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/34475/erdogan-turkey-will-not-become-europes-refugee-warehouse>

¹⁰ <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-primary-goal-is-stability-security-of-afghanistan-erdogan-167214>

¹¹ <https://residencepermitturkey.com/refugees-istanbul>

¹² <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66188>

The Turkish reception system for refugees and migrants is complex and encompasses a range of protection statuses and migrant visas. For refugees, the regulations distinguish between refugees of European origin (1951 Convention status), non-European origin (conditional refugee status), and subsidiary protection status (equal to the subsidiary status in the EU Qualification Directive) (ECRE, 2022).¹³ In addition, Turkey has provided Syrian refugees with a collective temporary protection status.

For those wanting to apply for protection, the process starts with registering with a local office of the national immigration authorities (Presidency of Migration Management (PMM)).¹⁴ Applications can be made in more than 80 so-called satellite cities spread across Turkey but cannot be made in the largest cities, including Istanbul. While the application is being processed, the applicant will be provided with an ID number and a temporary residency permit and must remain within the area where the application has been made. According to reports, gaining access to offices that accept applications and securing a continuous status throughout processing and appeals have been challenging (ECRE, 2022). More recently, however, measures have been taken to make information about the asylum process more easily accessible.¹⁵

1.3 Conditions for Afghans in Istanbul

Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul are not a homogeneous group but encompass the newly arrived (since August 2021), recent arrivals (over the past 10 years), and longer-term residents (often with dual citizenship). Other key distinctions include affluence / access to resources (money), education and vocational competency, and formal residency status in Turkey. Living conditions and challenges vary greatly across the different sub-groups within the Afghan group; however, except for long-term residents with Turkish citizenship, they have several major challenges in common, most prominently abrupt changes in residency regulations and increased skepticism toward Afghans.¹⁶

The residency dimension – having a valid permit or being in an irregular situation – was the single most important factor determining the set of hindrances and opportunities for Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul, as in the rest of Turkey. This dimension affected everyone who did not have citizenship, including the affluent upper middle class and those with minimal resources and no formal education. Legal status also influenced access to information and colored migration narratives.

The group without residence permits consists of those who arrived in Turkey irregularly, often travelling through Iran, and who have never had residency as well as those who have lost their residency. Afghan refugees and migrants without a permit were in a particularly precarious situation in Istanbul. They were denied access to key services, including public health services, schools, education, work, and access to housing, and they risked deportation. Those who did have permits were in constant fear of losing them and thereby being exposed to the same challenges.

¹³ https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/AIDA-TR_2021update.pdf

¹⁴ <https://en.goc.gov.tr/>

¹⁵ <https://turkiye.iom.int/blogs/iom-and-pmm-will-establish-115-information-kiosks-migrants-across-turkey>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/aug/05/fleeing-the-taliban-afghans-met-with-rising-anti-refugee-hostility-in-turkey>

There are two city districts in Istanbul which have sections dominated by Afghan refugees and migrants. According to the informants, one can find work in these areas, for example in small textile factories, restaurants, and cafes. Some of our informants had weighed these opportunities against being formally registered in one of the satellite cities. They chose work over safety and what they regarded as a minimal existence in the country's periphery.

1.4 Design, methods, and data

This study is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 46 Afghan refugees and migrants conducted in Istanbul in May 2022. In addition, we interviewed five migration experts (UNHCR (2), IOM (2), Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1), with knowledge of the situation of Afghans in Turkey.

In this section, we describe briefly how we gained access to informants, the method used, how research ethics were secured, an assessment of the quality of the data, characteristics of the sample, and the coding and analysis procedure.

Access

Permission to conduct research in Istanbul was obtained through contact between the Norwegian Embassy in Ankara and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Turkish Ministry informed local immigration authorities about the fieldwork. The IOM offices in Ankara and Istanbul assisted us in our efforts to gain access to informants. The IOM Istanbul office provided us with a team of two Afghan assistants and interpreters, along with one team leader. The local team had different ethnic backgrounds and covered five Afghan languages (Pashto, Dari, Tajik, Persian, and Urdu) in addition to Arabic, Turkish, and English. Most of the informants were recruited on the streets or in shops and restaurants in two city districts, while others were recruited through the local team members' networks. Trust was established through the straightforward approach taken by the local team members, who asked if the informants were willing to talk to researchers from the EU studying the situation of Afghans in Istanbul and prospects of moving on to the EU. The interviews were carried out in shops, restaurants, and cafes, venues belonging to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and in private homes.

Gender

While the research team consisted of one woman and one man, the local team comprised two women and one man. This situation allowed us to work in two teams, adjust the gender composition to the requirements of the situation and informants, and given also the age and ethnic variation within the research team, to vary the composition of the sub-teams and provide a secure environment for informants regardless of gender, age, or ethnicity. This flexibility resulted in our being able to elicit information on the specific challenges faced by women and families in coping with the challenges in transit and in possible onward migration toward the EU.

Methods used

The use of qualitative semi-structured interviews allowed the team to adapt to the varying settings and individual situations of the informants. Some interviews were carried out under

ideal circumstances, in a quiet place and lasting an hour or longer, while others were shorter and took place in back of noisy stores. The open format allowed us to repeatedly ensure the informants of the importance of their participation and of the solidity of the study. When the situation and the informants allowed, interviews were recorded and later transcribed. About two thirds of the interviews were not recorded. In these cases, notes were taken by the interviewer.

Research ethics

Gaining informed consent is a key element in interviews with people in a precarious situation. Given our ad hoc recruitment strategy, trust and understanding had to be established quickly during our fieldwork in Istanbul. We made sure to present the true purpose of the study and the role of information in onward migration, but we also stressed our interest in learning details of their current situation as Afghan refugees and migrants living in Istanbul. We also made sure to start the interviews with a section on ethics, our independent position as researchers, anonymity, the voluntary character of the interview, and how we would handle the information we received. After this section, we paused and asked the interviewees if they had understood the information and consented to take part. No written consent was recorded. In some cases, oral consent was recorded, but in others, it was only noted. Photos of the environment, shops, and so forth were only taken after explicit consent was given by the informants. In most cases, pictures did not include the informants. In a few cases, they explicitly wanted to be included. The issue of campaigns was raised in most interviews during the final part of the conversation. In cases where the informant was too fragile, or in emotional distress, we did not raise the question of campaigns.

At the start of some of the interviews, the informants asked us rhetorically, “why should I take part in this study?” The discussion that followed included the benefit of displaying the conditions of Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey.

The informants were not offered any type of standardized compensation for their contribution. In general, people wanted to tell their stories. Some were eager to do so, hoping that the situation of Afghan refugees and migrants would gain more public attention. For others, who were out of work and had had a long day, talking about their conditions seemed to offer a certain break from the usual glum situation in which they find themselves. What we did, as a symbolic gesture, was to buy drinks for informants and offer them lunch/dinner at the restaurants and cafés we used as locations for interviews to somewhat compensate their owners. Some informants had work in these cafes and were recruited and interviewed during their working hours, if their employers agreed. It should be added that, as the informants belong to a very proud and hospitable people, many also unyieldingly insisted on serving *us* drinks and snacks when interviews took place in in their own homes or in their office.

In the long term, the present study may help inform decision makers inside and outside Turkey and create pressure for changes to be made at a local, national, or transnational level. As researchers, we are, however, also obliged to be aware that the insights we produce may make information campaigns aiming to deter arrivals to Europe more effective.

Many of the informants were in a difficult situation and asked us for advice and help regarding visas and migration options as well as help to access health services. In some cases, we

checked options and provided contacts to national and local NGOs of which the informants were unaware.

Quality of information

Given the ad-hoc recruitment process, the informants did not have time to prepare or be strategic regarding the information they provided to the project. As the informants were in a precarious situation, we would expect that some would withhold certain types of information, such as information on smugglers and traveling routes. However, most informants were candid about their own situation and that of other Afghans in Turkey. They spoke openly about their reasons for leaving Afghanistan, their (lack of) residence permits, their personal challenges, the situation in their families, their battles with the Turkish authorities, and their (failed) attempts to cross the border into the EU. We experienced the informants as open and frank, largely due to the trust established by our local team, and the informants wished to contribute to raising awareness of the situation of Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey.

Sample of informants

The group of informants represented a variety of the ethnic backgrounds found in Afghanistan (Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen, Hazara), gender (17 women and 29 men), age (15 in their twenties, nine in their thirties, 11 in their forties, eight in their fifties, and three in their sixties), residence status (11 in an irregular situation, 35 with permits), education, competency, and affluence. Thirty-eight persons were interviewed individually, while a total of eight persons was present at two group interviews. The sample consisted of people with varied backgrounds, including high-ranking political representatives from the former Afghan government, upper-class women, former police officers, silversmiths, IT experts, civil servants, cooks, suppliers to the allied forces, electricians, businesspeople, and persons with little or no formal competency.

Coding and data

Using the software Nvivo 12, we coded the transcribed interviews and interview notes according to both an inductive (directed by patterns in the data) and deductive (directed by the mentioned research questions) strategy. This strategic coding gave 18 coded folders, covering, among other matters, background in Afghanistan, routes to Turkey, conditions in Istanbul, reflections on the role of residency, contemplations of onward migration, sources of information, views on onward migration, and perceptions of the messaging in EU information campaigns.

1.5 Structure of the report

The rest of this report is organized as follows. We conceptualize the role of narratives in section 2, where we also present a model of onward migration indicating the role information can play in migration decision-making processes. In section 3, we present the information sources for migrants and the narratives of migration relevant to the Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey. Next, in section 4, we discuss the potential impact of the messaging of EU-funded information campaigns on migratory decisions, before concluding in section 5.

2. Conceptualizing narratives and the messages of information campaigns

2.1 The role of narratives

The concept of narratives is used in a variety of ways, often to denote a story which is sequential and has a degree of stability and consistency over time and/or across space (Garcés-Mascreñas 2021). These stories include assumptions about causality, have a moral component (good and bad), and point to responsibilities and consequences. In a strict sense, narratives may include a plot and dramatic moments, symbols, relationships between heroes, villains, and victims, solutions, and a moral to the story (Jones and McBeth 2010; Boswell et al. 2021).

The work of migration scholars on narratives falls into two broad categories: studies of the narratives inherent in stories told by migrants themselves, on the one hand, and studies of the narratives presented about migrants, on the other (De Fina and Tseng 2017; Sahin-Mencutek 2020; Boswell et al. 2021).

In the first category, we find elements such as personal narratives of the migrant experience, migration journeys, and factors shaping migration decisions along with stories of adaptation, doubt, and suffering. Typically, the migrants are cast as the heroes or victims of these narratives, either as individuals or as groups (De Fina and Tseng 2017). In the second category, we find narratives of or about migrants and migration. Studies have looked at the role such narratives play in media coverage (Benson 2013; Thorbjørnsrud 2015; D'Amato and Lucarelli 2019), as part of political strategies (Jones and McBeth 2020), and in the formation of public attitudes (Manieri 2019).

As we shall see, both these categories of migration narratives are relevant to the current study. The interviews with the Afghan refugees in Istanbul revealed that their self-narratives dominated their understanding of their situation (category 1). At the same time, they were aware of, and impacted by, the official national Turkish narrative about refugees and migrants residing in Turkey as it emerged through the media (category 2).

Against a background of limited knowledge about the link between these types of migration narratives and migratory decision-making, the current study focuses on an exploration of the dynamics between access to different forms of information, narratives, and migratory action.

Both media narratives and the messages of official EU-funded information campaigns act as a vital backcloth for the personal stories of Afghan migrants. How these personal stories together form a collectively, socially shared narrative forms the backbone of this study. This synthesized master narrative is composed of different sub-narratives that, together, form a single over-arching storyline. This type of grand narrative, that emerges from similar individual experiences and understandings, has been conceptualized in different ways, as deep stories (Hochschild 2018) or as a *master narrative*, which is the concept used here (Bamberg 2005).

Master narratives are often associated with a standard, official understanding of a phenomenon or, in the words of Nancy Fraser, “the superordinate” public discourse (Fraser 2014). Here, as we see the social world from “below,” through the lens of a minority and an

outgroup, the stories of the migrants themselves form the master narrative. We use the concept of a *counter narrative* to depict the dominant representation of migration, in general, and Afghan migrants, in particular, as perceived in the national Turkish discourse through mass and social media. We also use the term “counter narrative” in reference to the main messages of EU-funded information campaigns. A key question is how these alternative understandings are felt and perceived by our informants.

One key assumption of narrative theory is that control of the knowledge people has of a topic, and how this knowledge is structured, enables control of such people’s actions; hence the slogan “knowledge is power” (Lévi-Strauss 1958). Applied to the current study, a central question is what narrative dominates and in what type of public or semi-public sphere. As we will see, the master narrative of Afghan migrants is pervasive within their group, but it hardly influences the dominant stories of the Turkish public sphere. Moreover, this master narrative is deeply incongruent with the message of the dominant EU information campaigns as formulated in recent years. It seems, however, that a new and clearly stated message from Europe is nowhere to be found, being lost in a public discourse absorbed by a European war which leaves refugees from elsewhere somewhat forgotten.

2.2 The role of information in the decision-making of refugees and migrants

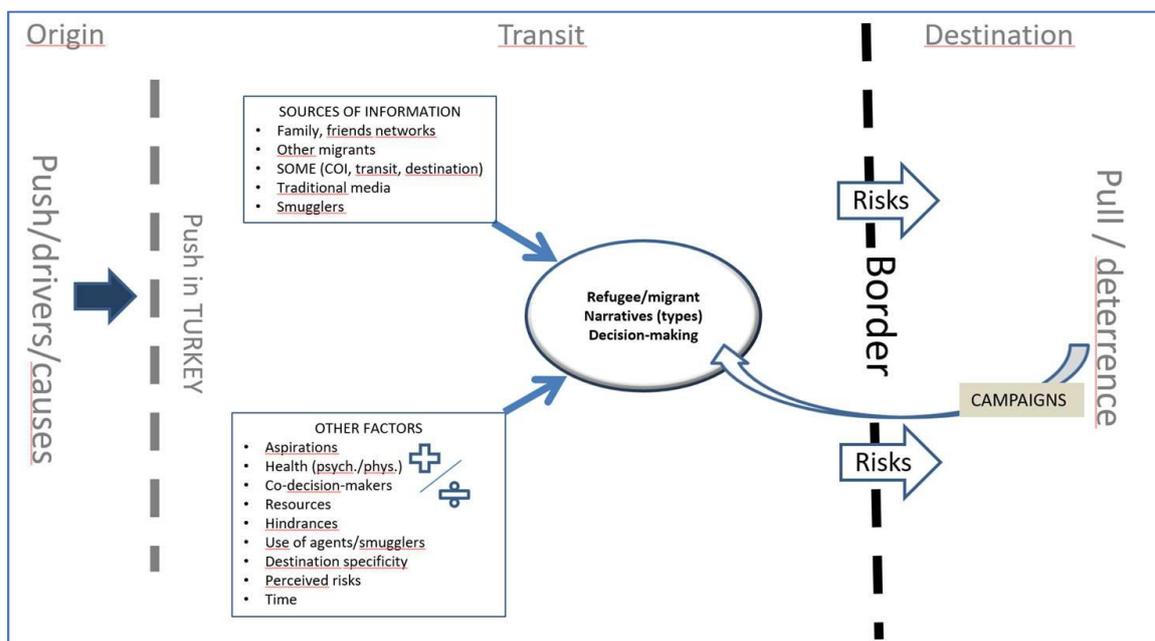
In this section, we position the role of information and narratives in relation to the central factors that influence secondary migration decision-making. We do so by adapting an existing model of onward migration (Brekke and Beyer 2019).

Refugees and migrants in transit must relate to a range of factors pertaining to conditions in their country of origin, their situation in the transit country, and regulations and opportunities in possible destination countries. In the literature, different strands have emphasized structural factors (push–pull, differences in economy, labor market) models (De Haas 2010; Van Hear et al. 2018), the agency of migrants (such as aspirations and capabilities) (Carling and Schewel 2018), or the role of families and networks in decision-making (Haug 2008), among others. The role of information and how narratives emerge and relate to the above-listed factors in migration decision-making processes have been less studied (Koser and Pinkerton 2002).

In Figure 2, we find the refugee or migrant in transit relating to sources of information and influenced by narratives of migration and a range of other factors in country of origin, transit, and potential destination countries. The original push factors (conflict, security, economic, or other) in the country of origin may still play into the decision in transit, for example by hindering the alternative of returning.

To the left in Figure 2, we find the push factors in the transit country. As noted, the immediate situation, as well as recent developments in Turkey, played a role in the aspirations of Afghan refugees and migrants to move on.

FIGURE 2: Conceptualizing migratory decision-making, with a particular focus on the role of information and narratives



Source: Adapted from Brekke and Beyer, 2019

Zooming in on the situation in transit, the model lists factors such as aspirations to move on, capabilities, access to resources, the role of co-decision makers, perception of hindrances and risks, access to agents/smugglers, destination specificity, and time. We will add details to these dimensions when we discuss the concrete situation of Afghans in Istanbul in the next section. Briefly, one could note that aspirations point to the presence or absence of an overall goal of achieving life goals through migration (Czaika and de Haas 2013). Resources, accordingly, are the availability of means that will help the individual migrant attain their migratory goals. The family and networks may play several roles in the decision-making process, including as sources of information (Haug 2008; Brekke and Brochmann 2014; McAuliffe 2022), co-decisionmakers (Mixed Migration Center 2021), and providers of resources. Migrants in transit will vary regarding whether they have a specific destination country in mind, should they decide to leave. In the model, risk refers to the physical and mental harm of moving on, but also to the risk of failing to reach the destination. Risk may also refer to risks involved in remaining in transit, including detention and return to the country of origin. Time spent in transit may increase (e.g., through the accumulation of funds) or decrease (e.g., through integration in transit or return becoming an option) the chances of moving on.

To the right in Figure 2, we find the destination countries and potential impact of strategic information campaigns on refugees' and migrants' decision-making process. As we will see in the next sections, the standard messaging of campaigns sponsored by EU+ countries may not fit the situation of Afghans in Istanbul.

2.3 Targeted and sponsored information campaigns

There is a broad literature in media studies focused on campaign evaluation. Standard theory distinguishes between inputs, outputs, outtakes, and outcomes (McNamara 2014, Brekke and Beyer 2019).

Within this framework, inputs refer to the messages, presentation of the information, choice of channels or platforms, and strategies to reach the intended audience. Outputs are observable results, such as the number of messages sent, the number of people who received them, and secondary media coverage. Outtakes refer to what the target audience takes away from the campaigns, that is, what they understand and remember. The outcomes of the campaign are concerned with the number of people who changed their attitudes or behavior because they were exposed to the campaign.

Three more concepts are relevant to the discussion of the effectiveness of the information campaigns. Firstly, we need to ask whether members of the target audience of a campaign feel that they need the information that is provided; that is, do they have a *need for orientation*? Secondly, how relevant does the audience find the information? And finally, how certain were campaign recipients of what they already knew about the matter (e.g., about the conditions along the route or what the situation was like in Europe)? According to media theory (McNamara 2014), the campaigns would be most effective if the migrants perceived the information as highly relevant and were uncertain about the validity of their knowledge.

We will come back to how these concepts apply to the situation of Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Turkey and Istanbul and whether the main messages of EU-funded campaigns convey a message that feeds into the dominant stories as they are conveyed by the refugees themselves or not.

Although several EU information campaigns did target potential Afghan migrants before the Taliban takeover in August 2021, no EU information campaigns have been actively conducted in Turkey in 2022 (Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2017).

Studying 52 information campaigns based in Europe, Brekke and Beyer found that all wanted to communicate one or more of three core messages in their material (2019:17): “there are opportunities at home,” “the route is dangerous,” and “life in Europe can be difficult for migrants.”

A Greek- and EU-sponsored campaign was due to be launched at the beginning of 2022 but was later postponed due to internal political opposition in Greece.¹⁷ In a press release in fall 2021, the Greek Ministry for Migration and Asylum said the campaign aimed to prevent the arrival of irregular migrants and that the core message would be that “Greece guards its borders in an organized way and does not allow illegal migration flows.”¹⁸ The initiative to the campaign, came after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, when Greek authorities were addressing the potential arrival of Afghan migrants.¹⁹ In the press release, the Greek Ministry described the country’s policy as strict, but fair, and in line with European and international

¹⁷ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/35209/greece-set-to-launch-new-media-campaign-on-migration>

¹⁸ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/35209/greece-set-to-launch-new-media-campaign-on-migration>

¹⁹ <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1168017/media-campaign-launched-to-stem-afghan-migration/>

law. The authorities also stressed that the campaign would seek to raise awareness among future “illegal migrants” so they would not fall victim to traffickers or endanger their lives.

The campaign was allegedly to be launched in national and international traditional media, on Afghan websites, and on various social media, including Viber, YouTube, Facebook, and Dailymotion.²⁰

In our interviews, we described the messaging of the planned Greek/EU information campaign to the informants, showed them a picture of the patrolled border wall between Turkey and Greece, and asked for their comments.

PICTURE 2. Soldier patrolling a steel fence at the Greek–Turkish border



Source: ARCHIVE/EPA/DIMITRIS ALEXOUDIS

In addition to the Greek/EU campaign which signaled that irregular migration is dangerous, we presented the informants with the other two standard messages conveyed in information campaigns: “Remain in and contribute to your country of origin” and “life in Europe can be difficult for migrants” (Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2017).

3. The main narratives of Afghans residing in Istanbul

The dominant *master narrative*, as conveyed by our informants, was that they, as Afghan nationals, had been forced to leave their home country and that conditions in Turkey were challenging to the extent that their future lay in Europe or the USA. They could not return to an Afghanistan under Taliban rule. At the same time, life in Turkey had proven increasingly challenging, unpredictable, and even dangerous due to the risk of being forcibly returned to

²⁰ <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1168017/media-campaign-launched-to-stem-afghan-migration/>

Afghanistan. They had lost their hopes of finding a safe haven in Turkey and were looking for possibilities to move on. For the time being they were stuck in transit, as put plainly by one young man: “I think that 99 out of 100 who is here now wants to go to Europe. But because of the border situation in Greece and in Serbia, it is increasingly difficult to pass the borders” (Tur_male_20s_1). Referring to the circumstances in Afghanistan, another informant stated:

With the situation in Afghanistan, we cannot go back. There are many people who do not wish to go to Europe illegally. But they cannot get legal visas. They are stuck here. There are no other countries they can go to. The only option is to go back to Afghanistan, but that is impossible. (Tur_male_20s_21)

This master narrative includes the sad history and fate of Afghanistan. The Taliban takeover and reversal of processes aimed at increasing the protection of human rights, democratization, and gender equality happened so suddenly that many informants vividly describe the shock and feeling of unreality when the same old Taliban, which they had endured under the most repressing and harsh conditions, suddenly reappeared. Shock and anguish were followed by deep sorrow and disappointment. For our informants, there was no longer a future in Afghanistan. As one young female informant said: “We all carry this deep sadness in our hearts.” Another informant, explaining how he was among those who, a decade ago, tried to persuade people to stay in Afghanistan, believing in a brighter future for his home country, explained his current feelings as follows:

People don't understand what the situation is really like here. In Afghanistan I was walking with my head raised high in the street. I had the privilege to live a full life. Here, I cannot even see my cousin who is working here; if I go to see him, the police might take me. I can only stay home or here where I work, I cannot go anywhere else. It is painful to see how Afghans are treated here, how they are haunted by the police in the streets. It is also painful to see the videos of Afghans spread on social media. (Tur_male_20s_21)

Several informants also expressed their disappointment with the international community and, in particular, their former allies and friends in Afghanistan who had left the country so abruptly. A substantial number of those who had arrived in Istanbul after the Taliban coup had worked for the former government or regime-friendly liberal NGOs or had been involved in the allied NATO forces, either directly enrolled or by providing services to the troops. Having placed their hopes and faith in a new and different Afghanistan than that of the Taliban, some harbored a deep disappointment over the lack of swift access to the USA or Europe now that the Taliban had regained its suffocating grip on power. Many had not been evacuated during the first intense weeks of the coups for various reasons, such as being stuck in a different part of Afghanistan than Kabul when the planes for the USA or Europe left. It is estimated that thousands of Afghans eligible for special protection due to their NATO involvement are still in Afghanistan or neighboring transit countries, stuck with pending visa applications, awaiting the outcome of cumbersome decision processes, or, even worse, unable to apply at all because they lack documents that they cannot access since the breakdown of basic state government functions in Afghanistan.²¹ Such people were left in the unbearable situation of risking deportation back to Afghanistan while struggling with visa processes to reach the USA or

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<https://nypost.com/2022/08/17/thousands-of-afghan-allies-still-trapped-year-after-biden-exodus/>

Europe. Such is the situation of one man who worked as a translator for the US NATO forces, now in Istanbul with his wife and little son:

We are stuck here. Now the Turkish government announce that you have to buy a house to get a residence permit. I am bewildered: What can I do, with no money? I have two months left in my residence permit. Several times, I have contacted the US embassy here. They tell me that I have to go forward by email. I send emails to the US embassy – to everywhere, to no avail. They do not look out for us; they have left us behind. (TUR_male_30s_41)

Several other informants used the phrase “*being left behind.*” Another man, who used to work closely with representatives of both the USA and UK as an upper-middle-class businessman, told us about his present situation living illegally with his family in Istanbul:

We submitted our documents to apply for a US visa back in July 2021, right before the regime change. I was not in Kabul when the one flight that could evacuate us left in August. I was in another province, and I missed it. I came here instead in late February, and I applied for a residence permit. Unfortunately, that was rejected, and there is no news from my visa case to the USA. [...] Even though I have an open case, and my documents are being processed and we are trying to change the decision allowing us a permit, I don't know. I mean it is possible that they will catch me and immediately deport me and that I end up back in Kabul. (TUR_male_40s_21)

These informants' answers to what would happen if they returned were always the same: They would be traced by the Taliban and find themselves in life-threatening danger, as stated in the following quotes:

Most of the Afghans staying in Turkey I know are like me – either they worked for the former government or they were working for foreign troops. They are in danger in Afghanistan; it is as simple as that. For a long time, I was living under the Taliban regime. I did not live in one place, I was always moving about, living under cover. (TUR_male_40s_21)

If someone dies, we usually quote one proverb: “Everything is done, everything is over.” If I am sent back to Afghanistan, that is all that's left to be said. (TUR_male_20s_41)

Others shared the same deep sorrow over the unbelievable return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but their disappointment was directed as much at their fellow Afghans, who, in their view, had failed to stand up for and build a sustainable democratic society. This was the case of a former student who, before the coup, was considering taking a PhD in a European country. He, too, had lingering concerns about how to renew his residence permit, which had only one year left before expiry:

I used to be part of a cosmopolitan community of students here in Turkey. My plan was to use my education to do business with Afghanistan and the rest of the world. Now, all this is taken away. But I don't blame the West; we need to look at ourselves and why we could not stay united against the Taliban. (TUR_male_30s_43)

Some informants had Turkey as their final destination when they left Afghanistan. At the time of the interviews, even these informants were considering moving on due to the challenging conditions in Turkey. Most, however, had already set their sights on EU countries, the USA, or Canada before they left Afghanistan:

While we were in Afghanistan, we knew that it was a difficult situation for Afghan people in Turkey. But our plan was not to stay there; we planned to go forward. We have tried three times. (Tur_fem_40s_25)

This quotation is from a woman in her forties who had worked for women's rights in Afghanistan. She had tried to cross the EU border irregularly three times when we interviewed her. Despite rough and dangerous experiences, she was going to try again: Living in Istanbul without a legal residency permit and in danger of being deported and sent back, she saw no alternative:

Everyone is hoping to go to Europe, so they start from Afghanistan and go through Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and then Bulgaria to Europe. They go step by step. (Tur_man_30s_4,6)

Most wanted to go step by step but were having a hard time making the final move into Europe. In the meantime, they were hoping that the conditions in Turkey would improve. Some informants explained in detail the ways in which conditions in Turkey disappointed them. One young woman in her twenties worked in a textile shop. She put it this way:

All Afghans would like to leave Turkey; everyone hopes to get a better life somewhere else. Life in Afghanistan is stressful, especially for Afghan girls. In Afghanistan, I was always ashamed to talk. Girls in Afghanistan are not encouraged to talk and be independent. Before I went to Turkey, I thought that it would be different here. That I could study and decide for myself. But it turned out that there are no opportunities for me here. Before the interview, I was nervous for this reason. When I was in Afghanistan, I thought that Turkey was like Europe regarding living conditions for Afghans. I have changed my mind. Turkey is maybe good for Turks but not for Afghans. (Tur_fem_20s_8)

The overall narrative of Afghan migration from Afghanistan through Iran and Turkey and onwards to Europe was operative on a group level (this is the fate of Afghans here), a family level (we will seek to cross), and an individual level (I had to flee, and I am now here, waiting to move on):

Yes, even my family is talking about going to Europe. They tried twice; the Turkish police turned them back. There are lots of people who want to go. It is because there they can study and easily find jobs, and here they do not have permits, they must work hard and have no future. (Tur_fem_20s_9)

The families of the informants had often been split by the conflict, evacuations, subsequent flight from Afghanistan, and, later, by parts of the family having made the journey onwards to Europe and the USA. As one elderly woman put it:

I have a son in Frankfurt and a daughter in London. My husband and I are stuck here; we can't go back, and we can't move on. [...] I want to join my children in Europe, but only God can help us. Or the EU governments. They can help us to get there. (Tur_fem_60s_28)

3.1 Alternative counter narratives? Migrants' reflections on staying in Turkey or going to Europe legally

Informants did ponder alternatives to the main master narrative about Afghan refugees being forced to leave Afghanistan and then, due to the precarious situation in Turkey, having to continue their journey to Europe or other safe countries, such as the USA, by any means.

One alternative was to stay in Turkey and make the most of the opportunities there. In fact, for several informants, Turkey had initially been the country of choice. For some, it was easier to see business opportunities in Turkey, as Turkey is a Muslim country, and the familiarity of Turkish culture was attractive.

Many of the informants had seen Turkey as a possible destination country prior to arrival. Those who arrived after the Taliban takeover, however, did not find the opportunities they had expected there. Of those with a longer history in Istanbul, some had managed to make a living running shops, restaurants, or other businesses. For informants who had both a residence permit and a business of their own or a steady job, staying in Istanbul was clearly an option. As one informant put it: "Since I have a business here, I want to stay. If I didn't have a business here, I would have preferred to go to Europe" (Tur_male_20s_23).

Sometimes, the families were split in their migration aspirations, with some members wanting to stay and others wanting to leave. One mother pointed to the importance of Turkey being a Muslim country:

We talk about the rights we have in the EU and that we don't have the same rights here in Turkey. Personally, I like living here in Turkey, because of the religion here, I can practice my religion here and wear the hijab. But my children would like to continue their studies in Europe and have peace of mind there. (Tur_fem_40s_29)

Others saw the risks of leaving irregularly as too high and opted to stay in Turkey. Some of the informants were in positions that made irregular migration impossible, whether because of illnesses or physical hindrances or because it would involve traveling with infants:

The situation is getting worse and not better. We don't have much hope. The only solution is to move to a third country, but with the baby, we are not able to travel illegally. With the baby, that is difficult. (Tur_WOM/MAN_41/42_30s)

As regards how to move on from Turkey, traveling legally would be by far the most desirable alternative for most, considering the high risks and physically challenging character of traveling irregularly. Most of the Afghan refugees and migrants who had recently arrived in Istanbul were aware of the existence of legal pathways to Europe, although for the majority these were not realistic alternatives. Before the Taliban takeover, young Afghans were able to follow studies abroad and took part in different exchange programs. Such opportunities ceased to exist with the Taliban takeover, and for those who were students among our informants this legal

pathway was now closed. As mentioned, quite a few had pending applications for visas to European countries, the USA, or Canada. Even among this group, however, faith that they would be granted visas was waning. Their stories were about trying to access relevant embassies and consulates, feeling caught in a paper mill, or even lacking means to obtain the necessary identification papers from Afghanistan that could have moved their process forward:

I was providing the [...] services for all the NATO bases. I tried to contact them to help us [we have applied], but we have not managed to get a visa yet. We are waiting. I have also tried to contact people inside the UK and US consulates in Istanbul. (TU_MAN_INF33_30s)

We want to try to leave Turkey. We have a case at the German embassy, seeking the possibility to go to Germany legally, and we are waiting for the case to be processed. We don't want to live in Turkey anymore. Germany would be good, but first and foremost out of Turkey, to any other country. (TUR_WOM_INF8_20s)

I worked as a gender advisor for the American military, I had a case there, they told me to wait. But I haven't had any answer from them, so that is why we had no choice but to leave. (TUR_WOM_INF25_40s)

Still, traveling irregularly fed into the master narrative. The informants were aware of the risks involved in trying to cross the border to Europe irregularly:

My sister tried to go irregularly to Europe. They were arrested by the police and went to jail (detention center). They were using handcuffs. Because she had tried to leave irregularly her application for the kimlik (residence permit) was rejected. [...] Now, she has been deported to Afghanistan. (TUR_WOM_INF27_40s)

Others mentioned that the newly arrived wanted to leave, while those who had established themselves in Turkey may opt to stay.

The "oldcomers" do not want to go. They may want to go in a regular manner, through universities etc., legally, but not irregularly. But the newcomers, all of them, want to go. Because of hatred here in Turkey, and because of the economy – it is hard to establish a normal life here. (Tur_fem_20s_45)

However, if they could manage it, all the informants who had experienced life in Istanbul without a residence permit, whether because they had never had one or because they or someone close to them had lost their permit, wanted to leave. Moreover, for all except those with Turkish citizenship, there was a constant worry that even stricter immigration policies might be introduced and thus that their residence permits might not ultimately be renewed.

3.2 The role of deportations in the master narrative

The constant threat of deportation from Turkey to Afghanistan was a key symbol of the precariousness of the situation of all Afghans without residence permits and those with contemporary residence permits that would soon need renewal. Numbers are not accurate,

but close to 50,000 Afghans²² are estimated to have been deported since the return agreement came into force between the Taliban regime and Turkey in 2022.²³ Others are pushed back to Iran when they try to cross the borders. From Iran, almost 200,000 Afghans have been sent back to Afghanistan. Informants point to the agreement between the Taliban and the Turkish government:

There was a visit from a Taliban representative earlier this year. After that, they restarted the deportations. There was a pause for two or three months after the Taliban takeover. Then they started again.

Some of those who are apprehended in the streets and in their homes are deported after a few days. Others are deported after two months in deportation centers.

The migrants who are captured in Dobaiazit [a region in Eastern Turkey on the Iranian border], they are deported directly to Iran. If you are picked up in other cities, they deport you to Afghanistan. (Tur_male_20s_1)

Many of the informants mentioned the ubiquitous presence of the police in the areas of Istanbul where there were high concentrations of Afghan refugees and migrants. They also talked about frequent raids by the police on homes and local businesses and factories, where the intention appeared to be to find Afghans without valid residence permits:

Every night, in the streets, the police pick up around 300 people to deport them to Afghanistan. They behave violently to force them to sign the deportation papers. These are documents that say that they voluntarily agree to be deported. The reality is that they are forced to do it. The police are in the streets and even enter people's homes to take them there. I have friends who were captured like that. (Tur_male_20s_1)

Due to the raids on people's homes, those without a permit could not feel safe. Several informants commented on the way the police conducted these raids:

Over the past few weeks, the police have raided houses. They are people and should be treated as people. They are being deported, I think, and even if they have no papers, they should be treated as humans. Now they have no rights. (Tur_male_30s_20)

Afghans risked being deported if apprehended at the Iranian–Turkish border (to Iran), while in Turkey (to Afghanistan), or while trying to cross the border to Greece or Bulgaria irregularly. In the latter case, according to our informants, they would either be transported back to Istanbul or registered for deportation to Afghanistan.

The master narrative about the need to leave Turkey at all costs was based on both a deteriorating economic situation and the increased stigma and prejudices facing Afghan people. However, the beating heart of the narrative is the constant fear of being *forced* to return to Afghanistan, with no realistic hope of being able to leave for another country legally at a later date.

²² [Over 240,000 Afghan refugees deported from Iran and Turkey | Middle East Eye](#)

²³ [TURKEY - AFGHANISTAN Ankara and Taliban meet to discuss refugee emergency \(asianews.it\)](#)

3.3 The Turkish counter narrative: Afghan immigrants must return home

As refugees and migrants who cannot go back to their home country, Afghans see themselves as being in need of protection and support. This narrative and self-understanding, both as a group and as individuals, was countered by narratives and discourses in Turkey, both as part of the political debate and on social media. Here, refugees and migrants were portrayed as causing problems, competing with the Turkish population for jobs, and not respecting the culture and norms of their host society.²⁴ This information environment clearly affected the Afghan migrants, who experienced what they saw as an increasingly hostile environment. As one informant put it: “Turks think that if you like your country so much, then go back to your home country and fight” (45_TU_WOM_20s).

A recurring frustration expressed by informants was the fact that they perceived that the wrongdoing of one Afghan individual led to a kind of generalization that blamed them all, as a group. Some of the social media posts targeted Afghan men. Videos of groups of young Afghan men marching in military uniforms were widely distributed, as were videos of male stalkers filming Turkish women. The latter allegedly turned out to be men of Pakistani origin but were labelled Afghan on some social media. The stigma that followed impacted the informants. They were also highly aware of how immigration had become a hot topic in political debate and how political parties in opposition promised to crack down on immigrants in the run-up to the national election in a year’s time. It was broadly conceived that Erdogan felt under pressure and that the operation to safeguard borders and deport Afghans, paired with the message that Turkey had done its share regarding hosting refugees, was part of ever stricter immigration policies to ward off parties competing for power.

The headlines of both incendiary social media discourse and negative press coverage, as well as the statements made by both the ruling party and political leaders in opposition, can be condensed to: “There is no more room for Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey; they are causing problems and should leave the country.”

Clearly, this message from Turkish society – that the limit had been reached regarding how many refugees the country could host and that Afghans, in particular, were singled out as a group not to be welcomed – did nothing but galvanize the master narrative of the Afghan migrants themselves. Their story of being forced migrants – forced to leave Afghanistan and now also forced to leave Turkey – was pervasive, as was the element concerning the need to travel irregularly to Europe. Most of the informants had family members, friends, and acquaintances who had made it to Europe and reported back from there, as shown by examples presented in the next section, which concerns narratives on Europe. The Taliban takeover cemented the group’s self-narrative of Afghanistan being a country where few saw a future for themselves. The deteriorating conditions in Turkey, particularly for refugees and migrants in 2021 and 2022, strengthened the urge to move on. The economic downturn, staggering inflation, unpredictable residency policy, and skepticism toward refugees caused by the long-staying Syrian refugees made the Afghans look to Europe. Parallel to this

²⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/21/turkey-immigrants-economy-erdogan/>

development, European countries stopped forced returns to Afghanistan. If they made it across the border, they would be safe – at least for a while.

3.4 Images of Europe as part of the master narrative

Although many informants would exclaim that they were ready to go “anywhere” as long as they got out of Turkey, in reality reaching Europe was the most realistic alternative for most. Informants referred to going to “Europe-side” – crossing the border. When we asked them why, their explanations suggested several elements of what they found attractive in Europe, falling into three broad categories: secured residency, a future (support, education, work), and respect:

We are eager to get out. We have a good impression of Europe. We hope that our children will have a good education and that we can find a good job with a good income to support our families. We also hear that governments in Europe and Canada are supporting families, like providing a house, giving a kind of salary, and paying for the education for the children. Because of all this, we want to go to Europe. Here, it is not like this, we have no hope for the future. The people in Europe see us as humans; they don't here. (Tur_male_20s_1)

This young man described a typical understanding of what Europe had to offer Afghans who made it to “the other side.” Some detail was offered regarding the positive impression of the possibilities of a future and types of government support, but there was little knowledge of the conditions that would have to be met to receive such support.

Informants who were hoping to obtain visas confirmed this positive narrative of Europe as a place where their future could be secured:

[Do you consider going to the USA?] Yes, if we got a visa to go there, we would. However, we are not aiming for the USA particularly, we would also like to go to a European country – any country that will save us and support my family and my children. In a European country, they would support the children. (Tur_fem_30s_26)

As mentioned, the informants experienced stigma from a majority of Turkish people. Most referred to the negative reactions to Afghans on social media or comments from politicians. Some also referred to personal experiences, instances of discrimination (housing, pricing), and negative encounters with the local population. The absence of stigma was part of the positive master narrative on Europe:

At least in European countries they respect you as a human. So, I have a good impression of Europe. Here, we are discriminated against. Turkish people tell us that we should go back to Afghanistan (Tur_fem_40s_25).

Those who had already made it to Europe sent back information that strengthened the positive master narrative on Europe:

Those who went already, they send their stories, they tell us that they get residence permits, and they are well received. Here, people don't have work and they want to leave. (Tur_male_20s_39)

Such stories came through family and contacts who had made it across. There were also stories of the opportunities to make a good living once established in the EU region. An Afghan in his twenties who had stayed in Turkey for a long time and had residency pointed to Afghans who came back and showed their success:

Everyone here has family on the European side, so they stay, of course they stay informed about what happens on the European side. I know many friends who live in Europe, they come here for Ramadan, they drive Mercedes, and they say that they buy them cheap, I know that they earned less when they were here, but now they have a better situation than me. (Tur_man_20s_23)

None of the 46 Afghan informants related negative information about Europe or other Western destination countries. We asked specifically about what they and other Afghans knew about the immigration regulations in European countries:

They (other Afghans) don't have information about residence permits in Europe, and they do not know how the system works. They just know from their friends and families about what countries they should go to, that some countries accept [Afghans], and others don't. (Tur_male_20s_1)

We did not find informants who reported detailed knowledge about how European governments process applications for Afghan asylum seekers since the Taliban takeover: "There is no exact information about this, but people are hopeful that their cases will not be rejected" (Tur_male_20s_1).

The only time the informants talked negatively about European destination countries was related to the slow processing of a visa application. Apart from that, it was the difficulties encountered crossing the border into Europe which stirred negative emotions. Several reported that they had had negative encounters with both Turkish and Bulgarian border guards, adding to their understanding of the risks involved in attempting the onward journey into the EU.²⁵

As demonstrated above, the role of Europe in the larger master narrative as a place of opportunities was pervasive. Making it to the "other side," – to the Europe-side, as the informants labelled it – meant being safe in a predictable environment where one would have support, have a future for one's children, and not be discriminated against. We did not challenge these perceptions during the interviews except by asking how respondents had formed this image of the destination countries in the EU. The master narrative on Europe was amplified by family members, friends, and members of networks who had already made it to "the other side." Those who had stayed in Turkey for longer had seen Afghan friends come back to visit, showing off tokens of success. For more recently arrived refugees, who had come since the Taliban takeover, these stories of safety and support were valued. A key element was that those who made it across the border were allowed to stay. They were not deported to Afghanistan.

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/06/lesbos-boat-capsizes-greece-migrants-kythira>

3.5 Information sources for the master narrative

The prevailing master narratives on Afghan forced migration toward Europe among our migrant informants were fueled and upheld by information from a range of sources. It should be noted that many informants have firsthand experience of fleeing Afghanistan, life under precarious conditions in Turkey, and, for quite a few, personal knowledge of failed endeavors to reach Europe. As such, they are primary sources and have the status of witnesses in the stories they convey. That said, the prevailing master narrative has a long history and chimes with related stories and different sources of information before they left or were forced to flee Afghanistan. Thus, the relevant sources for the continuation of this narrative are found in the country of origin, through the transit countries and all the way to the range of potential destination countries, as is the narrative of Europe (and the USA) as end points of Afghan migration journeys. The shared master narrative, which was so dominant among our informants, is thus a mix of personal experience, stories heard, and bits and pieces of information from various sources.

During the interviews in Istanbul, we zoomed in on the information sources relevant to possible onward migration in particular. Most informants pointed to family, friends, other migrants, and a range of traditional news media and social media.

Family, friends, community

When prompted, informants mentioned family and friends first before listing a range of traditional and social media. Many had family who had already made it across the border:

People get information from their families. I have family in Europe, I even have two cousins in Norway. They are my uncle's sons. I get information from their families and from Facebook. (Tur_male_20s_1)

The Taliban takeover made it challenging for Afghans in Turkey to obtain reliable news about the situation in their home country. The informants all agreed that they could no longer trust the national media in the country but had to obtain updates through private channels:

People here do not get any official info about Afghanistan, because there is no free press, so they use social media, family, and friends for news and migration. (Tur_group_13-15)

Some informants still had relatives in Afghanistan and relied on them to provide updates about the situation:

Two of my brothers and my mother are still in Afghanistan. They tell us about what is going on there. If something happens there, they inform us. (Tur_male_20s_24)

The traditional media channels in Afghanistan were viewed as controlled by the government. Some informants had networks in neighboring countries who followed the situation closely and then spread the information:

The news channels in Afghanistan are fully controlled by the government. We have some former colleagues who are now based outside Afghanistan. Somehow, they

manage to get the most accurate news. [They then spread it] through social media, mostly on Twitter and Facebook. (Tur_male_40s_21)

Media sources

All the Afghan informants had smartphones. When asked, they quickly provided us with a list of social media platforms, often starting with WhatsApp, Facebook, and Tik Tok:

Most Afghans are using smartphones; they use WhatsApp and Messenger to keep in contact with friends and families. People got access to phones like 20 years ago, Smartphones like 7 years ago. [...] All Afghans get the news from Facebook, and a lot get it from Tik-Tok. But they also get news from Afghan papers, news from the home country. (Tur_male_20s_1)

Many of the informants followed Turkish news. Some were able to read and understand traditional Turkish news outlets (online newspapers, TV, radio), while most obtained this news second-hand through Afghan contacts on social media:

I watch Turkish news daily, and then, of course, if there is anything about the migrants' situation, I follow it closely. This kind of news spreads quickly on social media. (Tur_male_40s_21)

Others were skeptical of Turkish news and saw that the media in Turkey may also be colored by political concerns:

I do not trust Turkish news channels. They are controlled by the government. And you cannot trust social media either. I follow Reuters news. And the German TV channel Deutsche Welle (DW-TV). (Tur_male_20s_18)

This latter quote, referencing the German TV news channel, illustrates the variation in the educational background among the group of informants. The access to sources of information varied. Some had to depend on others to access information:

A lot of those people who come irregularly are illiterate, so they rely on social media. Because of the situation in Afghanistan, they have no other choice than to leave the country. Here, the smugglers provide them with the country they should go to and the information [they need]. (Tur_male_30s_13)

Some informants were aware of how their background limited their access to information and, in some cases, made them dependent on their networks:

I am uneducated. I am only using my phone to inform myself and to talk to friends and family. But I have friends who are educated people. They will inform me about news, etc. (Tur_male_40s_2)

Both the narrative on Afghan onward migration and the narrative of Europe were shared on social media, but also face-to-face among family, friends, and networks. Some informants held that sensitive information on concrete plans for onward migration was best shared face-to-face:

The young generations are eager to leave, to go as far as possible. They see a better life than here. This information travels from person to person, not only on social media. We only talk one-to-one, face-to-face, why would they talk about this in the media? (Tur_male_30s_20)

This informant pointed out that detailed information on sensitive topics, such as intentions to go or not, travelling routes, and smugglers, was best shared face-to-face.

In sum, the Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Istanbul kept updated on news both in Afghanistan and in Turkey. Some had direct access to traditional and social media, while others were dependent on networks to stay updated. The access to smart phones meant that they had constant access to information feeding into their narrative of Europe – in a way; they were carrying Europe in their pocket.

3.6 Gender aspects

We did not find that the female informants gave different versions of the narratives than their male counterparts. However, they were aware that the risks of moving irregularly along the route from Afghanistan through Iran to Turkey were even higher for women and that the dangers involved in crossing into the EU for women were augmented and of a different kind than those facing men:

Most of the women are afraid of rape and abuse here because when they travel here through Iran, they are raped. One woman was raped on the route, and then the husband divorced her when they came to Istanbul. She had traveled through Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. That was tragic. [...] It is easier for men to travel, but for the women the journey is risky. (Tur_fem_20s_45)

Those informants who had experienced people being harassed, abused, and sometimes dying along the route noted particularly when women and children had been the victims. One informant mentioned a different route to Turkey for young Afghan women:

Many girls migrate in a different manner. Their families at home collect money and then they get marriage proposals in Saudi or Pakistan. Then, the girls' families in Afghanistan send the money to the husband's family – and they go there. This is how the girls go. Enough money for compensation, and they come. (Tur_fem_20s_45)

The narrative of Europe providing safety, predictability, and a future seemed equally pervasive among the female and male informants.

4. The reception of the messages promoted in EU-funded information campaigns

In this section, we discuss the potential impact of the three main messages of historic and active EU-funded information campaigns targeting potential migrants to the region.

As we have seen, there have been no active EU-sponsored campaigns targeting refugees and migrants in Turkey in 2022. However, Afghans have been targeted by several previous campaigns which have used a range of platforms and channels, including traditional media, online pages, and, lately, social media (Oeppen 2016; Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2017; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2020). The number of such campaigns increased following the record number of asylum arrivals to Europe in 2015. One example was the German government-sponsored campaign “Rumours about Germany” (Oeppen 2016), and another was a Norwegian-sponsored campaign named “Stricter Asylum Regulations in Norway” (Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2020). The most recent example was the private company Seefar’s campaign, which ran until the end of 2020 and aimed at informing “migrant decision making in Afghanistan.”²⁶ Even these three examples of campaigns included all three messages: Stay; it’s dangerous; and Europe is not a good option.

PICTURE 3. Campaign targeting Afghans in Afghanistan in 2020 ²⁷



Source: Seefar.org

Following the 2015 asylum crisis in Europe, cooperation increased in migration management between the EU and the then Afghan government. Information campaigns were part of this cooperation. In an agreement signed in 2016, the EU promised to inform Afghan communities in Europe regarding return and reintegration, while “the Government of Afghanistan will take the necessary measures to sensitize the population to the dangers of irregular migration,

²⁶ <https://seefar.org/news/projects/campaign-to-inform-migrant-decision-making-in-afghanistan/>

²⁷ Among the sponsors: EU, Netherlands, Norway, Germany, British Council, and Danish Refugee Council.

including through information and awareness raising campaigns. The EU will contribute to finance such information campaigns.”²⁸

Greek authorities and the EU planned to launch a new campaign in fall 2021, but it was halted due to political controversy. We showed the photo of the wall on the border between Turkey and Greece, part of the blueprint for the campaign to the informants and explained the message as it was outlined there. In addition, the Afghan informants in Istanbul were invited to comment on the other two standard campaign messages.

Presented with the planned Greek/EU campaign and the picture of the border guard, a woman in her forties nodded her head and said:

[The young ones who want to move on] know this information. They would have liked to educate themselves and work, but it was not possible to stay in Afghanistan, and they had to leave. Now they leave because they are young and have the power to leave. (Tur_fem_40s_29)

Some of the informants remembered the campaigns that targeted Afghans in Afghanistan after the asylum crisis in Europe in 2015:

Campaigns? Yes, I saw them in earlier years. On TV in Afghanistan, they were saying: Do not leave Afghanistan. They showed the danger of the journey. I think it was Germany who funded them. They wanted to make us stay in Afghanistan. (Tur_male_20s_22)

While the interviewees overall suggested that these types of information campaigns did not make a great impression at the time, there were a few exceptions. In one case, the post-2015 campaigns directed at Afghans in Afghanistan had made parents re-think:

When we saw these campaigns, we thought that we should not do it [leave Afghanistan]. The campaigns influenced my father and mother [back then] – and they told my brother not to go irregularly, because of the campaigns. Australia also had ads on TV. They said that Australia will not be your country – do not try it.

Such effects could be labeled the *long-term effects of campaigns*. They were recalled and played a role even seven years after they were launched. The former campaigns contributed to coloring perceptions of destination countries and migratory actions long after they had been terminated. That noted, in the material gathered for this study this effect appears minimal. It is, however, important to note that the study was not designed to map the pervasiveness of historical campaigns, as the current study is, after all, about those who did leave Afghanistan.

4.1 “There are opportunities at home”

The economic and security situation in Afghanistan had been challenging for several years when the Taliban took over in August 2021 and the international forces pulled out. Still, the

²⁸Labelled “Joint way forward on migration,” <https://www.asyl.at/files/93/18-eu-afghanistan-joint-way-forward-on-migration-issues>. The Joint Way Forward agreement had other elements in addition to campaigns, including cooperation, primarily on returns.

reversal of the reforms that had been promoted over the previous 20 years, on issues such as democratic rule, rule of law, individual rights, and gender equality, drained the hope that many still had of a positive development in the country. Indeed, a large portion of our informants had no plan to leave before the Taliban takeover; rather, they were among those who worked to ameliorate conditions in Afghanistan. With the Taliban takeover, however, the situation changed abruptly.

Those of the female informants who had gone to school or university or entered business, or the civil service notably characterized a future in Afghanistan as being like a recurring nightmare, with no way back. However, male informants also shared the grim fate of having to give up their aspirations and way of living, regardless of their educational background. Many had lost their houses and jobs; those with even a slight connection to the allied NATO forces, such as providing basic cleaning services, had been persecuted, gone underground, and then fled the country.

Hence, for many, going back would mean being persecuted for having worked for the allied forces. They feared death. For those not connected to the pre-Taliban regime or the Western allies, going back home would nevertheless imply pledging allegiance to the Taliban and all their strict rules regarding clothing, growing a beard, and keeping a “proper” family household where wives and daughters were denied the most basic freedoms. Moreover, business opportunities were meager, and those who had built companies based on import and export from countries such as Turkey no longer saw viable avenues to make a decent income.

Those among our informants who had fled after the Taliban takeover were forced migrants. A campaign with a message pointing to the opportunities in Afghanistan would never have been launched in the current situation. Many of the informants who were in Istanbul but had arrived before August 2021 could also be considered refugees and could risk refoulement (persecution, inhuman treatment, death) if returned to their home country.

Within this context, obviously any campaign pointing to the “opportunities” at home would seem futile, if not totally inconsiderate. As such, it is unthinkable that any new EU-funded campaign of this sort would be launched. Given the conditions in Afghanistan, a campaign with this type of message would have to encourage Afghan refugees and migrants to stay in Turkey, and we have seen that the conditions in Turkey contribute to pushing them toward onward migration. Such messaging would also risk pushback from the Turkish government. As Erdogan said, Turkey does not want to be Europe’s warehouse for refugees and migrants.

The deportation stories and experiences of Afghan migrants served as a stark reminder of what could happen to Afghans who did not have a residence permit or did not have their permit renewed. They were the ultimate push factor for those in an irregular situation.

In sum, the Afghan refugees and migrants in transit in Istanbul would not see a message pointing to opportunities in their home country as relevant. Return was not an option. Deportations were the ultimate failure. Further, there was no “need for orientation” on this point. They had good sources keeping them informed on the (lacking) opportunities to build a future in Afghanistan. Finally, the timing would have been wrong. Such a message would point to a future under a newly established, fragile, religious, conservative, and totalitarian regime.

4.2 “The route is dangerous”

The second standard message of EU-funded information campaigns is to point out the challenges and dangers of irregular migration. There may be reason to distinguish between messaging that irregular migration is challenging (i.e., it is difficult to succeed), on the one hand, and dangerous, on the other. Both messages appeared to be well known to the Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul. As one man put it in regard to migrants attempting to cross the border irregularly: “Yes, they know of the dangers, they will make it or die. They know this” (Tur_male_20s_39).

When we showed the informants the picture of the border wall between Turkey and Greece, their immediate reactions were telling with regard to the potential for campaigns pointing to the dangers of irregular migration:

I could have climbed that fence. I have climbed higher walls than that. The wall between Iran and Turkey is much taller. (Laughs.) I haven’t seen these kinds of campaigns. But I have got past taller walls than this. (Tur_male_20s_1)

A woman in her twenties agreed that campaigns using pictures of the wall on the Greek–Turkish border would not be effective:

This will not influence them. They know – they have seen the Turkish wall on the border with Iran. They share that information. We can easily see the Turkish side of the wall, and they talk about this – how did you pass the wall, how shall we pass the wall? They have a bit of fear for the Greek side – but still they feel that they have to try this. They say: Even if I lose my life, I have to do this. (Tur_fem_20s_45)

Another man in his thirties, who had not passed the Iranian–Turkish border himself, was of a similar opinion to the others. He had little faith that this messaging would make people change their minds:

Some Afghans consider going to Europe. Pictures like this do not scare them. Walls higher than this would be needed to deter any one of them! All they can think of is that we must go. And then later, we can invite our families. To have food for their families and education for their children, they will go no matter what. They do not care about these old walls. (Tur_male_30s_2)

Those who had traveled through Iran and passed the wall between Iran and Turkey shared available strategies with other migrants:

[How did you pass the wall between Iran and Turkey?] There are some places that the smugglers know in the valleys where there are some tunnels. There are also some places that are not as heavily guarded, and you can use stones, and then jump over the wall (laughs). Because the wall is so high, I hurt my waist when I did this, when I jumped over. (Tur_male_20s_1)

One informant, who worked in a store that sold equipment to those who wanted to move on and cross into the EU, met people setting out to cross the border every day. He said they knew the dangers involved and pointed out of the store window to the street outside, saying:

Everyone around here wants to leave. In this store we sell all the equipment you need to go to Europe, including Afghan flags, backpacks, energy drinks and dates, and a special bread, so they will not be hungry for a while. We have this special type of bread which lasts for a long time. This is because they will be without regular bread for 20 days. The dates come in special bags [made for those who want to cross]. They buy these things, and then they set out to cross.

When they leave the store, we say “bismillah.” Then, they start their journey. We always say this when we start travelling. What should we do – we cannot go regularly, there is no way. [Rhetorically] Or, is there a way? Tell me. (Tur_male_20s_39)

There was also a uniform understanding of the dangers involved in crossing irregularly. Some informants were aware that the smugglers could misinform some of the younger refugees and migrants:

[Looking at the picture of the border wall between Turkey and Greece] Nothing can stop them, like this kind of campaign, pointing to the dangers, they will not stop. [...]. The smugglers say that you will not face any kind of trouble, and the young do not know anything else – they just know it’s dangerous. (Tur_male_30s_40)

One informant pointed to the role campaigns may play in raising awareness of the risks involved (after the issue had been raised earlier in the interview):

All of them know the danger that many people will die, but still, they accept this. All Afghans know this because there were ads about this on Afghan TV. Those campaigns were from Sweden? From Australia, for sure. I have heard many times that Australia will not be your place. There was a soldier who was on TV. (Tur_male_30s_40)

Those informants who had experienced crossing Iran on their way to Turkey and those who had already failed to cross into the EU had detailed knowledge of the dangers involved in travelling irregularly (see box 1). The rest knew of the dangers second-hand.

PICTURE 4. Soldier guarding the border between Iran and Turkey in the fall of 2021



Source: AsiaNews.it

BOX 1: Woman, in her late forties, has tried to cross into Europe with her children three times. She has not succeeded. When we met her, she had just tried for the third time.

“We have tried to leave irregularly three times since we came to Turkey. But we haven’t made it. Four of my sons have succeeded, and they are now in Europe. The rest of the family is still here, except for my husband, who is still in Afghanistan. He is stuck there.

[Last time] we tried to go with smugglers (starts crying). The conditions were terrible, with dark and cold houses, my youngest son got sick. They took our phones, so that we could not contact anyone. It was ice cold. I could not continue, I wanted to return. The smugglers said it was not possible. Then a car came and picked us up, and we stayed in a forest for a long time. We were all very scared. It was terrible, we were there for three nights. On the fourth night we moved forward, I was afraid all the time, I was worried about my sick son. He is still sick, and now he is afraid of sounds that remind him of the time in the forest.

The time we spent in the forest on our way to the border was so terrible, we had five days all alone, it was so stressful. The smugglers had told us that on the boat it would be only 25 persons. Then we saw that there was only this small vessel, and it was supposed to carry more than 400 people. When the boat had started to move, the Turkish police stopped us. And we were taken to a police station. And there we also had a bad situation. We asked for our phones back. The police told my daughter that we were also a part of a smuggler network and opened a case. Then we were sent to a basketball arena. It was very cold. The UNCHR came and distributed carpets to help us keep warm.

The Turkish government didn’t care about the children; there were many children there. The UNCHR also came with diapers and food. Other nights all we had was bread. It was very dirty, dirty toilets, no toilet paper, no soap, etc. We stayed there for about five days. It was very far from the capital, in a region far away. We were about 500 people staying there, and the Turkish government did not look after us at all. Inside this dark place, it was such a bad situation. After that, with so many people, many of the young tried to break the door to get out of that place, and they succeeded. So, we ran away.

I met a woman there who had been trying to leave [Turkey] for three years. Her husband lives in Europe and has done so for nine years. But she has not succeeded (even though) she has tried so many times. That woman told us not to go to the house where the government wanted us to go to and live. She said they would arrest us in three months. So, we didn’t go with the police when they asked us to. And then the UNCHR came and told us that we could stay for 15 days and after that you must leave Turkey. But we escaped, and now we are hiding from the government.” (Tur_fem_40s_25)

One informant reflected on the moral aspects of the intentions behind the campaigns. We presented her with the picture of the wall between Turkey and Greece, and she said:

Yes, I understand their message, but what do they [*the senders of this information*] think about refugees? We have nowhere to be. There should be differentiation between refugees and other migrants. Yes, they can control their territory, but certainly the refugees should be able to come. (Tur_fem_40s_30)

When prompted on the issue of campaigns, some of the informants mentioned the push toward the Turkish–Greek border in February 2020. According to the informants, there was a statement from the Turkish authorities, or a rumor, that the border to Europe was open and would remain open for 72 hours. Some media reported that the Turkish government organized buses to take migrants from Istanbul to the border area.²⁹ The context was a broader international political debate between Turkey and the EU. Standing in a shop in Istanbul, two men in their thirties told us that “we saw on TV that people were leaving, so we joined in” (Tur_group_30s).

During our fieldwork, informants mentioned the possibility of new messages coming from the Turkish government, making potential migrants flock towards the border. They pointed out that there was to be a national election in Turkey during the spring/summer of 2023 and that one might see a similar situation in the months leading up to the event.

4.3 “Life in Europe is difficult”

In section 3, we noted that the Afghan informants in Istanbul did not speak negatively about Europe or provide alternative narratives to the dominant Europe-is-good narrative. In the context of campaign messaging, this could be interpreted either as indicating they did not have a sufficiently nuanced knowledge of the situation for asylum seekers and migrants in the EU+ or that they compared the situation with that in Afghanistan and in Turkey and could therefore not agree that life in Europe is difficult.

The informants in Istanbul did not display explicit knowledge about the asylum systems in the EU destination countries. They did not mention challenges regarding access to the asylum process, variations in support levels during this process, the difficulties experienced by people in an irregular situation, or the possibility of deportation for those who are rejected. Instead, they pointed to family members, friends, and networks who were already there, often referring to one country or another which they had heard “were good.” This scenario aligns with previous research (Brekke and Aarset 2010).

One would expect that the informants who had networks in the EU would be able to quickly obtain details on the immigration system, the chances they would be able to stay, and support and opportunities, when they needed them.

In a classic text in sociology, Ervin Goffman (1956) distinguished between impressions given and those given off. These concepts may be relevant to understand the challenges faced by EU information campaigns that seek to portray life in Europe as difficult for refugees and migrants. This is the message *given* in these campaigns. Meanwhile, in a thousand other channels, including through popular culture and social media, a different narrative is portrayed: Europe as a place with stability and immense opportunity; a place where you can build a future. This is the image and narrative of Europe which is *given off* – the lasting impression – no matter

²⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-security-turkey-eu-idUKKBN20Q2LD>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgVoYL823LM>

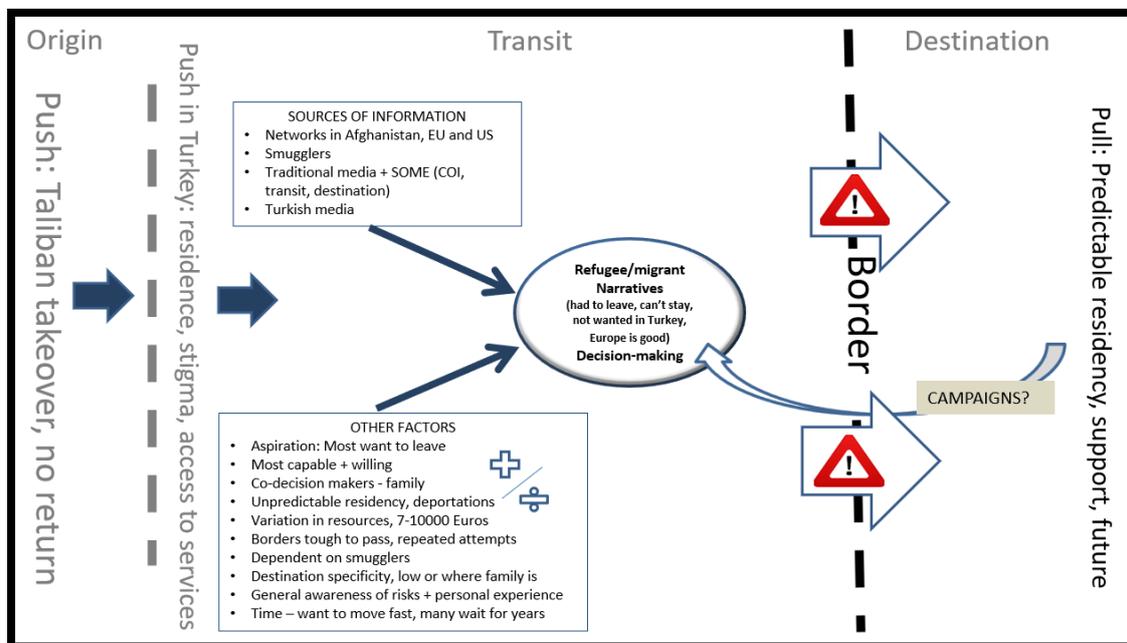
what the campaigns try to communicate. It is extremely difficult to counter this image, even with correct information about asylum procedures and examples of migrants who have failed in Europe.

4.4 Summing up the different stages and information environment as captured by the master narrative

In this section we introduced a model depicting push and pull factors influencing Afghans' self-narratives and decision-making. Starting from the left of figure 3, we have seen how the informants experienced the push factors in Afghanistan. The Taliban takeover abruptly caused a human rights crisis and caused large parts of the population to feel they had no viable future in their home country. Some of our informants had left before August 2021, pointing to an already bleak economic outlook for the country. Remaining on the left side of the figure, we have heard reports about the conditions awaiting those who cross the Iran–Turkey border and the importance of these experiences for the evaluation of the dangers encountered when moving onwards toward the EU.

What the informants most wanted to communicate to us, the central part of the “here and now” of their master story, concerned the conditions for them as Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul and elsewhere in Turkey. These are subsumed under push factors in the model (figure 4) and include unpredictable access to residence permits, the fact that such permits cover ever shorter time spans, lack of access to basic public services, risk of being deported for those without a permit, and experiences of discrimination and stigma.

FIGURE 3. Model of transit migration applied to the situation for Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey



Source: Brekke and Beyer (2019)

In figure 3 we see the same model, but this time we include the concrete case of Afghan refugees and migrants.

The informants confirmed the role of family, friends, and networks as vital sources of information. Together with their own first-hand experiences, these actors formed the basis of the self-narratives they conveyed. Different sources of information were important for staying up to date regarding the situation in all three contexts, namely Afghanistan, Turkey, and destination areas. Informants told us that smugglers often played a decisive role with regard to country of destination as well as the first destination reached in Europe, for example by using ship and boat routes directly to Italy.

The informants used to follow traditional media, online newspapers, and even TV before the Taliban takeover. At the time of our research, they relied on direct sources in their networks inside or outside the country for news about Afghanistan. Everyone had smartphones, and all were frequent users of social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Tik-Tok. On these platforms, they communicated with their networks inside and outside Turkey, stayed updated on news, and shared information on the situation for Afghans in transit and possibilities of onward migration. They were highly aware of negative videos showing Afghan or Pakistani migrants which created a stigma felt by all Afghans in Turkey. Most informants followed or knew someone who followed Turkish media, from which they obtained information about the political discussions and Turkish narratives of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan and Syria. The statements, rumors, and the campaign in February 2020, which led to a push of refugees and migrants towards the border to the EU and was launched on TV, were then picked up and spread on social media.

We have already provided a thorough description of the dominant narratives among Afghans in Istanbul on onward migration and on Europe as a destination. What can be added is that several of the informants mentioned that Turkey was once viewed as a destination country, and they themselves had even seen it as such. The economic downturn, along with the push factors identified above, including the stigma on Afghan migrants, meant that Turkey had lost that status for Afghans. Their home country was a political shamble, they were barely tolerated and certainly not embraced by the Turkish hosts, and they would be given residence if they made it across the border and into the EU, albeit that protection would be only temporary in certain countries.

In figure 3, we have replaced the generic list of factors from figure 3 with inputs from the informants. Regarding aspirations to move on, we saw that a few of our informants were established in Istanbul, had property and residence permits, and were likely to stay. However, even these pointed to uncertainty regarding renewal of residence permits and increasing stigma. Most, however, wanted to leave and were capable of doing so, but some informants realized that because of age, bad health, or young children, they could not attempt the irregular journey across the border.

Family members were often mentioned in connection with decisions on onward migration. We have already mentioned the very difficult conditions for Afghans in Istanbul which, for those without residency, included unpredictability, stigma, and deportations. Our material indicates that substantial differences existed in terms of access to resources. Some were looking to secure permanent residency through investment in property (minimum 250,000 USD), while

other had spent years trying to save enough to attempt a border crossing. The prices for smugglers' assistance ranged from 7000 to 10,000 Euros.

We have described the hindrances along the route and the risks involved in traveling irregularly. These were well known, and some had first-hand experience of them, both from passing from Iran into Turkey and from having attempted to cross into the EU and failing.

There was variation in destination specificity. Some mentioned that, due to having relatives there, certain countries stood out, such as Germany, the UK, the US, and Norway, while others referred to rumors, such as "Germany is a good country now." In several cases, some family members had made it across, while our informants had either not tried (yet) or had failed and been pushed back to Turkey.

Figure 3 also shows the hazard signs at the border with the destination area, which refer to the risks involved in crossing. We have seen examples of stories from informants who had experienced these risks: the women who traveled with her sick son and was turned back and incarcerated; the man who told of his brother who fell into the water and ended up in a coma before finally reaching Bulgaria.

On the far right of figure 3, we see examples of the factors that motivated the refugees and migrants to take the risks involved in attempting to cross the border. Those mentioned in the figure are predictability in regard to residency, support and a positive outlook, and a future for oneself and one's children.

The final element in figure 3 is the curved arrow running from the right of the model back to the decision maker in transit. We return to the potential impact of such campaigns on the Afghan refugees and migrants in the following section.

4.4 The impact of campaigns

Bringing back the concepts related to campaign evaluation discussed in section 2, we see that they have varying, but mostly low, relevance for the Afghans in Turkey. There were no active EU information campaigns, so there were no inputs (messages, formats, channels) to evaluate. Still, the informants did provide information about their susceptibility to the three standard messages. The first of these, "embrace the opportunities at home," was not an option for those who fled the new Taliban rule. The informants were also about to give up on the limited options for building a future in Turkey. The two other messages, that the route is dangerous and life in Europe can be tough, may have appeared more relevant. However, their sources of information – that is, their own experiences along with input from networks who had traveled ahead of them or who were already in Europe – would mean that they were already informed. Details on the dangers involved in onward migration or about the reception, processing, and support systems could be lacking, but, if needed, they would know where to find that information.

Regarding platforms and channels, all informants were fluent users of social media, followed reports from their home country, and had first or secondary access to Turkish traditional media. Some also followed online versions of traditional international media.

The informants frowned when we showed them the picture of the wall between Turkey and Greece, using the report on the campaign being planned by Greek authorities. The campaigns following the 2015 crisis were often based on shocking images and videos. Earlier studies have shown that these were not perceived to make an impression by the target groups (Brekke and Beyer 2019). Still, as we saw, some informants in the current study, referred to the Australian campaigns from 2014 onwards, where a soldier says, in a voice designed to deter, that viewers would not make Australia their home.³⁰

FIGURE 4. Excerpt from video. Australian campaign: There is no way you will make Australia home



Source: Australian Customs. Fri 11 Apr 2014 06.23 BST/The Guardian

Given that all informants had smartphones and used standard social media platforms, it should not be difficult to design an EU campaign which would reach the target group in a language they understand. However, reaching an audience is not enough for a message to be effective (Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2020; Brekke and Beyer 2019).³¹ We have demonstrated that informants' knowledge of the situation in Afghanistan and Turkey was quite fine-grained, as was their knowledge of the risks involved in moving on. They had less detailed knowledge about the conditions for migrants in Europe, but many referred to networks which could be prompted to provide this information. In other words, they did not express a need for orientation on these three aspects of onward migration.

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Py6vIDgXc>

³¹ <https://openmigration.org/en/op-ed/dangerous-journey-limited-effect-of-information-campaigns-to-deter-irregular-migration/>

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021 pushed thousands of refugees across the border to Iran and onwards to Turkey. Some were evacuated directly to Istanbul. The takeover simultaneously changed the situation for Afghans already living in Turkey. For most, there was no longer an option to return to their home country.

Conditions for refugees and migrants have changed over the past few years, following an economic downturn and high inflation, changes in access to residence permits, and negative political, and possibly popular, sentiments toward refugees and migrants. Turkey hosts around four million refugees, most of Syrian origin. What seems to be national, societal protection fatigue has appeared to affect the Afghan group as well. An election is expected in the spring of 2023, and opposition parties are pushing for stricter immigration policies.

In 2016, Turkey and the EU signed a statement of cooperation on migration management.³² A key element in this agreement is that Turkey will contribute to stopping people traveling irregularly from Turkey to the EU. Together with strict border control on the EU side of the Greek and Bulgarian borders, the Turkish obligation to stem migrants wanting to cross makes it difficult and often dangerous to cross the border irregularly.

Based on this context, and on interviews with 46 Afghan refugees and migrants focusing on the role of information and aspiration of onward migration, the following points can be made.

- **The Afghans residing in Istanbul are stuck in transit**

According to the Afghans in Istanbul, they could not go back to the Taliban-led Afghanistan. At the same time, strict border control hindered them from moving forward into the EU. Some informants stated that all Afghans in Turkey wanted to move to Europe. This appeared to be correct for those who had arrived after August 2022. Others were established in Turkey. Those who had worked for international forces and organizations before the Taliban takeover often had pending visa applications. Some of the informants had initially seen Turkey as an attractive destination country. All reported increasing precariousness.

- **Conditions in Istanbul and Turkey create a push to leave**

While the informants pointed to the deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan as the main push factor, the immediate situation in Turkey, including in Istanbul, pushed for onward migration. Immediate factors included the risk of losing, or living without, a residence permit, a downturn in the economy, and increasing stigma. Those with limited funds and no residence permit were particularly vulnerable. The lack of permits denied them access to proper health care, jeopardized access to schools for children, and left them in constant fear of being detained and deported. Those who could not afford to pay smugglers were, in practice, stuck in transit.

- **The role of narratives**

The dominant narrative among the Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul consisted of “having to leave,” “living under increasingly difficult conditions in Turkey,” and the goal of going

³² <https://eu.rescue.org/article/what-eu-turkey-deal>

to Europe or the USA and thereby “a predictable situation regarding residency, better living conditions, less stigma, and being able to build a future.” This was the dominant story told by our informants, regardless of background and years of residency in Turkey. This did not mean that everyone wanted to leave; there were exceptions, but everyone pointed to this as the master narrative. They all carried the sorrow of Afghanistan and the dream of a brighter future. There were few counter narratives. The heated national immigration debate in Turkey only helped fuel the Afghans’ ambitions to find a footing elsewhere.

- **Informants stayed informed – platforms, networks, sources**

The informants had a broad intake of news and information related to the situation in Afghanistan, the situation in Turkey, and the possibilities of moving on. They all had a smartphone and saw social media platforms as the prime source of information and the most important channels to stay in touch with family and networks both inside and outside Turkey. Many also followed Turkish news and political debates. Those with lower language skills or education kept up to date via friends and networks. Smugglers were important information sources, especially regarding when, how, and where to travel.

- **Information campaigns – their potential impact**

This study enabled an assessment of the potential of EU-sponsored information campaigns targeting Afghans in Turkey, although no campaigns were active at the time of study. The outcome of such campaigns typically depends on target populations’ need for orientation, which is closely related with the depth and confidence in the information they already have. We found that there was little expressed need for information related to the three standard migrant information campaign messages: Explore the opportunities at home (in our case Afghanistan or Turkey), irregular migration is dangerous, and Europe can be tough for migrants. While many were experts on the two first messages (stay, and the route is dangerous), they had less detailed knowledge of the policies, processes, and support for migrants in European countries. They did, however, have family and networks already in the destination countries whose detailed knowledge they could call on if needed. Apart from this, we noted that, when prompted, some informants referred to campaigns launched in Afghanistan around the migration crisis in 2015. They mentioned the Australian “No Way” campaign and campaigns sponsored by the German government as examples.

Having reviewed the statements from the informants, we believe that new, similar campaigns would risk having little or no effect on this group under current circumstances in Istanbul and Turkey more generally. The fading belief in building a future in Turkey can be expressed in the following equation:

BOX 2.

Fear of losing residency (and penalty for not having a permit) + downturn in the economy + increasing stigma + political instability = hard to imagine a future in Turkey

There was a striking dissonance between the master narrative of the Afghan refugees and migrants and the standard messaging of EU-funded information campaigns. In figure 5 we see

the general direction of the Afghans' own narrative and understanding of both their individual and group migration trajectories.

FIGURE 5. The narrative of onward migration according to the Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul. The process points forward toward the EU

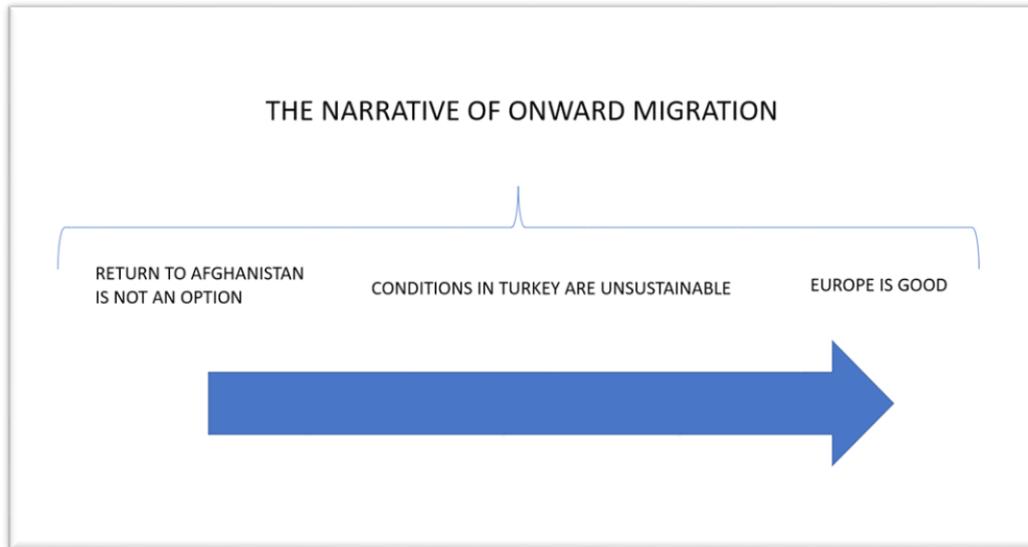


Figure 5 shows the three main components of their master narrative: Return is not an option, conditions in Turkey are unsustainable, and Europe is good. The arrow indicates the general direction of the process, namely toward Europe.

In contrast, the general direction in the standard campaign messages points in the opposite direction, away from Europe and toward the country of origin (see figure 6).

FIGURE 6. The three standard messages of EU-funded information campaigns: The general orientation is towards the country of origin / country of transit

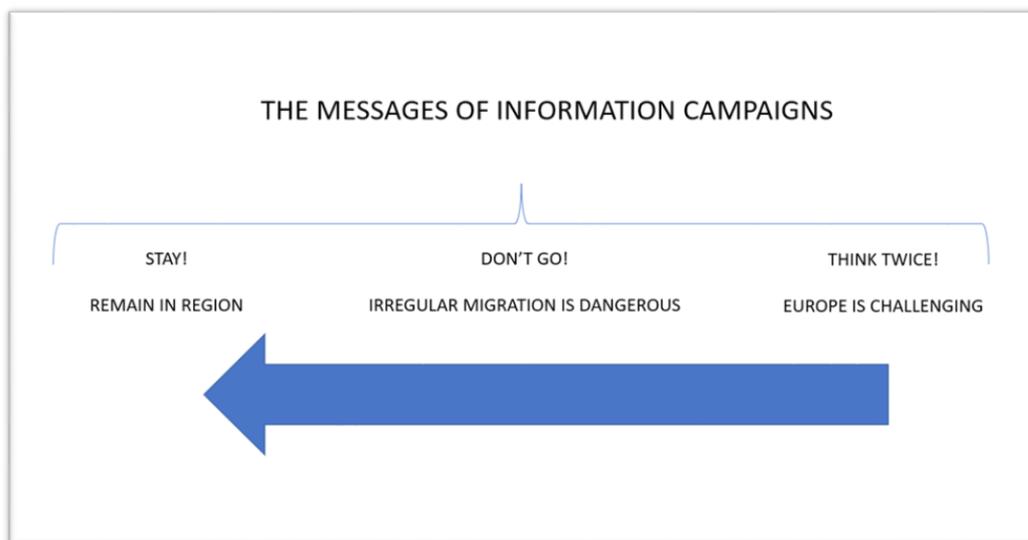
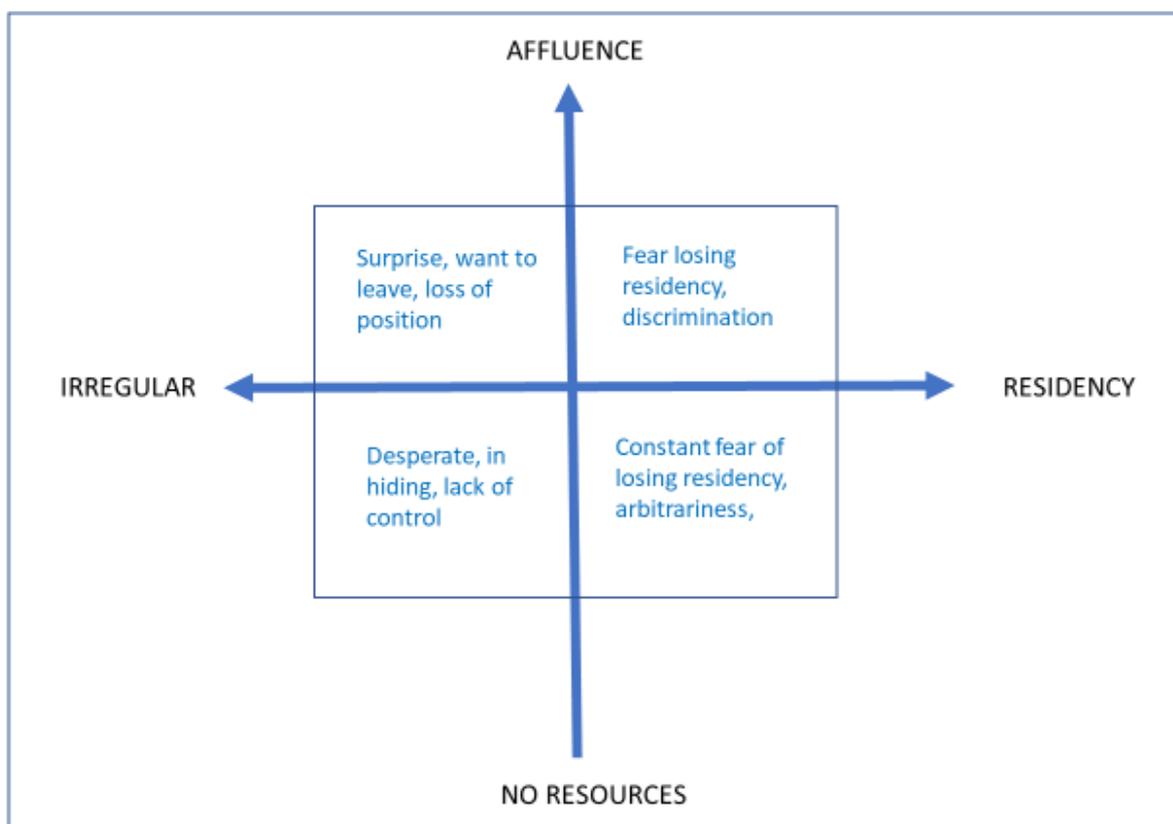


Figure 6 displays the three main messages in brief: Stay, don't go, and think twice (life in Europe can be challenging for migrants). Looking at Figures 5 and 6 in combination, we see the contrary directions in the refugees' and migrants' master narrative and the counter narratives provided in standard campaign messaging.

5.1 Adapting to insecure residence status – in-group variation

As we have seen, Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul and Turkey in are not a homogenous group. Two of the relevant dimensions cutting across the group were the level of resources, ranging from affluent to near zero (money, competence), and whether they had a residence permit or not. Figure 8 shows how these two dimensions can intersect to create four different combinations.

FIGURE 7. Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey – Four modes of adapting to the situation in Istanbul, according to residence status and level of resources (class/money/competency)



In the bottom left-hand corner of figure 7, we find those informants who did not have a residence permit and who had limited resources. These were in a desperate state: a situation marked by precariousness with no secure access to health services, schools for their children, or housing. They were in constant fear of being picked up by the police and risked being deported to Afghanistan. They were very motivated to try to travel irregularly to the EU but often lacked the means to do so. Smugglers were said to charge between 7000 and 10000

Euros per person. Such a sum was already difficult to find for one person in this category; for a family of four, it appeared unattainable. As a result, they were desperate but stuck.

In the upper left-hand corner, we find the educated or affluent informants. The most affluent, who had been able to secure their financial assets, could buy their way out. Residence could be attained through the purchase of property of substantial value (approximately 300,000 USD). Many people who used to be part of an upper middle class in Afghanistan, however, were astonished to suddenly find themselves in a situation where they had no access to a residence permit or had suddenly lost the one they had. They also expressed shock. Often, one or more persons in the household had not had their permit renewed, leaving the family split and obliged to put all their energy into securing a permit. This situation forced them to look for other opportunities, such as going to the EU irregularly. Even if they were able to pay the smugglers, however, this was a strenuous, expensive, and dangerous endeavor.

PICTURE 5. Storefront in Istanbul promoting the combination of property purchase and citizenship



Source: Jan-Paul Brekke and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud

In the upper right-hand corner, we find those informants who had residence permits and resources. This was clearly the best position to be in. However, even the families and individuals in this situation were worried, fearing ever-changing regulations regarding residency and housing. In their experience, the Turkish authorities and public treated them differently than the Turkish population.

In the bottom right-hand corner, we find those with limited means but with residency. These people still found themselves in a precarious situation. Knowing others who did not have residency or had recently lost it, they were continually wondering whether they would have theirs renewed the next time they applied and how much it would cost to apply for renewal.

Many in this position had family members who had permits with different durations. While a mother and father could be given six months, a daughter could be given 12. This added to the general sensation that the application process was unpredictable.

5.2 Recommendations

- Taking into consideration Turkey's situation as the world's largest recipient of refugees, this report documents that Afghan nationals residing in Istanbul without a residence permit are in a precarious situation. European governments should continue to work with Turkey to secure adherence to the norms for protection established in the 1951 Convention, including access to procedures, and the Declaration of Human Rights for this group. For Afghan refugees and migrants in an irregular situation in Istanbul, these latter rights were jeopardized regarding access to health services and, in the case of children, to schools.
- European governments may consider working together with Turkish immigration authorities to increase the predictability of the practice of issuing residence permits to refugees and migrants. A transparent, affordable, and predictable process would be the single most important measure to improve the living conditions of refugees and migrants in Istanbul and elsewhere in Turkey. Again, we recognize that there are other considerations that affect today's practice, including pressure regarding volume, immigration control, and political goals of dispersion of migrants to alleviate pressure in certain cities and areas.
- European governments should work with multilateral organizations, including UNHCR and IOM, and Turkish immigration authorities to secure human rights, including those in the Refugee Convention, in the ongoing Turkish operation of returning Afghan nationals from Turkey to Afghanistan. Around 40,000 such returns were enforced during the first six months of 2022. According to our informants, these returnees included women and children. Keywords in this work would be securing the conditions in deportation facilities, the quality of informed consent in cases of assisted voluntary returns, access to information about appeals, and a minimum of international monitoring during and after return.
- Given the situation of Afghan refugees residing in Turkey with pending visa applications to western countries, the governments of European countries and the USA should consider increasing their efforts and the speed of application processing.
- European countries currently envisaging the implementation of information campaigns targeting Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey should take into consideration the findings of this study regarding the dominant narrative and need for orientation. Such campaigns must be based on a deep knowledge of the precarities of the situation of refugees in Turkey and reflect the diversity of backgrounds present within the group. Any government-led communication should respect the common norms of the 1951 Convention on Refugees and the intentions of both the Global Compact for Refugees and the Global Compact on Migration.

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BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

BRIDGES: Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives is a project funded by the EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and implemented by a consortium of 12 institutions from all over Europe. The project aims to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues by focusing on six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To do so, BRIDGES adopts an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and is implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

The BRIDGES Working Papers are a series of academic publications presenting the research results of the project in a structured and rigorous way. They can either focus on particular case studies covered by the project or adopt a comparative perspective.

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