



POLICY BRIEF

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Reframing Migration: The Use of Visual Communication by Government Institutions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In today's digital age, where images circulate rapidly through technology and social media, the impact of visual representation on migration governance cannot be overstated. Scholarly research has shown that how government institutions depict migrants, refugees, the asylum system, immigration processes and integration shapes the public narrative and carries profound implications for migrants, public discourse and its influence on policymaking. Yet, while government institutions actively engage in a variety of communication methodologies, the importance of visual images in communication on migration often is overlooked in government communication strategies.

This policy brief argues that visual communication – the transmission of information and ideas through visual elements, such as images, graphics, charts and other visual aids – has a pivotal role in shaping migrant and public perceptions and influencing policy decisions concerning migration. The brief draws on research on the visual representations produced by government migration institutions in Canada and Europe to demonstrate the need for governments to develop and adopt best practices in visual communication on migration. Government institutions are advised to:

- Integrate visual communication into strategic communication frameworks
- Represent people on the move fairly and ethically
- Ensure visual representation is transparent and accountable
- Balance visual storytelling with data and facts
- Recognize the impact of images on public attitudes, migrant decision-making and policy formulation
- Foster continuous learning and adaptation

By adopting these recommendations, government institutions, and more generally all actors producing and disseminating images of refugees and migrants, can contribute to informed, balanced and ethical visual narratives, ultimately enhancing the fairness and efficacy of migration policies.

INTRODUCTION

In an age defined by the omnipresence of visual content and its rapid circulation beyond borders thanks to technology and social media, the impact of imagery in [shaping public perceptions and influencing policy decisions is extremely important](#). This is particularly true in the realm of migration as it becomes increasingly evident that images have evolved into potent agents that contribute to the production of meaning and significance in our collective consciousness, [shaping not only public opinion but also the policies and practices that govern migration](#). Equally important, [social media and technologies like smartphones have become indispensable instruments throughout the migrants' decision-making processes and journeys](#).

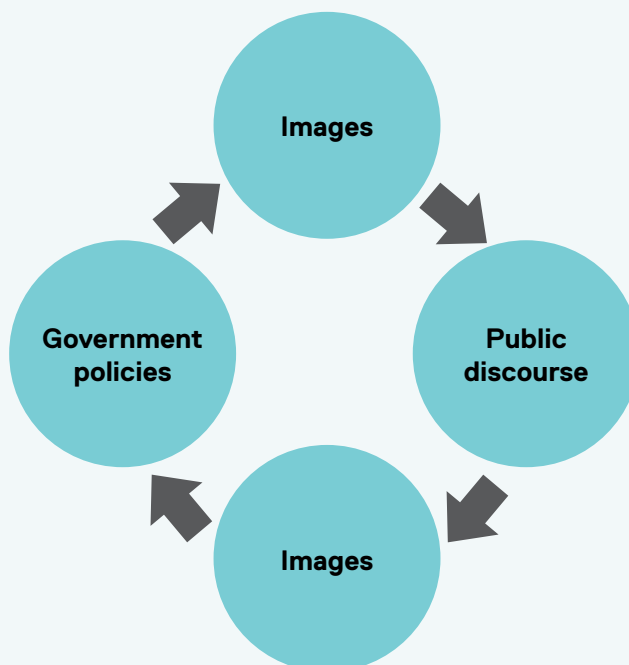
This policy brief emphasizes that it is imperative that key government institutions, which are pivotal in shaping migration narratives, use best practices in visual communication to produce a principled, ethical, more transparent and fair representation of migrants and migration issues. The analysis and recommendations that follow draw on the key challenges and best practices uncovered in [recent](#)

[research into the visual communications](#) used by government institutions responsible for migration in Canada and Europe.

Images are part of the iterative aspect of governance. Government institutions use images to convey their migration policies and practices. These images contribute to the evolving public discourse, attitudes regarding migration and potentially to migrants' decisions. Images of the outcomes of migrant decisions and public reaction to them in turn may result in changes to government policies and practices. And the cycle continues. In essence, governance has become intertwined with visual communication, and this iterative relationship merits careful consideration. (See Figure 1).

Indeed, in many countries, government agencies are increasingly prioritizing communication as a crucial focus. Communication departments are expanding, adopting more professionalized practices and becoming more influenced by public relations principles such as branding and proactive media strategies. However, governments around the world exhibit significant variation in their communication policies, typically leaning towards loosely defined guidelines rather than explicit instructions which recognize the powerful influence of the images used.

Figure 1: Iterative relationship between images, public discourse and government policies



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Extensive academic research has paid attention to the representation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers by media outlets and humanitarian stakeholders. These studies are important because they have shown not only how migrants and refugees are most predominantly represented, but, most importantly, what the consequences of these representations are on the way people think about the issue. For example, some studies have shown how certain kinds of media representation have [contributed to normalize racially based differences between refugees, migrants and “us”](#) and to [dehumanize the “other”](#). In contrast, limited attention has been directed toward scrutinizing how government institutions communicate migration matters, with even fewer studies investigating visual communications in particular.

Research on border security agencies in Australia, Canada, and the United States has found that, despite the emphasis that government agencies have put on proactive communication practices, they have [not fully realized the transformative potential of social media](#). The research revealed that while these agencies employ social media, their usage remains primarily conventional, focusing on broadcasting information, managing their public image, and soliciting public assistance. However, social media are powerful tools for proposing new narratives of migration. Government institutions could use social media to present a positive narrative on migration by, for example, creating informative and visually appealing infographics, videos and articles explaining the benefits of migration, such as cultural enrichment, economic contributions and diversity.

However, ignoring the transformative potential of social media can come at an ethical cost, as in the case of the Norwegian government. During the 2015 refugee crisis the Norwegian government turned to social media to influence migrants' destination choices by creating a campaign to discourage migrants from choosing Norway. The campaign highlighted a list of new restrictive measures, including a reduction in the benefits offered at reception centres and in the size of the temporary residency program. As well, the campaign focused on encouraging migrants' return and the limits to family reunification. This was in contrast to the government's [“ground rules of civil service information to the public”](#), which emphasizes the need to provide the public with a comprehensive package of information, transparency and accountability.

The fallout for Norway is a good reminder for other governments (and their agencies) to consider the ethical and political ramifications of their social media engagement.

An [analysis](#) of the communications by Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), a humanitarian NGO, showed that the two organizations had competing and diverging narratives and participated in a media battle for moral authority. While in Frontex's images, migrants are almost absent and a significant portion of the visual communications is aimed at constructing a positive image of Frontex as a robust and dynamic law enforcement agency, MSF's visual elements predominantly depict migrant suffering. Other studies have highlighted the complex interplay between humanitarianism and border policing in Europe, challenging conventional assumptions about their incompatibility. A case in point is the [study](#) on the shift toward humanitarian narratives in the context of Mediterranean migration. The study highlights the intersection of humanitarian aid and migration control, analyzing how both fields construct crisis situations as “emergencies” and employ humanitarian narratives that depict migrants and refugees as voiceless victims in need of protection and aid.

In the Canadian context, [an analysis](#) of the government's discourse concerning asylum seekers crossing the US border into Canada outside regular ports of entry revealed a complex narrative characterized by mixed messages. On the one hand, the government was shown to have presented an image of being an open and welcoming nation committed to international obligations (i.e., the [2018 IRCC #Immigration Matters Campaign](#) emphasizing that immigrants contribute to the economy, are properly screened and respect Canada's laws, and fully integrate into Canadian society). On the other hand, the government showed its strong concerns about the potential exploitation of the asylum system by asylum seekers. This multifaceted discourse represents a delicate balancing act aimed at maintaining Canada's humanitarian image while addressing public concerns about irregular entries and the government's intention to reduce future arrivals. The shifting nature of the government's messages in response to changing migration patterns raises important questions about government priorities: are they about addressing international obligations or domestic political pressures?

A: Visual trends in migration institution images

[The author's research](#) zeroes in on the X (formerly Twitter) images accompanying posts from four major migration institutions in the EU and Canada—specifically, the European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (commonly known as FRONTEX), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), and the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) (see summary of data in Table 1 below).

The visual analysis reveals a common trend among migration agencies in both Canada and Europe: the tendency to downplay the representation of

individuals on the move, particularly migrants and refugees, through photographic imagery. In essence, apart from IRCC, which incorporates several photos of immigrants—albeit primarily those admitted by Canada's highly selective immigration schemes (e.g., high-skilled economic, refugee resettlement, family reunification, and international student programs)—people in motion rarely emerge as subjects in photographic representations within the visual communications of government institutions on social media. This holds true even in the immediate aftermath of two pivotal events that triggered major refugee crises—the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. If the people to which migration policies are directed are visually absent, what are the X images depicting instead?

Table 1: Author's summary of social media content analysis from Aug. 15, 2021, to Nov. 15, 2021 (following the Taliban takeover) and from Feb. 24, 2022, to May 24, 2022 (following the Russian invasion of Ukraine)

	AFGHANS ON THE MOVE	UKRAINIANS ON THE MOVE	OTHER NATIONALITIES ON THE MOVE	TOTAL IMAGES OF PEOPLE ON THE MOVE	TOTAL NUMBER OF IMAGES POSTED DURING REVIEW PERIODS
CBSA	Photos: 3 Infographic: 0 Text-based image: 0 Total: 3	Photos: 0 Infographic: 0 Text-based image: 0 Total: 0	Photos: 0 Infographic: 0 Text-based image: 0 Total: 0	Photos: 3 Infographic: 0 Text-based image: 0 Total: 0	129
IRCC	Photos: 2 Infographic: 2 Text-based image: 10 Total: 14	Photos: 0 Infographic: 9 Text-based image: 1 Total: 10	Photos: 11 Infographic: 11 Text-based image: 4 Total: 26	Photos: 13 Infographic: 22 Text-based image: 15 Total: 50	96
EUAA	Photos: 0 Infographic: 5 Text-based image: 0 Total: 5	Photos: 13 Infographic: 34 Text-based image: 5 Total: 52	Photos: 5 Infographic: 2 Text-based image: 3 Total: 10	Photos: 18 Infographic: 41 Text-based image: 8 Total: 57	541
FRONTEX	Photos: 0 Infographic: 0 Text-based image: 0 Total: 0	Photos: 4 Infographic: 6 Text-based image: 0 Total: 10	Photos: 5 Infographic: 5 Text-based image: 0 Total: 10	Photos: 9 Infographic: 11 Text-based image: 0 Total: 20	177
ALL	22	72	46	127	943

Figure 2: Author's screenshots of posts from the European Union Asylum Agency and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada on X (formerly Twitter)



This research found that government agencies tend to use two very different types of visual images for different purposes:

1. On the one hand, government institutions heavily rely on the use of infographics to present statistics, trends and information, combining text with visual elements such as graphs, icons, maps and symbols. These non-text elements are used to provide data, analysis and information in a way that appears as neutral and impartial as possible, putting the data at the forefront of the image. They are only meant to convey a message without attempting to elicit emotions or calling for an interaction (or reaction) from the viewer, as media images of migration very often do. However, the overuse of infographics can be problematic as they often provide a quick and simplified overview of complex matters and often inadvertently reproduce dominant power or fail to represent the complexities and the nuances of the situations.

2. On the other hand, both European and Canadian border agencies' images accompanying X posts are visually dominated by uniformed border control personnel and insignia (see Figure 3). These recurrent images highlight the agencies' control and border management role. Quite distinctively, CBSA's images of their staff also offer a self-representation as a diverse and inclusive agency.

B: Absence and omissions

Pictures, by showing only certain things, impact what we notice and think about. It's essential to notice what's missing, not just what's there, because what isn't shown in pictures stays outside of the discussion and debate.

One of the most notable omissions in both European and Canadian government institutions' X images is the depiction of the border and the representation of people enforcing it on site. Both the physical presence of the frontier and the symbolic elements that signify

Figure 3: Author's screenshots of Frontex and Canada Border Services Agency X (formerly Twitter) posts



the divisions between spaces such as state border signs and flags, so important in the migration rhetoric from a policy and political perspective, are extremely marginal in most visual representations. In the visual representations of migration agencies, for whom the border is the central organizational focus, the border is notably downplayed and takes on a more discreet, behind-the-scenes role. From a visual perspective, the border is more a matter of scenery in the background in stark contrast with the textual and governance level where the border is often the “central character”.

Another example is that, apart from the widely

publicized image of Aylan Kurdi, there has been minimal attention given to the countless migrants who have lost their lives along the migration routes. In Calais, French authorities have implemented a “policy of invisibility,” deliberately removing migrants from public view to create the perception that the migrant “issue” has been resolved. Similarly, absent from the visual narrative of all migration agencies under scrutiny are any depictions of the perils and hazards faced during the journey, as well as the stark statistics of individuals who perish while attempting to reach the borders. The absence of any visual representation of mortality, along with the iconographic portrayal of the hazards and

risks encountered along the journey, such as rubber dinghies and lifejackets, is particularly striking in the European context. These symbols of the dangers of migration are visually absent, yet are supposedly central to a migration strategy that claims to prioritize “protection.” This omission is interesting, as narratives focusing on the risks of migration [often align with a border securitization discourse](#) and support [Europe’s containment and exclusionary agenda](#). Such narratives also contribute to a [framework that places the blame for the “refugee crisis” on smugglers](#) while allowing states to distance themselves from direct responsibility for this humanitarian tragedy.

Finally, both in European and Canadian visual communication on social media, integration, though mentioned as one of the pillars of a successful migration process, is entirely absent from the institutional visual communication observed on X during the five-month study periods in 2021 and 2022.

EXISTING GUIDELINES ON MIGRATION COMMUNICATION

Many documents such as the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\) communication strategy](#), the [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\) Public Communication Campaigns Toolkit](#), or the [EUAA communication strategy and implementing rules](#) outline communication strategies, toolkits, and occasionally digital campaigns involving images and videos. However, these documents often lack guidance on best practices for representing people on the move. Moreover, it is important to note that most of the existing guidelines for visual communication refer to the work of international organizations and non-governmental organizations rather than government institutions.

In the 2000s, organizations started reflecting on ethical and fair representation of migration issues. In 2007, for example, CONCORD, the European Confederation of NGOs working on sustainable development and international cooperation, developed their [Code of Conduct on Images and Messages](#) which encourages its member organizations to choose images and messages that respect human dignity. The signatories commit, among other things to:

- Choose images and related messages based on values of respect, equality, solidarity and justice;
- Truthfully represent any image or depicted situation

both in its immediate and in its wider context so as to improve public understanding of the realities and complexities of development;

- Avoid images and messages that potentially stereotype, sensationalize or discriminate against people, situations or places.

While it is relatively easy to identify numerous instances where organizations’ communications have failed to uphold these guiding principles, the mere existence of the code of conduct and the fact that many organizations refer to it are an encouraging step forward.

In the 2010s, there have been important attempts to change the narrative on migration and formalize specific recommendations. In 2016, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) organized an expert roundtable on [“Changing the public narrative on migration: promoting tolerance and confronting xenophobia against migrants”](#). Although not specifically on images, the report is relevant as several of its recommendations are also applicable to the visual domain. The recommendations emphasized the use of storytelling to build empathy and counter prejudice against migrants. They also identified the need to highlight diversity and human rights, collaborate with experts to reach specific audiences, focus on the local context, use art and humour in educational materials, and build capacity with communication professionals. Additionally, they stressed the need to enhance coordination between those shaping narratives and the development of standards.

In 2018, the International Centre for Policy Advocacy developed a toolkit for [Reframing Migration Narratives](#) which included a step-by-step approach to building a narrative change campaign and 12 core lessons for reframing the migration debate in order to “put diversity and inclusion back on the public policy agenda and counter populist narratives”. More recently, a 2019 [EU-funded report by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development](#) offered a comprehensive review of migration advocacy groups’ reports outlining recommendations for how to effectively communicate on migration issues in a way that might change attitudes and de-polarize the debate. It also provided a summary of key recommendations from existing best-practice guides for migration communication. Although some of these reports acknowledge and even emphasize the crucial role played by images, the guidelines and recommendations focused on

communication in general, overlooking the specific features of visual communication. Nonetheless, some of the recommendations that they identified as best practices could be transferable to the visual domain, such as the need to focus on value-based messaging and to dedicate time and resources to selecting and creating images, while avoiding (voluntarily or involuntarily) negative framing and stereotyping.

A policy brief, [Communicating effectively on migration: recommendations and policy options](#), published by Resoma: (Research Social Platform on Migration and Asylum) identifies the importance of the type of images selected in shaping public attitudes and building understanding of migrants' and refugees' experiences and needs. The document recommends that institutions should make visuals a central part of communications while ensuring that they avoid portrayals of victimhood that can reinforce perceptions of an 'unrelatable other' and reduce the complexities of the situation. Institutions are also advised against depicting refugees and migrants as 'ideal role models' as it risks creating unrealistic ideals of a "good immigrant".

Government institutions can draw valuable insights from the guidelines and recommendations mentioned above which were crafted for NGOs, international organizations and advocacy organizations in their communication strategies on migration. There is much to be learned that can be adapted for application by government institutions without the need to reinvent the wheel. The following six recommendations are made in that spirit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrate visual communication into strategic communication frameworks

In the formulation of an effective communication strategy, government institutions must first identify the key messages they intend to convey, the primary audience they seek to engage, and the specific communication objectives they aim to achieve. This should include a strategic evaluation of the visual imagery to assess how it aligns effectively with the intended message, resonates with the target audience, and helps to accomplish the established communication objectives. This thoughtful approach

ensures that visual elements are purposefully integrated into the broader communication strategy, contributing to its overall effectiveness and impact.

2. Represent people on the move fairly and ethically

Government institutions should pay more attention to the visual representation of people on the move, given its unique power to shape understanding of complex issues. By including images of individuals and families affected by migration, government institutions can humanize the issue and demonstrate empathy and understanding, as well as show the complexity and diversity of the mobility journey. To achieve this, institutions should ensure that visual representations not only reflect the diversity of people on the move, but also emphasize the agency of individuals throughout their displacement journey. Visual communication should avoid stigmatizing migrants. It is important to avoid using images that reinforce and perpetuate negative stereotypes or that depict migrants as helpless or dependent. Government institutions must always prioritize ethical considerations to guide the selection and use of images and videos. They should avoid exploiting vulnerable populations, including migrants and refugees, for the sake of visual impact. Visual content should not expose individuals or their families to harm or compromise their safety. Government institutions should also refrain from sensationalizing or dramatizing migration issues, as this can distort public perceptions and exacerbate misunderstandings.

3. Ensure visual representation is transparent and accountable

Government institutions should be transparent about the sources and purposes of their visual content, ensuring that images and videos are used responsibly. This includes providing context and background information about the visual materials shared, such as the time, place and people involved. Transparency can help prevent the misuse or misinterpretation of images and reinforce the institution's commitment to truthful and respectful communication. Additionally, government institutions should establish clear guidelines and mechanisms for accountability in visual representation, with periodic reviews and evaluations to assess the impact and ethical compliance of their content.

4. Balance visual storytelling with data and facts

While visual storytelling is a powerful tool, government institutions should strike a balance between emotive narratives and factual information in their visual communication. Incorporating data and facts through infographics, charts, and statistics can provide a well-rounded understanding of the migration phenomenon. By combining compelling stories with evidence-based information, agencies can create a more comprehensive and persuasive narrative that gives voice to the migrant experience and resonates with the public and policymakers alike. This approach contributes to informed decision-making and policy formulation that considers both the human aspect and the practical realities of migration. It is important, however, to always keep in mind that the visualizations of data and facts are not “neutral” tools; instead, recognize that the way in which data are visualized plays a role in how the audience understands an issue.

5. Recognize the impact of images on public attitudes, migrant decision-making and policy formulation

Government institutions should recognize the profound influence that visual narratives wield over public perception, migrant decisions and, by extension, the formulation of policy approaches to migration. In light of the far-reaching impact of visual content in shaping public discourse and governance, it is imperative that government institutions take a proactive approach to harnessing the power of imagery. They should consider the nuanced ways in which their visual communication can subtly mold public opinion and be acutely aware of the potential repercussions associated with their messaging. To that end, government institutions should actively engage in the development and adoption of best practices in visual communication, informed by critical scholarship and ethical considerations. They should not only acknowledge the pivotal role of images in shaping migration narratives and policy outcomes but also strive to adopt principled and equitable representations of migration. By doing so, these institutions can contribute to more informed, balanced, and empathetic visual narratives, enhancing the fairness and efficacy of migration policies on a global scale.

6. Foster continuous learning and adaptation

Government institutions should remain open to ongoing learning and adaptation in their visual communication strategies. This involves staying informed about best practices in visual representation, engaging with evolving technologies and platforms, and evaluating the effectiveness of their visual content. Regularly seeking feedback from migrants, the public and relevant stakeholders can help institutions refine their approach and respond to changing public sentiments and policy needs. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, government institutions can ensure that their visual narratives align with evolving societal values and priorities.

By embracing these recommendations, government institutions can contribute to informed, balanced and ethical visual narratives that enhance the fairness and efficacy of migration policies on a global scale.

About the author:

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Suggested Readings

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