

The role of narratives in migratory decision- making

A comparative study of Afghan transit
migrants in Turkey and potential
migrants in the Gambia

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Abstract

This BRIDGES report studies the migration narratives of (potential) migrants in the Gambia as well as Afghan (transit) migrants in Istanbul. A particular emphasis has been placed on the question of how individually held narratives on migration, Europe, and the irregular migration journey interrelate with EU-promoted messages put forward in migration information campaigns.

The locally held narratives highlight the opportunities for a positive life change enabled by migration to Europe. Migrants who made it to Europe are perceived as successful individuals who are now safe (in the Afghan case) and/or able to improve the situation of their families and communities (primarily in the Gambian case). In the absence of legal migration opportunities, the narratives on migration in both countries primarily concern irregular migration. Regarding the narratives on Europe, those of potential migrants in the Gambia are more nuanced than those in Turkey. While Europe is still seen as a place of opportunity in the Gambia, informants also put forward more critical statements on Europe, for instance regarding the colonial past.

The narratives on migration and Europe promoted in EU migration campaigns strongly differ from those of (potential) migrants in the Gambia and those in transit in Turkey. EU-funded information campaigns mostly portray (irregular) migration to and life in Europe in a negative light. However, there is a match between the locally dominant and EU-promoted narratives regarding the issue of risks during the migratory journey. Independently of or alongside migration information campaigns, there has been an intensifying public and private discourse about people suffering or dying on the road. Compared to those from the Gambia, Afghan migrants (in transit) in Istanbul pose fewer questions about whether to accept the risk of irregular migration as, for them, there seems to be no alternative. They increasingly perceive that they are unwanted in Turkey. Onward migration is narrated as a solution to a difficult or even life-threatening situation in Turkey, due to the risk of being deported back to Afghanistan. The narrative of Afghans in Turkey is one of forced migration.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the messages of EU migration information campaigns compete with locally dominant narratives. Information and knowledge about migration constitute just one of the many drivers of migration that interrelate with others.

Keywords: narratives, migration, EU, information campaigns, Gambia, Afghan migrants, Turkey, local narratives, EU-promoted narratives, irregular migration

1. The role of narratives and information in migratory decision-making

Funded by the EU's H2020 program, the BRIDGES project aims at understanding the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicization and polarization.¹ This report investigates migration narratives in countries of migrants' origin and transit. It compares the migration narratives of potential migrants in the Gambia with those of Afghan (transit) migrants in Istanbul, Turkey. Individual country reports have been written for these two case studies (the Gambia and Istanbul/Turkey). This report brings them together, compares the findings, and discusses similarities and differences (Trauner et al. 2023; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2023)

In concrete terms, the report pursues three central research objectives:

- 1) to analyze and compare the narratives which (potential and transit) migrants have developed in relation to migration and Europe;
- 2) to understand how such individually held narratives on migration and Europe interrelate with EU-promoted narratives often put forward in migration information campaigns; and
- 3) to assess the effects of these narratives on (potential and transit) migrants' migratory decision-making.

In the remainder of this introduction, we explain our case study selection and the methodology of our research. Next, we present the state of the art of previous research on the role that information and narratives play in the decision-making of (potential) migrants. The following chapter looks at the dominant – or master – narratives that Gambians and Afghans put forward regarding the themes of migration and Europe. We then discuss how these individuals perceive and react to the messages promoted by the EU on the same themes. The report concludes by investigating the extent to which information and information campaigns may influence the decision-making of (potential) migrants, and we also put forward some recommendations.

a) Selection of case countries

Originally, the BRIDGES project was meant to compare migration narratives regarding potential and transit migrants in two African countries.

We had selected the Gambia and Sudan as case studies. However, 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 in 2021 induced thousands of Afghan citizens to flee. Many of them crossed Iran and entered Turkey, a country already hosting millions of refugees.

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

A study of the narratives of Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Istanbul proposed itself as a timely and relevant alternative, filling an important knowledge gap. Their situation has been challenging (Refugee Rights Turkey 2021). Many Afghans who fled following the Taliban takeover could not return home. While several had pending visa applications to EU countries and the US at the time of the interviews, they had all experienced the downturn in the Turkish economy and increased stigma. Those who had residence permits had access to schools and services. Those who had arrived irregularly, or who had been denied renewal of their permits, had lost access to vital public services, including health and education. To many, moving on stood out as the only solution, as will be explained in more detail in later chapters.

The Gambia has been chosen as a relevant country of origin for migrants to Europe, having been the largest sender country of irregular migrants by percentage of the total population (Bah and Batista 2019). Despite the country's relatively small land size and population, which stands at about 2.5 million people, an estimated 45,000 Gambians migrated irregularly to Europe between 2009 and 2018 across the Mediterranean Sea (Frontex 2019). Given the relative small population of the country, the number of Gambian arrivals to Europe represents about 2% of the total (Frontex 2019). The numbers have decreased since the peak years of 2015 and 2016 but continue to be of relevance. Gambian emigrants have a high economic impact. In 2021, remittances made up about 63% of the Gambian gross domestic product (International Fund for Agricultural Development 2022), thereby playing an important role in alleviating household poverty. Remittances sent by Gambians in the diaspora tend to financially outpace overseas development assistance (World Bank 2019).

Therefore, the two cases compare migration narratives in the context of an origin country (the Gambia) and a transit country (Turkey). Moreover, the two groups of migrants are faced with different points of departures and types of decision-making. Whilst (potential) migrants from the Gambia usually have the choice to either migrate or stay in the Gambia, Afghans have fled to Turkey, most after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. In other words, they are refugees who were forced to migrate due to the political situation in their home country.

1.1 Research Design and Methodology

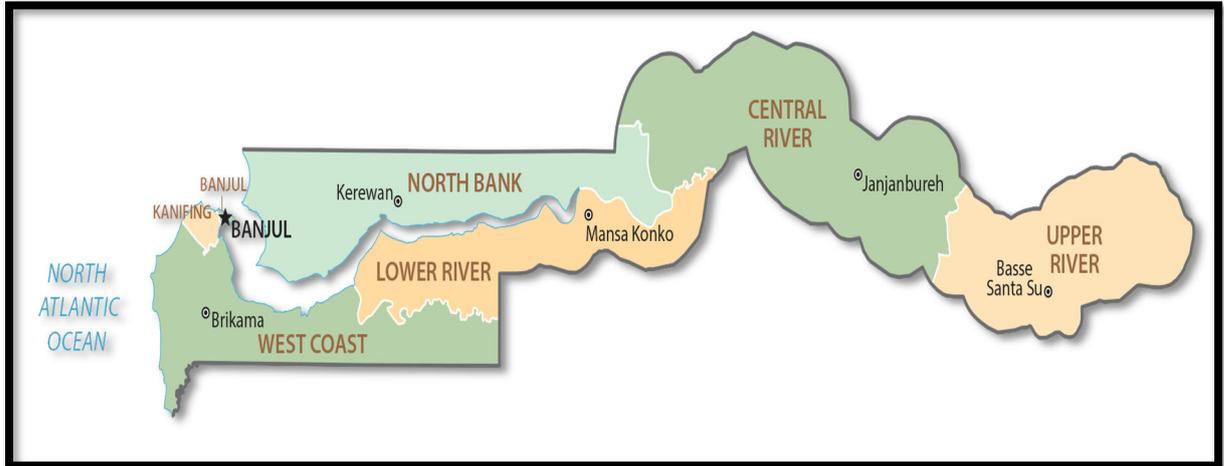
a) Fieldwork in the Gambia and Istanbul

The fieldwork in the Gambia and Istanbul was conducted by two different teams, which closely coordinated their activities. A more elaborate discussion of the methodology and fieldwork can be found in the individual country reports (Trauner et al. 2023; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2023). Here, we summarize our approach.

To answer the project's research questions, we conducted extensive fieldwork in the Gambia and Turkey. In the Gambia, The National Youth Council (NYC) of The Gambia became the local cooperation partner for the project (formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding). The NYC organization is an official part of the Gambian bureaucracy and is mandated to coordinate, and advise the government on, youth matters. The fieldwork took place in March and April 2022. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in four out of the six regions of the Gambia: West Coast Region, Lower River Region, North Bank Region, and

Upper River Region. These regions were selected due to (1) high levels of emigration; (2) intense campaigning on migration issues; and (3) the existence of a migration information center.

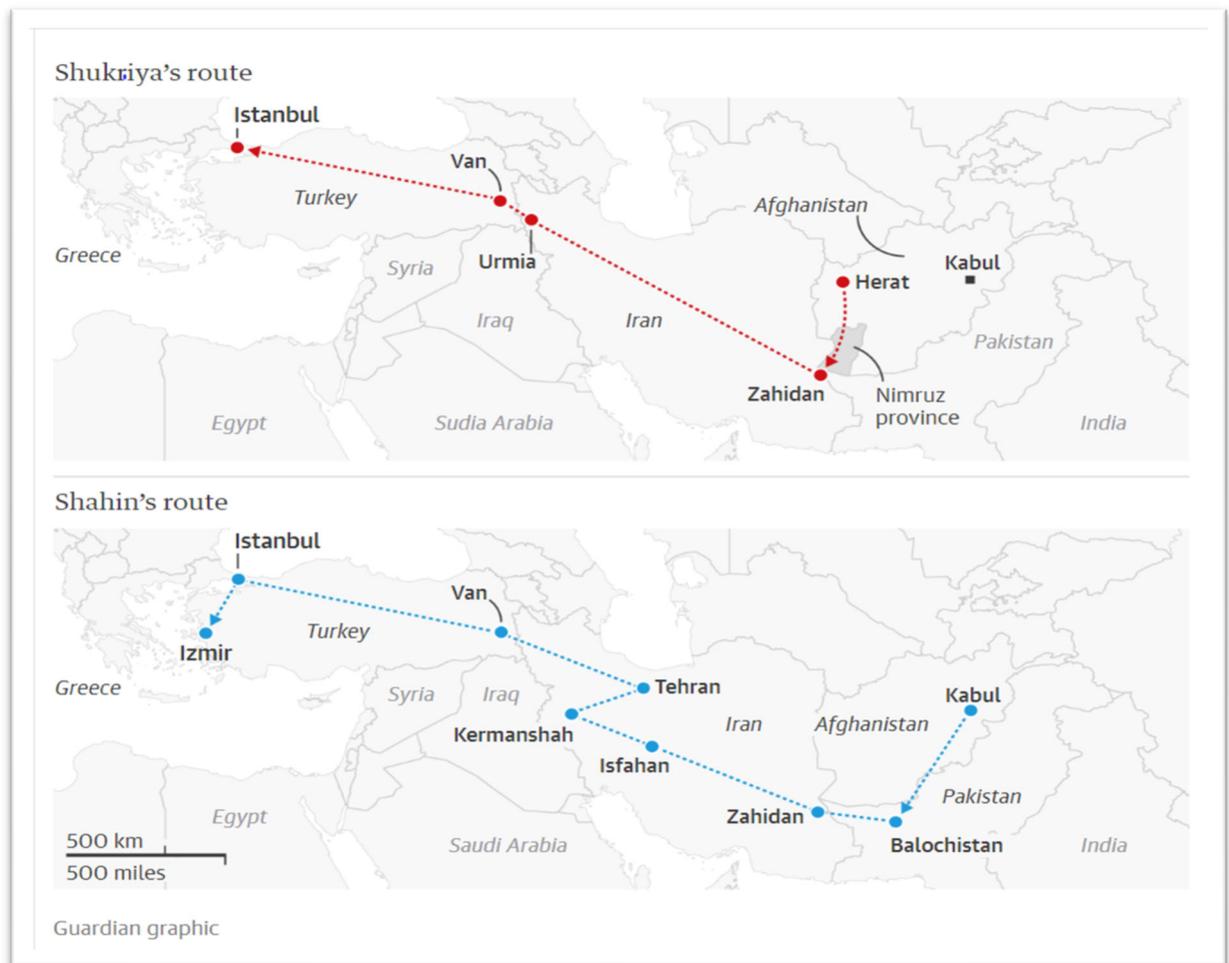
FIGURE 1. Map of The Gambia



Source: GISGeography.com – The map shows the four regions in which focus groups and interviews were conducted.

The fieldwork in Istanbul took place in two city districts with a particular high density of Afghan migrants and refugees. The Istanbul office of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provided 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 46 informants were recruited on the streets, shops, and restaurants in the two city districts, and some were recruited through the local team members' networks.

FIGURE 2. Map with two examples of routes from Afghanistan to Turkey



Source: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/07/i-will-reach-europe-or-die-three-stories-of-afghan-refugees-in-turkey>)

In both settings – the Gambia and Istanbul – we started our focus groups and interviews by investigating the dominant – and local – narratives on migration and Europe. We thus first collected information on how Gambians and Afghans view migration and Europe, how they talk and are informed about these subjects, and how they make decisions on migration. At a second stage, we looked in more detail at how the study participants react to and perceive the messages put forward in EU-funded information campaigns.

While different in terms of set-up and format, these EU-funded migration information campaigns tend to convey three core messages: (1) Life in Europe is difficult (do not come); (2) The route is dangerous (do not go); and 3) There are local opportunities in your country (stay) (see Brekke and Beyer 2019). These main messages can also be observed in the Gambia. As of 2017, after the democratic transition, the EU and several member states seriously enhanced their involvement in and funding of migration-related projects (see Cham and Adam 2021) including, among other initiatives, the set-up of information campaigns.

The Gambia is also included in regional information campaigns run by the IOM such as the “Aware Migrants” project, which has been financed by the Italian Ministry of the Interior. This project includes testimonies of migrants who describe their failed attempts to migrate to Italy/Europe or their struggles to get along in Italy. It is important to highlight, however, that we did not evaluate a particular information campaign implemented in a specific timeframe but analyzed more generally the reception of these EU-promoted messages among potential migrants.

The situation was different for Afghan migrants in Istanbul. Several EU-funded information campaigns targeted potential Afghan migrants before the Taliban takeover in August 2021. However, no EU-funded information campaigns were being actively run in Turkey at the time of the fieldwork there. A Greek- and EU-sponsored campaign was set to be launched at the beginning of 2022 but was later postponed due to internal political opposition in Greece (Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA) 2021). In a press release in the fall of 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” (ANSA 2021).

The initiative for the campaign came after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, when the Greek authorities pointed to the potential arrival of Afghan migrants (Georgiopoulou 2021). In a press release, the Greek Ministry described the country’s policy as “strict, but fair, and in line with European and international 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 (Georgiopoulou 2021). 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.

b) Overview of interview and focus group data

In each of the four regions of the Gambia, we conducted 11 in-depth individual interviews and one focus group discussion (with at least four participants) between March and April 2022. In total, 60 Gambians participated in this study. The participants selected were young people aged between 18 and 35. People in this age group are most likely to emigrate, particularly those living in the regions in which we conducted our interviews and the focus groups. Even though Gambian men tend to migrate far more than women, we included female participants in both the interviews and focus groups. Determining the extent of differences (in terms of narratives or decision-making procedures) between men and women was an integral part of the research design.

In Istanbul, we conducted 46 qualitative semi-structured interviews with Afghan refugees and migrants in May 2022. In addition, we interviewed five migration experts (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2), IOM (2), and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1)) with knowledge of the situation of Afghans in Turkey. The interviews were carried out in shops, restaurants and cafes, venues belonging to NGOs, and private homes. The group

of informants represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds found in Afghanistan (Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen, Hazara), gender (17 women and 29 men), ages (15 in their 20s, nine in their 30s, 11 in their 40s, eight in their 50s, and three in their 60s), 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 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 education or professional skills.

TABLE 1. The anonymization of the interview and focus group data

	Abbreviation	Full meaning
Country code	GM	The Gambia
	TUR	Turkey
Regional code (for the Gambia)	NB	North Bank Region
	WC	West Coast Region
	URR	Upper River Region
	LRR	Lower River Region
Form of Participation	I	Interview
	FG	Focus group
Sex of participant		Male
		Female
Age of participant		20s, 30s, ...
Number	Focus groups	1 in each Gambian region
	Interviews	1–11 in each Gambian region; 1–46 with Afghan refugees in Istanbul; 5 with migration experts in Turkey

The questions used in the two settings – Istanbul and the Gambia – differed slightly, albeit they covered the same topics relating to narratives and information sources on migration as well as the reception of the messages used in EU-funded information campaigns. We showed short campaign videos or photos in the individual interviews and focus group discussions representing one of the three main messages portrayed in these campaigns (life in Europe; migratory route; opportunities at home). After completion, all recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and anonymized according to the guidelines of the BRIDGES project. In the next step, the data were evaluated with the help of a coding scheme and the NVIVO software.

c) Ethics

The project teams in the Gambia and Istanbul adhered to high ethical standards while conducting the fieldwork. Each engagement with a participant started with an explanation of

the research objective and request for informed consent in either the local language or English, depending on the preference of the informant. The informed consent could be given orally or in writing. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw their consent at a later stage and given a local contact person in case they wished to do so. To ensure transparency, the project's funders were explicitly mentioned. We also highlighted that the research would serve academic purposes and might be published in the form of academic articles, project reports, and policy briefs. All interviews were recorded after consent was granted. For a more detailed description of ethical issues regarding this research, we refer to the two country reports (Trauner et al. 2023; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2023).

2. The role of narratives, information, and information campaigns in migratory decision-making

2.1 The role of narratives

The concept of narratives often denotes a story, which is sequential and has a degree of stability and consistency over time and/or across space (Garcés-Mascareñas 2021). These stories include assumptions about causality. They 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 (Jones and McBeth 2010; Boswell et al. 2021).

The work of migration scholars on narratives falls into two broad categories: the narratives as told by migrants themselves and narratives about migrants (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 migratory experience, migration journeys, and factors shaping migration decisions along with stories of adaptation, doubt, and suffering. Typically, 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, studies look at the role that narratives about migrants or migration play in media coverage (Benson 2013; D'Amato and Lucarelli 2019), as part of political strategies (Jones and McBeth 2020), and in the formation of public attitudes (Manieri 2019).

Both categories of migration narratives highlighted above are relevant to the current study. The interviews with potential migrants in the Gambia and Afghan migrants and refugees in Istanbul reveal that their own narrative is shaped by their interpretation of the socioeconomic context and their day-to-day situation. At the same time, they are aware of, and impacted by, the broader national debates in traditional news media and on social media as well as by information campaigns. There is limited knowledge about the link between these types of migration narratives (those of the migrants themselves and those about migrants and migration) and migratory decision-making. The current study thus explores the dynamics between access to different forms of information, narratives, and migratory action.

The narratives in the media and the messages of EU-funded information campaigns act as a backdrop to the personal stories conveyed by Gambian and Afghan migrants. The study is designed to focus in depth on how the personal stories and views of our informants form a collective, socially shared narrative. This shared narrative forms the backbone of the ensuing analysis. It is composed of different sub-narratives that together form one overarching storyline, conceptualized as the master narratives of Gambian and Afghan informants. This type of grand narrative, that emerges from similar individual experiences and understandings, is conceptualized in different ways, as “deep stories” (Hochschild 2018) or, as here, as a “master narrative” (Bamberg 2005). Master narratives are often associated with the dominant, standard, and official understandings of a phenomenon or, in the words of Nancy Fraser, “the superordinate” public discourse (Fraser 2014). Here, we see the social world from “below,” through the lens of lay individuals. Thus, the stories of the migrants themselves form the master narrative.

A relevant question is how these (individually held) master narratives reflect, contrast, or run counter to the messages of EU-funded information campaigns. Comparing the Gambian and Afghan master narratives, we also study the presence of counternarratives as they are conveyed by the migrants themselves. In this way we gauge the pervasiveness of the shared collective story and establish the degree to which it is nuanced or characterized by diversity.

A key assumption of narrative theory is that if you can control the knowledge people have of a topic and how this knowledge is structured, you can control their actions; hence the slogan “knowledge is power” (Lévi-Strauss 1958). Applied to the current study, a central question is what narrative dominates in what type of public or semi-public sphere. As we will see, the master narratives of both Gambian and Afghan informants are quite pervasive within their group. Moreover, these master narratives are largely incongruent with the messages of EU-funded information campaigns as they have been formulated in recent years.

2.2 The role of information in migratory decision-making

In this section, we place the role of information and narratives in relation to the other factors influencing migratory decision-making. We do so by adapting an existing model of onward migration (Brekke and Beyer 2019).

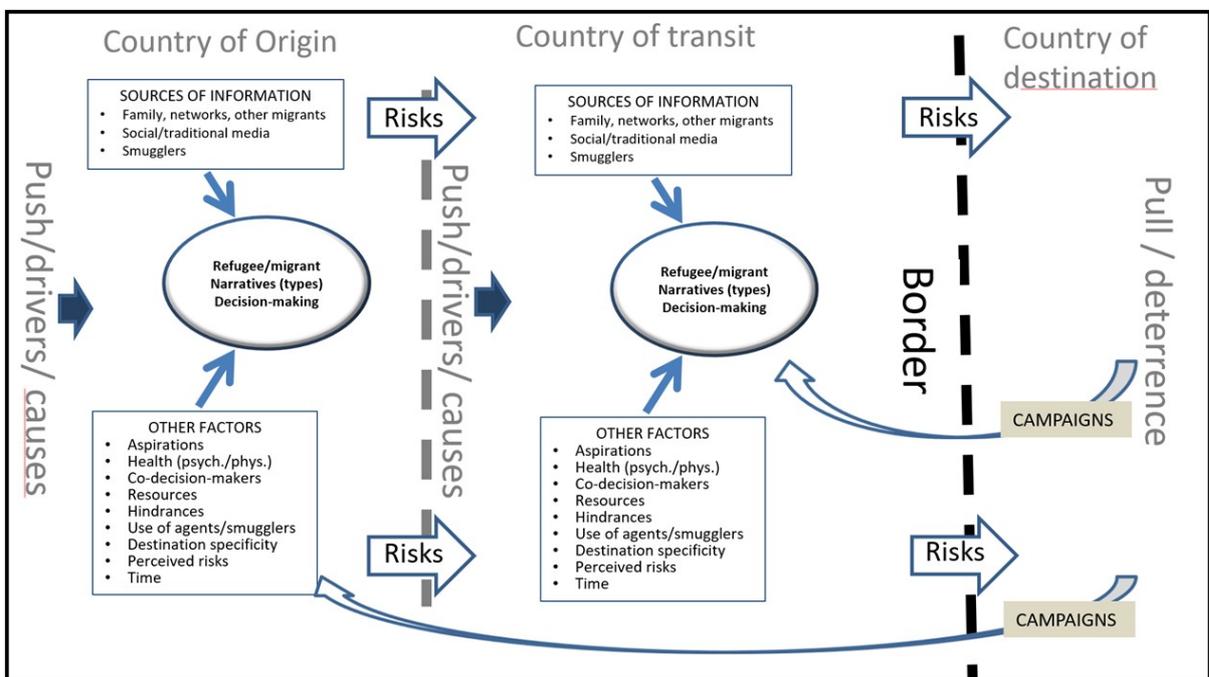
Potential migrants, as well as refugees and migrants in transit, assess and react to conditions in their country of origin, their situation in the transit country, and regulations and opportunities in possible destination countries (de Haas, Castles and Miller 2020). Scholars emphasize, among other matters, structural factors (push–pull, differences in economy, labor market models) (De Haas 2010; Van Hear, Bakewell and Long 2018), the agency of migrants (such as aspirations and capabilities) (Carling and Schewel 2018), or the role of families and networks (Haug 2008) in the context of migratory decision-making. The role of information and how narratives emerge and relate to such factors are less studied (Koser and Pinkerton 2002).

Different types of narratives may influence both potential migrants and migrants in transit. Information influences the aspirations and expectations related to migration as well as the assessment of risks and benefits. Therefore, these factors all directly affect migratory decision-

making. The role and sources of information also differ among groups of migrants, depending on the reasons and circumstances of migration as well as the national context (Brekke and Five Aarset 2009; Brekke and Beyer 2019). Information is gathered through various sources. These include social networks in countries of origin and those of people in transit or in destination countries; social media; and governmental and other public sources. The sources of information available to people with migration aspirations are thus rich and (usually) diversified. Information campaigns are only one such source. It is also important to note that information and knowledge are unevenly distributed amongst potential migrants depending on their educational background and other resources at their disposal (Brekke and Brochmann 2014).

Figure 3 focuses on the interplay of narratives, information, and other factors influencing the migratory decision-making of (potential) migrants. It also displays the different states of the migratory journey in countries of origin and transit, in both of which narratives constitute a background for migratory decision making. The migrants' decision-making is influenced by different sources of information as well as other factors. Social networks play a particularly important role in the country of origin as well as in transit, including as sources of information and co-decision-makers. For migrants spending time in transit, the decision-making situation may be repeated, as migrants regroup, gather new information, secure resources, and may change their perceptions of destinations.

FIGURE 3: Conceptualizing migratory decision-making at different stages of the migration journey with a particular focus on the role of information and narratives



A key issue in assessing the role of information in migratory decision-making is whether the sources of information are considered trustworthy. In a digital age, people may have an abundance of information, yet its quality and trustworthiness vary. Smartphones and social

media have contributed to what Dekker et al. (2018) name “the age of information precarity” (referring to Wall et al. 2018). In particular, the risks concern the trustworthiness, security, and accessibility of online information. In general, close social ties seem to be the most trusted informants and have a strong influence on migration decision-making. The information given by close social contacts can, of course, be transmitted via social media and tends to be trusted more than information found on social media which has been provided by others. Unlike information provided by close social ties, that generated by external and public sources does not seem to have a significant impact on the decision of whether to migrate or not. However, as Brekke and Beyer (2019) state, it can influence the timing of decision-making, for example when waiting for conditions on the route to improve.

2.3 The role of information campaigns at different stages of the migratory journey

Information campaigns have been an important part of the EU’s migration management efforts since the 1990s and have recently been increasing, following the 2015–2016 “migration crisis” (Brändle 2022). By 2019, the European Commission had spent over €23 million on information campaigns, and more than 100 campaigns had been organized by different member states (European Migration Network (EMN) 2019). There are different types of information campaigns. They can range from face-to-face conversations, “Migrants as Messengers,” to video campaigns and artistic performances. In the last couple of years, social media have gained relevance given that these platforms offer easy and comparatively cheap communication possibilities (Musarò 2019; Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2017). In terms of strategies, information campaigns have also shifted towards involving local civil society actors and returnees as trusted information sources (Dunsch, Taden, and Quiviger 2019; Marino, Schapendonk, and Lietaert 2022).

The information campaigns are often framed as having a humanitarian purpose, such as raising awareness of the risks to migrants or informing them about legal pathways to Europe. In essence, however, they are aimed at deterring migrants from trying to come to Europe in an irregular manner. From this perspective, they complement traditional methods of migration control, such as the surveillance of borders (Musarò 2019). Migrants are portrayed as lacking sufficient information, a gap which the campaigns aim to fill. The aim is to make potential migrants trust the information given and dismiss their plans to leave without proper documentation.

In terms of impact, most scholars believe that potential migrants tend to dismiss the messages sent out by EU-funded information campaigns as untrustworthy and biased (Oeppen 2016; Schans and Optekam 2016; Pécoud 2010). Information campaigns are often seen as part of a framework of restrictive border policies by migrants themselves, which spurs migrants’ resistance to them. This attitude is also reflected in anecdotal evidence from IOM-run information campaigns (Browne 2015) as well as evaluations of online information campaigns (Rodriguez 2017).

However, the evaluation of campaigns is methodologically challenging. Media science offers some ideas on how to evaluate the impact of campaigns. Standard campaign theory

distinguishes between inputs, outputs, outtakes, and outcomes (McNamara 2014, Brekke and Beyer 2019). Within this framework, inputs refer to the messages, the presentation of the information, the 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 it.

Three more concepts are relevant to assessing the effectiveness of information campaigns. Firstly, does the target audience of a campaign feel they need the information provided? In other words, do they experience a need for orientation? Secondly, how relevant does the audience find the information? And finally, how certain are the campaign recipients of what they already know about the matter (e.g., the conditions along the route or the situation in Europe)? According to media theory (McNamara 2014), campaigns would be most effective if migrants perceived the information as highly relevant and were uncertain about the validity of their own knowledge.

In brief, exploring the role and consequences of information campaigns in migratory decision-making is the main objective of work package six in the BRIDGES project. It is important to acknowledge that information is only one part of the complex set of factors influencing such decisions. Further, (potential) migrants depend on and make use of multiple different information sources and platforms. Information campaigns have to be understood in this context. The messages conveyed in the information campaigns present certain “narratives” on migration. These narratives compete or overlap with those conveyed by other sources of information, such as the migration experiences of friends and family, information transmitted via close social ties, and posts in social media groups. In the next section, we highlight the dominant/master narratives on “migration” and “Europe” among potential migrants in the Gambia and Afghan (transit) migrants and refugees in Istanbul. We also highlight the gender dimension in the master narrative on migration and Europe between the two groups.

3. Dominant Narratives/Master Narratives

We sought to establish the dominant narratives by posing the question of what connotations come to mind when hearing “migration” and “Europe” (and then discussing the different associations in more depth). The objective was to investigate which narratives on migration and Europe dominate among potential migrants in the Gambia and (transit) Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul.

3.1 Narratives on migration

a) Master (and counter-) narratives in the Gambia

The master narrative on migration in the Gambia is a positive one, highlighting the possibility of benign life-change for individuals, families, and societies. Migration is framed as providing a solution to an often-difficult life situation characterized by poverty and a lack of prospects (in terms of advancing professionally or gaining the means to finance a marriage). Individuals who manage to migrate are seen as the lucky or privileged ones. They can advance their own education or obtain a job and salary in an environment that would certainly be more facilitating than the Gambia:

When I hear migration, I think my life is about to change. I am about to experience something that I have not experienced before – be it in education or any other thing ... It is about change; it is about going to another level (GM_WC_FG_Male_17_3).

Migration is hardly ever a decision made by and for individuals alone. The narrative includes a “family” and/or “community” dimension. A migrant would improve the lives of the family and community members left behind in the Gambia. Remittances sent back by migrants are an important source of income for many families, contributing to a perception and narrative that migrants have a positive effect on society:

All the good structures, infrastructures, etc. are made by these people who migrate abroad. ... in fact, in order to build our mosque, our health centers, or our churches, we depend on people outside. So ... the people outside there are doing great work for the development of this country (GM_LRR_FG_MALE_30S_2).

The positive narrative incorporates both forms of migration, yet it primarily focuses on irregular migration, called the “backway.” There are few opportunities for Gambians to migrate legally to Europe. Legal migration is thus seen as being of minor relevance for Gambians:

Some say that applying for a visa is costly; you can apply for it but at the end you don't get it, and you lose your money. So, most of them have this fear, so they don't want to apply for a visa (GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_9).

The positive narrative on migration is very dominant, even if focus group participants and informants highlighted nuances and challenges to it. Concerns about the risks of the irregular migration journey and the negative consequences of irregular migration on Gambian society are frequently expressed. People are generally aware of the dangers of the “backway” journey. Some consider that the risks of the journey are so great that irregular migration should not be attempted. Yet even those participants have a generally positive understanding of migration while insisting that it should only be done legally. In focus group discussions, however, such an understanding does not remain unchallenged. Other participants ask whether there are alternatives to (the risk and choice of) irregular migration in view of their life situation and the existing constraints on legal migration. Migrating irregularly is thus not seen as a choice, but as the only option in view of the difficulties of covering basic needs in the Gambia and the impossibility of legal migration.

b) Master (and counter-) narrative in Istanbul

The master narrative of Afghans in transit in Istanbul regarding migration is also positive. The Afghans see onward migration as the only option. They believe that in the US or Europe, a better future would be achievable. However, their story is overwhelmingly one of *forced migration*. The master narrative is that they, as Afghan nationals, have been forced to leave their home country. The conditions in Turkey are challenging to the extent that their future now lies in Europe or the US. They do not see any option to return to Afghanistan under Taliban rule. At the same time, life in Turkey has proven increasingly challenging, unpredictable, and even dangerous due to the risk of being forcibly returned to Afghanistan. They have lost their hopes of finding a safe haven in Turkey and are now looking for possibilities to move on. For the time being, they are stuck in transit, as conveyed by this woman:

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).

This master narrative encompasses the sad history and fate of Afghanistan. Many interviewees describe the profound shock and a feeling of unreality when the Taliban suddenly returned. They endured the most repressing and harshest of conditions under their regime. This shock has been followed by a deep disappointment, as expressed by a young female interviewee: "We all carry this deep sadness in our hearts" (TUR_fem_20s_46).

The informants' answer to what would happen if they returned was always the same: They would be traced by the Taliban and find themselves in life-threatening danger:

If someone dies, we have a proverb we use to quote: "Everything is done, everything is over". If I am sent back to Afghanistan, that is all that is left to be said (TUR_male_20s_41).

Some informants intended Turkey to be their final destination when they left Afghanistan. This is no longer the case. At the time of the interviews, even those Afghans who initially wanted to stay in Turkey had started to consider moving on to EU countries, the US, or Canada.

The overall master narrative is operative at a group level (this is the fate of Afghans here), at a family level (we will seek to cross), and at the level of individuals (I had to flee, and I am now here, waiting to move on). The families of the interviewees are often split by the conflict, evacuations, and subsequent flight from Afghanistan. Such separations have continued since they left Afghanistan as parts of the family may have already made the journey onwards to Europe and the US.

In regard to moving out of Turkey, most would prefer to travel legally, notably in view of the high risks and physically challenging character of irregular migration. Most Afghan refugees and migrants who recently arrived in Istanbul are aware of the existence of legal pathways to Europe, although a great majority does not see them as realistic alternatives. Before the Taliban takeover, young Afghans were able to study abroad and take part in different exchange

programs. Such opportunities have, by and large, ceased to exist. A few of the interviewees who had been allied with the NATO forces or been part of the former government in Afghanistan had pending visa applications for European countries, the US, or Canada. Yet, even for this group, the hope of being granted a visa before being deported from Turkey has waned.

As refugees and migrants who cannot go back to their home country, Afghans consider themselves in need of protection and support. This narrative – this self-understanding both as a group and as individuals – ran counter to the discourse and narrative of political debates and social media inside Turkey. In the latter, refugees and migrants have been overwhelmingly portrayed as causing problems, competing with the Turkish population for jobs, and not respecting the culture and norms of their host society (Fahim 2022). This information environment has clearly affected the Afghan migrants, who consider themselves to be living in a country which is increasingly hostile to them.

c) Comparing the two settings

Potential migrants in the Gambia and (transit) Afghan migrants in Istanbul both have a positive (master) narrative on migration. In the Gambia, the narratives primarily focus on the prospects and opportunities that a migratory process may create (notably personal advancement or support for a family/community left behind). The narrative on migration has elements of a meritocratic “dream” narrative (similar to the “American dream” narrative): Everybody will have a chance to succeed, if only he or she dares to migrate and tries hard enough after arriving. In a similar vein, most Afghan migrants in Istanbul consider that reaching Europe implies more opportunities and a better life.

While the positive tone of the master narratives is comparable, there are also vital differences. These differences relate to the migrants’ or potential migrants’ current situation and how they view and deal with risk factors. Such factors are very different for Gambians still in the Gambia than for Afghans in Istanbul. Gambians may have good reasons for trying their chances abroad, but they are still part of a Gambian nation which is not at war and, moreover, experienced a change towards a more democratic government in 2016 (Cham and Adam 2021). Afghan migrants (in transit) in Istanbul are in a different situation. They increasingly perceive (and are told by Turkish politicians and media) that they are unwanted in Turkey. At the same time, their home country is in the hands of one of the world’s most repressive regimes. For them, migration is not a mere possibility. They inhabit a migratory life “in the middle”: they are not in their country of origin, yet most of them no longer believe they can stay or will be allowed to stay in their current host country.

These very different points of departure impact the ways in which Afghans and Gambians view and perceive the risk factors of irregular migration. Both groups are generally aware of the risks and dangers of irregular migration to the EU. In fact, both groups long for legal migration channels, but they tend to believe that such channels will not open up to them personally. The question is therefore how to deal with the risk factors during an irregular migratory journey. While the risk–benefit calculation of many Gambians goes in favor of migration, they still tend to have a fallback option, namely that they will not migrate and will seek to get along in the

Gambia. The Gambia shifted towards a more democratic regime in 2016, implying that the widespread persecution and human rights violations of former times have come to an end. The consequences of staying are not usually life-threatening (although many Gambians struggle to meet their basic needs). As a matter of fact, the question of whether to accept the risk of irregular migration to Europe is contested by several informants. They suggest that migration should only take place legally and that irregular migration, and particularly the dangerous journey on which many have died, has too many negative side effects for the concerned individuals and Gambian society.

Such an assessment is different for Afghan migrants in Istanbul. The options for Afghan migrants in Turkey are narrowing. For those without a permanent residence permit, the risk of being deported back to Afghanistan trumps the risk of using smugglers to cross irregularly into Europe by sea. This risk of deportation is very real. During the first eight months of 2022, more than 43,000 Afghan nationals were reportedly deported from Turkey to Afghanistan (Dawi 2022). Moreover, in May 2022, the Minister of the Interior announced that Istanbul was one of the areas to be considered closed to asylum seekers, closing the opportunities to register applications for protection (Hurriyet 2022).

Furthermore, Afghan refugees who make it to Europe have good prospects of gaining residence status (particularly compared to Gambian migrants). Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, European countries have halted deportations to Afghanistan. This means that, at least for the time being, Afghan migrants have reason to believe that they will be able to stay in Europe. Those with connections to the allied forces or who were active in the pre-Taliban regime have high chances of gaining asylum status in Europe. In sum, Afghans have more to win and less to lose than Gambian migrants. Gambians may still choose to take the risk and seek a better future in Europe. However, they still seem to ask themselves more questions about whether to leave or stay and have more room for maneuver than Afghans in Istanbul.

3.2 Narratives on Europe

a) Master (and counter-) narrative in The Gambia

In the Gambia, the master narrative on Europe is a predominantly positive one, which associates “Europe” with (professional or educational) opportunities and high(er) living standards. It includes a view that opportunities in Europe are plentiful and open to those willing to seize them. The opportunities are first and foremost professional/work-related. Europe is often associated with the word “hustling” (a colloquial term frequently used in the Gambia for working or making it); for example, “When I think of Europe, basically I think of hustling” (GM_LRR_I_MALE, 20S_5). Other statements highlight the high living standards which people in Europe are supposed to enjoy. Social rights are emphasized by highlighting a health care system and welfare state widely seen as functioning: poor people are not left behind, and they have an easier life because state or private institutions take care of them.

The opportunities, perceived as almost limitless in Europe, are often contrasted with a Gambian environment seen as more challenging. Most informants argued that you have to

know “the right people” to succeed in the Gambia. By contrast, making it in Europe depends on your own skills:

When I hear Europe, I think it is the place where you can succeed easily, because you can be here, and it can be difficult for you to succeed here especially if you don't know other people (GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_7).

The predominantly positive narrative on Europe is challenged primarily in three ways. First, people mention the colonial past of Europeans in West Africa, and second, they pinpoint unfairness and asymmetrical power structures in current EU–Gambian relations, for example regarding travel opportunities. Europeans are able to travel to West Africa with relatively few complications and without challenging paperwork. This is not the same for Gambians keen to travel to Europe. Third, the European treatment of Gambian deportees is also often perceived as overly harsh. At times, these counternarratives are intermingled, notably those concerning the European colonial past in West Africa. This legacy is seen to legitimize irregular migration to Europe or used to call for legal migration channels today:

They are not fair to us, because looking at the history of Africa, Europeans were allowed to come here during the colonial period. They were here; they looted our economy, our resources, and now I think it also our turn to go there and tap something from them – and come and develop Africa [ourselves] (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_3).

Overall, a counternarrative on Europe therefore exists, yet the negative views are less frequently expressed than the master narrative, which remains positive.

b) Master (and counter-) narratives in Istanbul

As in the Gambian case, perceptions of Europe are largely positive among Afghan informants. Many Afghans maintain that they are ready to go “anywhere” as long as they leave Turkey, yet reaching Europe is the most realistic alternative for most. Informants refer to going to the “European side” by crossing the border. When we asked them why, three principal reasons were put forward: In Europe, they may secure a residence, have a future (support, education, work), and earn respect. These reasons are summarized in the following quote:

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, here they don't (Tur_male_20s_1).

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

They 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 interviewees with detailed knowledge about how European governments have processed 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). Some of the Afghans who refer to specific destination countries point to relatives who are already settled there or have a pending visa process:

After the Taliban coup and the evacuation, my own family went to Germany – now they try to invite me – but they are not accepting us – because my husband and I form a separate family. Germany would be good, but first and foremost out of Turkey, to any other country (Tur_fem_20s_8).

As already mentioned, the Afghans feel that they are stigmatized by the Turkish majority. Most referred to the negative reactions to Afghans on social media or to comments from specific politicians. A perceived absence of stigma was part of the positive master narrative on Europe. However, there are also those who will prefer to live in Turkey if the conditions ameliorate or allow them to do so. These seeds of counternarratives point to the proximity to Afghanistan both geographically and culturally. The fact that Turkey is a Muslim country was also highlighted as a positive fact by some. At the same time, all Afghan interviewees see Europe as a place where families can have a future:

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 the religion here and wear the hijab. But my children would like to continue their studies in Europe (Tur_fem_40s_29).

Those who have already made it to Europe send back information which reinforces the positive tone of the master narrative on Europe:

Those who have gone 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).

These types of stories are transmitted by family members and acquaintances who have already made it to Europe. Those who stayed in Turkey for a longer period often see Afghan friends who come back to visit and show off tokens of success. The refugees who arrived after the Taliban takeover in mid-2021 value these stories of safety and support and take them seriously. A key element of this narrative is that those who made it are allowed to stay. They will not be deported to Afghanistan from EU territory.

Whereas the image of life in Europe is very positive, some express a disappointment over the slow visa processes. Several also feel that they were "left behind" when the NATO forces left Afghanistan so suddenly. Many interviewees who fled the Taliban regime believed in a

different, democratic, and liberal Afghanistan. Some had been involved with NGOs or the former government; others provided services to the NATO operations. Having embraced a more secular Western lifestyle and believing in the emancipation of women, they now place their hopes in the visa processes, even if they are slow. This group consists of those Afghans who were not part of the rapid evacuation by air in the first weeks after the regime change. Several feel neglected and disappointed since they were not secured an escape route by their democratic allies, in spite of their commitment to a different Afghanistan in the spirit of their former occupants – or allies.

c) Comparing the two settings

Both Gambian (potential) migrants and Afghan (transit) migrants in Istanbul highlight the opportunities that a life in Europe may open up to them. Working or living in Europe is seen as an option that is superior to working or living where they are right now.

The narrative on Europe is more nuanced in the Gambia, however. While Europe is still seen as a place of opportunity, participants in this study also put forward more critical statements, be it regarding Europe's colonial past or the perceived ill-treatment of Gambian migrants in Europe. Other problems, such as racism in Europe, are also thematized. As a matter of fact, historical (post-colonial) perspectives about unfairness and asymmetrical opportunities (e.g., regarding travel rights) challenge the positive master narrative on Europe, although such perspectives are the exception rather than the norm.

In Istanbul, we heard no examples of informants referring to prejudice or discrimination against people of Afghan origin in Europe. Neither were informants openly critical of the Western involvement in Afghanistan. Rather, for those we interviewed, the Taliban was the greater evil. Several informants referred to them as veritable brainwashed and radicalized killer machines when, at different times, they seized power in Afghanistan.

In brief, the Afghan refugees and migrants seem to have higher expectations of being treated fairly in Europe than those from the Gambia. Gambians often highlight a perceived necessity of overcoming hardship en route and upon arrival.

3.3 The gender dimension in the master narratives on migration and Europe

In the Gambia, there is a gender dimension in the narratives on migration and Europe, which can work in both directions. Women can indicate to their male peers that they prefer to date or marry a "migrant," thereby reinforcing the narrative that migration opens up new opportunities. Yet women are also more sensitive to risks and dangers of the journey, as those are clearly gendered. Women are believed to be exposed to different types of risks related to irregular migration, particularly sexual violence:

Within the community I have conversations with people, mostly girls. They will discourage you. What they will tell you is, like, many people have gone and have died.

They will advise you to settle here, marry and live your life, and leave the rest in the hands of God and all that stuff (GM_WC_I_Male_30s_1).

Regarding Afghan migrants, the female informants put forward versions of the narratives that were little different from those of their male counterparts. However, they are aware that the risks of moving irregularly along the route from Afghanistan through Iran to Turkey are higher for women. The dangers involved in crossing into the EU for women are considered to be of a different kind to those faced by 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 travelled through Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. That was tragic. [...] It is easier for men to travel, but for the women the travel is risky (Tur_fem_20s_45).

Several informants believe that it is particularly women and children who are victims when people are harassed, abused, and sometimes even die along the route. One Afghan highlighted that young Afghan women take a different route to Turkey:

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).

Regardless of these different narratives from and regarding women, the narrative of Europe as providing safety, predictability, and a future is equally pervasive among female and male interviewees in the Gambia and Turkey.

4. The reception of EU-promoted messages and narratives

In this section, we discuss similarities and differences in the reception of EU-promoted messages and narratives by (potential) migrants in the Gambia and Afghan refugees and (transit) migrants in Istanbul. As outlined, we investigated each of the three key messages typically promoted by EU-funded information campaigns (Brekke and Beyer 2019): 1) Life in Europe is difficult (do not come); (2) The route is dangerous (do not go); and 3) There are local opportunities in your country (stay).

4.1 “Life in Europe is difficult” (stay)

a) *Endorsement of the message*

In the Gambia, the EU-promoted narrative on the difficulty of life in Europe is only endorsed by a very small number of interviewees. They often have friends or relatives in Europe who have already told them about their experiences and struggles after arrival. Irregular migrants are

said to be more likely to face a difficult life in Europe than regular migrants. The few participants confirming this message cite anecdotes of friends or relatives living in Europe who portray a fake life on social media whilst living in difficult situations to do so. A young female participant explains it as follows:

Oftentimes, especially young people who migrate using the backway, they will not tell you the realities in Europe. They will act big, go stand behind a very nice building, take photos and send it or upload it on other social media sites for people to believe that they are doing very well in Europe. [In fact] they are living in camps or other consignment or detention centers (GM_WC_I_Female_20s_11).

Yet these types of endorsing statements of the EU-promoted narrative of the difficulty of life in Europe tend to be the exception. In general, the dissuading message on Europe is met with skepticism.

This is even more the case for the Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul participating in this study. They do not convey negative perceptions about Europe; nor do they provide alternatives to the dominant Europe-is-good narrative. In the context of campaign messaging, the reasons can be twofold. Either they do not have a sufficiently nuanced knowledge of the situation for asylum seekers and migrants in the EU and other European countries, or they compare the situation with that in Afghanistan and in Turkey and, thus, may not agree that life in Europe is so difficult.

As mentioned, interviewees in Istanbul do not display explicit knowledge of the asylum systems of European destination countries. They do not mention challenges regarding access to the asylum process, variations in support levels during this process, the tough situation for people in an irregular situation, nor the possibility of deportation for those who are rejected. Instead, they point to family members, friends, and networks who are already there or directly to one country or another which they have heard would be “good.” This aligns with previous research (Brekke and Five Aarset 2010).

The reason Afghans are not receptive to the message that life is difficult in Europe is, again, related to their current situation. Gambians (in the Gambia) are in their country of origin even if they contemplate leaving. They still have more choices, regardless of the constraints imposed by often tough living conditions. By contrast, Afghans in Istanbul are away from home and have limited choices and difficult life conditions. For them, the prospect of a different life in another country becomes a lifeline to which they link their hopes and dreams. Representing a truly marginalized group in Turkish society, they hope for more respect and dignity through onward migration – a type of social status they reportedly lack in their present environment.

b) Contestation of the message

Even if a few people endorse the message that life is difficult in Europe, a majority of the participants in the Gambia contest it. Participants mostly use arguments such as the economic viability of Europe and the “vast” availability of opportunities to challenge the message of a difficult life there. The general perception of Europe is that of a place of comfort and relative

ease. Moreover, the differences in wages and currency valuation are other indications that life in Europe is far from difficult. One of our participants contests the message as follows:

Once you get into Europe, you are greeted with opportunities. And then the money in Europe is different from the money in Gambia. Like 20 euro today, you can send 20 euro to your family member. That's some money here. That is compelling many people to leave Africa and go to Europe; because of the currency: the pound, the euro, the dollar. The money is powerful, the European money is powerful. Once you get the money and send it to the country, that is a lot of money in certain African countries, especially in the Gambia here (GM_LRR_I_Male_30s_4).

In the case of Afghans in Istanbul, the narrative of Europe remains positive, and the message that life is difficult there is met with skepticism. As in the Gambia, this narrative is continuously fed with stories of family and friends who have already made it to Europe. Their stories strengthen perceptions of Europe as a place of opportunity in terms of making a decent living and supporting a family:

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).

The following statement is also typical in terms of contesting the message of likely hardship for migrants in Europe:

Everyone here has family on the European side, so they are of course informed about what happens on the European side. I know many friends who live in Europe, they come here for Ramadan, they drive their 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).

Overall, both groups – Gambians in the Gambia and Afghans in Istanbul – therefore tend to contest the (EU-promoted) message that life is difficult for migrants in Europe. The lines of contestation are similar: “Even if life is not easy in Europe, it is not comparable to what we experience right now. There will be more opportunities in Europe, as can be amply seen by the manifold examples of ‘successful migrants’.” A difference is noticeable between the two groups. Economic lines of argument are dominant for Gambians, whereas Afghan migrants in Istanbul place more emphasis on the prospect of asylum and regularization once they arrive in Europe. Moreover, the hope for higher social status in Europe than what they experience in Istanbul is pervasive.

4.2 “The route is dangerous” (don't go)

a) Endorsement of the message

The Gambian participants in the study highlighted that irregular migration to Europe comes with significant risks and dangers. This (EU-promoted) message is thus widely confirmed and endorsed. Participants across the four regions in which we conducted interviews and focus

groups are fully aware of the different dangers, such as death, imprisonment, exploitation, rape, and kidnapping. Their understanding of the risk of the journey comes not only (and not necessarily) from the migration information campaigns. Different news outlets regularly report on migrant boat tragedies or other incidents. More importantly, friends, relatives, or even they themselves have already experienced such migratory risks and transmitted this information to others. This is evident in many anecdotes put forward by the participants:

I have interacted with victims – people that went and then they were back. Even those who succeeded, they will tell you how difficult, how dangerous, how unsafe the journey is. They will tell you that the journey is very difficult. They have encountered a lot of problems. I have one of my friends who spent almost a year or two in Libya. He was working to earn money so that he could move. [He tried it] three times. Sometimes they forced him to work, and then he was not paid. He would tell me that he has seen people that were killed in their camps. You know, a lot of things happen on their way to Europe (GM_NB_I_Male_30s_9).

In the case of Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul, the dangers of the route and the challenges associated with the journey are also well known. Several interviewees actually tried to enter Europe with the help of smugglers. They experienced the risks and hardship first-hand. As a young Afghan puts it: “Yes, they know of the dangers, they will make it or die. They know this” (Tur_male_20s_39).

The similarity in terms of the reception of the message is therefore high. Both groups are fully aware of the risks and dangers involved in the irregular migratory journey. In both groups, this knowledge stems not only from information campaigns or media coverage but also from their own experiences and the stories of (migrant) friends and relatives.

b) Contestation of the message

In the case of the Gambia, very few participants contest the message about the dangers of the route as there is broad knowledge of such dangers. A perceived lack of opportunity in the Gambia and the desire to improve the situation of their own families were recurrently cited as reasons that people choose to migrate – even if they are fully conscious of the risks. This statement, from a man in his 30s, stands for others in terms of explaining some of the pressures to migrate:

We are already living in a very terrible situation in the Gambia and Africa at large. Most of the youths, if you see they are moving, it is not because they just want to go. [They go] because of the type of condition they find themselves in Africa ... I cannot be in Africa here struggling day and night, seeing my family struggling ... Every day I am there with my family, and I am expecting to have my own biological children that I need to take care of. And in Africa, we live in extended families, do you understand? Our families are big. ... And as long as you have more relatives, all those relatives, one day or the other, will like to come to you and explain their problems. When you don't solve their problems, you will be termed a wicked person. So, if you are living here with your small salary and you cannot even solve your personal problems and your whole entire village relies on you? So, you want me to live in that terrible situation? I am seeing people going the backway.

Within one year, they are able to do things that people cannot do here in The Gambia for 10 years – and still, you want me to stay? (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_2).

More and better knowledge about the risks of the journey does not necessarily persuade people to stay. It is included in a personal risk–benefit analysis. The risk is weighted against the potential “gain” of arriving in Europe and “succeeding” as a migrant. Moreover, trust in religion and predestination is an oft-chosen strategy for coping with risk. For example, a young man puts it as follows:

I believe like whatever happens along the way, the same thing can happen to you in the Gambia. The example I will give to you is: If you go to Mile 2 [Gambia’s central prison], people are jailed there for no reason. People get locked up for crimes they did not commit.... So, it’s like this – it is just destined to be (GM_WC_I_Male_30s_1).

In the case of Afghans in Turkey, there is no reference to religious faith or the role of predestination in the interview data. For this group, a contestation takes place along the lines that staying in Turkey is hardly possible (notably in view of the risk of being deported back to Afghanistan). The risk of a migratory journey must therefore be accepted. When seeing a picture of the border wall between Turkey and Greece, the immediate reactions of informants were telling regarding 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 over taller walls than this (Tur_male_20s_1).

In a similar vein, a man in his 30s has little faith that this type of messaging will 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 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).

One interviewee reflects upon the moral aspects behind such campaigns. When presented with the picture of the wall between Turkey and Greece, 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 (Tur_fem_40s_30).

4.3 “There are opportunities at home” (stay)

a) Endorsement of the message

In the Gambia, most of the participants we interviewed agree with the EU-promoted message that there are opportunities “at home.” In the EU campaigns, the “opportunities” mostly refer to skills training opportunities. Almost all participants are aware of training centers for young Gambians. Some have even already benefitted from skills training. Others refer to friends who have been supported by the IOM or another organization to start a business:

In the Gambia, there are opportunities. We have lot of donors that are coming to help, to make sure that the youth stay in their own country and help themselves. Like the skills that are available, the grants, the loans; these are all motivations for youths to stay and try and make their own way of living without going into the backway. Such opportunities are available in the country (GM_URR_I_Male_30s_5).

In view of the current situation in Afghanistan, any campaign arguing there were “opportunities” at home would seem futile, if not totally inconsiderate. As such, the non-existence of this type of new EU-funded campaign while the field work was being carried out can be seen as a given. Some EU policymakers may still reflect on whether Afghan refugees and migrants can be persuaded to stay in Turkey. However, such a campaign would be politically highly delicate and risks a hostile reaction from the Turkish government. After all, President Erdogan repeatedly highlights that Turkey hosts its fair share of refugees. The country is not interested in being, in Erdogan’s words, “Europe’s warehouse for refugees and migrants.” Furthermore, the deteriorating Turkish economy, increasing hostility toward migrants, and crackdown on Afghan nationals lacking a valid residence permit are likely to prevent such a campaign from persuading the targeted individuals.

b) Contestation of the message

While most Gambians endorsed the message of domestic opportunities regarding skill training at a general level, they were usually quick to add some qualifiers or reservations. These contestations concern the scope and pervasiveness of opportunities. At a more technical level, the Gambians question the set-up and conduct of the training and skills projects and highlight challenges such as regional disparities in access, nepotism, and corruption. For example, a respondent reacts to a campaign video highlighting opportunity by stating the following:

This video is true, but for people living in the Gambia here, it is not easy. ... Nepotism overtakes everything. Like when your father is working there, or your relatives, you have easier access to some of these things than someone who doesn’t have anybody working there. You can be with your correct documents and the person is with his or her correct documents – but you will [still] have easy access to it because your parents are working there. And money also; if you have money, you can pay some people ... and they will help you to have this job (GM_WC_FG_Male_17_3).

A particular challenge in the Gambia is regional disparities. Three out of the four regions of our fieldwork are in rural Gambia. A frequently voiced contestation during our fieldwork in rural

Gambia is that the opportunities created by these funds are concentrated in urban areas. Young people in rural areas are left behind as they cannot easily go to urban areas to undertake vocational training there. These opportunities in urban areas are difficult for them to access due to their lack of resources or relatives to support the sojourn:

[Opportunities] are not decentralized as they are only based in the urban areas. Some of these opportunities, you can only come across them ... in the urban areas. Not everybody can relocate and go there. Most potential migrants come from rural Gambia. This is where you have lot of potential migrants taking the backway. ... If the opportunities presented can also be transferred to rural Gambia, I think it will help a lot in coping with irregular migration (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_1).

Regarding the dimension of “opportunities at home,” a comparison between the two groups of this study is almost impossible. The message is irrelevant to the Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul. Moreover, their opportunities in Turkey are narrowing. Access to basic services such as health and education is also becoming more contested and restricted.

5. The impact of narratives and information on migrants’ decision-making

In this section, we reflect more deeply on how the narratives and information impact the decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia and Afghan (transit) migrants and refugees in Istanbul. It is important to highlight that both groups tend to consider irregular routes to Europe as the only or most realistic option. Despite their different situations, Gambians and Afghans are both constrained in terms of opportunities for legal migration to Europe.

In both settings – the Gambia and Istanbul – the master narratives depict Europe as a continent of opportunity and migration. These dominant narratives on Europe and migration are reinforced by feedback mechanisms provided by “success” stories from emigrants. Feedback mechanisms are a classic explanation of migration decision-making (Czaika et al. 2021). Feedback from friends and relatives is generally considered the most trustworthy source of information.

5.1 Sources of (trustworthy) information

In the Gambia, practically all media outlets (newspapers, TV, radio) touch upon the migration theme in one way or another. They reinforce the positive master narratives on migration and Europe (by showing success examples) but also feed into challenges (e.g., by reporting about the deaths of migrants en route). However, no information source has become as important for young Gambians in regard to making up their mind about migration as social media. It has become standard for young Gambians to follow migrants on Facebook, Instagram, or other social media outlets. People show each other “stories,” videos, and photos of Gambian

migrants in Europe, reinforcing the master narrative that it is possible to get there and succeed. Yet not all messages on social media are considered trustworthy. The stories of personal friends and acquaintances inspire more trust than campaigns or stories posted by unknown people or authorities.

Concrete migration intentions impact the information sources which a Gambian may consult. If an individual develops precise plans to migrate, he or she will particularly consult information from other migrants who have made it, most often on social media. Official sources, or sources believed to come from national or international governmental actors, struggle to compete at this stage:

I believe most of the people who go the “backway” never consult government agencies or the right channels. They follow the smugglers and friends to go. They get more information from smugglers and peers who have successfully embarked on the journey (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_2).

Information is hence most relevant for making up one’s mind about concrete migration opportunities and risks. The most trusted sources are family, friends, or successful migrant friends who are already in Europe.

In the Gambia, the participants highlight the relevance of local *ghettos* for young Gambians who reflect upon staying or going. *Ghetto* is a local slang word for public venues of meetings and gatherings for young people, mostly on the streets. *Ghettos* are the venues where the success of others is discussed, and individual aspirations are developed and outlined:

When we sit in the *ghettos* talking, a friend of ours in Europe will be calling. Sometimes, we show each other the photos of Europe they sent us. Sometimes, you will be sitting in the *ghetto* and a friend will send you something [money] so that you can buy something with it (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_3).

The *ghetto* therefore has an important standing. If you “succeed” as a migrant in Europe, you “inform” your friends and acquaintances who are still in your hometown or village about your new life. As the quote above highlights, a migrant may occasionally even directly transfer some money for the young, thereby further increasing admiration and social standing. A village’s *ghetto* is also an important place to obtain information about the migratory route (e.g., contact details for a smuggler, often referred to as an “agent”).

The sources of information which Afghan migrants in Istanbul use are comparable to some extent, but there are also differences. The prevailing master narrative has been fueled and upheld by information from a range of sources. The informants have had their own experience of fleeing Afghanistan and living under precarious conditions in Turkey. Many have even tried but failed to reach Europe. As such, they themselves are primary sources. They have the status of witnesses in the stories they convey. That said, the master narrative has developed over time and become interwoven with related stories and different sources of information originating from Afghanistan. Other information comes from migrant networks in Europe. The shared narrative has been so dominant among our informants as it is a mix of personal experiences, stories heard, and bits and pieces of information from various sources.

Starting from this general observation, the interview data from Istanbul allow us to zoom in on those information sources that are most relevant for possible onward migration. Of outstanding importance are family, friends, and other migrants. They are usually mentioned first, before a range of traditional and social media are listed. Many have family members who have already made it across the Turkey–EU 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 interviewees maintain that they no longer trust the national media in Afghanistan and must obtain updates through private channels. Some also have networks in the neighboring countries which allow them to follow the situation closely and spread 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).

All Afghan interviewees in Istanbul has smartphones. A list of social media platforms, often starting with WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok, is used to gain information on the situation for migrants in Turkey and aspects related to onward migration.

Some interviewees follow Turkish news (online newspapers, TV, radio). This habit is mostly limited to those who have spent longer periods in Turkey and speak Turkish. The others obtain information from Turkish sources second-hand by talking to other Afghan contacts or through social media. Many are critical of Turkish news and believe that the Turkish media are biased by political interests. The statement of an Afghan man with a university degree is a case in point:

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 quote illustrates the different educational backgrounds among the group of interviewees. Access to information varies greatly: Some depend on others to obtain information, in part because of their living conditions. They spend long working hours in often poorly paid and unregulated jobs. As such, they must often rely on the information they obtain from social media and/or smugglers:

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 tell them the country they will go to and the information [they need] (Tur_male_30s_13).

Some Afghans suggest that sensitive information on concrete plans for onward migration is shared primarily face-to-face. This again highlights the relevance of family, friends, and migration networks, which provide a level of confidentiality that is not matched by any other source:

This information travels from person to person, not only through social media. [Some of this information] we only talk about one-to-one, face-to-face. Why would they talk about this in the media? (Tur_male_30s_20).

5.2 Information vs. other drivers of migration

a) The impact of EU-promoted messages

One major difference exists regarding our two case studies: Whilst Gambians have been targeted by EU-funded migration information campaigns, Afghans in Turkey have not. Messages promoted in these EU-funded campaigns may conflict or align with other sources of information. The reflections on their (non-)impact must be located within this broader context. Even with in-depth research like ours, it is extremely difficult to deconstruct migration decision-making. We thus do not pretend to present a full causal impact analysis. Rather, we portray how the messages from EU-funded information campaigns are endorsed or contested and interact with other drivers of migration.

In the Gambia, the endorsement or contestation of the narratives that the EU seeks to put forward varies strongly for the three main messages (life in Europe is difficult; the migration route is dangerous; there are opportunities at home). The largest match between locally dominant and EU-promoted narratives concerns the issue of risks during the migratory journey. There is a strong awareness of the risks and dangers that migrants undergo when travelling to Europe. Several young Gambians who took part in this study mentioned that their families hold them back from migrating due to concerns over their safety. Such an awareness of the dangers of the route is not necessarily a direct result of an information campaign. A public and private discourse of growing intensity about people suffering or dying on the route plays an equally important role. Yet the EU-funded information campaigns feed into and reinforce these dynamics, thereby contributing to a stronger relevance of the narrative emphasizing risks:

So, I think, my parents, the concept they have is that if I embark on this journey, I may end up losing my life. The concept they have is how are they going to stop me from using this backway (GM_WC_FG_Male_17_3).

(EU-funded) information campaigns can sometimes influence the decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia, notably of those already having doubts. If a person – and those around them – is hesitant about whether to start a migratory journey, these campaigns can reinforce existing doubts and concerns. However, we refrain from claiming to know precisely how these doubts ultimately influence migration decisions, given the complex interaction with other drivers of migration.

Afghan nationals in Istanbul were not subject to any EU-funded information campaign at the time of writing. Still, it is evident that the standard messages of such campaigns are

overwhelmingly met with skepticism by this group of migrants. Let us consider, for instance, the idea of opportunities at home. The economic and security situation in Afghanistan was challenging even before the Taliban took over in August 2021 and the international forces pulled out. The reforms pushed for the past 20 years on issues such as democratic rule, rule of law, individual rights, and gender equality have been revised. This has drained hopes of any positive development in Afghanistan. Indeed, a large portion of our interviewees did not have any plans to leave before the Taliban takeover and were among those who worked to improve the socioeconomic situation in Afghanistan. With the Taliban takeover, however, their situation changed profoundly. There are no opportunities “at home” for them – and the situation in Turkey, their current host country, has deteriorated. Hope has been building that they will be able to migrate onward to Europe (or other Western countries such as the US and Canada).

The Afghans are less receptive than the Gambians to messages highlighting the difficulties and dangers of a migratory route towards Europe, principally because there are other powerful drivers for migration for Afghan migrants. The danger of the journey competes with the danger of being sent back to Afghanistan.

b) Other drivers of migration

Information and knowledge about migration do not stand on their own. They interact with the potential benefits of migration and the current difficult life situations that push people to migrate. This implies that knowledge of the risk and dangers alone does not alter the overall risk–benefit analysis. Gambians and Afghans may have different considerations when undertaking such an analysis.

In the Gambia, the migration of a family member to Europe can be a household strategy to deal with a difficult situation and a lack of livelihood opportunities. Gambians with family members in Europe (or elsewhere) have often developed a higher living standard than their peers thanks to the remittances sent back. This situation creates a societal dynamic in which social and material rewards are increasingly associated with a successful migratory experience. The “social rewards” are related to the higher prestige of a successful migrant and include increased chances of finding a husband or a wife or providing support for loved ones. The social and material rewards of leaving are often contrasted with the lack of opportunities when staying. The (structural) conditions of the employment and housing market are disadvantageous and difficult for many young Gambians, notably those living outside urban centers. Furthermore, the pressure exercised by a family (and the wider social environment) can be considerable. In such a situation, staying implies acquiring the stigma of failing to live up to one’s potential and expectations:

Some people prefer to die there than to stay with their families. It is the family pressure. You see these young people, some of them, the problems at home are so severe that they cannot withstand them. So, they even prefer going through the backway, die on their way going, or make it to Europe, rather than stay in their homes. Some people know that most of the things they are seeing on social media are actually fake, concerning the pictures that their friends take and send them. Some of them already know that, but

staying in their compounds, staying in a society where they are jobless, and the treatment they receive is a problem (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_3).

A key intervening variable in the cost–benefit analysis is the risk associated with an irregular migratory journey. Yet the risk does not often prevent a person from leaving. Several Gambians who personally know a person who has suffered or died on the route are still pursuing the intention to migrate irregularly to Europe (see also UNDP 2019). The risks are widely known, yet this information and knowledge *per se* do not change the life situation of potential migrants. Factors other than knowledge are more important for people to decide on migration. As a man in his 30s succinctly put it: “It is not about the information, it is about the situation” (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1).

The knowledge of dangers during an irregular migratory journey are even less relevant for Afghans when they are making decisions about onward migration. In their day-to-day life in Istanbul, Afghan refugees and migrants risk exposure to the Turkish authorities, which may lead to deportation to Afghanistan. As mentioned, there were reportedly around 42,000 deportations of Afghans from Turkey to Afghanistan in the first eight months of 2022.

Being deported back is a worst-case scenario for the Afghan people we interviewed in Istanbul. The people feel that there is no going back to their country. Among the female interviewees who had gone to school, attended university, or entered business or the civil service, the situation in Afghanistan is a nightmare. Male informants also share 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 their jobs. Those with even a slight connection to the allied NATO forces (e.g., providing basic cleaning services) had been persecuted, gone underground, and then fled the country.

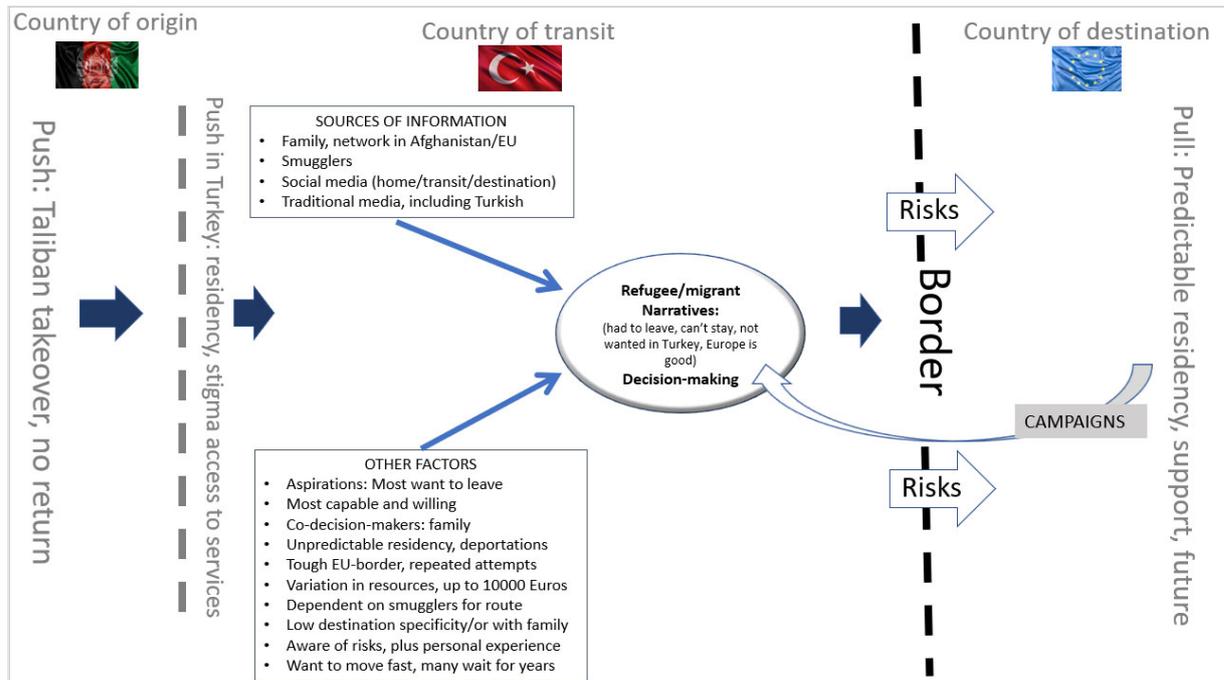
Hence, for many a return to Afghanistan implies a high probability of being persecuted. They fear death. Those who were not connected to the pre-Taliban regime or the Western allies face lesser risks, but return remains unviable. Going back implies pledging allegiance to the Taliban and all their strict rules regarding clothing, growing a beard, and how to keep a family household where wives and daughters are deprived of the most basic freedoms. Moreover, business opportunities are meager. Those who have built companies based on import and export from countries such as Turkey see few, if any, viable avenues to make a decent income.

The dangers of onward migration are hence weighted against the risk of staying (while keeping in mind the impossibility of going back to Afghanistan). Rather than knowledge of the dangers, it is the differences in legal status which are a determining factor in migratory plans. No one contests that the journey is highly dangerous, but only those Afghans who have acquired Turkish citizenship can refrain from considering such a high-risk project. The others see themselves as being in a more precarious situation. A residence permit gives individuals a kind of mid-term predictability. These people hesitate more before they embark on an irregular journey by boat (usually organized by smugglers), but they do not rule it out. People without proper documentation are the most vulnerable. Accordingly, they are also the keenest to reach a place where they have better prospects.

5.3 The role of narratives revisited

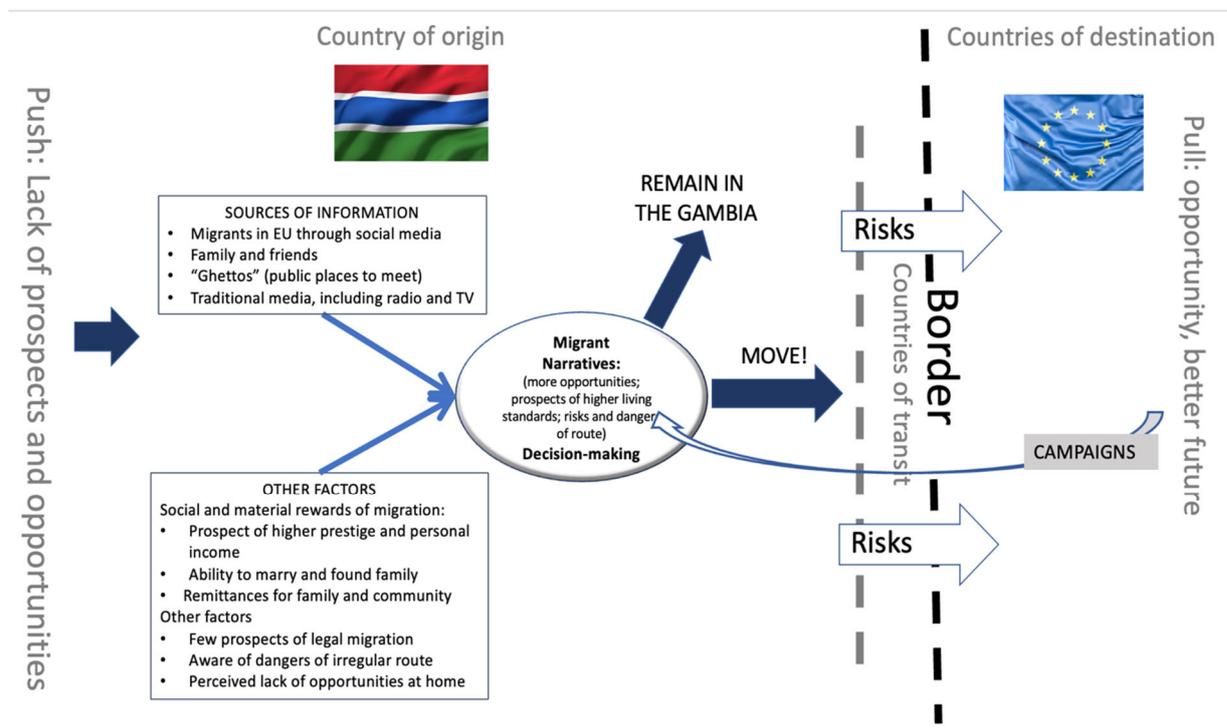
The data presented about Gambian potential migrants and refugees/migrants in Turkey can now be inserted in the model presented in section 2. In figures 4 and 5, we provide an overview of the decision-making situation of migrants in these two specific situations.

FIGURE 4: Factors influencing onward migration decisions of Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Turkey, with a particular focus on the role of information and narratives



In figure 4, we see the potential movement of Afghans after being pushed out of Afghanistan following the takeover by the Taliban. Their decisions are influenced by information and a range of other factors. We also see their dominant narrative summed up (in the circle “had to flee, can’t stay, not wanted in Turkey, Europe is good”), and we see a slim arrow of EU messaging. To the right in figure 4, we find examples of strong pull factors in Europe, where Afghans envision a predictable residency, support, and a future.

FIGURE 5: Factors influencing migratory decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia, with a particular focus on the role of information and narratives



The figure above shows the factors that influence Gambians reflecting upon migration. The most trusted information comes from family, friends, and migrants who made it to Europe. A range of social and material rewards may come with a successful migration. The narratives on Europe and migration are predominantly positive and focus on the opportunities. However, the dangers of the route are well-known and are also a major factor in the decision-making. Socioeconomic challenges, being able to provide for oneself and one's family, or being able to start one's own family are key drivers.

6. Conclusions

This report of the BRIDGES project investigates the migration narratives of (potential) migrants in the Gambia as well as Afghan (transit) migrants in Turkey (Istanbul). It brings together and compares the findings of two (in-depth) national reports on these case studies (Trauner et al. 2023; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2023). A particular emphasis has been placed on the question of how local and personal narratives on migration and Europe interrelate with EU-promoted messages often put forward in migration information campaigns. The report is embedded into wider academic and policy debates on narratives, information, and information campaigns.

The research is based on extensive fieldwork in the Gambia and Istanbul. We conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews with 60 Gambian informants in four different regions of the Gambia in March and April 2022. In the same period, we carried out 46 qualitative semi-

structured interviews with Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul in addition to interviews with five migration experts. The fieldwork in Istanbul and the Gambia was closely aligned and coordinated, thereby ensuring comparability of the findings.

We did not evaluate a particular EU-funded information campaign in a specific timeframe. As a matter of fact, there was no information campaign targeting Afghan migrants in Istanbul at the time of the research (although Afghans were the target of such campaigns before the Taliban-takeover in 2021). The project rather sought to first, establish the dominant/master narrative on migration and Europe, independently of any campaigns; and second, analyze how the Gambian and Afghan participants react to and perceive the messages typically put forward in EU-funded information campaigns (Trauner et al. 2023; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2023). These messages were that (1) life in Europe is difficult; (2) the migratory route is dangerous; and (3) there are opportunities at home (for the Gambian case study).

a) The master narrative on migration

In both settings, the Gambia and Turkey (Istanbul), the informants highlight the opportunities for a positive life change enabled by migration. The dominant or master narrative on migration is clearly positive. Migrants who made it to Europe are perceived as successful individuals, who are safe now (in the Afghan case) and/or able to improve the situation of their families and communities (primarily in the Gambian case). In both settings, the narrative primarily concerns irregular migration. Trying legal migration channels and visa applications for the EU is largely seen as futile because of high visa rejection rates and the lack of legal pathways; this perception was seen in both groups.

While the positive tone of the master narratives of both groups is comparable, there are also vital differences. Gambians may have good reasons for trying their chances abroad, but they are still part of a Gambian nation which is not at war and experienced a change towards a more democratic government in 2016. While the risk–benefit calculation of many Gambians goes in favor of migration, they still tend to have a fallback option – they may not migrate and seek to get along in the Gambia or neighboring countries. As a matter of fact, some informants are not sure about taking the risk of irregular migration to Europe and only want to go if they find an opportunity to migrate regularly. Several Gambians participating in the study argue that irregular migration has too many negative side effects for the concerned individuals and Gambian society.

Afghan migrants (in transit) in Istanbul are in a different situation. They increasingly perceive (and are told by Turkish politicians and media) that they are unwanted in Turkey. Many have lost their hope of finding a safe haven in Turkey and are now looking for possibilities to move on. Onward migration is narrated as a solution to a difficult or even life-threatening situation in Turkey (due to the risk of being deported back to Afghanistan). The narrative of Afghans in Turkey is one of *forced migration*.

b) The master narrative on Europe

The other master narrative that we investigate concerns life in Europe. In the Gambia, Europe is associated with (professional or educational) opportunities and a probability of obtaining

high(er) living standards. The opportunities in Europe are often contrasted with a perceived lack thereof in the Gambia. The narrative on Europe is also largely positive among the Afghans. Many interviewees are ready to go “anywhere” as long as they can leave Turkey. Reaching “Europe” is the most realistic alternative for most.

The discourse on Europe is, however, more nuanced in the Gambia than in Turkey (Istanbul). While Europe is still seen as a place of opportunity, participants in this study also put forward more critical statements, whether regarding Europe’s colonial past or a perceived ill-treatment of Gambian migrants in Europe. Other problems, such as racism in Europe, are also thematized. Such critical statements are largely absent in the interviews with Afghans. The Afghan refugees and migrants also assume they will be treated more fairly in Europe than suggested by potential migrants in The Gambia (or compared to Turkey, where they currently live). By contrast, the Gambian narrative often includes a necessity of fighting against the odds and overcoming hardship en route and upon arrival.

c) The reception of EU-promoted messages

There are some similarities but also considerable differences in the ways in which the Gambian and Afghan informants react to the messages usually promoted in EU-funded information campaigns. The message that “life is difficult” for migrants in Europe is confirmed by few Gambians (mostly those who personally know someone in Europe who has faced problems or challenges). Most contest it with arguments such as that a difficult life in Europe would still be easier than life in the Gambia or that “successful migrants” indicate the many opportunities that life in Europe offers. Afghan migrants do not convey negative perceptions of Europe; nor do they provide alternatives to the dominant “Europe-is-good” narrative. Either they do not have a sufficiently nuanced knowledge of the situation for asylum seekers and migrants in the EU and other European countries, or they compare the situation in Europe with that in Afghanistan and in Turkey. If the latter, they may not agree that life in Europe is so difficult.

The EU-funded information campaigns compete with other sources of information, for example those which emphasize how attractive Europe is as a destination for refugees and migrants. 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-funded 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 many other channels, including popular culture and social media, a different narrative is portrayed: Europe as a place of stability and immense opportunity; a place where you can build a future. This is the image and narrative of Europe which is given off. It is extremely difficult to counter this image, even with correct information about asylum procedures and examples of migrants who have failed in Europe.

In the Gambia, the EU-promoted message of “there are opportunities at home (stay)” tends to be partially endorsed, but also often challenged or even put aside upon closer inspection and reflection. Gambians accept the idea that there are training programs or skills centers, to which the EU-funded information campaigns refer. They do, however, often question the scope and pervasiveness of these opportunities. They pinpoint challenges such as the conduct of these

training programs, regional disparities in access to them, nepotism, and corruption. Most interviewed Gambians also contest that these opportunities for training programs make people stay in the country in view of the difficult economic circumstances. A Gambian may be trained, but he or she may still not find a job. A person can create a small business but still struggle to win customers and become financially viable.

The largest match between locally dominant and EU-promoted narratives concerns the issue of risks during the migratory journey. The Gambians participating in this study are aware of the risks and dangers of irregularly travelling to Europe. Independently of or alongside migration information campaigns, there has been a public and private discourse of growing intensity about people suffering or dying on the route. The EU-funded campaigns feed into and reinforce these dynamics. They contribute to a stronger relevance of the narrative emphasizing risks, thereby often reinforcing the doubts that some people already have. However, we refrain from claiming to know precisely how these doubts ultimately influence migration decisions, given the complex interaction with other drivers of migration (mentioned above), such as security risks, socioeconomic circumstances, or predestination thinking.

d) Information vs. other drivers of migration

Gambians in the Gambia and Afghan migrants in Turkey often talk about and view migration-related issues in a comparable way, albeit they also exhibit considerable differences.

The nuances in the master narratives are higher among Gambians. When talking about migration or Europe, issues such as the perceived ill-treatment of migrants or Europe's colonial heritage regularly come up. The issue of risk and danger is of concern for many (potential) migrants in this country (and a key theme of EU-funded information campaigns). Still, information and knowledge about migration do not stand on their own. They interact with the potential benefit of succeeding as a migrant. In the Gambia, the migration of a family member to Europe can be a household strategy to deal with a difficult situation and a lack of livelihood opportunities. Gambians with family members in Europe (or elsewhere) have often developed a higher living standard than their peers thanks to the remittances sent back. This situation creates a societal dynamic in which social and material rewards are increasingly associated with a successful migratory experience.

The situation and the narratives are different from those of Afghan migrants and refugees in Istanbul, who approach these issues from the perspective of forced migration. A large portion of our interviewees did not have any plans to leave Afghanistan before the Taliban takeover. They were among those who worked to improve socioeconomic conditions and democratic rule there. With the Taliban takeover, however, their situation changed profoundly. There are no opportunities "at home" for them – and the situation in Turkey, their current host country, has deteriorated. Hope has been building that they will be able to migrate onward to Europe (or other Western countries such as the US and Canada). The knowledge of dangers during an irregular migratory journey is less relevant for Afghans when making decisions on onward migration. In their day-to-day life in Istanbul, Afghans refugees and migrants face the risk of exposure to Turkish authorities, which may lead to deportation to Afghanistan (in particular for those Afghans who have not yet acquired Turkish citizenship or a residence permit). There is

another key difference to Gambians who embark on irregular migration to Europe. Both Afghans and Gambians may face comparable risks, such as death and exploitation, once they are en route. However, compared to Gambians, Afghans have a higher probability of gaining asylum or residence permits once they arrive in Europe.

Overall, our findings are consistent with what other scholars have found in other contexts. Previous research on the impact of information campaigns have argued that they are largely ineffective due partly to the dismissal of the messages as biased propaganda by migrants (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2012) or due to a different perception of the risk (Townsend and Oomen 2015). Other studies have shown the limited impact of such information campaigns on (potential) migrants decision-making (Heller 2014; Rodriguez 2017). Our findings concerning reception and impact of EU funded information campaigns suggest that they are only one among various sources of information on migration. Personal relations and social media are of particular relevance for the decision making of (potential) migrants. It is also clear that information is only one of many factors influencing migratory decision-making.

7. Recommendations

Based on the data and conclusions of this report, we would like to make four recommendations which EU stakeholders may consider.

Increase predictability and prioritize the processing of visa-applications for Afghan refugees in Turkey

European governments may consider working together with Turkish immigration authorities to increase the predictability of the practice of issuing residence permits. Transparent and affordable processes would be an important measure to improve the living conditions of refugees and migrants in Istanbul and elsewhere in Turkey. European governments should also pay increased attention to precarious situation of this group. To avoid the dire consequences of deportation back from Turkey to Afghanistan, EU-countries should speed up visa-processing. European governments may also consider relocation or resettlement quotas of Afghans in Turkey who face a particular high risk, including people with ties to previous regimes in Afghanistan, women activists, and journalists.

Expand legal routes, visa predictability, and real opportunities in the Gambia

At present, legal migration to Europe plays a miniscule role in the migration narratives of young Gambians. The EU may consider increasing access to legal migration avenues for Gambians, thereby reducing the attractiveness of the “backway.” The EU and its member states could, for example, consider reimbursing visa application fees for younger applicants, introducing visa lottery programs (similar to the US Diversity Immigrant Visa Program), or opening up other legal pathways in their cooperation with the Gambian government. In addition, the EU may support the Gambian government in developing tailor-made, sustainable, and targeted policies which will enable young Gambians to access the labor market or start viable businesses.

Currently, the lack of opportunities also affects return migrants and their efforts to secure (re)integration.

Enhance the transparency and relevance of existing information campaigns

European information campaigns targeting potential migrants from third countries may be based on a deep knowledge of the precarities of the situation of refugees and existing opportunities for migrants. The legitimacy of these campaigns hinges on transparency regarding sponsors and the inclusion of legal migration alternatives. They must also pay close attention to the experiences of potential migrants. To be useful for potential migrants, the campaigns need to be both factually correct and sensitive to local narratives.

Move towards more inclusive engagements

Pure non-communicative deterrence is highly unlikely to have an impact on attitudes and outcomes. The study in the Gambia suggests that local or international actors may consider developing more inclusive and open-ended forms of engagement that are less oriented toward the overarching goal of persuading people to stay there. Hence, citizens may contribute new ideas on how to deal with migration in the Gambia, be it having more and different opportunities at home or enhancing the safety of their fellow citizens en route.

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BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

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