TransAtlantic
COUNCIL on
MIGRATION

*A Project of the **Migration Policy Institute***

Public Opinion, Media Coverage, and Migration

Developing Strategies for Immigration and Integration Reforms

COUNCIL STATEMENT

THIRD PLENARY MEETING OF THE TRANSATLANTIC COUNCIL ON MIGRATION

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I.   Introduction

The politics of migration can upend the best-laid plans of even the most clear-headed and thoughtful policymakers. As with an increasing number of other complex issues, engineers of immigration reforms must be acutely attuned and responsive to public opinion. They must also understand how their proposals will be echoed (and frequently distorted) by the media. Analysts and idea makers, meanwhile, must fireproof their recommendations — so that they survive not only on paper, but in the heat of public debate. In the controversial realm of immigration, producing groundbreaking and well thought-out ideas is not enough; policymakers must frame these ideas in a way that will resonate with voters and thus have a realistic chance of being implemented. Only through a deep understanding of public opinion on immigration can they do so.

Recent history has proved that this is true even in the best of times. Today, in the midst of a global recession that has fueled nativist sentiment and made the politics of immigration more tendentious, it is truer than ever. Given that migration systems in both Europe and North America are essentially broken, the Transatlantic Council on Migration views as one of its most urgent priorities to help reformers chart a path through the politics of migration.

The goal, therefore, of this Council meeting was to fortify policymakers and champions of reform by systematically analyzing public opinion and media coverage of migration across the Atlantic. By convening an unusual constellation of leading pollsters, politicians, political consultants, journalists, and migration experts, the Council was able to assess what is known about public opinion, media coverage, and political rhetoric on migration in North America and Europe. The goal was to hone in on strategies to advance immigration and integration reforms. The case studies examined by the Council focused on the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, though analyses from

other European countries — including the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain — also were brought into the discussion.

What follows are the principal conclusions from the Council meeting.

II.   The Politics of Migration: Political Rhetoric, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion

In the hands of progressive immigration reformers, political rhetoric is a poorly wielded tool: Noticed when it does damage, but rarely used to advantage. Many groups with an anti-immigration agenda have deftly seized the language of security, patriotism, and values to mobilize the public for more restrictionist immigration measures. Proponents of progressive reform, meanwhile, get tangled in politically correct language and fuzzy arguments that fail to move voters.

Politicians must learn that the language used to talk about immigration and immigrant integration *does* matter — perhaps as much as the ideas themselves. The right words can shape public opinion, foster support for policy initiatives, and stave off criticism; whereas the wrong words can inflame and polarize public opinion, amplify existing anxieties, and mobilize the opposition. A catch word like "amnesty" activates value judgments and can become lodged in the public consciousness, clouding debates and obstructing policy reforms that rely on a nuanced understanding of the issue.

In order to advance thoughtful reforms, politicians must understand and constantly assess public opinion of immigrants and immigration and frame their words in a way that reflects and addresses public hopes and anxieties. Polls show that people's everyday experiences with immigrants influence their thoughts above all else, but a politician's word choice sets the tone for the debate. Indeed, words and phrases can become imbued with new meanings depending on how and in what context they are communicated. Elected officials thus must heed the currents of public opinion and carefully calibrate their words so that policy initiatives have the best chance of being understood and accepted.

The following points are critical to making rhetoric more effective:

1. *Language should be straightforward, unambiguous, and honest.* Euphemisms backfire. A politically correct phrase like "undocumented worker" polls poorly with the public because it comes off as disingenuous. "Illegal immigrant" is more effective because it states the issue clearly. The public does not want to be manipulated.

2. *Rhetoric should acknowledge genuine public concerns.* Politicians must acknowledge and address the public's concerns about immigration, such as border control, public security, and potential crowding in the labor market. Ignoring these concerns — or worse, suggesting they are evidence of prejudice — will only alienate voters. A pragmatic emphasis on problem-solving and a focus on real solutions must be balanced with an appeal to people's hopes.

3. *Politicians should appeal to values and emotion, not just recite statistics.* Effective rhetoric hinges on the emotional resonance of key words, and understanding that people process words, phrases, images, values, and emotions into connections known as networks of association. Politicians must understand and invoke the lived experiences and values of their

constituents, and be mindful of the networks of association a word such as "immigrant" or "asylum seeker" will unconsciously trigger. Public opinion is based on (and influenced by) *values* more than by statistics; therefore addressing a contentious policy issue by "defending facts" can backfire.

4. *Leaders need to be proactive, not reactive.* Communication is more effective when leaders address immigration matters routinely and are on offense at key points rather than defense. Political crises offer opportunities for leaders to set the tone on sensitive issues and boost their authority by proactively creating a joint experience with the public instead of simply "reacting" to events.

5. *Understand ambivalence.* People hold divergent and often contradictory opinions on immigration, but can be primed with strong messages that underscore positive associations to immigrants and deactivate negative ones. In the US context, speaking about immigrants as reliable coworkers, trusted caregivers, and individuals who share basic American values can spark these positive associations.

Even if policymakers rightly recognize the importance of fine-tuning their political rhetoric, they may not have the capacity to use language in a way that advances their ideas in the court of public opinion. Elected officials often have to speak to multiple audiences at once, and therefore must deliver messages that work on multiple stages (especially with a 24-hour media cycle that seizes upon sound bites and sensational catch phrases). Words may matter more or less depending on several factors, including: public priorities, local context, and where the country is on its political trajectory. People can respond to a nuanced position if it appeals to their values, assuages their concerns and addresses their ambivalence, and appeals to their pragmatism and desire for leadership.

Broadly speaking, public anxiety about immigrants and immigration has increased across the globe in the past decade. While well-documented increases in migrant flows and stocks (especially illegal ones) are partially responsible, it is the rapid *pace* of these changes that has been a key driver of anxiety. Curiously, despite this decade-long trend of growing anxiety about immigration, the global economic crisis had not caused a spike in anti-immigrant sentiment as of the time of the Council's meeting in spring 2009. People were more worried about their own economic and job prospects than immigration issues. This mild reaction could change if the recession turns out to be deeper and/or longer than expected, or conversely if the economy starts to pick up and immigrants are perceived to be recovering jobs more quickly and easily than natives.

There is gathering evidence that negative reactions to immigrants are indeed growing. But the issue cuts even deeper. Confidence in government is falling in countries everywhere. Many people no longer believe or trust that governments are properly managing the flows of people and the impact immigrants have on jobs, public services, and the civic space. However, there *is* something approaching consensus as to the "right" policy prescriptions. Most clearly, publics want governments to create more stable, predictable, and usually smaller flows of legal migrants; to dramatically reduce illegal entry; to prevent unscrupulous employers from undermining wages and work standards; and to ensure that immigrants learn the local language, obey the law, pay taxes, and respect a country's civic culture and institutions.

In this context, leadership is crucial in delivering a strong immigration narrative that is likely to garner public support. Politicians who take an active role in the debate, lean into controversial issues rather than respond in a reactive capacity, and emphasize problem-solving can do well. Policy

statements on immigration must appeal to the interests of the country as a whole, be rooted in an understanding of public concerns and current trends in public opinion, and also be forward-looking. Most importantly, immigration should be embedded in a narrative of *solutions* and *measurable progress*. Policymakers can cull lessons learned from polls to create more effective narratives and address their constituents' desire for greater control over their lives. The most effective response is to acknowledge people's fear of change, instead of trying to "counter" that fear with facts and statistics.

Public opinion is deeply influenced by media coverage of immigrants and immigration, which both reflects and influences the parameters of the policy debate. In some ways, the media act as an independent social actor, instead of simply a mediating institution that reflects the concerns of our times, and must be understood as such. Media serve as both an agenda setter and driver on immigration issues, and a mirror, reflecting debates already going on in public and policy circles.

There are certain characteristics of media coverage on both sides of the Atlantic that obstruct the path to reform. The media focus disproportionately on illegality and overemphasize the immigrant as protagonist in that narrative (thus underplaying the role of government or employers in "enabling" illegality). Also, coverage tends to follow an "alarm-bell mentality," as the media seize upon immigration stories primarily during crises, belying the fact that immigration is actually a fairly steady (and positive) social phenomenon. During crises, the loudest voices that get heard on media outlets are those that represent the most extreme positions, thus contributing to a polarization of public opinion that stymies reform and hinders compromise.

III.   Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Globalization, including rising immigration, is changing the fundamental character of our societies more quickly than at any other time in the post-World War II era. People are concerned that the rapid pace of change has left them without control over their lives and that the very identity of their communities is transforming before their eyes. The public has lost confidence in the government's capacity to come to terms with, and manage, these changes effectively, particularly because the necessary social infrastructure and institutions cannot be built overnight, and only a few governments have engaged systematically in the hard work of preparing society to better understand and prepare itself for this new era.

This perceived loss of control manifests itself in a desire for visible borders and restrictions — a reality which politicians must acknowledge. In a climate where millions of workers, including disproportionate shares of immigrants, are out of work (and the legal status of many immigrants is increasingly at risk), the pressure from populist parties, especially on the right, makes maintaining a reasonable tone both more important and more difficult.

Governments must balance two main priorities: policy (making their immigrant-selection systems smarter) and politics (reassuring anxious publics that flows are managed effectively). An analysis of the interplay among public opinion, media coverage, and policy reveals five lessons for crafting effective political rhetoric on immigration:

- In most immigration debates, fear resonates much more viscerally than hope. If advocates of reform do not deliver a strong aspirational message, the opposition will fill the void with

passionate, negative rhetoric. Even if positive rhetoric does not prevail, it can blunt the effect of fear mongering.

- Politicians must talk about immigration reform in a way that addresses the *national* interest, not just the interests of certain segments of society; they must paint a picture of how society and national identity should look in the longer term, and explain how immigration fits into that construct.

- Leaders must strike a balance between language that addresses *local* anxiety (curbing illegal immigration and managing net legal flows to relieve costs and other pressures on society) and rhetoric that advances *national* priorities, such as recruiting immigrants with an eye toward maintaining economic competitiveness.

- Ambition must be balanced with pragmatism: it is important to propose legislation that legislators will actually *pass,* in addition to laws that make most sense.

- The most effective messages should appeal to three different areas: smart selection (bringing in immigrants who will address economic growth and competitiveness directly); staying true to a country's core values (e.g. continuing to permit refugee flows; also understanding that immigrants don't move as economic units, but as families, and thus accommodating family immigration); and respect for the rule of law and security.

In Europe especially, governments must demonstrate to their publics that they are in control of both the composition and scale of immigration. In the past, politicians have made a strategic misstep by avoiding what they perceive to be tough, contentious issues, instead of "leaning into" them and thus getting them off the table. Perhaps the most critical factor in designing a reform package is to anticipate and help shape what the public will view as "success" in immigration reform, and ensure that the proposals can deliver this success.

In order to create the political space for this to work, however, politicians and advocates must recognize that immigration touches a deep nerve about national identity. Therefore, policymakers must create a forward-looking, values-based narrative that explains why our societies *need* immigrants and addresses the public's practical concerns, instead of merely focusing on technical and bureaucratic issues that leave people feeling unsatisfied.

Balancing values with pragmatism can defuse social tensions. To do so, it is paramount to advance immigrant integration. Even incremental progress on integration increases the room for maneuvering on the broader immigration debate.

Managing the change that results from rapid immigration growth — that is, building the political and institutional infrastructure that can absorb and reflect the new diversity, as well as bringing the public along — takes time and challenges the way societies are organized socially, culturally, and politically. Yet, nothing is more critical to succeeding *with* immigration than that.

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Demetrios G. Papademetriou is President of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank dedicated exclusively to the study of international migration. He is also the convener of the Transatlantic Council on Migration and its predecessor, the Transatlantic Task Force on Immigration and Integration (co-convened with the Bertelsmann Stiftung). Dr. Papademetriou also convenes the Athens Migration Policy Initiative (AMPI), a task force of mostly European senior immigration experts that advises EU Member States on immigration and asylum issues, and the Co-Founder and International Chair Emeritus of *Metropolis: An International Forum for Research and Policy on Migration and Cities.* He also serves as Chair of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Migration. Dr. Papademetriou has taught at the universities of Maryland, Duke, American, and New School for Social Research. He has held a wide range of senior positions that include Chair of the Migration Committee of the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; Director for Immigration Policy and Research at the US Department of Labor and Chair of the Secretary of Labor's Immigration Policy Task Force; and Executive Editor of the *International Migration Review.*

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