

## **BACKGROUND GUIDE**

# **COUNTERING TOXIC NARRATIVES ABOUT REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS**



UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is launching the MUN Refugee Challenge to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates.

### **The Challenge**

There are powerful voices around the world that are determined to denigrate refugees and turn them into objects of fear and loathing. This is very often the result of narratives and sentiments centred on a phobia of the outsider – based on ethnicity and race, religion, income, language and similar signs of “otherness”. This, in and of itself, is divisive and can lead to violence and persecution. More practically, advocating on behalf of refugees, fundraising and lobbying can all depend on prevailing public and political attitudes towards refugees.

***Hate speech:*** There is no international legal definition of hate speech, and the characterization of what is “hateful” is contested. According to the United Nations, hate speech is generally understood as “any kind of communication, in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in others words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.”

***Incitement to violence:*** According to the United Nations, “incitement is a very dangerous form of speech, because it explicitly and deliberately aims at triggering discrimination, hostility and violence, which may also lead to or include terrorism or atrocity crimes”. International law prohibits incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.

***Fear of the “other”:*** Very often, refugees are grouped together with migrants in the public mind; in turn, migrants – and asylum-seekers – can be negatively portrayed as a particularly mobile and predatory subset of “foreigners”. The terms are often used carelessly and interchangeably but in a generally negative sense; or they are used in an outright hostile manner.

***Refugees and migrants as “threat”:*** Outsiders are generally depicted by the far right as a threat to Western values, culture, religion, jobs, school places, health systems and other public services, and a source of terrorism and crime. A 2016 poll by the Brookings Institute in the US showed that 46% of Americans who opposed accepting refugees were concerned about perceived links to terrorism. And yet statistics show that refugees are the least likely section of a population to get involved in violence – they are refugees because they fled violence and persecution.

The perpetrator of the recent mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March, which left 49 dead, was apparently motivated by “identitarian” ideology, akin to theories such as the “great replacement” of white Europeans by people of colour. Former refugees were amongst those killed.

***Social media:*** In March 2018, the chair of the UN’s Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar, investigating the circumstances of the violence that drove more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims from their homes, said that social media had “substantively contributed to the level of acrimony” among the wider public. Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, added: “We know that the ultra-nationalist Buddhists have their own Facebooks and are

really inciting a lot of violence and a lot of hatred against the Rohingya or other ethnic minorities. I'm afraid that Facebook has now turned into a beast, and not what it originally intended.”

An article in the Financial Times reported on the work of two PhD students at Warwick University in the UK, who studied social media use in their native Germany between 2015 and 2017. “During surges in online anti-migrant sentiment, they estimated that areas with higher Facebook populations saw up to 50 per cent more anti-refugee incidents — mostly violent crimes, including refugees’ homes being set on fire — than the national average. They attributed this to the spread of hate posts. ‘Social media can push potential perpetrators over the line,’ says Mr Schwarz. ‘Their views get more extreme [from reading hate posts] and, at some point, they might decide to assault someone.’”

**Contexts, questions and public opinion:** Several pollsters and academics have pointed out that the results of public opinion surveys depend very much on the question being asked, as well as the situation in the country where the survey is being conducted.

A June 2017 report by the Royal Institute for International Affairs (RIIA) in the UK cited Ipsos MORI global data from 2016, which found that over half of those surveyed agreed with the statement: “Most foreigners who want to get into my country as a refugee really aren’t refugees. They just want to come here for economic reasons, or to take advantage of our welfare services.” However, it added that people in the UK were more inclined to be well disposed toward refugees when they were isolated as a distinct category, while responses were more likely to reflect negative attitudes if people were asked simply about “immigration”.

A study conducted by More in Common in 11 European countries also revealed that while only 55 per cent of people agreed with the statement “my government should provide financial assistance for refugees, alone or alongside charities”, 72 per cent agreed with “my country has a responsibility to accommodate at least some refugees”.

In Kenya, a top refugee-hosting country, an IRC study found that 94 per cent of citizens support the delivery of public services to refugees and that only 27 per cent see refugees as a security threat. Nonetheless, a significantly smaller portion supports longer-term needs such as access to land (39 per cent) and citizenship (31 per cent).

**Audiences matter:** While some people are overwhelmingly hostile to refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers, and others are welcoming, most are conflicted. According to research by More in Common, most people find themselves in the “conflicted middle”: they feel empathetic towards refugees, while also experiencing real anxieties about issues such as job security, public services, cultural change and terrorism.

**Bullying:** In recent years, the problem of bullying in school has gained attention. Research conducted in Italy showed that migrant and refugee children tended to be victims of more bullying than their peers.



## **Responses and solutions**

**Laws against hate speech:** Rather than prohibiting hate speech as such, international law prohibits the incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence. Hate speech that does not reach the threshold of incitement is not something that international law requires states to prohibit.

**Combatting disinformation about refugees:** Distorted or “fake” information about refugees and migrants regularly surfaces online. Many companies, media and governments have taken steps to combat fake news.

Fact-checking media play an important role in debunking myths about refugees. For example, in 2018 an item of fake news claiming that an American teenager had killed a refugee who had raped his sister was circulating online. But if people look for information about it on Google, all the first results redirect to fact-checking websites, such as Snopes or Truth or Fiction, that explain in detail why this “news” is false.

In 2019, the BBC and several tech firms, including Google, Twitter and Facebook, announced that they would join forces to fight disinformation. The plan includes the development of an early-warning system for organizations to alert each other rapidly when they discover life-threatening disinformation, with the aim of undermining it before it can take hold. In 2019, Apple also launched a media literacy initiative to equip young people with the critical-thinking skills to enable them to detect fake news.

**Countering the “invasion of hostile aliens” narrative:** Focusing on rebutting false facts and figures is tempting – and in some cases is necessary. But it is equally important to address the fear of difference. The “conflicted middle” respond more to emotional appeals than statistics – something populists have spotted, preying on fears of “the other” and the threat of losing national/cultural identity.

Stories in the media showing the human side of refugees – as unique individuals whose lives have been overturned by conflict or persecution – are particularly effective. Although they need protection, refugees are also seeking independence, self-sufficiency and dignity. UNHCR also seeks to highlight positive stories of generous and compassionate people who welcome refugees.

**Messages and messengers:** The RIIA report recommends encouraging both “regular” people and celebrities to speak out on behalf of refugees and to demonstrate ways in which they have supported and welcomed them, rather than politicians, representatives of NGOs and other figures who would be expected to do so. In other words, a pop star is more effective at influencing public attitudes to refugees than a UNHCR official.

**Creating encounters between refugees and host communities:** A number of civil society groups have attempted to engage with public opinion by encouraging contact between refugees, migrants and host communities, and by trying to promote refugee and migrant voices in public debates. These groups encourage volunteers to gather and distribute items that refugees need, and organise events at which refugees and host communities can meet and interact, for example by cooking and eating together.

**Getting the public involved:** To that end, UNHCR runs campaigns that aim to put ordinary citizens at the forefront of positive messaging about refugees. For example, a targeted campaign such as the Somos Panas (We are Friends) campaign in Colombia aimed to reduce manifestations of xenophobia towards Venezuelans living in the country. The campaign promotes messages of solidarity from Colombians to Venezuelan children, women and men, as well as messages of gratitude received from Venezuelans. Since its launch in December 2017, the campaign has reached more than six million people and over 235,000 opinion leaders and members of the government. Other campaigns have included **No Stranger Place**, which showcased Europeans

who took refugees into their own homes; and **From Far and Wide**, which profiled Canadians who supported resettled refugees.

***Politicians are needed, too:*** Political leadership can be extremely influential. UNHCR is working with a coalition of mayors and cities worldwide that encourage their citizens to be supportive of refugees. After the New Zealand shootings, Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister, said: “We represent diversity, kindness, compassion. A home for those who share our values. Refuge for those who need it. And those values will not and cannot be shaken by this attack.” Her comments were widely reported and praised.

***Social media – the good side:*** Tech giants, including major social media platforms, have a role to play in combatting hate speech. Some steps in the right direction came after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which revealed that data taken from millions of Facebook profiles had been used for political advertising that tapped into people’s fears, including about immigration. Twitter announced in November 2019 that it would ban political advertisements. While Facebook has not followed suit, it banned content supporting white supremacy and hate speech in March 2019.

Social media can also be used for good by refugee advocates, NGOs and international organizations. For example, UNHCR also uses social media to boost its digital campaigns and engage people with the refugee cause.

***Acknowledging concerns:*** Attempts to engage with the “conflicted middle” without acknowledging their concerns would be counter-productive. The RIIA report recommends “promot[ing] an open discussion of solutions and initiat[ing] clear responses to real concerns.” It adds: “It is crucial to acknowledge that understanding and engaging with public attitudes works best when clearly rooted in national and local contexts.”



## Questions to guide debate

- Who should be responsible for monitoring and tackling hate speech and disinformation about refugees and migrants online? Governments, tech companies, citizens or international organizations?
- Is it fair to differentiate between refugees and migrants? Can explaining the difference help reduce stereotypes and discrimination? Or should the focus be less on facts and points of law, and more on overcoming the fear of “others”?
- How can we tackle toxic narratives about refugees and migrants in the political arena? What can political parties and movements, lawmakers, mayors and other public officials do?
- What other segments of society should be involved in countering toxic narratives about refugees and migrants?
- How can we ensure that refugees and migrants who are victims of hate speech report it and have access to justice and psychological counselling?
- What measures can be put in place to ensure that refugee and migrant children are not bullied in school?
- How would you design a campaign to counter negative stereotypes about refugees? What channels have we not mentioned that you think would be effective?
- Who do you think are the best people to speak out on behalf of refugees?