

Global Forum Introduction

Global economic crisis, in conjuncture with the crisis in the Middle East and the recent terrorist attacks in Europe by the jihadists, have contributed to the rise of xenophobia (islamophobia) and racism against migrants.

Public perceptions of migrants are becoming more and more ‘toxic’. High rates of unemployment, heavy pressure on the Asylum systems in southern Europe, increasing influx of undocumented migrants from poor living conditions and authoritarian regimes coupled with failure and mistakes concerning integration policies lead to further deterioration of negative public perceptions, already existing in hosting countries. The xenophobic discourse of certain populist and far-right political parties and the way that many mainstreaming media depict migrants are as well responsible for enhancing negative stereotyping of migrants.

In the absence of a sound communication strategy on the role of migration in the overall development of both receiving and source countries by many governments and migrants diaspora associations, public perceptions of migrants are based on rumours and myths circulated by anti-migrant cycles. Rumours and myths are easily perceived and hamper any effort of evidence based information emanating from research or official data. I will refer to some of the most well known and favourite myths on migration, forging negative perceptions of the public opinion.

- 1) “Migrants are stealing our jobs”. A broad array of research on migrants’ access to the labour market show that there is a complementarity between jobs of native born and migrants often “3D” jobs in most of the receiving countries.
- 2) “Migrants do not pay taxes and they are exploiting our welfare and pension systems”. Regular migrants pay taxes in case that they are employed in the official labour market. They often work in the black labour market and they are deprived of social benefits that the welfare state provides to regular workers.
- 3) “Migration is responsible for high rates of criminality in host countries and young migrants tend to delinquency more often than their native-born peers”. Research shows that the number of migrant criminals is slightly higher than that of natives and that often the increasing number of migrants in jail has to

do with petty crimes, with their detention for being undocumented as well as with xenophobic attitudes within the judicial system.

- 4) “Second generation migrants with a Muslim background are would-be terrorists”. Research shows that even though there is a tendency for muslim radicalization, a young muslim can become terrorist only under very specific conditions.
- 5) “Thousand of hundreds migrants in their majority undocumented are invading western and northern countries”. Data show that the South-South and the East-East migration are higher than the South-North and East-West one.

While myths circulate at a state level, rumours are more often city or neighbourhood based. Their subject often is the specific behaviours of people with a different cultural background or incidents and problems always attributed to migrants’ presence in the city or quarters. Opinion leaders often produce or reproduce rumours held as indisputable realities. A very innovative project implemented by the local authorities in Barcelona was labelled as ‘an antirumour campaign’. Volunteers working in groups were charged to provide reliable information on incidents and persons, leaving no room for the proliferation of rumours.

But myths and rumours are not exclusivities of host countries. In countries of origin a different repertory presents a mystified image of immigrants and migration. “The emigrants are all well-off if not rich enough to support not only the extended family but as well the neighbours and the whole village or town of origin”.

It is well known that only a small number of migrants really succeed in their migration project and their majority work mainly for making a living, paying the education fees of their children and for buying or constructing a house.

“The emigrants betray their home country traditions and deny their national/religious identity with a view to conform to the norms and attitudes of the host society.”

It is evident based that at least first generation migrants, stick to their home culture and tradition more than their compatriots left behind, in order to survive in an unfriendly and different environment, feeling at risk of being assimilated and of losing their identity.

“The emigrants become individualists and transgress the community order and rules”.

It is a common place that migrants tend to form their own communities abroad and often assist their communities of origin (as for example Africans and Mexicans) in their development plans through collective funding.

Rumours on the bad reputation of emigrants returning for vacations and accused for having adopted immoral attitudes of the receiving countries or for having allied with the ex-colonists are often widespread.

Failing to address the gap between misperceptions/misconceptions and the reality about migrants and migration can generate high risks for both receiving and source countries and migrants themselves.

The rise of xenophobia and racism as well as persisting discrimination against migrants can endanger democracy, the rule of law, the respect of human rights and can have a negative impact on social cohesion. The rise of radicalization of young muslims in many European societies is the fruit of both the failure of integration policies and the stigmatization of certain groups of migrants through the public discourse and the mainstreaming mass-media.

Failing to address this gap can create conducive conditions for social exclusion, exostracism and fragmentation of the social fabric in receiving societies.

In countries of origin it can result in difficulties for the reintegration of returned migrants to the home country, hamper the development impact of the circulation of human and social capital and last but not least can contribute to strengthen brain drain through the myth of an existing “El Dorado” in the developed countries.

It might be useful for countries of origin and destination to create platforms of dialogue and consulting committees (comprising of members from the academia, journalists and specialists in communication) to the governments for the promotion of positive public perception of migrants and for their recognition as enablers of development. A spokesman on migration issues, providing official and reliable information on migration, integration and development might be as well a useful tool for fighting against misperceptions in the field.

In Greece, within the European Fund of integration of third country nationals we have financed different projects in order to fight against myths, discrimination and negative stereotyping of migrants. More precisely we have financed: a targeted seminar for journalists and people working in the media in order to provide a “politically correct” way of addressing migration issues in the mass-media, a project for the training of migrants in journalism and radio broadcasting through which the trainees produced a series of radio programmes in a mainstream radio station, and a project which dealt with an awareness raising campaign through the media on fighting against racism and xenophobia.