New Narrative Action Research

XJENZA MALTA

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NewNAR Report

New Narratives of Migration in Malta: Mapping Media Representations and Practices of Change

Daryl Mifsud, Denitsa Markova, Emelie Kristina Elisabeth Schultz, Federica Pettinato, Laura Cappai, Viviana Premazzi

The names of the authors are put in alphabetical order based on their first name.

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01

Introduction

Migration narratives are increasingly pervasive everywhere, determining public attitudes, dominating political debates, and shaping beliefs and misperceptions. Migration narratives are also crucial as guarantors, or threats, to human rights, since the way we perceive and speak about migrants and migration plays a fundamental role in safeguarding equality and the human rights of migrants (Dennison, 2021). Thus, it is imperative to investigate and understand how narratives work, and how the pervasiveness of anti-immigration public narratives can be overcome. The NewNAR action research project, developed by Global Mindset Development (GMD), explores how new narratives can foster more inclusive and cohesive societies by challenging dominant representations of migration and cultural and religious diversity. It addresses the growing need to counter exclusionary discourses that portray migration as a crisis or threat, narratives that often undermine integration efforts and social cohesion across Europe and in Malta.

The project is funded by Xjenza Malta. Xjenza Malta is the government agency entrusted with the promotion of scientific research, technological innovation and science communication in Malta. As a high service-provider institution, it hosts the National Contact Point (NCP) network for Horizon Europe, promoting and ensuring Malta's overall successful participation in the EU Framework Programme for R/ I and related support schemes, while also representing the Government of Malta within the comitology structure of Horizon Europe.

This report contributes to the main efforts of the NewNAR project by setting out to answer the following research questions:

Which new narratives of migration exist in Malta? What are their approaches, and what form do they take?

In order to do so, we first review the existing literature to establish the theoretical framework and definitions of dominant and new narratives on migration, within which we will position our findings, as well as the necessary conditions that enable narrative shifts to emerge. Then, the report presents two analyses: a media study with a special focus on the 2026 Maltese general elections; and a collection of eight practices operating in the Maltese context. The methodology employed follows the principles of participatory action research, and it uses secondary sources, as well as a collection form for the practices. Then, the results are discussed, and we present recommendations for future research, for the development of new narratives in media and in practice, and more specifically for the development of scenarios which will constitute the future outputs of the NewNAR project.

Glossary

Narrative: Selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time that include one or more causal claims (Dennison, 2021).

Dominant Narrative: Narrative which reflects and reinforces prevailing worldviews, values, and norms (Han & Kalra, 2024).

Migrant-led Narrative: Narrative where the content and framing are directly shaped and controlled by individuals with first-hand lived experience of migration.

New Narrative: Fresh lens through which migration is interpreted. The idea is to reject the us/them divide by articulating migration in universal terms and recognising it as inherent to the human condition.

Action Research: Research method where the research endeavour is seen as a relational and collective process aimed at generating knowledge for action, following a cyclical and reflective process that unfolds through cyclical reflection of planning, acting, evaluating, and adapting (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

02

Literature Review

In order to contextualise new narratives in Malta and to understand how they develop and are shared, the following sections present the literature review, including the guiding definitions that inform the analysis of the practices and our conclusions. Starting with an overview of the study of migration itself, the sections will go through the main definitions and categories of migration before landing on the 'Global Mobility' approach, which is central to how new narratives on migration are understood and enacted throughout this research project. The following sections grapple with definitions and literature on what constitutes a narrative and different categorisations, before diving into the dominant narratives around migration. Then, the literature inquires into strategies of narrative change, which aim at challenging the dominant paradigms, and lastly, the definitions of new narratives are presented and related to the Maltese context.

Fragmentation within Migration

Migration is an interdisciplinary field with broad implications, particularly in discussions of the economy, human rights, integration, and conflict. Migration as a field encompasses people who are implicated at various levels and fall under the categorisations of migrant, immigrant, expat, refugee, and so forth - labels commonly invoked to address individuals, groups, and communities, to separate and identify how migration looks, feels, and is experienced differently by people on the move. Distinction, then, within the field of migration became increasingly important to label - especially when applied to institutionalised laws, accords, treaties, signatories and pacts between nation-states and within international organisations. Even as these categories appear in colloquial discussions, in the media, at high-level conventions, and inscribed in treaties, their definitions and descriptions are constantly reworked through politicised and ideological framing (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 60). As these categories pertain to Malta in the ways people from a migrant background are discussed and how migration is experienced, it is essential to map out the various labels, along with the roots of their conception and the purposes they served, given that migration is a highly politicised topic in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world. Thus, in the context of this study, the most applicable and utilised labels for migration in Malta will be defined, firstly, by looking at the academic definitions, followed by legal definitions in order to showcase how these categories within migration are used within different contexts, their applications, and their effects.

Categorisation of Migration

Academically, migration as a category has its origins in Ravensteins (1885) laws of migration and early 20th century sociology, with intensified growth since the 1990s onwards (Levy et al., 2020, p. 2). Within the umbrella of terms in which migration sits at the top, the category gets broadly divided into voluntary and forced migration, which is a distinction broadly applied by states and international legal frameworks rather

than one that reflects how migration is experienced by those on the move (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 50; Zetter, 2007, pp. 172–173).

- **Voluntary migration**, broadly defined as movement "acted by choice, with free will and without compulsion" by Erdal & Oeppen (2018, p. 982), is associated with labour, economic and lifestyle movement, where individuals are understood to have exercised agency in their decision to leave. It is also noted, however, by the authors, that the category carries an oversimplified generalisation, depending on the quality of alternatives, and the instability of the label to change depending on outcome and circumstance of the journey (Erdal & Oeppen 2018, p. 982, 991).
- **Forced migration** includes refugee flows, asylum seekers, internal displacement and development-induced displacement, which is a formative part of the Global 'North–South' divide and how we understand social transformation and our contemporary societies (Castles, 2003, p. 13). As will become clear, the apparent simplicity of this binary of categories hides a far more complex and contested reality. Furthermore, the securitisation of migration, and, in turn, migration studies, has heavily influenced the development of these categories (Castles, 2003, p. 13; Zetter, 2007, p.172).

Forced Migration: refugees and asylum seekers;

Refugees:

Refugee studies developed as a distinct subfield of inquiry that evolved separately from the broader discipline of migration studies, in time including its own epistemic communities (Levy et al., 2020, p. 2, 15). According to UNHCR, **refugees** are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution in an effort to search for some form of protection (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 51). The historic 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of refugees defines a refugee as someone who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UNHCR, 1951, Article 1A). As with the rest of these categories, the interpretation of the legal definition ultimately depends on the nation-state in which the person resides, highlighting a notable disconnect between the international legal system and national priorities and implementations (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 31).

Asylum seekers:

On the other hand, an asylum seeker is a person who has applied for refugee status and is awaiting a decision to be classified as a refugee (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 31). Crucially to note here, while the refugee category has a basis in international law, asylum seeker takes more of a mainstream label institutionalised in policies translated to practises in European states, without having a basis in international law for the temporary protection it implies. This distinction shows a further breakdown of these socially implicated categories/labels and the malleability of who gets to be labelled as a refugee or asylum seeker - the implication leading to "withdrawal or reduction of established rights… fast track appeals and deportation, limited judicial review, (and) more detention" (Zetter, 2007, p. 183). Thus, an asylum seeker as a category is heavily dependent on the connotations given by institutional state definitions of who is placed in this category, and on other, more politically and racially charged terms, as elaborated below through other categories.

The debate around these categories centres on the gap between their legal appearance of neutrality and their political and social reality. Even though the category of 'refugee' is one which is more legally institutionalised, it is still constantly formed, transformed and reformed in response to changing political movements and interests - meaning, even when defined under international law, it is never simply a legal instrument but always a political one (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 51; de Haas et al., 2020, p. 31).

Undocumented/Irregular Migrants:

Academically, scholars have converged on "undocumented" and "irregular" as the most value-neutral terms for people who have entered a territory without proper authorisation from the governing entity - or overstayed their residency - the latter being the most common source of this status (de Haas et al., 2020, pp. 33–34). These labels can be further politicised, criminalised, and racialised when invoking "illegal" as a pretext for a person's existence and residency. Although, as it has been noted, it is "neither accurate, nor desirable, nor analytically useful" to label people as illegal, thus invoking the label of illegal migration as a broader action at a general level caused by a phenomenon is still used at many different levels of policy, advocacy, and research (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 34).

Undocumented/Irregular Migrants are institutional categories for people who have entered a territory without the right or proper documents/authorisation, or overstayed their initial residency/visa - the latter being the biggest source of what puts people under these labels, and critically, why the securitisation of migration based on militarising and policing borders does not correctly deal with situations of Undocumented/Irregular Migrants (de Haas et al., 2020, pp. 33-34). Institutionally, neither "undocumented" nor "irregular" are consistently codified across jurisdictions. At the EU level, the European Migration Network's glossary defines an "irregular migrant" as a third-country national present on the territory of a Schengen state who does not meet, or no longer meets, the conditions for entry, stay or residence as defined under Article 3(2) of Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council (Wagner et al., 2024, p. 34).

The debate here mirrors that around the refugee label but is in some ways more politically charged. These two categories are not without limitations in their perceived objectivity and/or ambiguity regarding the populations they are used on, including underlying assumptions that paint pejorative imagery that invokes unwelcomeness, marginality, and a threat to the host country (Zetter, 2007, p. 184). The array of labels used is further fragmented and politised, such as "illegal migrant," "trafficked migrant," "overstayers," "failed asylum seeker," "undocumented asylum seeker", which ultimately are all "varied in its scope but singular in its covert intention - to convey an image of marginality, dishonesty, a threat, unwelcomed" (Zetter, 2007, p. 182). Additionally, in various contexts, referring to common migration patterns as irregular migration is misleading, as some migration routes have become the norm for the people on the move, while undocumented migrants without the "papers" supporting their residency might still possess other personal documentation - even one gained through the host country while their visa/residency were still valid (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 34).

Economic Migrants / Labour Migrants / Third Country Nationals:

Academically, labour migration is one of the largest driving forces of global migration patterns, falling broadly within what is characterised as 'voluntary' migration. Perhaps most apt for this study, within the context of Malta, the present implications of labour and population demographics are these very categorisations. As

labour migration is one of the biggest driving forces of migration patterns, specifically when referring to the many distinctions that fall under "voluntary" migration patterns, they can likewise be categorised into low- and high-skilled migrants, who carry their own fragmentation of categories within the implied connotations of the types of jobs and countries of origin of the economic migrants (de Haas et al., 2020, pp. 30–31). These varied skills-based categories of the economic migrant are becoming implied and captured within the previously mentioned 'irregular migration' due to the complex nature of why people choose to leave and how much agency is stripped or attached to their actions, with realities of migration showcasing people leaving from both persecution and socio-economic exclusion (Zetter, 2007, p. 182). Thus, even if 'economic migrants' as an academic concept has its roots in neoclassical economics, which understands migration as the result of the rational, cost-benefit calculations between origin and destination areas, it lends a reductive framing that positions migrants as solely economic actors, devoid of structural constraints from the category entirely.

Legally, Economic Migrants are a broad category, not defined under statute or international law, loosely defined by IOM as "any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State, solely or primarily motivated by economic opportunities" (Sironi et al., 2019). In Malta, economic migrants make up around a third of the workforce, where this group is broadly viewed under the legal-administrative label of Third Country Nationals (TCNs), defined as non-Maltese or non-EU/EEA/Swiss citizens, covering the biggest percentage of those occupying the jobs created, supporting the wholesale, construction, retail, transport, accommodation, and food sectors - mainly in lower-skilled positions (Government of Malta, 2025, pp. 10, 15–16, 30). It is worth noting, however, that under EU law a TCN is more broadly defined as any person who is not a citizen of an EU member state, meaning a category that also encompasses refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons, not only labour migrants (Council of the European Union, 2003). Within the Maltese TCN label, the realities of people described under the label are flattened, with the hierarchy of holders differentiated by skill and salary showcased through specific routes, such as the Key Employee Initiative (KEI), Specialist Employee Initiative (SEI), seasonal and temporary workers, and the 'standard' Single Permit holders, who represent most of the TCN workers in Malta (Government of Malta, 2025, pp. 34–35; Jobsplus, n.d.).

The debate around this category is perhaps the most currently politically and socially consequential of all. As Piccoli et al. (2024, p. 1027) noted, the distinction between categories, together with the implications they carry, in practice is deeply racialised as "white persons on the move are seen as 'expats' whereas others are labelled 'migrants' in public discourse." The 'economic migrant' label, even when contextualised in the case of Malta for people considered as TCNs, homogenises their experiences when this term is used within public discourse. In turn, the imagery associated with this category influences national policy, public opinions and attitudes, as the term TCN carries connotations of country of origin, race, ethnicity, and the jobs these people hold.

Why these categories break down

Given that the action-research project revolves around centring agency in people's experience through narrative, the question of agency and representation within these categories has been highly contested and debated in academic spaces and within the field (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 50). Although helpful in certain contexts for mapping out differences and legitimising migrant experiences, these categories are likewise used to flatten, marginalise, and discriminate against migrants, thus prompting us to look more deeply into the

purposes they serve and their consequences (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 48). As shown, most of these categories do not carry a single definition, whereas migration itself is a natural human phenomenon. “There is nothing ‘natural’ or ‘fixed’ about the legal and policy categories associated with international migration,” as these categories are constantly changed, renegotiated, and redefined as part of a political process defined by policy agendas, reducing people to objects as opposed to subjects in policy (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 60; Zetter, 2007, p. 172). Migration, when reduced to the categories of forced and voluntary, even though it operates on a spectrum of experiences and levels of agency, carries these distinctions into other categories within it, as explained above (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018, p. 981). The absence of consistent, agreed-upon definitions across legal, institutional, and academic domains is not merely a legal or academic problem; it is a political one with consequences for the people these categories are defined through. This is not to say that these categories are not needed or will not inherently be used in reference to the study and particular migrant label self, socially, or institutionally defined throughout this action research. Rather, this is an acknowledgement of the power tied to these socially inscribed and heavily contextualised categories, the reason for which they are used, why they are created, and lastly, how they can help us navigate entrenched biases carried through these distinctions to not reproduce epistemic violence against the people they claim to represent (Piccoli et al., 2024, p. 1020).

Global Mobility Approach

Within the NewNAR project, which is migrant-centred and follows a bottom-up approach, the concept of Global Mobility has been interwoven into the project's aims and outcomes. Global Mobility is the perspective that underlies the lens that this project will employ in its research and initiatives - one that is able to encapsulate the omnipresent reality of categories through their critique and expanded outlook on migration. In this capacity and in the context of this study, Global Mobility can be explained through de Haas's (2021) aspirations-capabilities framework as illustrated in Figure 1 (de Haas, 2021, p. 25), which views migration as occurring along a continuum of constraints rather than as a binary of forced versus voluntary movement. Moving beyond categories used to split human movement into hierarchies, de Haas’s framework treats all migration through a unified analytical lens of mobility, differentiated only by the degree of constraint and agency involved (de Haas, 2021, p. 14). The use of the term global mobility is not an argument solely to highlight how labels within migration, tied to positions of power, define and enforce them, thereby further flattening the migrant experience into a single term meant to encompass all. In this way, Global Mobility is distinguished from other uses of the term in the literature; building on de Haas, Piccoli et al. (2024) demonstrate that migration and mobility often function as four distinct categories with different relations to each other. These are the “continuum (fluid mobilities transform into more stable forms of migration and vice versa), enablement (migration requires mobility, and mobility can trigger migration), hierarchy (migration and mobility are political categories that legitimise hierarchies of movement) and opposition (migration and mobility are pitted against each other).” (Piccoli et al., 2024, p. 1019). Adopting a Global Mobility Approach, in this sense, is not simply a terminological preference but a deliberate rejection of the hierarchy listed to collapse the artificial separation

between mobility and migration that has structured the categories discussed throughout this section.

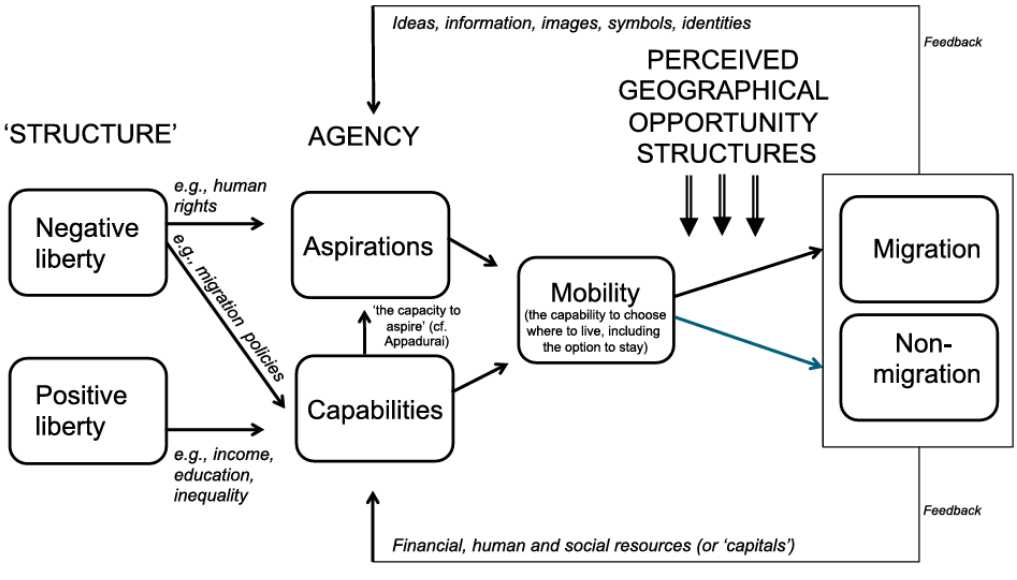


Figure 1. Expanded aspirations–capabilities framework for conceptualising migratory agency. Reprinted from "A theory of migration: The aspirations–capabilities framework," by H. de Haas, 2021, Comparative Migration Studies, 9, Article 8, p. 25 (https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4). CC BY 4.0.

In summary, invoking global mobility by understanding it through Haas's aspirations-capabilities framework and further expanding it through Piccoli's migration/mobility categories allows us to approach migration and the realities and narratives it carries through a lens that neither collapses everything under one term nor rigidly separates them into categories. Holding this viewpoint is essential for understanding how we later define new narratives in relation to this study, within migrant realities, agency, and experiences, in order to evaluate projects that might contribute to the new narrative paradigm shift. The following sections will thus expand on narrative(s) as a distinct category, and specifically in relation to migration, to fully capture the literature, studies, and aims of the New Narrative Action Research on migration in Malta, first, by outlining how we think of and conceptualise the discourse, application, and implication of invoking 'narrative' within research.

What is a Narrative?

Turning to our conceptualisation of narratives, we consider their specific place in relation to migration, why they matter, and how we define them for the scope of the NewNAR project.

Narratives are used across various fields, with classical narratology deriving its framework from literary analysis. Narratology views a narrative as a text that builds a world, introduces characters, and shows change over time, enabling readers to discern the motives and causes that form a coherent plot (Ryan, 1992). While this perspective focuses on the structural mechanics of storytelling, narrative also holds a socio-political function. In migration studies, the way society perceives and speaks about migrants through narrative plays a fundamental role in ensuring, or undermining, their human rights and equality (OHCHR, 2020). Understanding migration narratives therefore requires analysing who produces them, their underlying motivations, and their relative authority.

Since narratives are subjects of inquiry across many academic fields, significant variations exist regarding their formal definition (Dennison, 2021). Synthesising these major conceptual debates, Dennison defines narratives as:

> *"selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time that (according to most definitions) include one or more causal claims" (Dennison, 2021, p. 3).*

For the purposes of our project, we adopt this as our working definition. Within this framework, narratives are distinguished from related concepts such as discourses and frames, and are understood as incorporating a normative dimension. This distinction is important because narratives do not simply describe events or circumstances; they also establish interpretations of reality and can imply judgements about how people, events, and social phenomena should be understood.

Because narratives act as selective depictions of reality, they make explicit claims about people, events, trends, and phenomena, some of which may be true, while others are exaggerated, downplayed, or fabricated for political ends (Dennison, 2021). As a result, narratives can directly inform and motivate the creation of research hypotheses, propaganda, and fake news (Dennison, 2021). This selective nature embeds narratives within distinct power dynamics: by establishing specific normative boundaries, a narrative can set the terms of an entire political debate (Jones, 2010). Consequently, the question of selection carries immense significance, raising inquiries into who possesses the power to create narratives and determine what content is included or excluded. Ultimately, research highlights that various actors are involved in the creation and reinforcement of narratives, including communities, the media, popular culture, political figures, and individual actors through continuous repetition (OHCHR, 2020).

Understanding these power dynamics requires examining who produces migration narratives, what motivates their participation, and how their influence varies. Actors framing migration typically aim to exert control, extend compassion, or contribute practical expertise (Broadhead, 2021). Non-state actors involved in migration narratives can also be categorised into three broad groups: local civil society, international organisations, and migrants (Sahin Mencutek, 2020). However, the influence of these groups is unevenly distributed. Institutional bodies like international organisations possess a dominant sphere of influence, allowing their statements to overshadow the voices of individual actors and migrants (Triandafyllidou, 2025). Consequently, because migration narratives are predominantly generated either by migrants or practitioners in the field, practitioner-led framing risks reinforcing a process of "othering" by substituting institutional authority for lived experience (De Fina & Tseng, 2017).

When examining narratives, it is also crucial to emphasise the different forms of narration utilised by the different actors. Somers (1994) argues that there are four dimensions of narration. *Ontological narratives* regard personal stories and aim to create meaning and identity from individual experiences. *Public narratives* are created for an audience and conveyed, for example, through media to address cultural or institutional contexts. *Conceptual narrativity* is created and communicated through scholarly contributions in the research field. Lastly, *metanarrativity,* or *master frames,* narrates larger conceptualisations for construing our current societal reality, including concepts such as capitalism or industrialisation (Somers, 1994). This concept is

further distinguished from *event-related narrativity*, where the focus lies on isolated instances rather than larger conceptualisations (Garcés-Mascareñas & Pastore, 2025; Triandafyllidou, 2025).

Historically, the academic discussions defining the concept of narratives of migration have moved from the traditional representational form of storytelling towards establishing an ontological condition of social life that makes sense of reality, guides human action, and provides identity (Somers, 1994). The different forms of narratives also shape the construction of social identities. Scholars argue that humans construe their social identities through assembling reality into a coherent narrative, which informs about the present as well as guides actions in the future (Somers, 1994). The most important and defining narratives that build our identities may be referred to as master narratives (Triandafyllidou, 2025).

Then, migration narratives can also be examined in terms of effectiveness. Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore (2025) conceptualise "migration narrative success" as a framework for evaluating narrative efficacy, measuring it across two core dimensions: pervasiveness and transformativity. A **pervasive narrative** allows for the message to dominate the discourse and have a spillover effect on other parts of the political discussion, while **transformative narratives** refer to their ability to change societal attitudes and impact policy decisions (Garcés-Mascareñas & Pastore, 2025). Additionally, Dennison (2021) argues that the success of a narrative depends on its ability to transform a complex issue into an understandable one, the internal and external coherence of the message, and its ability to engage the receiver's imagination and align with values and identity. Lastly, Broadhead (2021) argues that successful narratives target the people existing within the middle of the political spectrum, who are more open to being swayed in opinion and do not belong to an extremist group.

Overall, migration narratives reach beyond simply describing migration, providing frameworks for interpretation, identity construction, and public and political discourse. Narratives are developed and communicated by a range of actors, take different forms depending on their intended audience, and vary in their ability to influence policy. These insights provide the theoretical foundation for the NewNAR project, which seeks to examine how migration narratives are constructed, communicated, and understood, while exploring how alternative narratives may contribute to reshaping public perceptions of migration. To understand how such alternative narratives can emerge, it is first necessary to examine the dominant narratives that currently characterise migration discourse across Europe.

Dominant narratives of migration

In this section, we address the question of why we need new narratives and whether there is something wrong with the existing ones. This is why we look at dominant narratives of migration, where by dominant we understand something that is used more or has more effect than something else.

In the Global North, one of the most dominant migration narratives is the so-called "migration-security nexus", which emerged after the Cold War as governments began viewing human movement as a security threat rather than a social or economic phenomenon (Faist, 2005). This nexus can be understood through the Copenhagen School's framework of securitisation, which posits that powerful state actors convince the public that national culture or safety is under existential threat, which in turn allows them to bypass democratic norms and deploy extraordinary measures like border walls and military intervention (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde, 1998). This political narrative has been reinforced by mass media and cultural institutions that strip

migrants of their agency, treating them not as active "political subjects, but as subjects of politics" (Schwiertz, 2021, p. 403). For example, governments and the media typically spotlight dramatic events like boat crossings in the Mediterranean while completely ignoring routine, daily movements across EU borders or from the countryside to cities (Piccoli et al., 2024). This selective focus creates a dominant imaginary of migrants, and especially refugees, as passive, depoliticised, and perpetually vulnerable victims (Walters, 2008; Owens, 2009).

Sociological perspectives in migration studies speak of dominant migration narratives as “migration myths” and define them as instruments of political agendas that portray migration as a threat, a solution, or a drama of heroes, victims and villains, gaining coherence through cherry-picked facts and repeated storytelling until they solidify into belief systems that resist contradictory evidence and crystallise into a typology of the Mass Migration Narrative, the Migration Threat Narrative, the Migrant Victim Narrative and the Migration Celebration Narrative (de Haas, 2024). Building upon her concept of the “community of value” introduced in Us and Them?, Anderson utilises the lens of state control to demonstrate how modern nations deploy narrative categories that demarcate insiders from outsiders (Anderson, 2013). She conceptualises this exclusion through three distinct narrative tropes: the “good” migrant who is economically valuable, the “bad” migrant who threatens public welfare, and the “ugly” migrant who is structurally necessary but legally marginalised (Anderson, 2016).

This state-manufactured categorisation is also exposed by De Genova’s (2002) foundational and heavily cited work on the production of migrant “illegality”, which directly challenges such dominant narratives by demonstrating that illegality is not an inherent trait of individuals, but rather a socio-legal status deliberately manufactured by the state to maintain a highly exploitable and legally vulnerable workforce. De Genova argues that this status is sustained through a hyper-visible “border spectacle” - the theatrical media coverage of walls, enforcement, and raids - which visually reinforces the dominant narrative of exclusion to the public, while masking the economic reality that these legally vulnerable individuals are actively included as a cheap and highly exploitable workforce. Another use of this spectacle framework comes from recent research by Piccoli (2026), whose analysis of cinema from 1940 to 2024 highlights a cultural “spectacle of human mobility”. Piccoli’s work demonstrates that movies heavily focus on irregular, risky journeys of survival, while everyday legal mobilities, such as labour migration and family reunification, remain largely invisible. Ultimately, because existing narratives create unrealistic public expectations of border control and erase ordinary realities like labour migration (Piccoli, 2026), although, as we will see later when discussing the Maltese context, this might not be the case elsewhere, dominant narratives demonstrate why new narratives are the needed continuity of different perspectives that, as we will see below, do not necessarily mean something positive.

Migrant-led dominant narratives

In narrative research, a great deal of analysis has shed light on the ways in which migrants tell stories about themselves, also revealing dominant aspects of narration which trace arcs of departure, journey, arrival, and ongoing “in-betweenness” that are configured by audience expectations and institutional demands (Bönisch-Brednich and Meyer, 2024). This is particularly evident when migrants are required to present coherent, fixed narratives to authorities to justify their movement and secure legal protection, forcing them to fit their complex lives into rigid institutional narrative templates (Adinolfi, 2024). Consequently, long periods of waiting, trauma, contradictory feelings of belonging, and the stories that cannot be told or do not fit official

narrative frames often remain unspoken or marginalised (Bönisch-Brednich and Meyer, 2024). In this sense, migrant-led narratives do not inherently challenge or disrupt the dominant, state-sanctioned representations described above. While these are not the only manifestations of migrant-led narratives, this limitation is explored in new research within migration geographies by Hummel, Sommerlad, and Cummings (2026), who examine the potential of short-form digital media, such as Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts, for allowing migrants to become the authors of their stories. While these platforms offer vital spaces to resist victimising portrayals and claim personal visibility, the authors caution that hyper-visibility does not automatically guarantee political or social recognition; rather, the liberatory potential of these self-narratives remains constrained both by the commercial power dynamics embedded within algorithmic platforms and by the structural limitations of short-form content to capture the intricate, everyday complexities of migrant (in)visibility.

Narrative Change

While narratives provide the stories and frameworks through which individuals and societies make sense of migration, they are also embedded in relations of power. Dominant narratives constitute certain truths about society, shape power relationships, and often entrench inequities while reinforcing the status quo (Kalra et al. 2021). This recognition has motivated practitioners and social actors to move beyond how certain narratives are constructed and towards exploring the process of narrative change as a deliberate exercise of contesting dominant narratives and introducing alternative ways of narrating and understanding social reality.

Rather than focusing solely on changing individual attitudes, narrative change seeks to reshape the broader systems of meaning through which societies interpret issues, identities, and relationships. The change can pertain to different aspects: either the content of the narratives used, their relative preference, or, at the individual level, changing beliefs and attitudes (Davidson, n.d.). This perspective recognises that public opinion and social behaviour are embedded within cultural narratives that define what is perceived as normal, legitimate, and desirable (Han & Kalra, 2024).

The communication and decision-making of what is accepted as *normal* or *legitimate* can be understood through two paradigms (Fisher, 1948).

The “rational” paradigm sees humans as rational beings, with decision--making and communication taking place primarily through argument-based evidence and the application of reason. However, he argues that this paradigm cannot be applied to everyday arguments or to public moral arguments where competing values are at stake.

The second paradigm is the “narrative paradigm”, under which humans are storytellers, and the world is a set of competing narratives between which we must choose. Then, decision-making happens through the production and exchange of symbols, signs, and “good reasons”, the coherence of the story and whether it sounds aligned with what people already know. In fact, whether a narrative is seen as credible or salient to the people it is targeting greatly impacts how well people can connect to the proposed narrative frames. This is particularly relevant for marginalised groups with limited access to the means with which to realise narrative prescriptions and who face numerous structural constraints, as the potential incompatibility of personal narratives with the general public’s daily experiences raises questions about the capacity of narratives to influence behaviour and decision-making (Harding, Dobson, Wyse & Morenoff, 2017).

Understanding how narratives change requires attention to their dynamic nature. The core cycle of narrative change involves different stages (Han & Kalra, 2024): the first stage is one of narrative equilibrium, during which dominant paradigms establish legitimate goals, values, and interpretations. In the second phase, this equilibrium may subsequently be disrupted by political, economic, or social events that challenge existing assumptions and open space for competing interpretations. A third stage of narrative contention emerges when alternative stories compete for legitimacy, deconstructing and reconstructing established meanings. Finally, successful narrative transformation culminates in the emergence of new paradigms where some narratives disappear while others become institutionalised as the new cultural common sense.



Figure 2. Process of Narrative Change, from "Narrative Change: A Review of Concepts, Frameworks, and Approaches" by Han, J. & Kalra, N. (2024).

This cyclical understanding of narrative change aligns with broader theories of social transformation. Benford and Snow (2000) argue that successful social movements engage in collective action framing, whereby activists strategically construct narratives that diagnose social problems, propose solutions, and motivate collective action. This approach emphasises that social change is fundamentally communicative, involving struggles over meaning rather than merely conflicts over material interests.

Again, central to narrative change is the recognition that narratives are intimately connected with power. Dominant narratives function as "control mythologies" (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010), legitimising existing social arrangements while marginalising alternative voices. Cultural narratives therefore shape whose experiences become visible, whose knowledge is considered credible, and whose interests are prioritised. This perspective echoes Frank's (2010) understanding that narratives not only describe reality but actively construct social hierarchies through representation. Consequently, narrative change is not simply about replacing one story with another, but about challenging unequal systems of meaning production and redistributing symbolic power.

Strategies of narrative change

The strategies of narrative change focus on the type of dissemination and on the target group.

Narrative change can be pursued via mass media, by shifting the narratives presented by journalism and nonfiction media; via mass culture, by focusing on the storytelling in entertainment; and by mass movements, which focus on organising and collective action (Han & Kalra, 2024).

Nevertheless, one of the core principles of narrative change is the fact that it targets the portion of the population which sits between opinions, called the *movable middle*. In fact, polling and segmentation of attitudes show that a large share of people who are not that involved or engaged in the target issue are quite easily influenced and convinced by the dominant public narratives, as well as feeling quite conflicted, anxious and frustrated about ongoing debates, are the responsive target to narrative change (ICPA, n.d.).

However, communication strategies directed toward the movable middle require careful balancing between resonance and disruption. Messages that are excessively confrontational may reinforce defensive attitudes, while overly positive portrayals may appear inauthentic or patronising. Instead, Cassehgari (2020) argues that narratives emphasising ordinary, everyday experiences of migrants often prove more effective because they encourage empathy without explicitly instructing audiences how to think. Such narratives create sufficient familiarity to establish trust while simultaneously challenging stereotypes through subtle cognitive dissonance. This approach reflects broader framing theory, which demonstrates that persuasion often occurs by activating values already present within audiences rather than attempting to replace them entirely (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Therefore, after exploring the concept of narrative change in contrast to the dominant narratives widespread in public discourse, we turn towards the result of this process, and what constitutes a *new* narrative.

New Narratives

Following our discussion of dominant narratives, and the prominent, increasingly pervasive public anti-migration narratives (OHCHR, 2020; Dennison, 2021), it becomes evident why numerous initiatives have emerged to reframe them. Agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have long advocated for counter-narratives that directly challenge anti-migration narratives (UNHCR, 2020). Exploring new formulations is central to our broader research and will be examined specifically within the context of Malta in subsequent sections. Before evaluating their localised implementation, we address two questions: what constitutes a new narrative, and how has migration studies conceptualised it?

Building on the previous section on narrative change, the structure of our report follows the logic of this approach. We first outlined some of the dominant narratives of migration and their main criticisms, and we now move to the stage of emergence of new narratives that compete for legitimacy, deconstructing and reconstructing established meanings. International organisations working on migration have long advocated reframing harmful, dehumanising narratives by establishing narratives grounded in alternative values in order to shift the interpretive lens through which society understands migration (OHCHR, 2020). In a similar vein, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees highlights the importance of countering dominant narratives by addressing their links to misinformation and disinformation (UNHCR, 2020). Rather than relying on isolated slogans or reactive messages, they propose a counter-narrative centred on refugees that replaces fear-driven frames with those grounded in empathy, dignity, and shared community (UNHCR, 2020). Taking this critique further, de Haas (2024) emphasises the necessity of constructing an entirely new migration narrative. He argues that traditional academic attempts to correct public misconceptions have largely failed.

In his view, a truly effective new narrative is to tell "a different story about migration", one that moves beyond reacting to dominant frames and is not only "backed up by facts and data" (p. 18). What transpires, then, is that new narratives are conceptually distinct from reframing and counter-narratives. Rather than resisting or arguing against dominant narratives, new narratives seek to replace them entirely. The way we understand it, new narratives, in de Haas's sense, aim to build an alternative story from the outset.

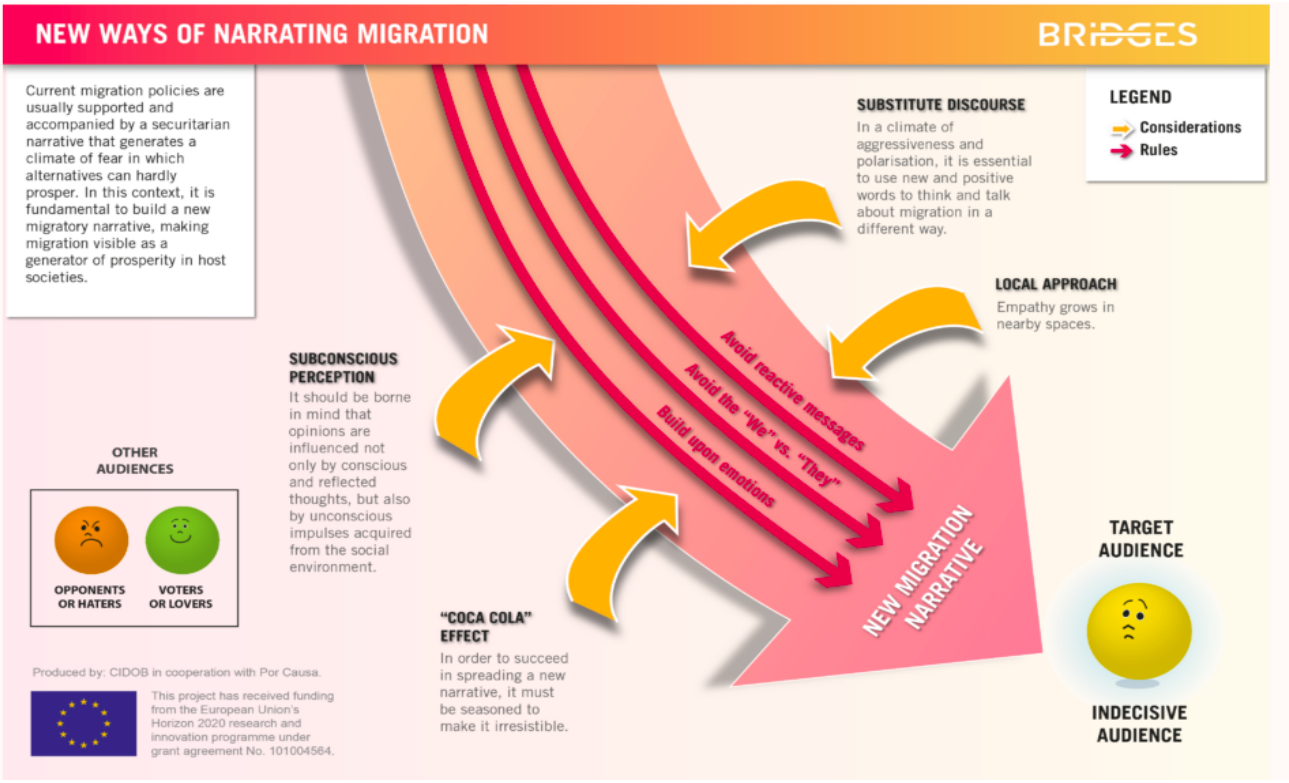


Figure 3. CIDOB /Por Causa (2023). New ways of narrating migration. BRIDGES Project.European Union's Horizon 2020, Grant No.101004564 . bridges-migration.eu (Infographic)

de Haas's (2024) framework appears to have influenced organisations to explore practical ways of creating a "story from the outset". One example is the work carried out in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom through the BRIDGES project, which developed a toolkit for constructing new migration narratives (Fundación por Causa & BRIDGES Consortium, 2023). According to this toolkit, new narratives require avoiding dominant narratives that influence how audiences currently think and feel about migration, and instead designing a fresh lens through which migration is interpreted. The idea is to reject the us/them divide by articulating migration in universal terms and recognising it as inherent to the human condition. The guiding logic is to rely on emotional rhetoric rather than data-driven messaging, since feelings and stories tend to resonate more strongly with mainstream audiences. Additional principles include engaging empathetically with public fears, grounding messages in local contexts, and making the narrative compelling through creative communication.

Centring our inquiry on Malta, this report examines whether, and how, new narratives are created and sustained. In doing so, we move beyond approaches focused on countering or reframing dominant narratives.

Conceptualising the "New" Narrative: Beyond Representation

For the purposes of this study, this conceptual development is significant because it suggests that the challenge for new narratives is no longer simply to replace a negative image of migration with a positive one. Rather, a new narrative asks who is permitted to speak, which forms of speech are treated as credible, how personal experience is shaped by collective histories, and how apparently private stories are connected to institutions, borders, economies, and systems of classification (Khan, 2026). The value of this framework lies precisely in its refusal to reduce a person to a stable identity category or a single authorised story.

This aligns directly with the **Global Mobility approach**: mobility cannot be reduced to the exceptional border crossing, just as the person on the move cannot be reduced to the category through which a state encounters them. Instead, a new narrative aims to broaden the representational field so that migration can be understood through multiple experiences, relationships, and forms of agency.

This theoretical reorientation opens space for new visibility driven by migrants themselves, translating into concrete self-agency mechanisms. Migrants increasingly utilise digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok Reels, to assign value to their own storytelling and life trajectories (Triandafyllidou & Monteiro, 2024). Yet, heightened visibility does not automatically dismantle the powerful hierarchies sustained by state power and broader social discourse; in many cases, visibility can inadvertently reinforce or reiterate the representations it seeks to subvert (Gebauer & Sommer, 2023; Triandafyllidou & Monteiro, 2024).

A key intervention is to enable migrants to influence not only the content of their stories, but also the structural mechanisms governing how those stories are framed, circulated, interpreted, and received by the general public. Rather than pro-migration organisations merely integrating inclusivity into top-down diversity campaigns, institutional frameworks should aim to support migrant self-agency as a transformative process capable of "pre-bunking" rigid categorisations (Robbe et al., 2025).

Consequently, the interface between migrants and institutions exposes fundamental structural questions:

> *Who defines the problem?*

> *Who selects the story?*

> *Who determines its form?*

> *What forms of knowledge and experience are treated as "sayable"?*

Here, the role of institutions shifts away from speaking *on behalf of* migrants, and towards creating the conditions through which migrants actively shape how their experiences are crafted and understood.

The Maltese Context: Trajectories, Categories, and Agency

This framework becomes particularly salient within Malta. *Malta's Integration Strategy and Action Plan 2025–2030* extends its focus across different migrant statuses and generations, framing integration through social cohesion and inclusion rather than exclusively through migration control (European Commission, 2025). The simultaneous coexistence of labour-market regulation, integration policy, and border-management discourse demonstrates that Maltese migration narratives cannot be reduced to a simple binary of "welcoming" versus

“hostile.” Instead, several competing narratives operate at once, assigning varying degrees of value and belonging to different migrant experiences.

Trajectories respond dynamically to conflict, livelihoods, climate pressures, and evolving border policies, encompassing both acute displacement and longer-term aspirations for work, protection, and integration (IOM, 2026). Therefore, developing new narratives of migration in Malta requires examining not only what migration does to Malta, Europe, or the economy, but also what people moving into the territory contribute to, experience, create, remember, and negotiate. This perspective highlights how an individual initially labelled as an “asylum seeker” or “refugee” undergoes ongoing events that lead them to become a worker, parent, student, artist, or long-term resident. Evaluating alternative practices through this transformative lens focuses attention directly on these “processes of becoming.”

Ultimately, the Maltese context provides a vital site to question whether new narratives should merely seek to adjust the public image of migrants, or whether they must instead alter the underlying conditions through which migrants become visible in the first place (Muscat & Moulton, 2013). A new narrative is not simply one that depicts migrants in a more favourable light, but one that enables a complex, multi-dimensional understanding of who they are, what they experience, and how they actively participate in shaping the society in which they live. In line with the Global Mobility approach, the migrant is never fixed within a single category or moment of movement; the potential of new narratives lies in establishing the conditions for migrants to participate in determining which stories are told, how they are told, and how they are received.

The next section outlines our methodological approach, tracing how we gathered and organised our data to understand the efforts of various local actors to construct new migration narratives, following the currently established guidance on how such narratives are built and exploring whether new questions emerge from our analysis.

03

Methodology

The starting point for outlining our methodology is the premise that dominant narratives of migration are harmful, and that our work aims to contribute to changing them. On this basis, Global Mindset Development (GMD) set out an action research methodology and applied for funding to implement it through a dedicated research project called NewNAR action research project. The Core Action Research Group consists of five co-researchers, each responsible for specific components of the research process. This approach commits us to a predefined research design that is intentionally structured to support collective inquiry and narrative transformation, while still requiring further development as the project unfolds.

However, our shared understanding is that action research offers a way of doing research differently from traditional methodologies in which the researcher sets the rules and retains most of the power. Instead, action research positions the entire research endeavour as a relational and collective process aimed at generating knowledge for action, following a cyclical and reflective process that unfolds through cyclical reflection of planning, acting, evaluating, and adapting, guided by the dynamics of the process rather than by rigid prediction (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Coghlan, 2019).

Also, while positioning ourselves within the action-oriented rather than fully participatory domain of this tradition, although we strive to maximise participation, the time and project constraints of our context limit our ability to co-design the research focus, questions, and certain outcomes with those most affected by dominant migration narratives.

Our core action research group is responsible for driving the action component of the research forward, more specifically through conducting a literature review on migration narratives and narrative change, analysing media and public discourse, and examining organisational practices in Malta that have integrated new narratives into their work.

Data collection methods

To do this, we employed several data collection methods: a participatory survey to map local initiatives that may or may not align with the concept of new narratives and narrative change; a media analysis based on secondary sources to identify the current state of migration narratives in Malta; and meeting minutes to document cycles of collective reflection and decision-making.

Participatory survey

The participatory survey was developed collaboratively. It was disseminated through GMD's online channels, inviting organisations to share initiatives they had implemented in relation to migration and narrative change. The survey design combined open-ended and multiple-choice questions intended to capture both descriptive

and reflective information about each initiative. Open-ended questions explored the origins and development of the initiative, its key messages and objectives, the intended and actual audiences, the actors and stakeholders involved, the role of migrants, and the ways in which impact was planned to be measured. Additional multiple-choice questions sought to understand how each initiative responded to potential shifts in migration narratives, the tools and means used to convey these narratives, and the types of outputs produced.

The survey was not anonymous, and personal data were collected and stored in accordance with GMD's data protection policy, which was clearly communicated to all participants. A total of thirteen responses were received, of which only those relevant to the Maltese context were analysed. The survey remained open throughout April 2026. All responses were stored in a dedicated project folder managed by GMD and accessible only to the core research group and the advisory group, in line with the organisation's data storage policy.

In total, the survey received 13 submissions. Of these, five were not based in Malta, so they were excluded from the analysis. Thus, the final sample included the following eight practices.

Initiative	Organisation
Fact Sheets	Blue Door Education
Empowering Malta	Malta Refugee Council
Integration and Ethnoecologies	The Migration Commission
Empower to Integrate	Aditus Foundation
Collective Mapping	Aditus Foundation
Dissertation: What Makes Working Migrants in Malta Thrive? An Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods Approach	Lanette Kristel Dela Cruz, University of Malta
Colonial manifestations and contemporary anxieties: Exploring how Malta's colonial past influences contemporary politics towards alterity, belonging, and immigration through historical fiction.	Daryl Mifsud, University of Notre Dame, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies
The Expatriates of Malta	The Expatriates of Malta

Following the organisation of the responses, the core action research group met to draft criteria for assessing the collected practices. These criteria were subsequently revisited after the completion of the literature review to ensure alignment with the conceptual framework of the study. The group then reviewed all Maltese practices, ranking them and reflecting collectively on the central concepts of the research, particularly the concepts of new narratives and narrative change. Decision-making within the group was based on consensus.

The assessment framework consisted of six criteria. The criteria were based upon previous research on new narratives and their core dimensions.

1. **Involvement of migrants in the practice**, capturing varying levels of participation.

No migrants involved · Advisors are migrants · Core Active Participants/Leader/Founders

2. **Target audience and the initiative's outreach**, distinguishing between efforts aimed at new audiences or the "movable middle" and those primarily reaching established migration-related organisations.

Ally close to the organization: pro-migration-usual NGO · Relatively close to the organization or Anti-Migration (other institutions) · New Audience - Movable Middle / Public 50/50

3. *Extent to which dominant narratives were challenged or reframed.*

Not countering dominant narrative · Acknowledging dominant narrative ·Challenging/Countering dominant narrative · Reframing/Debunking dominant narrative

4. **Real stories / personal stories**: whether the narratives relied on secondary, re-shared information or were grounded in first-hand personal stories from migrants.

Fictional stories / Real stories from other people that are not migrants · Stories shared as secondary source (second hand information, re-shared information) · Real stories from migrants (first hand information)

5. **Accessibility of the project**, in terms of cost, time, and space.

Not accessible (Location, language, Financial) · Relatively accessible · Easily accessible

6. **Accessibility of the content**, including the form and language used.

Niche accessibility (highly academic piece, journal article) · Relatively accessible · Easily accessible (highly colloquial, movie, art, emotional)

Media analysis

A secondary media analysis of migration narratives was conducted to complement the participatory survey and provide a broader contextual understanding of how migration is framed in Malta. This analysis drew on a selection of local and international reports that examined major Maltese media outlets, including newspapers such as Times of Malta and Malta Independent, as well as social media platforms such as

Facebook and Instagram. The aim was to identify dominant narratives circulating within the Maltese media landscape, alongside any emerging or alternative narratives that may signal narrative change.

The use of secondary sources allowed for an overview of existing analyses of media content without engaging in primary coding of articles or posts. These sources offered insights into recurring themes, framings, and representations of migrants and migration, enabling the core action research group to situate local initiatives within a wider narrative environment. The media analysis thus served as a contextual layer, informing the interpretation of practices collected through the participatory survey.

Meeting minutes

Action research is oriented toward cycles of action that co-researchers have taken, are taking, or wish to take to address a problematic situation, with change occurring both within the setting and within the co-researchers themselves (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In other words, how the group thinks, negotiates, disagrees, and decides is not separate from the research. It is one of the mechanisms through which action research produces insight and transformation, because the methodology relies on cycles of collective reflection and decision-making, where knowledge is generated through interaction rather than imposed externally. As Paolo Freire puts it, "critical reflection is also an action" (Freire, 2017, p.101). In this spirit, our methodology documents not only the actions undertaken in relation to narrative change and the development of new migration narratives, but also the ongoing reflections that shape these actions, captured through systematic meeting minutes of discussions held during Core Action Research Group meetings. By doing this, we integrate meeting dynamics into our analysis, treating group discussions as part of the dataset and documenting how interpretations and decisions evolve. This helps shape how we read our literature review and organisational practices collected, grounding our findings in the collaborative process of the research. As the analysis of our research process, particularly points of disagreement, shifts in understanding, emerging questions, and moments of collective insight, relates primarily to methodological specificities, our plan is to elaborate on these aspects when preparing the academic publication of the project findings, which will constitute one of the outputs of the New Nar Project. For this reason, we are not including detailed reflections in the present report. Instead, we provide a summary of when the meetings took place and the main topics discussed during them.

Date	Summary of the meeting
11/06/2026	The meeting focused on discussing the consent form and data collection approach for the research project.
26/06/2026	The meeting focused on coordinating interview scheduling and discussing the literature review progress for the project.

Date	Summary of the meeting
03/07/2026	The meeting focused on tightening the conceptualisation of narratives and narrative change while improving the coherence of the literature review and overall structure. It also centred on preparing for interviews by agreeing on preparing an interview protocol.
22/07/2026	The meeting focused on clarifying the project's methodological positioning, specifically distinguishing action research from fully participatory action research, and reflecting on participation levels, power-sharing, and positionality within the research group.
31/07/2026	The meeting focused on defining a general methodological structure which would include bullet points focusing on the action research more than on the participatory, data collection, survey, interviews, thematic analysis, limitations and positionality
03/08/2026	The meeting focused on the content of data analysis. The final decision was to focus on two methods, including 1) survey answers (interviews will be used as a follow-up to the survey) and 2) media analysis. RE: how the interview transcripts will be processed/read - the interviews will have the complete recording accompanied by the transcript. The transcript will be adjusted and corrected only for it to be legible enough to follow through the recorded conversation. The research will focus on the Maltese context in responding to the research question. European contexts for data analysis will be at a 'supporting role' to the research and participatory analysis.
15/09/2026	The meeting focused on the challenges related to the approach of collaborative analysis of the practices, mainly due to time constraints and differing schedules. We agreed to individually assess the remaining practices using the Excel sheet by the end of this week, and then meet to discuss and agree on the final evaluations. We also discussed personal situations and the news that the team will be reduced, with Emilie stepping down and Daryl as well. The core group will therefore consist of three people rather than five around the beginning of October.
22/09/2026	The meeting focused on conducting collective evaluations of the Maltese practices related to new migration narratives. We discussed challenges arising from limited information collected through the survey. It was agreed that non-Maltese initiatives would be excluded from the final analysis, narrowing the focus to eight local practices. All eight initiatives were reviewed and scored, and consensus was reached on the final evaluation.
02/10/2026	The meeting focused on clarifying the definition of "new migration narratives", noting that the current draft felt overly philosophical and disconnected from other sections. We agreed to draw on migration studies, including de Haas, to strengthen conceptual clarity and revise new narratives sections for greater coherence. Authorship dynamics in academic publishing were also discussed, with plans to address authorship and power relations in the methodology.

These diverse research and data collection measures have enabled us to conduct the report from a transdisciplinary approach reflective of the researchers' various backgrounds and expertise. Therefore the following analysis section will explain and synthesize the aforementioned data collection methods starting with the media analysis. The media analysis will contextualise the Maltese migration scene within the local landscape containing pertinent reactions, attitudes, and the narratives that are subsequently being

propagated and pushed. The participatory survey analysis then goes into further detail in the Maltese context in relation to analysing the practices, results, and patterns through the organisations, individuals, and projects which participated in the survey.

04

Media Analysis

In the digital age of information sharing and dissemination, AI and online platforms that combine bite-sized information, content creation, and virality have hyper-focused narratives on migration as a central societal issue, structural incompetence, and demagogic identity politics. Although the multimedia presence on the islands portrays various realities of migration, the most recent general election highlighted migration and population as among the main issues people wanted addressed, as they were constantly invoked in arguments, rebuttals, and counter-rebuttals within Malta's political system, dominated by the two major parties. This mirrors a broader pattern within the EU, with migration among the top priorities voters consider during campaigns; Malta had the highest proportion of concern on migration and asylum (European Parliament, 2024, p. 60). The following section highlights media analysis through secondary sources focused on migration narratives, drawing on independent organisations, online platforms, and major newspapers to identify dominant and emerging narratives in migration discourse, including a deeper look at Malta's last election period.

Because population management and migration are intertwined and contribute to broader societal contention and collective anxiety, the media landscape is heavily commodified for interaction. Other underlying realities facing the Maltese islands, such as population decline and overdevelopment, have also been prompted by a visible demographic increase and shift over the past ten years. These topics have especially been evident on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, where articles, posts, and comments drum up alarmist narratives through sensationalism (African Media Association Malta, 2025, pp. 5, 12; MedDMO, 2024, p.9). As stated, this section won't be doing a comprehensive media analysis from scratch, given the focus of the project at hand; however, together with previous research, including secondary sources from organisations which have already examined a media analysis, specifically with regard to migration in Malta, we can provide background to how narratives are formed through media, in understanding both the targeted 'movable middle' and the context within which the projects examined for this report were produced. This section will also include a condensed media analysis of how migration was portrayed in the media during the most recent general election, given the intensity of public and political participation, highlighting how much the subject has been a focal point of people's voting priorities. Lastly, acknowledging the hierarchies embedded in migration terminology, as explained in the literature review section, when we use the term migrant, we refer to broad categories of movement that fall under forced and voluntary migration, with such labels appearing only when directly cited from sources.

Media Analysis - Migration in Malta

The secondary sources from which the Media analysis is going to be drawn from cover three diverse platforms and time frames; a qualitative interview-based research with Maltese journalist, editors, and civil society actors conducted in 2025 (African Media Association Malta, 2025), a quantitative social-media monitoring of political and public discourse between January 2023 and June 2024 (MedDMO, 2024), and a critical discourse analysis of news by specifically looking the news outlets of Times of Malta, The Malta Independent, and MaltaToday, covering 2020 to 2023 (Fechner, 2023).

Given this project's migrant-centred approach and its values of promoting knowledge and research from the main stakeholders, the analysis will begin with the African Media Association Malta. The non-profit organisation promotes ethical journalism, media freedom, and positive representation of Africa and related topics like migration, and their EU co-funded Erasmus+ project MILD (More Correct Information, Less Discrimination) enquires into "access to media professions, institutional inclusivity, representations of migrants, and practices to counter discrimination or hate speech." (African Media Association Malta, 2025, p. 6).

In the MILD report, it was shown that news narratives of migration lacked migrant perspectives, leading to a landscape that produced an invisibility of voices, reflecting both a representation issue and an access issue, with a lack of migrant voices and coverage shaped by national security, emergency discourses, and political or humanitarian crises (African Media Association Malta, 2025, pp. 10–13). The report also identified visual stereotyping as shaping public perception through alarmist depictions, such as boat imagery, which tends to dominate migration coverage even when the content does not match the imagery (African Media Association Malta, 2025, p. 12). A subtler theme was the selective empathy underlying the media, highlighting how religious, ethnic, racial, and national biases emerge when engaging with different migrant populations, especially evident within minoritised/racialised groups (African Media Association Malta, 2025, p. 13). Concluding their analysis, it was noted that, as perceptions of public awareness have increased, it also showed how racism, structural and cultural biases are embedded within Maltese society, and that there is also a need for more collaboration and training within the media space when it comes to representing and including migrants and their narratives in media discourses (African Media Association Malta, 2025, pp. 2, 10).

The Mediterranean Digital Media Observatory (MedDMO) is a regional hub within the broader European Digital Media Observatory, focused on Malta, Greece, and Cyprus, and it combats disinformation and fact-checks content; in these countries, these efforts often focus on immigration and border control. Given their regional focus and country-specific reports, MedDMO provides an additional comprehensive picture of Malta's media landscape on false claims about migrants and migration. The report examined claims made by some of the most prominent figures in the Maltese political scene and members of the public on migration

and population, combining research, fact-checking, and media organisations. Similar to the MILD report, the prominence of discrimination, far-right, anti-immigrant sentiments, and selective empathy was laid out, while acknowledging, in the background, the pressures that the islands' residents and infrastructure face from overpopulation, with immigration as one of its main contributing factors (MedDMO, 2024, pp. 5–7). The report listed examples of how population and migration figures are used to portray minority groups in ways which "fuel and are fuelled by racism and xenophobia" - by highlighting the context in which things are said, the language used, and by whom they are said (MedDMO, 2024, pp. 7–8). The examples the report used were statements and comments made by MEP, MP's, and members of the public within popular online groups which the report debunked as misinformation, and ones which spread "negative connotations, attitudes and emotions associated with immigration" (MedDMO, 2024, p. 7) Lastly, the report was especially helpful in analysing how engagement metrics - such as likes, shares, the content and volume of comments - play a role in formulating mass opinions formed by misleading cherry-picked statements and claims in social media platforms (MedDMO, 2024, p. 9).

There have been additional studies on media in the Maltese Islands from an academic standpoint regarding migration, although it is worth noting here that most of these articles focus on 'irregular migration', mainly those leaving from North Africa, which account for a minuscule percentage of migrant populations in Malta, with the vast majority of migrants being 'economic migrants' immigrating through official channels. Fechner's study draws on 30 articles over three years from the aforementioned outlets, along with four additional interviews with people in the migration sector (Fechner, 2023). The study focuses on the securitisation of migration in relation to 'asylum seekers' and 'irregular migration'; it holds a magnifying glass towards the political voices dominating such news coverage, through the usage of crisis language, repeated phrases and words of "burden/burden-sharing," and the binary of an us/them framing, spoken by top-positioned government talking points (Fechner, 2023, pp. 42–44, 50). Adding nuance to the MILD's report, an analysis of boat imagery shows most portrayals depict people being rescued in calm waters, already wearing life jackets, downplaying the urgency of rescue while adding overbearing images of arrivals (Fechner, 2023, pp. 52–53).

Placed in dialogue with each other, the three reports reveal comparable narratives viewed through different lenses: the African Media Association Malta focuses on visibility and voice by highlighting the absence of migrants as contributors and narrators, while the report by Fechner and MedDMO emphasises who fills that absence and what narratives get circulated in effect. All three illuminate how the media architecture of migration is framed through crisis and security language supplied by political factors, amplified through sensationalist social media engagement, and left structurally uncontested by the formal press landscape that is disconnected from migrant sourcing. The secondary media analysis thus showcases how in Malta there are, on one hand, attitudes of nativism, xenophobia and racism, and on the other, growing concern with overpopulation, cultural protection, overburdened infrastructure and dependency on foreign labour, which

reinforce each other within misguided discussions and reporting. Taken together, these three secondary sources point to a narrative coverage of migration to Malta, one that is oftentimes devoid of nuance and context, where migrants are constantly spoken about but rarely spoken to, and narratives that confirm - yet complicate and amplify - underlying social, cultural, and economic anxieties that face the Maltese population.

Media Analysis - Deep dive into the Malta 2026 General Election

As an illustrative case, the following sections take a snapshot of the latest Maltese 2026 general election, showing how narratives on population, demographics, and immigration were discussed within a tense, charged political atmosphere, resulting in heightened tensions, reactive comments and attitudes, which increased Islamophobic and xenophobic imagery and statements. This intensified atmosphere, where issues of the country were lambasted and put under a magnifying glass, will be briefly examined by reviewing a few independent media sites that included a rundown of the issues and main topics discussed during the election cycle, along with the aforementioned European Digital Media Observatory and recap reporting rather than systematic content analysis.

As aforementioned, migration and population growth - reflected in overburdened infrastructure and housing strain - was one of the main issues referenced in the election campaign. Amphora Media, a non-profit investigative journalism platform, noted that despite rising resident dissatisfaction with these issues, migration policy itself was not a distinct campaign issue (Amphora Media, 2026a). Rather, migration was framed through two main, hypervisible points of contention, the first being the securitisation of migration, which showcases pictures and titles of deported individuals from Malta - only a few days prior to the general election - noting its maximum visibility and effect on public perception of population control and security visibility (Newsbook, 2026a). Although these reported deportations have mainly happened to people who outstayed their visas, as opposed to deportations tied to irregular migration, with the backdrop having the lowest number of asylum applications in more than a decade, the imagery and subtle messaging in such posts carry a deeper racialised insinuation of the deported individuals (Newsbook 2026a, 2026b).

The other point of focus was the overt islamophobia and xenophobia which dictated headlines, billboards and slogans, which showcased how identity-based tensions on migration are portrayed, especially through social media. As reported by MedDMO, the election month featured AI-distorted images of slogans and party leaders, with a few highlighting, in a negative manner, the population of Indian nationals in Malta, one of the most populous nationalities in Malta, feeding into right-wing political talking points. The most notable case was personified through the candidacy for the Labour Party of Omar Rababah, a Maltese-Syrian who became the target of an Islamophobic fearmongering campaign to paint the election of Omar and by extension the Labour Party, as an existential crisis to Maltese identity through its religious affiliation (MedDMO, 2026). Amphora Media noted that, alongside Omar's candidacy, concerns prompted by repeated questions about building another

mosque in Malta dominated the discourse on migration (Amphora Media, 2026b). Doing so throughout the election cycle and reporting both bypassed real public concerns about migration, such as overpopulation and overtourism, and reoriented such frustrations into misleading, sensationalist discussion surrounding identity politics and reductive, alarmist points.

The micro-media analysis of the last election provides an unfiltered lens into how migration is framed in the media when matching people's concerns and frustration, a worrying trend with regard to how complex structural problems are collapsed and redirected towards communities and individuals, easily used as scapegoats and marginalised. The real-time election snapshot reflects the report's broader analytical discourse on how narratives can mislocate, construct, and intensify the categories of migration this work outlines, leading Maltese residents to project anxieties onto migrants in Malta.

05

Participatory Survey Analysis: Practices

Descriptive Results

The analysis included 8 out of the 13 practices collected. The exclusion criteria was whether the practices were happening in, or were related to, Malta and the Maltese context. Out of them, the strongest results appear on the work on dominant narratives, with five practices out of eight focusing on debunking dominant narratives as well as reframing them, thus producing new ones. The remaining three practices were evaluated as countering dominant narratives, which still reflected a critical direction to overcome the established discourse. For example, practices report:

> *"shifting the narrative from migration as a crisis to migration as a fact of life and a shared responsibility" and "shifting the focus from vulnerability and division to empowerment and mutual understanding"*

Another crucial dimension of debunking and reframing narratives is changing the discourse around the people. The collected practices highlight how "instead of portraying migrants and refugees as passive recipients of aid, it presents them as active contributors to society who are capable of shaping their own integration journeys and enriching the communities they are part of". More, "the project highlights a narrative of migration as an opportunity for social cohesion, where empowered individuals and communities actively contribute to a more inclusive and understanding society".

5/8
practices debunking and reframing dominant narratives

4/8
practices with migrants as core participants, founders or leaders

4/8
practices recounting real, first-hand experiences

2/8
practices clearly reaching the movable middle

The analysis also points to a gap between narrative ambition and narrative reach. A core dimension of narrative change pertains to the possibility of reaching people who do not already share the view, particularly the *movable middle*. Only two of the eight practices clearly do so, while the others speak mainly to allies or to audiences already close to the organisation. This also raises an interesting question about projects where the target audience and main participants are migrants themselves, and how they contribute to new narratives even if they do not explicitly reach the *movable middle*.

Migrant involvement in the practices was generally high, with four practices reporting that migrants were involved as either core participants or founders and leaders. However, this was not always reflected in the content of the initiatives. Four projects recounted real, first-hand information and experiences, while the rest reported either second-hand knowledge, content shared in a fact-sheet template, or an informative written production. Lastly, the criteria of accessibility of the projects and their content was strong for most practices. On this point, an interesting reflection was sparked regarding the temporality of practices: are projects that take place in person as accessible as projects with a digital footprint, which will remain at disposal for longer than the sheer duration of the initiative? Future research should investigate these points about the perceived value of such initiatives and their lasting impact.

Patterns

Taken together, the profiles point to two broad groups.

The first consists of **public-facing, civil-society initiatives** which combine high accessibility, broad audiences and strong migrant involvement. In fact, civil society organisations are often confronted with the difficulty of 'changing the story' on migration, as the dominant narratives produced by the media and political spheres are pervaded by stereotypes and migrants have few opportunities to express themselves as political subjects (Güell & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2024). The constant dichotomy between the in-group and the out-group maintains power relationships and hides the great heterogeneity that especially dominates within those coming from outside Europe (Güell & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2024). Against this background, the work of civil society organisations is crucial, as they insert themselves in the social fabric and foster new migration narratives.

The second consists of **academic or research-oriented work**, which scores lowest on audience reach and accessibility despite seriously engaging with narratives. Due to the nature of qualitative research, there is an automatic restriction to upper-academic spaces - albeit having the potential to be used in policy and civil society spaces to inform practices and wider attitudes on migration.

The role of real, first-hand stories is also central in the observed patterns, since personal accounts can humanise migration and counter abstract or stereotyped representations.

First, such stories are more likely to impact broader narratives if migrants themselves are positioned as authors of their own stories rather than as subjects described by others. Moreover, there was a mismatch observed, such as migrant-led initiatives that rely on second-hand material, suggesting that involving migrants in the practice and giving them narrative voice are related but distinct goals. Taken together, the practices that appear most promising are those that combine a reframing approach, first-hand voices and accessible formats aimed at broader publics.

06

Discussion section

So, this project aimed to uncover which new narratives of migration are fostered in Malta, their approaches and the form they take.

Overall, the analysis points to the fact that new narratives of migration, which include first-hand stories and engage migrants as leaders or core participants, usually challenge dominant narratives of migrants as *victims* or as a *threat.* They do so by focusing on migrants' active involvement in the community, on mutual understanding, and on the normalisation of migration experiences, not as a phenomenon but as the reality of many people in Malta. Moreover, a crucial point regards the importance of direct engagement of migrants in (co)creating new narratives. In fact, co-production can offer a path which diverts from dominant narratives: in fact, refugees' embodied and embedded knowledge can "unravel the normalised colonial foundation of the dominant integration discourse" and contribute to decolonising its implications through co-production of knowledge in practice (Ghorashi, 2025), which can be applied to the engagement of migrants in the Maltese context as well.

The analysis also highlights the role of civil society organisations in tying together different societal groups and creating shared spaces of dialogue and understanding, which emphasise commonalities and challenge the dominant narratives present in Malta

One shortcoming, compared to the narrative change approach, is the challenge of approaching the *movable middle.* Most initiatives cater to either migrants or like-minded organisations and individuals. While this contributes to active participation and building positive relationships within one's network, this approach can undermine one of the goals of new narratives by **not reaching out extensively.**

Nevertheless, the importance of such initiatives lies not only in countering, but actively creating, messages of shared belonging and community, and of equal participation in Maltese society. This limited reach could also be explained in terms of ease of reach, since initiatives are shared within one's own network, as well as a process of self-selection by the audience and participants: people who are already familiar with, or in favour of, the themes explored in the initiatives will be aware of them and choose to participate. This suggests that participation and narrative voice are also related but distinct goals.

These limitations notwithstanding, projects aimed at migrants retain considerable value, even when they do not extend to a wider public. Migrants themselves are an audience whose trust, comprehension, confidence,

and behaviour are shaped by narratives. When narratives are catered to migrant communities as intended recipients it can affect service uptake, health behaviour, and community trust. Pilots focusing on co-creation of activities with migrant and local community members showed an increase in participation and uptake of the services offered by the initiatives, and increased confidence (Wieland et al., 2017).

The evaluation of these results, within the criteria of accessibility, also led us towards a reflection on the role of time, intended as the duration for which an initiative remains available.

This criterion is not present in official evaluations of narrative change, but it came up several times in discussions as a dimension which could impact the fruition and the impact of the narratives shared via such projects. In this light, projects with long-lasting outputs can be shared further and may reach a larger audience, including the *movable middle*. Projects that produce outputs that cannot be accessed after the conclusion of the initiative might have a more limited reach. This should not be read as a judgement of the quality of the outputs. In fact, initiatives that leave no long-lasting output might derive their greatest value from the connections and reflections generated in the moment. Duration therefore merits further attention as a complementary criterion, and future research could explore how it relates to the reach and long-term impact of narrative change initiatives.

Another reflection binds together the results from the survey and the media analysis, showing that a practice can be led by migrants and still reproduce, on a smaller scale, the media's pattern of describing migrants rather than letting them speak. If invisibility is the core failure of the dominant landscape, then inclusion in the organisation is also not sufficient. In fact, a meaningful standard is authorship, highlighting whether migrants are positioned as narrators of their own stories rather than as subjects described by others.

By contrast, the media analysis shows a more sobering landscape where it confirms inherent structures and biases that form part of dominant narratives which are easily disseminated online. Given that the analysis was done through reviewing secondary media analysis, their very presence, although more limited to either of their specific audiences, provided discourse that reflected an engagement in the effort needed to counter harmful narratives which the projects represented in the participatory survey analysis meant to disrupt, counter, and provide new alternatives.

At the same time, the audiences reached through the media platforms, especially shared through social media platforms, target a much wider audience, meaning narratives propagated through media outlets, including partisan ones, have far more reach when reporting on migration. These narratives are often reactive, politicised, and amplify existing anxieties around the Maltese islands, which end up reinforcing dominant narratives surrounding migration, given they structurally lack migrant-centered narratives, inputs and collaborations, including showcasing migrants as valuable residents and contributors.

Recommendations

- Practices that aim at creating new narratives should still be more inclusive of migrants as core active participants, both at the level of civil society and within institutionalised settings such as academia. Migrants' first-hand accounts should be prioritised as a central source of knowledge and narrative development. Migrants' strengths, vulnerabilities, and lived experiences should be represented as interconnected aspects of their journeys, rather than used to reinforce stereotypes that portray them as either helpless victims or exceptional heroes.
- Society's reliance on secondary and tertiary sources when discussing migration often positions migrants as objects of representation rather than as active subjects with the agency to narrate their own life trajectories. It is therefore essential to strengthen the role of civil society in facilitating and amplifying migrants' own stories. These narratives should extend beyond the conventional focus on departure and arrival to encompass the broader social, cultural, political, and temporal contexts in which migrants' lives unfold.
- The same inclusion must be fostered within the Maltese media landscape. At the moment, the media architecture of migration is framed through a crisis and security lens, and migrants are largely absent from the official news space, leaving a gap filled by dominant narratives.
- To counteract sensationalist, crisis-focused, or any of the other externally-led narratives, narratives that focus on real stories and empathy draw more attention and can be more impactful for the general public, thus being more conducive to narrative change.
- Promote the use of value-neutral, precise, and non-stigmatising language in migration-related communication, policymaking, and administrative procedures, including asylum processes. Institutional and public discourse should avoid terminology that reinforces rigid binary distinctions, criminalises migrants, or reduces complex human experiences to simplistic categories. The aim should be to adopt language that accurately reflects migrants' legal circumstances and lived realities without reducing individuals to their migration status or reinforcing exclusionary narratives.
- Initiatives should reflect on the accessibility of the practices they offer, both in terms of accessibility of the project and in terms of the content, in order to tailor it to a broad, diverse audience. At the same time, practices aiming to reach a migrant population should still aim to actively involve the population in the project, as this can overall improve the uptake of the practices.
- The media landscape should be able to engage a wide array of diverse actors and be reflective of the narratives which receive the majority of the media attention. As media and cultural discourse contribute to creating the hegemony of dominant narratives, it is a responsibility of those working on these subjects to actively give space to different actors and voices, or at least to acknowledge how they are portraying dominant narratives through their activities.

- When reporting in the media, categories should be named accurately and placed in specific contexts, so public communication doesn't collapse these groups into labels solely consisting of "foreigners" or "migrants" - which simplifies an overtly interconnected system of categories, privilege and access.
- The media landscape should separate population pressure from migrant blame, since housing, infrastructure, overdevelopment and cost of living are structural grievances, so that naming them removes the scapegoat and stops identity politics from absorbing legitimate frustration. Narratives that are centred around the movable middle's concerns regarding population pressure thus need to be acknowledged rather than dismissed, and simultaneously contextualised within national economic policy and other aforementioned pressures outside of increased migration.
- Election periods and major/breaking news surrounding migration/migrants should be treated with increased humanity, accuracy, and caution, since migration rhetoric intensifies when visibility is highest, including focused fact-checking where necessary.

Recommendations for future research

- Future research should focus on the conceptualisations and applications of new narratives around migration, with specific attention given to increasing participation and engagement in voicing and sharing the narratives, and the legacy and impact that such new narratives have on the societal level in Malta.
- Research should increasingly be conducted following multidisciplinary approaches, where different subjects intersect to create both academic and practical field knowledge and experience on the topic of migration narratives and narrative change
- Research could further include participatory creative practices (e.g. artistic residencies, co-creation labs) for more inclusive forms of social practices

Recommendations for scenario development

- Scenarios, focused on narrative change and developing new narratives, should focus on a coherent, emotion-based strategy through first-hand engagement of migrants
- Scenario development should be based on relational processual understanding of identity and overcome the rigid classifications regarding migrants' legal and moral identities
- The development of the scenarios could benefit from artistic, performative laboratories where participants, including migrants with different migration experiences and local community members, could engage in collaborative creative processes within diverse environments. These laboratories would encourage the emergence of new, multidisciplinary forms of knowledge and expression through embodied practices, storytelling, movement, sound, and visual arts. The resulting scenarios

could serve as spaces of encounter in which identities are understood as fluid, relational, and continuously evolving.

- Scenario developments should be happening with migrants, reflecting real lived experiences and overcoming dichotomies and dominant paradigms of migration

Conclusion

To conclude, this research project first presented an interdisciplinary theoretical background on the current debate on dominant narratives, narrative change, and new narratives. Then, it examined eight practices promoting new narratives of migration in Malta, as well as secondary sources on the Maltese media landscape and the 2026 general election. The results show a promising, yet still developing landscape. Civil society actors, who made up the majority of the collected practices, used new framings to depict migrants and the migration process, moving away from the *us* versus *them* narrative and towards a space of cooperation, coexistence, and normalcy. The projects happened to engage migrants to different degrees, reflecting increased awareness of the importance of migrant voices as the first narrators and protagonists of the narratives which are shared. By doing so, civil society actors fill up the *new narrative* space, which is left void by the traditional and social media platforms, where narratives are heavily relying on polarised framings and securitisation narratives. In the media landscape, the overt islamophobia and xenophobia which dictated headlines, billboards, and slogans showcased how identity-based tensions around migration are portrayed, reflecting a lack of engagement of diverse actors and especially of migrant voices. Future research should further explore the ever-changing conceptualisations of new narratives around migration, with specific attention given to increasing participation and engagement in voicing and sharing the narratives, and the legacy and impact that such new narratives have on the societal level in Malta.

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