COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

ROUNDTABLE ON FACT-BASED COMMUNICATION ON MIGRATION

SUMMARY REPORT

Strasbourg, 7 November 2025

This initiative is a contribution towards the

New Democratic Pact for Europe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY[1]

This first-ever Roundtable on fact-based communication of migration organised by the Council of Europe Division on Migration and Refugees brought together 12 international experts to discuss the growing problems of misinformation, disinformation and related hate speech about migrants and refugees, which are putting European democratic societies' cohesion under serious strain. The discussion identified key challenges, including how increased media attention on migration, even when positive, tends to reinforce perceptions of it as a problem; how people's underlying attitudes about migration are formed early in life and are deeply embedded; and how extreme anti-migrant voices have formed flexible international networks that are pushing conspiracy theories into mainstream discourse. Contributors emphasised the need for a portfolio of multi-level and multi-stakeholder, short- and long-term parallel approaches to tackle this complex and vast terrain. These approaches might combine digital monitoring and enforcement efforts with preventive approaches such as building connections in local communities, training journalists and reinforcing ethical journalism, diversifying newsrooms, and using arts and culture to share human stories of migration. Practical suggestions for future possible action included evidence-based guidance on when to pre-emptively warn people about anticipated disinformation and when to correct falsehoods already in circulation.

I.   ROUNDTABLE CONCEPT, CONTEXT AND CONTRIBUTORS

1. The Council of Europe Division on Migration and Refugees (DMR) convened this Roundtable in recognition that communicating publicly on migration has become intensely difficult in many contexts. Narratives based on fallacies proliferate in media discourse, particularly in the lead up to elections when they are often disseminated by bad faith actors who stoke anger and division. Countering misinformation and disinformation (hereafter mis/disinformation) on this topic, and getting coverage of more balanced and accurate stories, is a complex technical and political challenge raising at the same important issues concerning protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

2. This one-day, hybrid Roundtable[2] therefore brought together 12 international experts in communication about migration (see Appendix 2) with practitioners and institutional representatives to exchange possible responses. Presentations were organised within three thematic sessions covering:
    -   the importance of using factual information, and under which conditions such fact-based communications are most effective;
    -   how to navigate the current communication environment including mainstream media and social networks; and
    -   how to balance the protection of freedom of expression with the prevention and combatting of hate speech against migrants.

3. Though several of the presentations contained case studies and data drawn from previous years, the discussion was largely forward-looking and directed towards one key question: How can international human rights organisations, national authorities, NHRIs, civil society, and other stakeholders enhance their action and collaborate to further foster inclusive, respectful and fact-based communication on migration?

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[1] This Summary Report was prepared by Ophelia Field, an independent consultant in the fields of policy and communications, who was among the Roundtable's contributors.
[2] See concept note and agenda at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/council-of-europe-roundtable-highlights-need-for-fact-based-communication-on-migration-1

II. KEY THEMES FROM EXPERT CONTRIBUTIONS

4. Defining the nature and scope of the problem.

4.1. **The socio-political impacts of migration-related mis/disinformation and hate speech.** It was noted that not only can fearmongering about migrants impact elections, but, as a result of the social discord created, many people with a migration background live in fear of hate crimes and suffer direct material and physical harms. Rash policy changes may also be adopted following a misplaced public outcry rather than after a process of rational, systematic analysis.

Some contributors emphasised the continuity between older forms of propaganda or mis/disinformation and its newer incarnations, while acknowledging that the speed and opacity of such mis/disinformation has increased dramatically, driven now by the power of technology companies, Artificial Intelligence (AI), social media echo chambers, and their synergies with xenophobic populism. What is therefore new is the disparity between the rate of increase in the problem's scale and our democratic institutional ability to counter or regulate it.

Since 2015, extremists casting themselves as "truth-tellers" have been increasingly able to shape public discourse with fringe views on migration that are not based on facts. One contributor highlighted how such anti-migrant extremists are now forming opportunistic coalitions, working in an atomised, flexible manner with extremists on other issues, rather than belonging to set, easily identifiable groups. They are also increasingly vocal and networked internationally, so that there seems to be a constant "background buzz" of migrant scapegoating in certain countries or cities, even when the commentators are geographically and politically removed from local realities.

There were several brief summaries of the fear-framed narratives commonly used, based on securitisation and dehumanisation, such that migrants become associated in the public imagination with crime, terror, disease and violence. Cultural threats to "Western culture" are also a common trope, with conspiracy narratives such as the "Great Replacement Theory" and the language of forced "remigration" becoming worryingly mainstream over the last few years. The problem therefore no longer emanates solely from the far right. Others in public life echo, intentionally or not, more subtle forms of prejudice that contribute to social fragmentation and a climate of fear.

One expert highlighted the way that episodes of "crisis" (the 2015 spike in refugee arrivals; the COVID pandemic; Islamicist terror attacks) are seized as opportunities for amplification of baseless claims. In general, such capture of media and social media discourse then makes having a pragmatic policy conversation virtually impossible. At the same time, the Roundtable's contributors recognised that it is crucial not to label all opinions that are hostile to migration as mis/disinformation. To do so would be very dangerous to free speech and democratic debate.

4.2. **Major challenges facing journalism.** Lack of issue-specific expertise among most journalists makes it difficult for them to always distinguish true expertise from disinformation sources. The relative absence of people with migrant or exile backgrounds in newsrooms also tends to remove an important critical lens on news stories gathered, and to constrain the news agenda.

In parallel, the disappearance of so much local journalism has removed an important "reality check" and made it more difficult for stories that normalise the presence of migrants to gain coverage. Inversely, there is also a lack of scope for journalists to cover issues in countries of origin or transit when reporting on arrivals in Europe, and to thereby "join the dots" in the public imagination in terms of the causes of specific inter-regional migrations.

Headlines quoting extremists or posing divisive questions are used by certain outlets in a way which is irresponsible, often combined with dehumanising images (e.g. massive, faceless, impoverished crowds). Civil society organisations working in this area in Germany have noticed that most people who respond in the comment sections under articles only seem to have read the headline, not the full article. Unfortunately, many editorial teams say they lack sufficient resources to moderate such comments sections as thoroughly as they should (The 'BetterPost' project).

4.3. **Other challenges of the communication environment.** Migration questions are situated at the centre of a wider "post-truth" crisis of liberal democracy. The financial incentives and political agendas underpinning the current media landscape therefore need to be recognised and addressed.

Intentional confusion is being produced by a number of so-called "think tanks" and "observatories" that are in fact founded by individuals with xenophobic, racist or extreme anti-immigration views they wish to promulgate. One sign that somewhere is not engaged in genuine scientific research was said to be the implausibly frequent production of their "studies". Similarly, there are now some "fact-checking" platforms that are deliberately spreading disinformation. Meanwhile, those academics and others who are engaged in genuine research often lack the skills and support to act as public communicators.

5. **Misinformation concerning the European Court of Human Rights' case law on migration and on freedom of expression.** Multiple contributors drew attention to the frequent misrepresentation of the Convention's standards and case law related to migration. A study conducted in the United Kingdom by the Oxford University Bonavero Institute of Human Rights between January and June 2025 found that 75% of mainstream media news stories about the Convention related to migration (mostly the issue of deportation of "Foreign National Offenders") and that these stories misrepresented the facts of cited cases. One ludicrously misreported case was elevated to become a paradigmatic example used by those arguing that the Convention obstructs British sovereignty. They also found that the United Kingdom's immigration tribunal system was misunderstood and misreported, and that (at that time) there was a lack of reliable data available from the government or from other credible sources to promptly counter such misreporting. Analysis showed that one report, which the Roundtable suspected had been planted by a politically motivated actor, was cited by many other outlets and effectively "mis-disseminated". This created a "ratchetting effect" with outsized impact on the discourse.

Another contributor drew attention to the European public's lack of understanding in relation to case law on freedom of expression, and how this pertains to the issues under discussion. The 'Handyside principle' that freedom of expression extends to ideas that can "offend, shock and disturb" (*Handyside v. United Kingdom*), for example, does not extend as far as hate speech, while the public meanwhile does have the right to be "properly informed" on all matters affecting them. Migration policy and practice are matters that meet this public interest principle (*The Sunday Times v. United Kingdom No.1*), as confirmed in the case of *Szurovecz v. Hungary* in which the Court

concluded that whether the State fulfilled its international obligations regarding protection of asylum seekers was indisputably newsworthy and of public interest. As a result, the government could not deny a journalist access to a detention centre to interview asylum seekers. Furthermore, in the case of *Dink v. Turkey*, it was confirmed that State parties have a positive obligation to ensure that everyone can participate in public debates without fear, and this includes debates about migration. Such case law provides the legal basis for member states to tackle the chilling effect of unregulated hate speech.

While there is no binding definition of hate speech, the Court has confirmed that politicians not only have far-reaching rights to freedom of expression but at the same time heightened duties with regard to avoiding incitement of hatred (*Norwood v. United Kingdom*). A 2022 Council of Europe Council of Ministers Recommendation on combating hate speech (CM/Rec2022(16)) importantly highlights the direct, causal link between mis/disinformation and hate speech and sets out practical, non-binding guidance to member states and others on how to tackle it within a human rights framework. Also, the close link between hate speech and hate crime is identified in the 2024 Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation on combating hate crime (CM/Rec(2024(4), esp. paras. 55-56).

6. **The "salience trap" and the deeply embedded nature of public attitudes.** Research has found that increased polarisation of attitudes about migration is mainly driven by increased salience.[3] Eurobarometer data going back over a decade, analysed by Dennison and Geddes in a forthcoming publication,[4] shows that while publics' feelings about inter-EU migration have been largely positive and stable in most countries, immigration coming from outside the EU was generally regarded with rising positivity until the 2010s, then opinions plateaued, and have started to decrease in positivity only during the past two or three years. Nonetheless, the general picture is one of a surprising stability in public attitudes, despite the obvious political volatility of the topic. This apparent contradiction is explained by the way that the media (including social media) activates people's deeply embedded attitudes at times when migration is perceived as having higher immediate importance to their country or region.

This has two important implications. Firstly, since personal attitudes on this subject are formed from an early age and tend to be very "sticky", media can merely set the agenda or seek to persuade on particular sub-topics, but the overall predisposition to welcome or fear migration is unlikely to be changed by anything so short-term as a fact-based communications strategy. Secondly, since increased salience of migration among policy issues inevitably translates, for most audiences, to the assumption that migration is a problem, then increased reporting on migration – even if intended to be positive or constructive – can be counter-productive.

7. **When to ignore and when to answer mis/disinformation.** Following from the dilemma of the 'salience trap', the question of when stakeholders with finite resources should counter mis/disinformation with reactive communications was discussed. In recognition that mis/disinformation and hate speech against migrants are often used to distract from larger structural and socio-economic issues, and conscious of the negative side-effects of repeating mis/disinformation when attempting to counter it, contributors emphasised the need for institutions and others to develop criteria for when and how to respond (see Appendix 1 below).

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[3] 'Salience' refers to how prominent and prioritised an issue is (in this context, in the media and in public discussion) at any particular point in time.
[4] Dennison, J. and Geddes, A. (2026), *What Europeans think about immigration and why it matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

The importance of supporting individuals with migrant backgrounds when they are in the frontline of such countering efforts – and perhaps suffering or living in fear of violence, including digital violence, as a result – was repeatedly emphasised.

8. **Supplementing facts with values and emotions.** Most communication guides produced to support a more balanced understanding of migration and its consequences, or which are human rights based, have concluded that facts on their own are rarely enough. Such guides tend to recommend appeals to people's core values – in particular, framing of stories in ways that appeal to multiple Schwartz value sets rather than solely the 'universalist' value set. There is, however, no consensus on this approach, as some find the triggering of non-universalist values to be detrimental; others recommend beginning messages with appeals to "benevolence values" (care for those close to you) as these values sit between universalist and more traditional, security-centred values, and then only secondarily attempting a more universalist appeal.

   Such guides also tend to emphasise the need to trigger emotional (cognitive, psychological and behavioural) reactions in certain ways. Meta-analysis suggests, however, that emotions and values are better at changing the agenda than persuading anyone towards a particular viewpoint.

   The same meta-analysis also indicates that the components allowing facts to be heard more effectively are:
   - the degree of conformity between the newcomers and the receiving society;
   - the identification of any common interests and common ground; and
   - the nature of the migrant population.

   Appeals to the idea of "diversity", or to people's own perceived self-interest, or the choice of messenger, all seem to have little measurable effect on a communication's effectiveness. There was discussion of some practitioners' hypothesis that a diverse "ensemble" of messengers in a single communication does tend to be more effective than using any one individual messenger, since it conveys the sense that the views expressed are widely shared among people of many identities, but this requires further study.

9. **Structuring of individual communications in response to mis/disinformation.** Various layered "sandwich" structures for public messages were recommended by contributors. These included the "fact/myth/refuted fallacy/fact" layering tested as most successful by BIT and the University of New South Wales Kaldor Centre (see Appendix 1) and a "truth/refuted fallacy/truth/context" structure utilised by BetterPost in Germany. These recommendations may require situational testing.

10. **A portfolio of approaches is required.** No one simple "playbook", messaging guide or communications strategy is applicable to all situations in this complex and vast terrain. On the one hand, there was optimism about technical solutions, such as large language models and monitoring projects able to gauge the level of hate speech in media and social media (cf., for example, Institute of Strategic Dialogue monitoring). Their use can be followed by the engagement of digital regulators and law enforcement to deliver robust responses to hate speech, or to achieve disruption of the mis/disinformation systems that ultimately generate and amplify hate speech.

   On the other end of the spectrum, there was emphasis on the need for longer term frameworks to support civil society stakeholders with building social resilience in the face of disinformation. Multiple contributors recommended a "public health model" of

prevention and inoculation rather than simply "cure". Certainly, when it comes to promoting a more fact-based understanding of migration, a portfolio of multi-level and multi-stakeholder, online and offline investments will be required.

11. **Localism as an effective approach, despite the dominance of "sociotropic" concerns.** Research has repeatedly found that most people's thinking about migration is dominated by "sociotropic" concerns, meaning concerns about the state of their nation or culture, rather than localised concerns directly affecting them. Paradoxically, it may be precisely because migration resides imaginatively as a "problem" at the macro level that a key part of the solution lies in taking it back down to the place where realities can be witnessed at first hand: the micro level.

    A portfolio of responses therefore needs to include engagement of stakeholders all the way down to local neighbourhoods, and investment in local bridge-building processes which, for example, might embody interculturalism's principle of "meaningful interaction" across lines of difference (CDADI 2021(6)). Such interaction can be either spontaneous (encouraged by policies, for example, to break down spatial segregation in town planning) or they can be a series of events designed by a local authority or its partners. These could even be participatory consultations with local communities about communications – for example, what they might want to understand about the migration and integration systems.

    Local media communications are also likely to be effective for several reasons.

    - Local news media, including community media, are intrinsically more likely than national media to run good news stories, reporting on instances of reciprocity between locals and newcomers, or stories of individuals with a migration background contributing to their communities.
    - There are intrinsic cognitive benefits to proximity, where people are better able to assess distortions, exaggerations or falsehoods.
    - Local politicians are consistently shown to be more trusted by the public than other politicians and other messengers are also likely to be more relatable to their audiences if they share (local) characteristics and values with those audiences.

12. **Education as a long-term approach.** Section 4 of the Council of Europe Council of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec2022(16) on combating hate speech emphasises the duty to raise awareness of hate speech and promote "counter-speech" through education and training at every level and involving all varieties of stakeholders and audience. Migration can be a useful example topic within broader curriculums that cover media literacy and critical thinking, for example, but there is a need to supply teachers with good data and training so that they can feel confident leading discussions.

    While there is some debate among experts about the effectiveness of adult education on topics like migration, one contributor emphasised the need for a whole-society, human rights based but non-partisan approach, aligned to mental health, youth and educational policy more generally. Again, such an approach is about local empowerment.

13. **Entertainment and culture as another approach within the portfolio.** Facts do not only mean data and case law; there are also factual narratives of lived experience that will best resonate when they come with the specificity, nuance and emotional impact that only art can carry. Cooperation with the independent creative industries and support for artists and their organisations, especially those that are refugee or migrant led, are a means of both side-stepping the "salience trap" described above, and also

triggering less psychological "reactance" than political communications (see: European Commission 2025). They are a valuable way to encourage public debate. Entertainment and culture are, furthermore, the most effective routes by which to reach those audiences, particularly the young, who no longer consume traditional news sources.

III.   POTENTIAL FUTURE ACTIONS AND APPROACHES

The following are not intended as a comprehensive set of recommendations but are a selection of those suggested by the Roundtable's contributors and conveners. They are offered in the context of possible future work, both by the Council of Europe (for example, the recent production of public reference documents on law and policy, such as the DMR's FAQ on the European Court of Human Rights and migration and the Migration Key Facts Sheet) and by the Council of Europe's partners such as UNHCR, EU, NHRIs and civil society.

14. States, in the spirit of the New Democratic Pact for Europe, need to be further assisted in ensuring that international **legal standards** relating to freedom of expression and combating hate speech and hate crime are embedded in national legislation, standards and practice, and are applied in the context of anti-migrant mis/disinformation.

15. Allocated **communications budgets** are then required for promoting familiarity with those standards – and, in addition, for the European Court of Human Rights to respond effectively to harmful misreporting of its case law. Accurate data on migration topics (including Convention case law relevant to migrants' or refugees' rights) should be circulated to members of national parliaments and to NHRIs and CSOs who can become positive multipliers.

16. It is the responsibility of **parliamentarians, other political leaders, NHRIs and civil society** to respond strategically to **communications which fall below the legal threshold of hate speech**, but which nonetheless perpetuate stereotypes or trigger baseless fears in relation to migrants and refugees. The Council of Europe and other intergovernmental institutions can help NHRIs and civil society organisations in their member states to do this in a more systematic and coordinated way.

17. Continuing investment is needed in genuine think-tanks and academic observatories who can conduct **rigorous research on migration** but also then communicate their findings to the media. Media training and contacts should be provided to such researchers, while both communications and migration studies research agendas should address the areas of uncertainty faced by those trying to effectively communicate reliable information on migration to the public.

More research and evaluation are required, for example, on the effect of using multiple versus solo speakers in particular communications; how to apply emotions and values while remaining fact-based; the way to pivot between different sets of values, and other ways to elicit empathy for migrants as human beings who share much in common with their non-migrant neighbours; and evaluating the long-term impact of offline interventions that build social resilience, despite their relatively high cost and despite the scale, speed and statistical results more easily generated by short-term online interventions.

18. More training of **journalists** on reliable sources of information about migration, and the means of identifying mis/disinformation, is needed. This might involve workshops to discuss common sub-themes of migration reporting so that journalists gain in confidence when covering them. Workshops are most useful to train those journalists and other content-producers who are unintentionally creating misinformation or

clickbait that can worsen stereotyping and/or fear of migrants. They can be reminded of their ethical and legal responsibilities, including comment section or community forum moderation, in relation to this topic. Management of online communities can be improved by setting clear guidelines and response rules for resourced teams to follow, using AI as support, and allowing space for team discussions when problems arise.

19. Migration should be a topic in all major **journalism schools' curriculums** (as too should be the functions and processes of relevant national and international legal systems). Ongoing professional development should be available to journalists to keep pace with changes in migration research, policy and law.

20. More **journalists with lived experience of (forced) migration** should be included in newsrooms to promote nuanced reporting of these issues, and there should be wider scope for linking international reporting from other continents to the situations of migrant and refugee populations in Europe.

21. **The Marseille Charter on Information and Migration**, and similar charters in Italy, Greece and elsewhere, might serve as models for developing more focused ethical media guidance regarding reporting on migration. The possibility of a European charter that requires commitments similar to the eleven principles of the Marseille Charter could be discussed with the European Federation of Journalists and others.

22. **Press councils** in member states are important partners in this process of journalistic self-regulation. Though the number of cases adjudicated by such councils may be small (albeit increasing with the scale of mis/disinformation), their work can have a much broader deterrent function. When it comes to migration, the wider aim to promote responsible and ethical reporting relates to helping journalists search for reliable sources, put data into context, and avoid the use of ethnic stereotyping and stigmatisation.

23. News media might be encouraged to **break the (usually false and weaponised) association between migrants and crime** by mentioning the nationality of the perpetrator every time a crime is reported, including when the perpetrator is a citizen. Though one might think this would reinforce a negative assumption that nationality relevant, research in Germany has shown that *Sächsische Zeitung* doing this has decreased readers' fear of migrants.

24. The Division on Migrants and Refugees may explore possibilities of more synergies with the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and the Intercultural Cities Unit, to develop **local-level strategies** for member states around this issue. These could involve not only support for independent local media and community media, and a reprioritisation of governmental communication at that level, but also support for in-person, intercultural interactions that encourage bridge-building and cooperation between newcomers and their neighbours.

25. **Education, entertainment, sports and culture** should be included as crucial channels for communicating the realities of migration and integration to the public. Those directly involved in migration and integration policy should therefore be in dialogue with their colleagues in these departments, as well as people in the creative industries, to look for synergies and joint projects.

26. According to researchers, human rights based communication on migration that seeks to employ values and emotions alongside facts will find the most resonant messages to be those that **emphasise any elements of commonality** between newcomers and the audience.

27. More research could be conducted on **the values, attitudes and concerns of local populations** so that facts relating to their specific concerns can be better highlighted in local communications strategies. If their concerns are primarily cultural, for example, then there would be little point prioritising facts about the economic cost-benefits of immigration.

28. The Council of Europe could begin to compile **a practical compendium** of:
    - media organisations and platforms handling this most contentious of subjects in a fact-based, human rights based and effective manner;
    - national, regional and local authorities countering hate speech and misinformation with some effectiveness, and/or actively promoting more balanced and nuanced narratives in mainstream media;
    - examples of state action aimed at preserving freedom of debate and plurality of independent perspectives on these issues.

Appendix 1

With regard to **when and how to react to misinformation**, the Kaldor Centre's recommended 'decision tree' for engagement strategies (see below) centres on two key questions useful for practitioners:

a) *Is the misinformation expected or already in circulation?*
   If the former (for example, in anticipation of an election), then it is best to pre-empt (or 'pre-bunk') with a warning about the motivations of those bad faith actors who are disseminating the falsehoods, and/or by exposing their manipulative techniques, and/or by issue-based factual refutation.

b) *If already in circulation, does the misinformation pass the '3 Ps test' ? Namely, is it prominent, persuasive and proximate?*
   If so, then attempt to debunk it using a 'fact sandwich' made to match your context and audience, where facts introduce and conclude (to fix in the memory) but where the myth or misinformation is also mentioned in a way that 'removes the heat' from it and where the fallacy is clearly explained.

'Decision Tree for Countering Misinformation'

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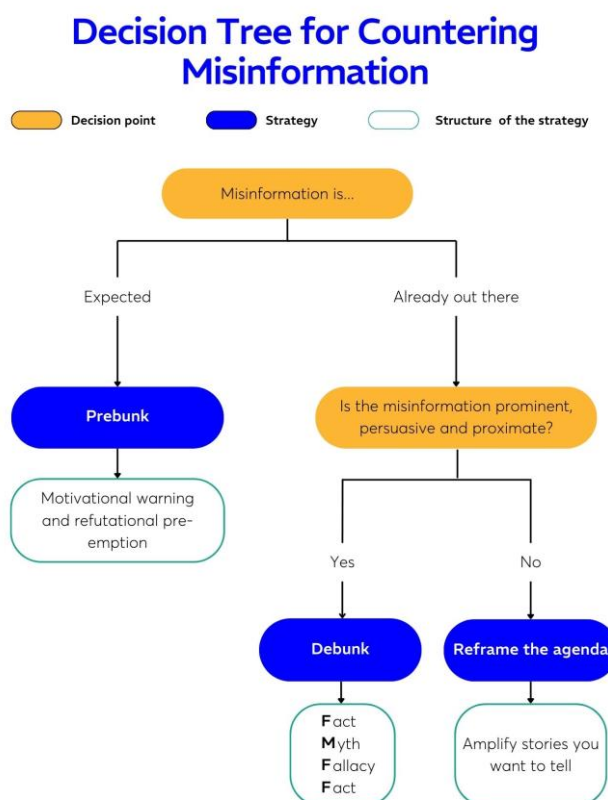
Appendix 2

Contributing Experts

The 12 contributing experts, in order of presentation, were:

- Daniel Ghezelbash, Professor and Director of the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, UNSW, Australia
- Ophelia Field, Independent Researcher and Consultant, ICC Programme
- Basak Çali, Professor of International Law, Head of Research at the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights, University of Oxford
- Tamás Berecz, General Manager, International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH), The Netherlands
- Tania Racho, PhD in Fundamental Rights, Consultant Désinfox-Migrations
- Leila Amar, Journalist, Guiti News, France
- Muriel Hanot, Secretary General, Council for Journalistic Ethics (CDJ), Belgium
- James Dennison, Professor at Harvard Kennedy School & Part-time Professor, Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, Florence
- Myria Georgiou, Professor of Media and Communications, London School of Economics
- Tarlach McGonagle, Professor of Media Law and Information Society, University of Amsterdam
- Jacob Davey, Director of Policy and Research, Counter-Hate, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, UK
- Judith Höllmann, *Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen e.V.*, Germany