Building support for civic space: A messaging guide for Croatian civil society

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I. About the Guide

This guide is intended for staff working in organisations that want to improve attitudes among the public towards NGOs that promote progressive causes such as human rights, equality, anti-corruption and environmental protection, using tools such as campaigning, litigation and advocacy. For the remainder of the guide, these NGOs are referred to as 'advocacy NGOs'.

Public audiences can be divided into at least three segments on progressive causes, such as human rights, equality, environmental protection and social justice. Those who are solidly in favour of your cause (the base), those who are solidly against (opponents), and those in the middle, who are moveable. The moveable middle can be further divided into those who lean in your favour (soft-supporters), those who lean towards your opponents (soft opponents) and those who can go either way (undecideds).

Your 'base' includes your existing supporters, but also people who would be very likely to support you if you can reach them with your messages. Research in different countries on different human rights-related topics suggests that this base can be anything between 15% and 25% of the population.[1] The same is true for opponents. Your base and your opponents won't usually change their position. But the middle segments can. This moveable middle is usually the biggest chunk of the public.

Public-facing campaigns that are aimed at growing public support for a particular cause should try to mobilise your base and enlist their help to spread your message to shift at least part of the moveable middle over to your side. The messaging advice in this guide is designed to mobilise and persuade your base, soft supporters and undecideds.

Currently, advocacy NGOs message in a way that is likely only to appeal to supporters and is either ineffective or counterproductive with moveable middle audiences. This contrasts to your opponents' messaging. Although we do not have data to prove this in Croatia, evidence from other countries suggests that concerted smear campaigns against advocacy NGOs shift undecideds from neutral to negative views, while not affecting support from supporters and soft supporters.[2] Smear campaigns against NGOs are used as a tool in their own right to harass and intimidate staff at NGOs and reduce public trust and support, and are often a prelude to legal and policy proposals to restrict civic space.

This guide will help users to shore up support among supporters and soft supporters and win over undecideds. As a result, advocacy NGOs will be better able to fend off restrictions, deter the use of smear campaigns and, in the long-term, grow public support for measures that deliver a healthy civic space.

[1] Much of this research is unpublished, but for published research that segments the population see research by More In Common on attitudes towards migration, available via their website.
[2] See further the review of research contained in the Annex to Butler, I., 'How to talk about civic space: A guide for progressive civil society facing smear campaigns', Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2021.

The guide is informed by the science and practice behind narrative change. This guide refers to this approach as ‘persuasive messaging’. It draws heavily on the work of Anat Shenker-Osorio. The recommendations in this guide are based on an analysis of Croatian public opinion on civic space as well as message testing. These were carried out through social listening over Facebook (June and July 2024) on selected Croatian language pages as well as focus groups with undecideds (October 2025). The same project also explored attitudes and tested messaging on migration, which also inform the findings in this guide. While the messages were tested with undecideds, as noted, they have been developed to also appeal to the base and soft supporters. Put otherwise, messages that risk alienating your base or soft supporters are not included in this guide.

The guide uses the term ‘progressive’ in a non-politically partisan sense to refer to public interest causes recognised in European legal instruments such as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Section II of the guide highlights current messaging habits of advocacy NGOs that are probably working against them and explains what to do instead. Section III explains the structure of a persuasive message and sets out sample messaging, including creative content and messaging designed to respond to attacks.

II. Drawbacks of current messaging practice.

Section II reviews the messaging habits of advocacy NGOs, points out where these are counter-productive and makes suggestions on how to improve them. Campaigners tend to make certain mistakes when trying to persuade public audiences to support advocacy NGOs as a sector or the specific causes they work on. These mistakes can be divided into two categories. First, in the way that they structure their messages. Second, in the details of their messaging. This section will outline these messaging mistakes to help you avoid them.

A. Structural mistakes

Campaigners tend to try to build support by using messages that focus on the harm they are fighting (like restrictions on protests, the introduction of bureaucratic burdens for NGOs, restrictions on funding opportunities or smear attacks) and then talking about the appropriate legal or policy solution (for example, changing the relevant law, policy or institutional structures).

Messages that contain only one or both these ingredients tend not to be effective at persuading audiences outside your supporters. This isn't to say that information about the harm and the solution don't belong in the message. Rather, the problem is that there are other elements missing. These include not giving the audience a (good enough) reason to care about the cause being advanced - whether that's civic space in general or the specific topics advocacy NGOs work on - not explaining why the harm is happening, and not giving the audience a vision to inspire them.

To understand the structural mistakes set out in this subsection, it would help campaigners if they first understand the structure that a message should follow in order to be most effective. Section III will go into this in more detail.

Structure of a persuasive message (also referred to as a 'narrative')

1) Values statement: tell your audience how the cause you are advancing delivers something that they find important for themselves, people they care about or people whom they consider to be like them.

2) Explain the problem: show your audience that the things they care about are at risk or aren't being delivered. Set out who or what is causing the problem and, in certain circumstances, what their motivation is.

3) Explain the vision your solution delivers: tell your audience what the world will look like if your solution is put into practice. This is often a call-back to the substance of the values statement. Do name your solution, but don't dwell on the policy details.

4) If necessary, show your audience that change is possible by reminding them of past positive social changes, and tell your audience what they can do to show their support for your solution.

i. Not giving your audience a good enough reason to care

Advocacy NGOs tend not to give their audience a (good enough) reason to care about the causes they are promoting. They tend to talk about the causes they promote in abstract or technical terms. Supporters tend to understand these terms and agree with them on principle. But moveable middle audiences don't understand how, for example, human rights standards help to protect or promote things that they value. Abstract arguments that do not connect to tangible things or moral rules that your audience finds important will have no emotional impact on them. And the latter is necessary in order to mobilise them to spread a message and take action in support of a cause.

For example, we asked focus groups participants to react to the following message:

'Snažno i zdravo civilno društvo ključno je za demokraciju. Udruge omogućuju običnim građanima da političarima govore o problemima koje želimo da se riješe. Udruge također doprinose svojim iskustvom da bi zakonodavci donosili bolje zakone, a ujedno nadziru one na vlasti kako ne bi kršili zakon ili oduzimali naša prava.'[3]

This message is a summary of an argument frequently made by advocacy NGOs, though in a more concise and clearer form than the typical style of advocacy NGOs. The same or similar message was also tested in focus groups in three other EU countries. Participants reacted to it in almost the same way in all countries. They appreciated that it was clear and concise but remarked that it had no emotional impact.

The legal arguments that advocacy NGOs typically use are also unlikely to have the desired impact on moveable middle audiences. Again, this is because the audience is unlikely to see the link between particular legal standards and things that they find important. Section III of the guide will go into more depth, but below are some short examples of how to shift away from using abstract or legal arguments and instead articulate what these principles or standards deliver that is of importance to your audience.

[3] English translation: 'A strong and healthy civil society is essential for democracy. Associations give ordinary citizens a way to talk to politicians about the problems we want solving. They also contribute their expertise to law-makers so they make better laws, and they monitor people in power so they don't break the law or take away our rights.'

From	To
Human rights law obliges governments to guarantee people's basic needs.	Human rights give us the means to demand that our leaders fund the things our communities need to thrive, like good schools and modern hospitals.
Everyone is protected against discrimination.	No matter the colour of our skin, who we love, who we pray to or how old we are, most of us agree that all of us should get the same opportunities to do well in life.
Marriage equality.	Everyone should be free to make a long-term commitment to the person they love, no matter who they are attracted to.
Environmental protection.	Most of us want our children to breathe clean air and drink clean water.
Democracy.	We all want our leaders to listen to our concerns and do what's best for ordinary people.
Anti-corruption.	The resources we contribute should go to fund the things we all rely on, like roads, schools and hospitals.
The right to asylum.	Most of us will do whatever it takes to keep our families safe and give them a better life. We work, sacrifice, and even pack up everything so we can put food on the table, a roof over their heads and send our kids to a decent school.

ii. Making your message mostly about the harm you are fighting

Typically, advocacy NGOs focus their messaging on the hardships they are fighting. For example, in relation to civic space this means informing your audience that the government has reduced or cut off funding to civil society. On a topic like environmental protection it might mean informing your audience about levels of pollution caused by fossil fuel use. Or on migration it might mean making your audience aware of pushbacks or other forms of mistreatment.

However, awareness of the harms advocacy NGOs are fighting by itself tends not to be enough to persuade people outside the base to support us, and it has several drawbacks. First, it can cause the audience to tune out because they don't want to engage with a purely negative message. Second, it can make the audience feel like the problem is too big or difficult to solve.

Third, it leaves the audience to fill in their own (usually mistaken) explanations for why the problem is happening. For example, campaigners might expect their audience to react to the news that the Croatian authorities carry out violent pushbacks at the border by thinking that the government should provide more safe and legal routes. However, when we tested this message in focus groups, the audience instead blamed asylum seekers for trying to enter the country illegally instead of using 'legal' routes. This reaction seems to be based on a mistaken belief that there are readily available legal routes that asylum seekers choose not to take,.

Similarly, we know from the focus groups that among undecideds have a (superficially) negative frame of advocacy NGOs, which they see as organisations that take up public funds without doing anything useful for society. So if we were to inform this audience that the authorities are cutting funds for advocacy NGOs without adding other elements to the message (such as giving them a reason to care) they would be likely to react in the opposite way to what we intend. That is, they would probably think that reducing public funds is a good thing because it reduces waste.

For these reasons, it is important for your message to not only focus on talking about the harm. But also to include other elements such as giving your audience a reason to care about advocacy NGOs and, if responding to smears, explain the motivation behind the attack.

iii. Talking about the technical solution but not the vision

Campaigners often have solid recommendations about the legal and policy reforms government should carry out. It's important to talk about policies and technicalities when you're telling the authorities what they need to do. But when talking to a public audience, focusing on laws and policies isn't enough to mobilise them, and going into too much policy or legal detail will even demotivate them.

Instead, you should mention the law or policy or decision that you want from the authorities. But campaigners must also set out their vision: if this solution is put in place, what will the world look like? What does this solution deliver for your audience? Below are some examples.

Not only the technical solution	But also what it delivers
The government should introduce / increase the minimum wage.	People who work should be paid enough to support their families.
The courts should automatically dismiss lawsuits based on insufficient evidence, make plaintiffs bear the costs and compensate defendants.	When we protect journalists from bogus lawsuits, we get the information we need to demand our leaders deliver the things we rely on.

NGOs should be protected from abusive audits and smear campaigns.	When we are free to come together and join our voices, we can demand that our leaders solve the problems that worry us.
The government should invest in renewable energy sources, green technologies and energy saving measures.	By funding locally-made green energy and improving our homes we can all afford to stay warm this winter.
The government should introduce minimum standards for public consultation.	All of us want a say in decisions that affect us. / When citizens get to have our say, our leaders make decisions that benefit all of us.

iv. Direct contradictions and repeating damaging frames

When NGOs are victims of smear campaigns the most common response is to contradict the smears and try to establish the correct facts, perhaps using a myth-busting format. When we try to counter our opponents by directly contradicting their claims, we end up reinforcing the original damaging message, rather than the correction. To contradict a claim we need to repeat it, and repetition makes information stick in the brain. The emotive words carry more weight and the words we use to negate the false claim ('no', 'not', 'no one', 'nothing') get forgotten.[4] For example, saying that 'we do not misuse public funds' or 'we are not paid political activists' will just tend to entrench the original damaging attack. Section III sets out how to counter misinformation by using a 'truth sandwich' or by reframing the issue.

Sometimes advocacy NGOs try to proactively refute claims that they are corrupt or are under the control of donors with malicious agendas. Even though this is not a direct contradiction, it is still an unhelpful approach because it repeats damaging frames. As will be discussed below, trust in NGOs is primarily based on your audience's agreement with the cause you promote. But if an NGO tries to build trust by arguing that it has safeguards and processes in place to guarantee that funds are spent correctly or to maintain independence, this is likely to backfire. It most likely prompts your audience to question your trustworthiness by asking why an organisation needs such safeguards to begin with.[5] Furthermore, any airtime

[4] See review of research in: Schwarz, N. et al., 'Making the truth stick and the myths fade: Lessons from cognitive psychology' 2 Behavioural Science and Policy (2016), 85.

[5] See research discussed in: Keating, V. & Thrandardottir, 'NGOs, trust and the accountability agenda', 19 British Journal of Politics and International Relations (2017) 134. This article points to social psychology research that shows individuals are more likely to trust each other where they cooperate without external guarantees like a contract. External guarantees, like a contract, were found to lower trust between people who cooperate. Although some research finds that integrity is important to drive trust towards CSOs, this is mostly carried out in countries where the risk of misuse of funds by CSOs is part of public awareness. e.g. Saudi Arabia and Mexico. See: Alhidari, I. et al., 'Modeling the effect of multidimensional trust on individual monetary donations to charitable organisations', 47 Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly (2018) 623; Ron, J. et al., 'Ordinary people will pay for rights. We asked them.' Open Global Rights, 15 February 2017. The analysis of Keating & Thrandardottir, that focusing communications on integrity in a situation where it is not overtly in question (for example from a scandal or smear campaign) can backfire is also borne out by

dedicated to making these unproductive arguments is a missed opportunity to talk to the public about the thing that is effective at winning over their support; namely, the causes advocacy NGOs promote.

B. Mistakes in the details of the message

i. Negative slogans

Slogans capture the essence of your message. Currently, advocacy NGOs' messages tend to focus on the harm they are fighting, rather than talking about the world they want to create or showing their audience why their cause delivers something important to them. As a result, the slogans they use tend to be negative: saying 'no' to something bad, or calling for something bad to 'stop'.

This can become a problem, because we need to mobilise people to take action. And to mobilise moveable middle audiences they need a vision of a better future that they're willing to fight for. It's better to have a message that is, overall, a positive one. You can do this by focusing on what your campaign will preserve or prevent your audience from losing, and you can do it by invoking your vision of what things will look like if you win. This doesn't mean campaigns can never have a negative slogan, but the message behind the slogan should be a positive one. Below are some examples.

From this	To this
Stop corruption	Fund our futures
We stand against discrimination	Freedom to… / Yes to equality
Stop burning fossil fuels	We want clean air / protect our health
No more violence against women	Safety for women and girls
End pushbacks	Compassion first

ii. Using overly sophisticated language

Communicators should keep their language at a level that will be understood by their audience, who are not experts and may not necessarily have a university degree. This doesn't just apply to legal jargon - it also applies to using complicated language more generally. Research shows that when we use language that is too complicated for our audience, this frustrates them and puts them off from taking part in the discussion.[6]

research on framing in general, which shows that making a 'non-problem' salient to your audience can backfire.

[6] See Schulman, H., et al., 'The effects of jargon on processing fluency, self-perceptions, and scientific engagement', Journal of Language and Social Psychology (2020); Oppenheimer, D.,

The social listening report suggests that people outside of policy, academic, civil society and donor circles do not use the term 'civic space' or 'civil society'. Moveable middle audiences tend to speak about specific substantive topics, events, protests and, sometimes, organisations. In focus groups nobody understood the terms 'civil society organisations' (organizacije civilnog društva) or 'non-governmental organisations' (nevladine organizacije). When we used the term association (udrudge), this brought to mind associations involved in service provision or grassroots associations in the minds of undecideds. However, undecideds were happy to refer to advocacy NGOs as 'associations' after we described the causes they work on and the tools they use.[7] In situations where you need to refer to advocacy NGOs collectively, we therefore suggest that you use descriptive language and be as precise as possible, rather than referring to 'civil society', CSOs or NGOs. For example, associations that work on… / associations that are trying to change… / associations that are drawing attention to… .

Below are some further examples of how to simplify language advocacy NGOs tend to use.

From this	To this
SLAPPs.	Bogus lawsuits designed to stop associations helping ordinary people come together to protect e.g. their clean water / air, public funds from corruption.
We need transparency.	Our elected representatives should show / tell / explain how they make decisions (so that citizens know what is going on and can give their opinion).
Integration measures.	We should support people who come here for work or for safety to learn our language and culture and get a job so they can support their families and rebuild their lives.
Inclusion.	All of us, whether we have a disability or not, should have the same chance to live a good life.
Public consultation.	Citizens want to have a say over decisions that affect them.
Violation.	Broke the law.

'Consequences of erudite vernacular utilised irrespective of necessity: Problems with using long words needlessly', Applied Cognitive Psychology (2006).

[7] We described advocacy NGOs as 'associations' that 'work on issues like migration, equality between men and women, the environment, equality for LGBTQ Croatians, and fighting corruption in politics and government', gave examples of marches and protests as tools they used and explained how they make government responsive and accountable to ordinary people.

Right to education / health care.	A good school for our children; we should be able to see a doctor and get treatment when we're sick.
Everyone has a right to participate in a democracy.	The only way for democracy to work for all of us is if it includes all of us. That's why every person has an equal vote in elections.
Accessibility.	Everyone should be able to get to and move around the places they need to be, whether it's the town hall, the place we work or a supermarket.

iii. Educational approaches

Campaigners sometimes try to educate audiences into agreeing with them. This tends to involve breaking down complicated concepts or explaining legal texts or their origins. Sometimes this is combined with myth-busting. The problem with educational approaches is that it tends to hide from the audience what the causes advocacy NGOs promote deliver for them that they find important.

Although formal human rights education has been shown to make students more supportive of human rights, advocacy NGOs are not communicating in an educational setting. We cannot force our audience to absorb hours of our materials. In a campaign context, educational content is a useful tool for helping the base or journalists deepen their knowledge. But it is not an appropriate tool for shifting opinions among the moveable middle.

This isn't to say that campaigners cannot give the moveable middle new information and perspectives. But they should only do this to the extent that it's necessary for the audience to understand why the cause being promoted is important. For example, imagine a situation where an environmental NGO wants to persuade their audience to oppose an industrial development that will harm local nature. And the NGO knows that their audience is worried about extreme weather, so campaigners want to argue that the development should be opposed because it will make extreme weather events more severe. But the NGO also knows that this audience does not understand that local forests and marshlands provide protection against floods and heatwaves. For this argument to work with that audience, campaigners would therefore need to explain to them how nature mitigates the impact of extreme weather locally.

Otherwise, as a general rule, campaigners should focus on explaining what the right or principle they're talking about delivers to the audience, rather than trying to break down the content. Below are examples of how to talk about judicial independence and the rule of law or SLAPPs.

From this	To this

An independent judiciary is a requirement of the rule of law that protects against corruption.	Most of us want our leaders to fund the schools, hospitals, roads and buses our communities rely on. To make that happen, judges check that our representatives are following the rules and not pocketing our resources. Judges need to be independent from politicians so they can do their job without fear or favour.
An independent judiciary is an element of the rule of law that ensures citizens' rights and freedoms are protected.	When judges owe their jobs to politicians, helping them pass their dangerous laws come first, and protecting our rights, like abortion care or having clean air and water, comes second.
SLAPPs are Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation designed to silence critical voices like activists or journalists by harassing them and draining their resources with baseless lawsuits.	Focus instead on the cause you are promoting and then explain SLAPPS as a problem that stops us delivering something we find important. e.g. All of us want air that's safe to breathe and water that's clean to drink, especially for our children and older relatives whose health is most at risk from pollution. But company x has been secretly leaking poisonous chemicals into the water and air. And now they are trying to stop journalists from telling the public by using bogus lawsuits to harass and bankrupt them.

III. Sample messaging and creative assets

Section III explains how to structure a persuasive message and gives examples of how to execute this, including through creative content, before covering how to respond to misinformation.

A. The structure of a persuasive message

Research and practice on public attitude change show that there are several common barriers that can prevent the audience from lending their support. These include: not seeing how the cause being promoted delivers something that they find important; having an inaccurate understanding of why the problem is happening (leading them to support the wrong solutions); not having a vision to inspire them to action; and thinking that change is too difficult to achieve (referred to as fatalism).

Campaigners can overcome these barriers by developing messages that follow a particular structure in a particular order. This type of three or four part message is referred to here as a 'narrative':

1) Values statement: tell your audience how the cause you're advancing delivers something that they find important for themselves, people they care about or people whom they consider to be like them.

Advocacy NGOs can speak about the causes they advance in two ways: the substantive topic they're working on and their structural role in society; more specifically they fact that they help to bring people together to make their voices heard and make positive change in society. This section will offer examples of how to communicate both of these dimensions.

2) Explain the problem: show your audience that the things they care about are at risk or aren't being delivered. Set out who or what is causing the problem. If executing a 'strategic' version of a narrative or a 'truth sandwich' you should also point out the motive behind the person causing the harm. This will be explained further below.

This means point out how the laws or policies you are contesting will mean that the audience or people they consider to be 'like them' will be harmed, or how values your audience thinks are important (like the need to treat people with compassion and dignity or the ability to join with others to have a say over decisions affecting them) will be threatened.

3) Explain the vision your solution delivers: tell your audience what the world will look like if your solution is put into practice. This is often a call-back to the substance of the values statement. Do name your solution, but don't dwell on the policy details.

4) Remind your audience that change is possible by pointing to past positive social changes, and tell your audience what they can do to show their support for your solution.

When people take action to support a cause, it helps create a 'social identity' for them, which in turn makes them more likely to remain engaged and take further action in future.[8] This is important if campaigners are trying to expand their base of supporters to mobilise in future campaigns. A call to action can be something small, like asking the audience to share or respond to social media content. Research also shows that even when the audience agrees with you, they can still be reluctant to do things you ask of them because they have a sense of fatalism and feel that 'nothing changes'. Pointing to past examples of positive social change can help overcome this.[9]

In practice, reminders of past successes can get merged into the explanation of the solution, because it makes the message less repetitive. Following these three or four steps in the order given has been shown to be the most effective structure for a message that shifts your audience's attitudes towards your position and mobilises them to take action to show their support for your cause.

The sample narratives include different examples of times in the past where either people came together to achieve something (e.g. through protesting or volunteering) and/or where there was some significant legal or social change. Some of these were tested in focus groups. Others have been included here on the basis that they are similar and might reasonably be expected to work. e.g. preventing the privatisation of motorways, protecting Radio 101, obtaining education reform, support during COVID, earthquakes and flooding and protecting Srd in Dubrovnik from developers.

B. How to use the four-part narrative structure

Follow the four-part structure in full as often as you can. Some formats make it possible to use a full narrative, or allow you to add to the narrative with more detail, statistics, storytelling elements, or hooks for the media. For example, press releases, speeches, lines to take in an interview, or a video script.

Of course, it won't always be appropriate or possible to deliver the narrative in full every time. Sometimes you will be using communication formats with limited space. In this situation, it's fine to use only part of your narrative. Choose which part of the narrative to focus on according to what you think your audience needs to hear the most. For example, our analysis of undecideds' attitudes and message testing shows that it's very important to dedicate attention to dissolving the negative frames about migrants that exist. Sometimes the format you have available only allows you to summarise the essence of your narrative, such as when you develop a campaign slogan and image or hashtags.

[8] See e.g., Bamberg, S. et al., 'Environmental protection through societal change: What psychology knows about collective climate action - and what it needs to find out', in Psychology and Climate Change (2018).
[9] For an example of how fatalism affects your audience see: NEON, NEF, Frameworks Institute & PIRC, 'Framing the economy: How to win the case for a better system', (2018).

Look at your campaign materials in the round and ask: are there enough products carrying the whole narrative for my audience to see it; do my communications products either remind my audience of the overall message or help them understand it? And don't forget, you don't need to deliver all your message using words: you can represent elements of it through images and videos. Work with a creative person or agency who has some experience of narrative change work and has worked on social justice-related causes with non-profit organisations to convert your narrative into creative assets for campaigning. Examples are included below for inspiration.

C. Messaging considerations affecting campaign strategy

Sub-section D will set out the sample messages recommended by the guide. Sub-section C will first set out how messaging considerations might affect the strategy of a campaign to increase public support for advocacy NGOs. Message testing in the focus groups suggests that campaigners should use the 'we decide' narrative as an overarching narrative, but not by itself. To be effective, it needs to be used in combination with other messaging. The 'we decide' narrative builds support for advocacy NGOs by pointing to a) the causes that they promote and b) the tools that they use to bring people together to make their voices heard. However, there are two barriers that prevent the narrative currently resonating with undecideds.

- First, undecideds do not tend to appreciate how the causes advocacy NGOs promote deliver something they find important, and there isn't enough space in the narrative to unpack these causes sufficiently for the audience. Undecideds tend to be 'undecided' not just about advocacy NGOs but also the causes they work on. Put otherwise, you can't persuade undecideds that advocacy NGOs deserve their support by just listing causes like marriage equality or access to abortion, because this audience has mixed feelings about these causes.

  To overcome this barrier campaigners need to reach undecideds with messaging that helps them realise that the causes advocacy NGOs promote are important to them. To do this, campaigners might choose to run campaigns that focus on unpacking one or more progressive causes, which will in turn increase support for advocacy NGOs working on those issues. For example, a coalition of advocacy NGOs might collectively decide on a sequence of campaigns covering specific topics chosen on the basis of which causes attract the most smear attacks. Later in this section the guide will set out examples of messaging for inspiration.

- Second, undecideds tend to be fatalistic (i.e. do not think that people like them can make a difference) and are either unaware or do not have at the forefront of their minds that associations in general, and advocacy NGOs in particular, give people like them a way of uniting to pursue a cause and that this has allowed them to achieve tangible successes.

  Campaigners probably don't need a separate campaign to address this barrier - it could be done through dedicated creative materials as part of a campaign that

executes either the overarching ‘we decide’ narrative, or a campaign that focuses on unpacking specific progressive causes. To be clear, overcoming this barrier requires two kinds of related messaging. One is showing our audience that advocacy NGOs bring people together around a particular cause. The other is showing our audience past successes achieved by associations more generally, though examples attributable to advocacy NGOs would also be useful. Undecideds were sometimes unaware of the examples of past successes they were given, which affected how well they reacted to the message.

Assuming that advocacy NGOs can mount campaigns that reach undecideds with the right messaging about specific progressive topics, this would open the way for them to use the more general ‘we decide’ narrative in the longer-term.

How messaging on specific progressive causes stimulates support for the NGOs that promote them

Campaigners might ask why the guide suggests talking about the causes that advocacy NGOs promote as a way of improving attitudes towards the organisations that promote them. Research shows that trust in NGOs is based on how much a person supports the cause that organisation is promoting.[10] This finding was confirmed by the focus groups in Croatia, as well as the other EU countries where they were carried out. Further, people who trust NGOs are more likely to support them and the causes they promote. For example, by donating, volunteering, defending them from criticism, participating in protests and campaigns, or repeating their messages to others.[11]

[10] When an individual believes that an organisation shares their values, they are more likely to trust that organisation: Keating, V. & Thrandardottir, ‘NGOs, trust and the accountability agenda’, 19 British Journal of Politics and International Relations (2017) 134. Some researchers suggest that shared values are the single most important driver of trust: Schultz, C. et al., ‘When reputation influences trust in nonprofit organisations. The role of value attachment as moderator’, 22 Corporate Reputation Review (2019) 159; Siegrist, M. et al., ‘Salient value similarity, social trust, and risk/benefit perception’, 20 Risk Analysis (2000) 353. This is supported by research from other disciplines, which shows that people who support progressive causes in general, people who are more likely to trust progressive NGOs and people who show most support for progressive NGOs are people who place greater emphasis on the values that underpin progressive attitudes; that is, universalism, benevolence and self-direction. See: Equally Ours et al., ‘Building bridges: Connecting with values to reframe and build support for human rights’, 2018; Schwartz, S. et al., ‘Basic personal values underlie and give coherence to political values: A cross national study in 15 countries’, 36 Political Behaviour (2014) 899; Davis, J. et al., ‘In INGOs we trust? How individual determinants and the framing of INGOs influences public trust’, 30 Development in Practice (2020) 809; Hudson, J. et al., ‘Not one, but many “publics”: public engagement with global development in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States’, 30 Development in Practice (2020) 795; Crompton, T. et al., ‘No cause is an island: How people are influenced by values regardless of the cause’, 2014. See further the review of research contained in the Annex to Butler, I., ‘How to talk about civic space: A guide for progressive civil society facing smear campaigns’, Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2021.

[11] Schultz, C. et al., ‘When reputation influences trust in nonprofit organisations. The role of value attachment as moderator’, 22 Corporate Reputation Review (2019) 159; Alhidari, I. et al., ‘Modeling the effect of multidimensional trust on individual monetary donations to charitable organisations’, 47 Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly (2018) 623.

D. Sample messaging

The ‘we decide’ narrative has a ‘gentle’ and a ‘strategic’ version. The ‘strategic’ version of the narrative differs in the way that it explains the problem by pointing out the malign ulterior motive of our opponents in spreading misinformation either about advocacy NGOs or the causes they promote or the groups they protect. In particular, by pointing out that attacks against NGOs or certain groups are part of a strategy to gain or maintain political power by deflecting blame or unfavourable attention away from the politicians making the attack. Campaigners may feel uneasy calling out their opponents so explicitly. If so, you can always use the ‘gentle’ version. In the focus groups, participants reacted positively to the ‘strategic’ version of the narrative. And when this kind of messaging has been tested using methods other than focus groups (such as randomised controlled trials) in other countries, it has proven effective.[12]

The sample narratives do not include a call to action, since this is something specific to a given campaign. The narratives can be adapted to respond to specific proposals for restrictive measures by adjusting the second part (the explanation of the problem) to specify the measure and the harm it’s causing.

i. The ‘we decide’ narrative

This narrative explains how advocacy NGOs offer ordinary people tools to join together so that they have the power to demand that their leaders deliver things that they consider important, using examples of human rights-related causes that advocacy NGOs promote. Campaigners can adapt the narratives to include different examples of causes that advocacy NGOs promote or include a smaller number of examples.

<u>We decide - gentle</u>

We all want leaders who deliver the things we rely on, whether it’s making sure that we have enough teachers and doctors to care for us and educate our children or that we can afford to support our families and put food on the table, protecting us from the damage caused by climate change or making sure we all have the same opportunities regardless of who we love or our genders.

But today, many of us are going through hard times. We face rising costs for food, energy and housing, crumbling schools and hospitals and wages and pensions that haven’t increased enough. Our homes and health are threatened by extreme weather and some of us still aren’t treated fairly just because of who we are. Sometimes it feels like our leaders aren’t interested in solving our problems.

That’s what makes associations so important. We bring people together so that our politicians have to listen to our concerns whether it’s with petitions, protests, or court cases.

[12] This kind of narrative which exposes how our opponents use racism, transphobia or attacks on other groups or organisations as a strategy was developed and tested by Anat Shenker Osorio, and is also known as the ‘race-class narrative’.

In the past, associations helped to bring people together to protect Srd from property speculators, stop our motorways being privatised, protect Radio 101, reform our schools and to have each others' backs during COVID, earthquakes and flooding. When citizens speak with one voice, we can demand that our leaders deliver the things all of us need to thrive.

We decide - strategic

Campaigners can decide to use the strategic, rather than the gentle, version of the narrative either in direct response to attacks against them, or if you consider that there is a more general climate of hostility towards advocacy NGOs. The strategic version functions to dissolve the misinformation directed at you by causing your audience to question the credibility of your opponent, by pointing to their hidden, malign motives. A later section below concerning 'truth sandwiches' will elaborate on this further.

We all want leaders who deliver the things we rely on, whether it's making sure that we have enough teachers and doctors to care for us and educate our children or that we can afford to support our families and put food on the table, protecting us from the damage caused by climate change or making sure we all have the same opportunities regardless of who we love or our genders. That's what makes associations so important. We bring people together through petitions, protests, or court cases so that ordinary citizens can join our voices to demand that our leaders deliver the things we need to thrive.

But today certain politicians attack us because we hold them accountable and demand that they serve the public interest. They talk about us so that people don't talk about them.

We see through their attempts to distract us. In the past we helped join ordinary people together to protect Srd from property speculators, stop our motorways being privatised, protect Radio 101, reform our schools and to have each others' backs during COVID, earthquakes and flooding. Today, we will continue to bring citizens together to pressure our leaders to make life better for all of us.

As explained above, if campaigners use the 'we decide' narrative, it's important to accompany this with other lines of messaging:

- To help undecideds appreciate the importance to them of progressive causes, campaigners need to deploy messaging that unpacks specific progressive causes that you have chosen as examples in the first paragraph of your narrative. This will be dealt with in sub-section C. ii.

- To help undecideds recognise that advocacy NGOs allow ordinary people to join their voices, campaigners need to deploy messaging - particularly through creative materials - that shows advocacy NGOs bringing ordinary people together around a cause. This will be covered in sub-section C. iii.

- To address fatalism, campaigners need to deploy messaging that highlights examples of past successes by associations more generally and / or advocacy associations more particularly. This will also be covered in sub-section C. iii.

As noted above, it may make more sense for campaigners to begin with a series of campaigns on chosen progressive topics and run a campaign with the 'we decide' narrative later, once undecideds have been exposed to messaging that helps them appreciate the importance of progressive causes, recognise that advocacy NGOs bring people together around those causes and recognise that when citizens work together they can achieve positive social change.

ii. Messaging on specific progressive causes

As noted, trust in NGOs is largely based on whether the audience agrees with the cause being promoted. However, as set out in Section II, currently, advocacy NGOs message in a way that does not get across to their audience how the causes they promote align with their audience's values or deliver something that they find important. In message testing during the focus groups we found that after being shown messages and creative content on the topic of migration that applied the rules of persuasive messaging followed by this guide, participants became more positive and enthusiastic about the NGOs working on that topic. The same was true in focus groups in other countries on other topics.

This sub-section will set out sample messaging on four topics: migration, local environmental protection, access to abortion and marriage equality. Only messaging on migration was tested in the focus groups in Croatia. For more detail, readers can refer to the separate messaging guide 'Messaging for fair and humane migration policies in Croatia' published alongside this guide. Messaging suggested below on local environmental protection is based on messages tested in Hungarian focus groups. Messaging on the other two topics is drawn from campaigns on those topics from other countries. We are confident that the sample messaging on migration would work in a Croatian context to promote more favourable attitudes towards NGOs working on the topic. For the other three topics, we are confident that the suggested messaging is much more effective than messaging currently used by advocacy NGOs, but suggest that campaigners use any methods available to them to test their effectiveness.[13] The messaging here is not set out in great depth. Rather campaigners are referred to additional resources for more detailed guidance.

a) Migration

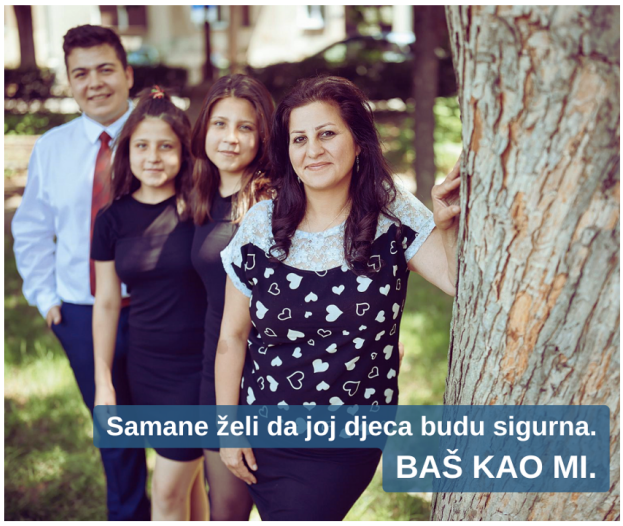
Traditionally, NGO messaging promoting the right to asylum focuses on showing the harm suffered by asylum seekers (such as violent pushbacks or harsh detention conditions) and tends to argue that the audience should support the right to asylum because it is legally protected under European or International Law. These arguments proved ineffective and counter-productive when tested in the focus group.

What proved effective were two basic moral arguments, which have also been shown to be effective in other countries in this topic: the 'people move' narrative and the 'golden rule' narrative developed and tested by Anat Shenker Osorio. These narratives should be accompanied by messaging to stimulate empathy between your audience and asylum seekers (so that the audience recognises them as 'people like me' who deserve humane

[13] For guidance see: Public Interest Research Centre, 'How to test your communications', 2018.

treatment) and messaging to dissolve a negative frame of people who migrate as unable or unwilling to integrate and adopt Croatian values.

Below is an example of the 'people move' narrative executed as a social media post:

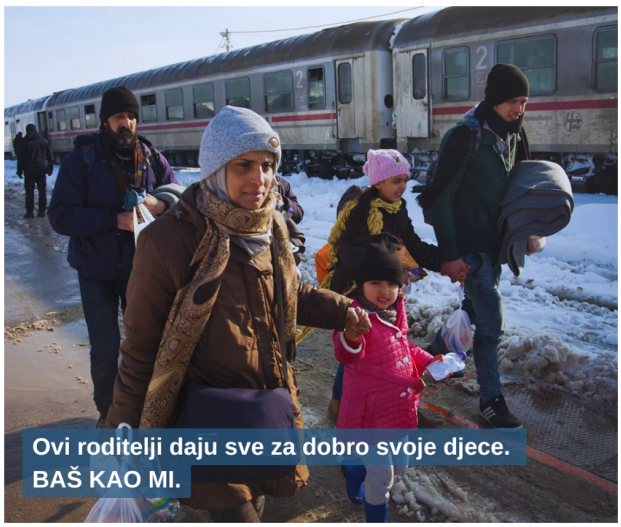


Većina nas učinit će sve što je potrebno kako bi naše obitelji bile sigurne i imale bolji život.

Radimo, žrtvujemo se, pa čak i pakiramo cijeli svoj život u kofere kako bismo svojoj djeci osigurali budućnost.

Ispravno je poželjeti dobrodošlicu ljudima koji su riskirali sve kako bi pobjegli od opasnosti i pružiti im podršku u ponovnoj izgradnji njihovih života.

Below is an example of the 'golden rule' narrative executed as a social media post:



Većina nas nastoji postupati prema drugima onako kako bismo željeli da se postupa prema nama.

U prošlosti su Hrvati, koji su strahovali za svoje živote i svoje obitelji, pronalazili sigurnost i nadu u bolji život u drugim zemljama.

Danas je ispravno da isto učinimo za ljude koji riskiraju sve kako bi pobjegli od opasnosti.

Here is a link to a video tested in the Croatian focus groups that is an example of how to dissolve negative stereotypes that people with a migration background are unable or unwilling to integrate.

For sample narratives on the topic of asylum as well as foreign workers and further examples of creative materials, please refer to 'Messaging for fair and humane migration policies in Croatia' and 'Messaging for fair and humane migration policies in Sweden.'

b) Environmental protection

Traditionally, NGO messaging promoting environmental protection takes on one of two forms.

- Campaigners emphasise the harms that they are fighting like rising temperatures, sea levels and pollution and call on their audience to take urgent action. This is typically accompanied by imagery of environmental destruction like floods, fires, destroyed forests and polluted land, air and water.

  and / or

- Campaigners point to nature as something the audience should want to protect for its own sake simply because it is beautiful, innocent, vulnerable and cannot protect itself. This is typically accompanied by imagery of breathtaking landscapes or wildlife.

Messaging that is focused on the harm campaigners are fighting tends not to be effective with audiences outside supporters for a number of reasons. First, it makes the audience feel like the problem is too big to solve. Second it makes the audience feel scared, which causes them to want to turn away from, rather than engage with, the message. We also found in the Hungarian focus groups that messaging that focuses on protecting nature for nature's sake, while effective, was less compelling than messaging that gave additional reasons for protecting nature.

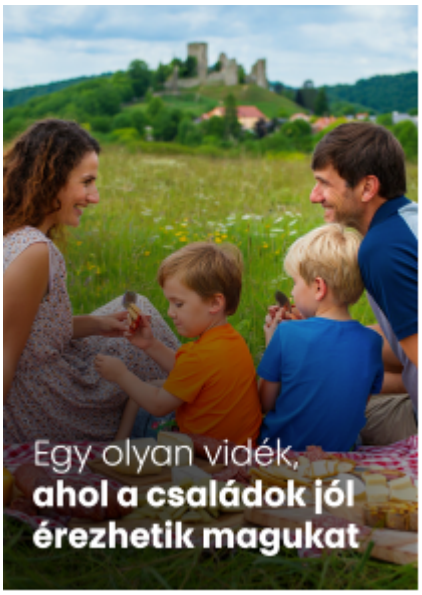
The Hungarian focus groups were looking specifically at messaging that would stimulate undecideds to want to protect nature in their local area against damaging industrial or commercial developments - rather than environmental protection more generally. We found several arguments to be effective in making the audience want to protect nature, such as because:

- it allows children and older generations to bond by exploring together and passing on their knowledge;
- it allows us to relax and spend quality family time together;
- it's part of our natural heritage that we have a moral duty to pass on to future generations;
- it protects us from extreme weather by storing water and soaking up pollutants.

Below are a collection of sample social media posts that performed well with undecideds to give campaigners a sense of how to message on environmental protection more effectively.

English translation: ‘Wildlife every generation can still experience’;

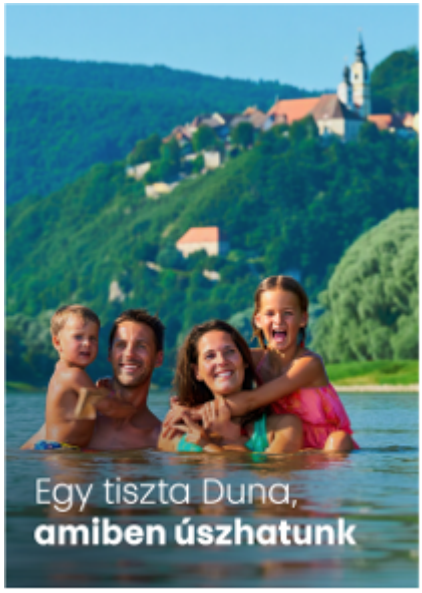
Social media caption text: ‘Of all the things we want to leave our children and future generations, the natural beauty we explored and discovered when we were children with our own parents and grandparents may be the most important.’[14]



English translation: ‘A countryside families can still enjoy’ ;

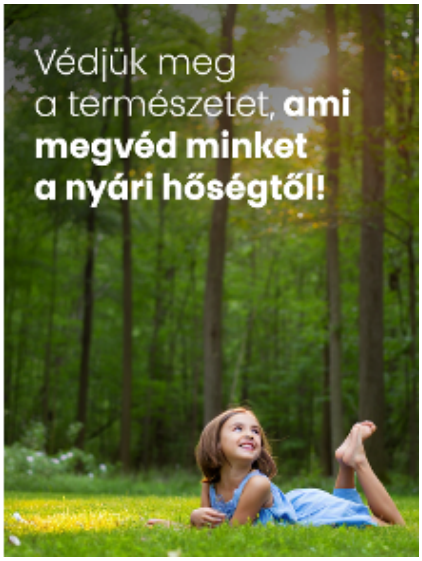
Social media caption text: ‘For many of us, natural beauty is our oldest form of heritage and a source of pride. It’s been handed down from past generations for us to enjoy today and protect for our children in the future.’

[14] The social media caption text has been adjusted based on insights from focus group testing.



English translation: ‘A clean Danube we can swim in’ ;

Social media caption text: ‘Most of us want to protect nature in our area because it’s where we relax and recharge our batteries with family and friends. It's where some of our most precious memories are made.’



English translation: ‘Protect the nature that protects us from summer heat!’ ;

Social media caption text: ‘By storing water, absorbing pollutants and cleaning the air, lakes, rivers, forests, swamps and the animals that live in them can dial down the impact of extreme heat, storms and drought.’

Here is a link to a video that also makes the argument that we should protect nature because it protects us from extreme weather.[15]

For full sample narratives and further examples of creative materials, see the English version of the ‘Messaging guide for community activists protecting the local environment from polluting projects’ [LINK].

c) Marriage equality

[15] English translation: ‘Nature protects us. From extreme heat and floods. Thanks to a new law, however, it is becoming easier to cut down our forests. This way, we could lose the wonders of nature which protect us. Join us and let’s work together for the environment!’

Traditional NGO messaging on the topic of marriage equality has tended argue that lesbian and gay couples should have the right to marry because everyone should have equal rights on principle, while pointing to the harm this unequal treatment causes, such as the lack of 'next of kin' rights in relation to medical treatment, social security, inheritance or adoption.

This messaging has tended to be ineffective for at least three reasons, First, because people outside of our supporters tend to have a frame of marriage that involves two people of the opposite gender. Second, because of a negative frame of people who are lesbian or gay as uninterested or incapable of long-term monogamy and wanting to challenge rather than join traditional institutions like marriage. Third, because most people tend to think that they have no personal connection to the issue.

Campaigns that were successful in building public support for marriage equality in the USA, Ireland and Australia reframed marriage and dissolved negative stereotypes of lesbian and gay people. Marriage was reframed as a relationship of mutual trust, respect and support where gender became irrelevant. Campaigns used story-telling to show lesbian and gay couples in long-term relationships alongside stories of heterosexual couples to emphasise that there was little difference between them and to dissolve negative stereotypes. And the argument shifted away from the administrative drawbacks or the abstract right to equality to one of fairness and freedom. Campaigners argued that we all share the same human experience (falling in love) and desire (to make a long term commitment) and that it's unfair to deprive people of the freedom to enter marriage just because of their gender.

Campaigners' choice of messengers was also important. Centre-right religious and political figures spoke publicly of how they had shifted their position after careful consideration as a way of giving more conservative audiences permission to change their minds. And in addition to lesbian and gay people themselves, campaigns used story-telling that involved friends, colleagues and family members talking about how they wanted their loved ones to be able to have access to marriage because of the joy it had brought them, which also emphasised to the audience how they were connected to the issue through friends, colleagues or children who might not know yet if they were lesbian or gay.

For a review of marriage equality campaigns from around the world see here. Examples of creative content from the Australian campaign can be found here. A valuable resource of creative content from campaigns in the USA can be found here.

Since none of these resources sets out sample narratives as such, below is an example of what a narrative for a marriage equality campaign might look like:

All of us have fallen in love. When we find someone special, many of us want to make a long-term commitment to each other through marriage.

But today, our out-dated laws deny some of us the freedom to commit to the person we love just because of who we are attracted to.

Just like in the past when we [insert example of past success] we can modernise our laws, so all of us can be free to commit to the person we love, whether it's someone of the same or the opposite gender.

Show your support for the freedom to marry by… [e.g. share content, tell your story, sign the petition.]

d) Access to abortion

Traditionally, NGO messaging promoting access to abortion has focused on the idea of personal autonomy, arguing that a woman should have control over her own body and the decision whether and when to have a family should be hers. This argument has tended to fail outside our supporters for a number of reasons. First, because people outside our base often have a negative frame of women who have an abortion as irresponsible or promiscuous and therefore being undeserving. Second, because most people don't feel directly connected to the issue. Third, because of concern for unborn children. Fourth, because the language of 'choice' ('my body my choice') suggests that people who argue for abortion view the act as trivial or whimsical (in the way one might 'choose' which colour socks to wear or what flavour of ice cream to have today).

Campaigns that were successful in building public support for access to abortion in Ireland and Argentina, as well as creative materials tested in the USA followed a similar approach to that used by the marriage equality movement. Abortion was reframed as a painful decision facing women in impossible situations, such as health problems threatening the mother or child, financial constraints that would prevent the family supporting another child, or life situations where people are not in an environment or stage in their lives when they can bring up a child. Campaigners did not address directly the question of personal autonomy or moral correctness of abortion, but rather used as a starting point that abortions happen and the choice is between treating women who need them with compassion and giving them safe treatment, or allowing them to put their lives at risk with unsafe procedures. This approach acknowledges the concerns the audience might have while redirecting them to the need to provide women with care when they need it.

Campaigners' choice of messengers was also important. In addition to women with experience of abortion themselves, campaigns used story-telling that involved friends, colleagues and family members talking about how they wanted the women in their lives to have access to safe abortion care if they should ever need it. This helped to emphasise to the audience how they were potentially connected to the issue through friends, colleagues or their own children in the future. In Argentina, campaigners relied heavily on story-telling by doctors based in provincial areas who had treated women with serious injuries resulting from clandestine abortions since they were particularly trusted as messengers by moveable middle audiences outside urban areas.

Campaigners can find videos carrying these messages here, here and here, as well as a case study on the abortion campaign in Argentina and Ireland which includes discussion of the messaging used.

iii. Examples of how to connect messaging on progressive causes to the NGOs that promote them

Below are two examples of how campaigners could connect progressive causes they're explaining with the NGOs that promote them within the same narrative.

Example on environmental protection

We all want our families to be healthy and feel safe in our homes.

Today, extreme weather like floods, forest fires and extreme heat are already causing health problems like strokes or breathing problems, damaging our homes, cutting off power and threatening our food supply.

A healthy environment soaks up pollutants and acts as a buffer against extreme weather like flooding and drought. But instead of protecting the nature that keeps us safe, the government is authorising projects that pollute and destroy our environment.

We can make a different choice. Associations like ours bring ordinary citizens like you together so we can demand that politicians do better. We know what we can achieve when we unify, like when we protected Dubrovnik from property developers. Today when we join our voices we can demand that our leaders protect the nature that protects us and keep our health and homes safe.

[+ call to action]

Example on the right to asylum

Most of us strive to treat others the way we'd want to be treated. In the past, Croatians who feared for their lives and their families found safety and hope for a better life in other countries. Today, it's right that we do the same for people who come here to escape danger.

But our leaders have made it almost impossible for people looking for safety to come here without risking everything. And for those who make it, our government refuses to give them the support they need to make a new start and contribute to our communities.

It doesn't have to be this way. Associations like ours bring ordinary citizens like you together so we can demand that politicians do better, and honour our values. We know what we can achieve when we unify, like when we gave each other the care we needed after the earthquakes. Today by joining our voices we can demand that our leaders welcome people who come here for safety and support them to rebuild their lives and contribute to our communities.

[+call to action]

iii. Addressing fatalism and highlighting the tools NGOs offer for collective action

As discussed, as well as unpacking particular progressive causes for your audience, you should also dedicate messaging to addressing fatalism and to highlight the tools that advocacy NGOs offer for collecting action.

Campaigners should think of addressing fatalism separately from highlighting how NGOs bring people together to achieve change. Having said this, it's possible to do both at the same time and the reason it is dealt with together here is because we tested these two elements together as part of a single narrative. While the tested narrative did not have the impact we wanted on the audience (and so is not part of the messaging recommended here), the testing did deliver two important insights. First, it showed us that undecideds react positively to seeing examples of how associations bring people together around a common cause. Second, it confirmed that being reminded of past successes helps undecideds overcome fatalism. These findings were true in all the EU countries where we tested messages and creative content about civic space.

When your objective is to address fatalism, there's no need to confine yourself to giving examples of past successes from advocacy NGOs. Of course, if you can point to these, it will probably help cement a frame of advocacy NGOs as effective at doing good things, which is positive. But the main thing you're doing when addressing fatalism is helping your audience overcome the feeling that they are powerless and therefore there's no point getting involved in your cause.

If campaigners choose to highlight examples of past successes that are specifically due to advocacy NGOs, you should consider using story-telling as a technique. For example, having people who have been helped by laws, policies or court decisions act as messengers to talk about the positive impact on their lives. These could be 'ordinary' people e.g. locals who are able to enjoy public beaches saved from property speculators. Or it could be people from respected professions, e.g. doctors or teachers able to provide a better service because of increased resources. Or it could be service-delivery or grassroots associations whose work has been helped by advocacy NGOs e.g. local environmental groups who have received legal support from an advocacy NGO to protect local nature against developers. When your objective is to highlight to people how advocacy NGOs bring people together, then you should try to stick to showing examples of people taking action together as part of the work of advocacy NGOs.

Below are links to examples of creative products, with an explanation of which elements could serve as inspiration either to address fatalism or to highlight how advocacy NGOs bring people together.

This video tested in the Croatian focus groups implements a narrative which was not ultimately included in this guide. Although the video performed very well in focus groups, it mainly reinforced the audience's already positive opinions of service and grassroots NGOs, rather than causing them to realise that they should also support advocacy NGOs because of the similarity in the nature of their causes. Having said this, the images in the video

showing people working together after natural disasters are examples that could be used to address fatalism. And the imagery of protestors protecting Dubrovnik against property developers serves as an example of advocacy NGOs bringing people together.

This video tested in Hungarian focus groups implements a different narrative. This narrative was tested in written form in the Croatian focus groups and was not ultimately included in this guide, because it did not seem to have a significant impact on how Croatian undecideds think about advocacy NGOs.[16] However, the written narrative did have a positive impact on fatalism. This Hungarian video is included here to show how historical examples of past successes can be executed in creative format as a way of addressing fatalism. In addition, the more contemporary examples of different kinds of protest can provide inspiration for how to visualise the way advocacy NGOs bring people together around a cause.

In addition, this video also tested in Hungarian focus groups is an example of how to talk about a specific cause (in this case environmental protection) while also highlighting how advocacy NGOs can bring people together in order to advance that cause.[17] This shows how campaigners can both build support for particular progressive causes while also highlighting the tools advocacy NGOs offer to bring ordinary people together to advance them in a single short video.

This video was developed by campaigners in the USA and is an example of how to address fatalism and motivate people to vote by pointing to past successes.

Campaigners should also be aware that undecideds react much more enthusiastically when they see 'ordinary' people represented in protests and other forms of collective action - rather than organisations, institutions or people they might identify as typical activists. This is probably because they consider these people to be 'like them' and therefore they find it more empowering.

E. Messaging for responding to misinformation

As discussed, communicators should generally avoid directly contradicting their opponent's messages, even if this is to correct misinformation. To contradict a claim, you need to repeat it, and repetition makes information stick in the brain. To neutralise your opponent's messaging, you can either reframe the topic on which you're being attacked, or use a 'truth sandwich'. A truth sandwich reframes the topic, but it has an additional layer, which is to expose your opponent's ulterior motives in using misinformation. A truth sandwich follows the same structure as a normal narrative or message. The main difference is that when

[16] English translation: 'Hungarian history is full of moments when civil courage moved the country forward. What are you proud of from the past? Today we face new challenges. But just as in the past, there are those who stand up for the interests of us all. Whether they are fighting for healthier hospitals, better education for young people, or a more just Hungary, advocacy civil society organizations continue to represent values that we can all be proud of. Let's be the engine of change—together!'

[17] English translation: 'Nature protects us. From extreme heat and floods. Thanks to a new law, however, it is becoming easier to cut down our forests. This way, we could lose the wonders of nature which protect us. Join us and let's work together for the environment!'

explaining the problem, you point out that your opponent is attacking you as part of a strategy to serve a malign agenda - which is the same as in the 'strategic' version of the 'we decide' narrative. As a reminder, this is the structure to follow:

1. Values: rather than directly contradicting your opponents, begin by reminding your audience why they find the cause you are promoting important. Instead of directing attention to your opponents' message and letting them set the agenda, this allows you to bring your own cause back into focus.

2. Explain the problem: expose your opponents' malign agenda; why are they attacking your organisation, the causes you promote or the groups you work with? Allude to your opponent's lies but don't repeat them.

3. Your vision and solution: return to the cause you are promoting by talking about how we can bring the situation into line with the values you outlined in the first step.

4. If this is part of a campaign, remind your audience of past successes and ask them to do something to show their support.

Reframing works by a) avoiding repeating the misinformation and b) giving your audience your alternative frame as a different way of understanding the issue. In a 'truth sandwich' the audience is, in addition, c) also prompted to let go of the misinformation by the revelation that the source of that misinformation is not trustworthy. In the context of an interview or a debate you may respond to misinformation with a truth sandwich, and then use a short reframe to rebut a follow-up attack. In the context of an interview or debate it maybe impossible to avoid engaging completely with the substance of the initial attack while maintaining credibility. In this case you should deal with the substantive issue as briefly as possible before reverting to talking about the cause you are promoting and, if appropriate, pointing out why you are being attacked.

Below are some examples of what (longer) truth sandwiches can look like as well as (shorter) reframes in response to common attacks or misinformation relating to advocacy NGOs. Because a truth sandwich does not respond directly to specific attacks or misinformation, it can be repurposed to respond to different kinds of attack. The main difference between different truth sandwiches is the explanation of the motivation behind the attacks. Shorter reframes may need to be adapted more closely to the original attack.

Example 1: truth sandwich that can work as a response to a wide range of attacks, (e.g. accusations of political bias, foreign influence, corruption or wasting public funds) where the motivation of your opponents is to deflect attention from their failure to address people's material problems.

Whatever our party, most of us want our elected representatives to deliver the things we need to thrive: jobs that pay enough for us to support our families, good quality hospitals and schools, and homes, food and energy we can afford. Associations like ours help to bring citizens together so we can speak with one voice and demand that our leaders deliver the things our communities need.

Many of us are going through hard times because our government has failed to bring down the cost of living or fix our public services. And now they attack us because we're calling them out for not doing their jobs.

We reject their attempts to divide us. In the past we helped join Croatians together to protect Srd from property speculators, stop our motorways being privatised, protect Radio 101, reform our schools and to have each others' backs during COVID, earthquakes and flooding. Today, we will continue to bring citizens together to pressure our leaders to make life better for all of us.

Shorter generic reframe

Certain politicians are attacking us because they're trying to deflect blame for failing to solve the problems citizens are worried about. Most of us, no matter who we vote for, just want our leaders to come up with real solutions instead of trying to divide and distract us.

Shorter reframe where the attack is an accusation of political bias against an environmental NGO

We're working to make sure that citizens have clean water to drink and air that's safe to breathe. It's not a question of left or right. It's a question of right or wrong. The fact that certain politicians have a problem with this and feel the need to attack us shows that they're putting the needs of the bosses of polluting corporations above ordinary people like us.

Shorter reframe where the attack is an accusation of foreign influence because of your sources of funding against an NGO working on migration

Most of us think it's right that we should welcome people running from war, just like we were welcomed by people in other countries in the past. This is what we work on. We are completely transparent about where our funding comes from and every year we publish this information on our website. Certain politicians are attacking us because they need to keep blaming people who migrate for the problems that they have failed to solve like high living costs and low wages.

Example 2: truth sandwich that can work as a response to a wide range of attacks, (e.g. accusations of political bias, foreign influence, corruption or wasting public funds) where the motivation of your opponents is to deflect attention from corruption.

Most of us want our elected representatives to use our contributions to fund the things we rely on like good quality hospitals and schools, pensions that let us live in dignity, and rent and energy prices we can afford.

But some politicians are using their position to pocket our resources or to make their friends rich instead of working for ordinary people. And when we call them out for this, they attack us so that people will look at us instead of them.

It's our job to inform citizens about how their funds are being used and help them join their voices together when they're not happy about what our leaders are doing.

Shorter reframe.

It's our job to inform citizens and give them the tools they need to join their voices when they want to raise concerns with our leaders. Certain politicians attack us because they don't want us to report about their corruption.

Example 3: truth sandwich in response to an attack that NGOs are receiving excessive public funds from politically friendly city authorities

Most of us think it's important that citizens should be free to work through associations to make our lives better. Whether that's by maintaining our parks, running after school clubs for our children, or organising cultural events for all of us to enjoy.

But certain politicians are attacking us because they see strong associations as a threat. When citizens work together through associations, we can join our voices to demand that our leaders serve the public interest and hold them accountable.

We reject their attempts to divide us. We will continue bringing ordinary people together to make our city a better place to live for all of us.

Shorter reframe

The city authorities have funded associations to do things that make it a better place to live for all of us for decades no matter who was in charge. And that's because over the years parties of all political colours have recognised that funding things like free summer concerts or delivering meals to older people are good things that the vast majority of people agree with.

Annex: Summary of target audience attitudes on civic space

[Inclusion in the final guide is optional]

This summary sets out the main attitudes of the moveable middle on the topic of civic space in Croatia. It is based mostly on social listening carried out in 2024 and focus groups carried out in 2025. The social listening report gives us insights into how the broader 'moveable middle' group thinks. This includes 'soft supporters' (people who lean towards our position), 'soft opponents' (people who lean towards our opponents) and 'undecideds' (people who have very conflicted opinions or are unsure what to think). The social listening report doesn't distinguish between these three segments. The focus groups were held with 'undecideds' and the summary refers to them where insights were available.

Moveable middle audiences don't share our understanding of 'civic space' and 'civil society' and don't understand or use these terms. Neither do they use or understand the terms non-governmental organisation or civil society organisation. These terms seem to be mostly used and understood among certain professional sectors such as NGOs, philanthropies and certain institutions that deal with NGOs.

Public audiences talk about specific elements of what we term 'civic space' in more tangible and concrete terms. For example, activities like volunteering to deliver food or delivering medicines, or mounting a campaign or protesting.

Service NGOs

In Croatia, as in other countries, moveable middle (and opposition) audiences are favourable towards service-delivery NGOs. It seems that this is because they consider them to be making an important contribution that fills gaps left by the state. For example, care for animals, support for children, older people like home renovation and repair or food delivery, people with disabilities, health care for women, and disaster relief.

Community-led, grassroots initiatives and volunteers

Similarly, moveable middle (and opposition) audiences are favourable towards volunteering and grassroots, community-led initiatives and charity work. Support for this work is probably based on a few factors. First, often it's these kinds of organisations that provide some of the essential services referred to in the community. Second, their very existence seems to be appreciated for creating solidarity and a community feeling at local level.

The rootedness in the local community seems to provide some immunity from opposition attacks. Aside from providing services locally, community-based organisations are often involved in promoting local culture and heritage and art (murals, festivals) but also in campaigns to protect and regenerate or reclaim the local environment. Professionalised NGOs promoting environmental protection do not enjoy the same level of appreciation.

Advocacy NGOs

The social listening report suggests that moveable middle audiences neither actively support nor oppose advocacy NGOs or the causes they work on (LGBTQI+ equality, gender equality, environmental protection and government accountability (anti-corruption, human rights protection, democratic participation). Rather, they seem confused, distrustful or skeptical because of the attacks against them.

Undecideds know very little about advocacy NGOs, the causes they advance or how they help to bring people together to promote worthy causes. To the extent that they are aware of advocacy NGOs, they tend not to think that they do anything useful for society. However, this attitude changed when they were exposed to messaging that explained some of the causes they work on and how they allow people to unify around issues of importance.

The focus groups reveal that undecideds have superficially negative frames of associations, particularly advocacy NGOs, which is due to negative stories in the media. There is a broad range of smear attacks against NGOs, namely that they are: politically partisan; promoting the harmful agenda of foreign funders; damaging traditional Croatian values; helping minority groups at the expense of ordinary Croatians; against economic development; taking up public resources without delivering anything of benefit. However, the only smear that seems to have taken root is the last of these, that certain NGOs are ‘parasites’ on the state, taking resources while doing nothing useful for society. This negative frame was held slightly more strongly by men than women, and fell away once undecideds were exposed to messaging that showed how advocacy NGOs bring citizens together to promote worthy causes.

Undecideds recognise that politicians attack advocacy NGOs, but see this as a general tactic by politicians that was to divert attention away from their political problems. Put otherwise, they think that politicians attacks all sorts of targets to deflect attention from themselves and don’t think that NGOs are ‘special’. Neither do they recognise that attacks on advocacy NGOs are part of a deliberate strategy to weaken democratic accountability and participation. Only our base seems to understand this.

In relation to protests specifically, undecideds support, in principle, the right to protest and think it is an important way to draw attention to issues of concern to groups of citizens. At the same time, they tend to know very little about what protests actually take place in Croatia and, to the extent that they do know, are skeptical that they stimulate productive public debate. For example, they questioned the point of having Pride and ‘anti-’ Pride demonstrations. They are also unsupportive of forms of protest that are violent or disruptive such as blocking traffic.

Civil Liberties Union for Europe

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