



# *What narrative will we embrace at this pivotal moment in history?*

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## The Recurring Statements

*Why should we give money to people over there when we have enough problems over here?*

*This climate change thing is a hoax; it's just made up so they can do whatever they want.*

*It's because their leaders are corrupt; that's why these countries are poor. Why should it be our problem?*

*We have too many immigrants; they are diluting our heritage.*

*We can't let China control the world; we have to beat them and get as many resources from Africa as we can.*

*These Woke people are the ones ruining everything and allowing anarchy in our countries.*

*Aid has made people dependent; they need to be responsible for their own lives.*

*These feminists are the reason women don't know where they belong.*

*Some of these issues are not really about disability; people are just too soft; they need to toughen up.*

*Colonialism is in the past; people need to get over it. We are all equal now.*

*Those people in the Middle East are terrorists. Why should we care about what happens there?*

*We need fossil fuels; they just want to control us. Drill baby, drill!*

I am sure some, if not all, of these statements are familiar to you. You may have heard them or statements similar to them, while having casual conversations with friends, in church, at work, in meetings with stakeholders or policy makers. You may have heard them on podcasts or news programmes or even read them on your favourite online information outlet. In essence, while there are various underlying reasons for these statements, they all have one thing in common: fear.

It's fear in all shapes and sizes, fear of:

- ✓ not being able to provide for one's family.
- ✓ the loss of their privilege in a diversifying world.
- ✓ job losses because of the poor economy and international trade.

- ✓ being replaced by industrial robots and artificial intelligence.
- ✓ the effects of globalisation, which creates competition that leads to lower wages.
- ✓ war on the horizon because of the constant escalation of conflict globally.
- ✓ communities falling apart because of vices affecting the youth.
- ✓ immigrants taking jobs and not 'respecting' the dominant culture.

This list above is not exhaustive, and could go on; it needs to be acknowledged that some of these fears are rooted in deep, real problems. People are not just worried—they feel disconnected from systems they once trusted to manage complexity, provide security, or plan for the future. When people want to be heard and don't feel heard, they turn to those who not only articulate their fears but also offer solutions. This leads to the enactment of more nationalistic, isolationist and internal measures and policies to protect 'us'. The 'us' could be the community, member state, the EU, or even High-Income Countries. The concept of 'us' creates a 'them,' leading to the assumption that a specific group threatens the favoured one. This 'othering' process dehumanises people, making it easier to disregard them or blame external issues for local problems. While it doesn't capture the complete geopolitical picture, othering is a recurring theme in many narratives during uncertain times.

The stories we tell, and live, are not about facts but our values, fears and hopes – all of which, to a certain degree, are not fixed. In my recent article on the value of using hope-based communication in our advocacy, I note that when surrounded by narratives of fear, we find ourselves in survival mode, making it challenging to foster empathy and understanding, particularly towards those who hold opposing values.<sup>1</sup> We need to seek out new narratives because existing narratives not only reflect our values, fears, and hopes, but also shape them. As we confront the challenges in our line of work, it's essential to take a moment to reflect on our narratives. What narratives are we using in our advocacy, and what values, hopes, and fears do they convey?

## Why Narratives?

### The Importance of Narratives

*The confidence people have in their beliefs is not a measure of the quality of evidence, but of the coherence of the story the mind has managed to construct. (Daniel Kahneman)*

Re-read the quote and think about it for a moment. Some of our beliefs, which we hold so dearly, are not about what we can prove but more about how our minds have constructed them.

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<sup>1</sup>Available at <https://www.eu-cord.org/advocacy-with-hope-in-uncertain-times/>.

These constructions are the stories, the narratives, and these are not fixed. They're like rivers, constantly flowing and shifting with the emotional undercurrents of their time.<sup>2</sup>

A narrative is generally the representation of an event or sequence of events. Broader than stories, narratives present overarching frameworks that shape how people perceive and interpret reality. A narrative engages us because it reveals human motivations, reflecting what matters in life and our connections and responses.<sup>3</sup>

## The Use of Narratives in Advocacy Work?

A critical component of a successful advocacy campaign or even policy challenge is its narrative. What story are you telling about what is wrong with something or why something needs to improve?

Today, we are looking for new narratives that help us work together, find solutions, and rethink the systems that shape our future. We are aware of the multi-faceted challenges facing us internally in our respective countries and externally as the interconnectedness of our world is ever apparent. Our objectives are to influence attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, and catalyse policy change or change social norms.



Narratives are especially critical now, because we are living in a highly polarised world. Two approaches to the challenges facing us are worth exploring to reflect on the narratives we will choose to drive our advocacy.

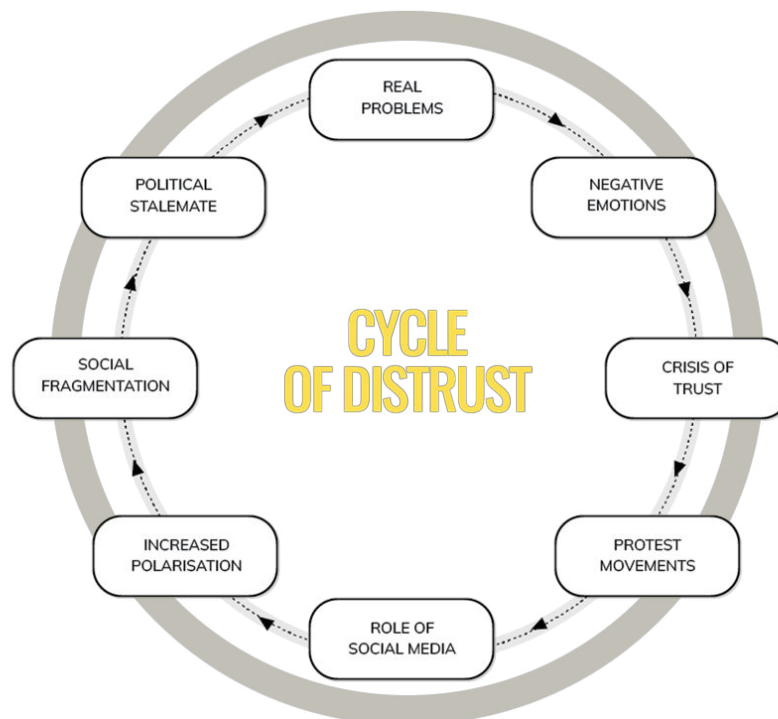
<sup>2</sup> The FOMO Frame Handbook A Strategic Narrative Guide to Reposition ODA for Europe's Future: A Strategic Narrative Guide to Reposition ODA for Europe's Future 2025(p.4).

<sup>3</sup> Sarah E, Worth. "Storytelling and Narrative Knowing: An Examination of the Epistemic Benefits of Well-Told Stories." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2008, pp. 42–56. *JSTOR*,

# THE R.E.F.R.A.M.E METHODOLOGY and THE FOMO FRAMING

## The R.E.F.R.A.M.E Methodology

This methodology's foundation is that much of the polarisation experienced today stems from misunderstandings rather than fundamental differences in values.<sup>4</sup> The argument is that at the heart of it, most people share similar aspirations: access to healthy food, clean water, thriving ecosystems, and prosperous communities. The confusion often arises when shared words carry different meanings, leading to conflicting interpretations of concepts such as "climate" or "freedom".<sup>5</sup> The R.E.F.R.A.M.E. methodology promotes a systematic approach that encourages stakeholders to move away from language that is intentionally used to create division and conflict between groups to language focused on understanding and finding common ground, even amidst disagreements. The emphasis is on exploring diverse perspectives to foster viable solutions rather than winning arguments. Divisive rhetoric leads to increased polarisation, which ends up creating a cycle of distrust.



This cycle of distrust, it is argued, is also an opportunity for new ideas and perspectives to emerge that respond to critical challenges facing Europe. These new ideas and perspectives need to focus on changing the conversation, not changing minds. Thus, the emphasis is on

<sup>4</sup>See <https://re-imagine.eu/>.

<sup>5</sup>Available at <https://re-imagine.eu/methodology>.

goal-oriented narratives and not conflict narratives because conflict narratives are easily divisive. To create new perspectives, REImagine Europa suggest the seven-point R.E.F.R.A.M.E. methodology.

**R**

**I. Responsive Listening.** Learn to hear beyond words, grasping what is truly being said

**E**

**II. Eliminate Polarising Language.** Use neutral terms to sidestep emotional triggers and maintain a constructive dialogue

**F**

**III. Focus on Shared Objectives.** Direct discussions toward common aspirations, using common values as a foundation for joint action

**R**

**IV. Recognise Shared Humanity.** Approach adversaries with empathy, seeing beyond labels to the person beneath

**A**

**V. Adopt Clear Guidelines.** Implement procedural rules to guide discussions and curb escalation

**M**

**VI. Merge and Solve.** Tackle issues systematically to reduce friction and enhance cooperative problem-solving

**E**

**VII. Evolve Collective Stories.** Shape new, shared metanarratives that emerge from collaborative engagement

The R.E.F.R.A.M.E Methodology is designed to break cycles of distrust by refocusing attention on the core issues, rather than allowing emotions and entrenched positions to dominate the discussion.<sup>6</sup> The goal of R.E.F.R.A.M.E is to navigate emotions constructively and avoid common pitfalls that escalate tensions. The methodology is structured around seven key steps that offer a practical framework for depolarising discussions and fostering more productive dialogue.

This methodology requires intentional and sustained reflection for those who want to use it. Are you able to decide on what language is generally polarising, considering that sometimes context frames language? If you are directing discussions towards common aspirations or values, is this only with those who are not too far from your fundamental beliefs, or does this mean everybody? There is value in using this methodology in some contexts, and focusing on shared objectives is an essential part of our mission as a Faith-based network. This is even more essential as, at least in Brussels, Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) are more likely to

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<sup>6</sup> White Paper- The Power of Narratives A Strategic Approach to Combatting Disinformation in Europe – Key Findings from the First European Narrative Observatory available at [https://nodes.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/20241202\\_NODES\\_WhitePaper\\_The-Power-of-Narratives\\_.pdf](https://nodes.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/20241202_NODES_WhitePaper_The-Power-of-Narratives_.pdf).

be perceived as being able to build bridges towards conservative or far-right groups. Fostering productive dialogue requires knowing how to change the conversations in the right way to ultimately change minds. The framework would be helpful if one's aim is to explore and discuss diverse perspectives to cultivate viable solutions, especially when initiating dialogue with people on issues that have so far proved impossible.

However, the notion that polarisation experienced today stems from misunderstandings rather than fundamental differences in values is not entirely true. One might argue that it is a naive position to take. There is no misunderstanding when the perception of the worth of human life is decided by geopolitics, race, gender, religion and other social status identifiers. When entire ecosystems are destroyed because of over-consumption, the race for technology and weapons reveals a stark contrast in values. The same applies to the neglect of Policy Coherence for the sake of urgent needs for current gains with minimum thought for future generations, as can be seen by the sidelining of Agenda 2030. Hence, I suggest that to incorporate the R.E.F.R.A.M.E framework into advocacy strategies successfully, one needs to acknowledge the reality of the context in question. Recognise that this framework is a practical starting point for initiating conversations, shaping new narratives, and encouraging dialogue without using inflammatory language or demonising others. However, it's essential to understand that this methodology is not designed to implement the policy changes you desire; rather, it serves as a means to an end.

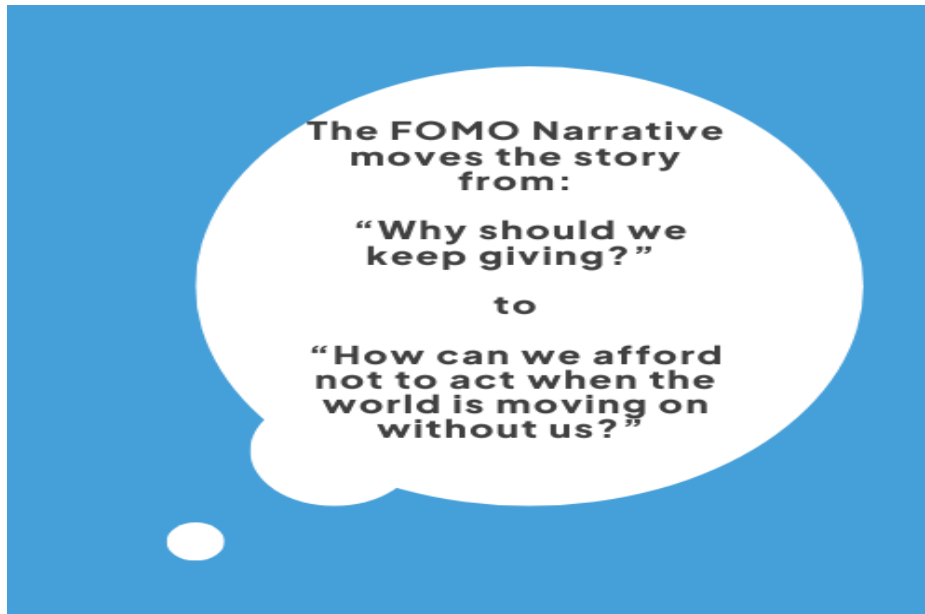
## The FOMO FRAME HANDBOOK

This handbook, focusing on Official Development Assistance (ODA), argues that traditional appeals to morality, solidarity, or international responsibility now struggle to resonate. In today's climate, they are not just ineffective—they are often turned against ODA advocates, reframed as naïve, out of touch, or elitist. This is not just a budget problem. It's a communications crisis. And without a new narrative, ODA risks becoming expendable.<sup>7</sup>

The Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) frame focuses on an offer to reposition ODA for a new era—without abandoning its underlying purpose. At its core, the FOMO narrative reframes ODA not as a cost, a duty, or a moral gesture— but as a strategic investment in Europe's future prosperity, influence, and resilience. It taps into a growing feeling across Europe that the world is changing quickly, and those who act now will shape what comes next. FOMO reframes the story around what Europe gains: trusted partnerships, access to new markets, energy security, geopolitical relevance, and economic opportunity.

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<sup>7</sup> The FOMO Frame Handbook A Strategic Narrative Guide to Reposition ODA for Europe's Future p.6.



The FOMO approach:

- ✓ Ties ODA directly to EU priorities

It reframes development cooperation as core to Europe's strategy for competitiveness, energy transition, supply chain resilience, and global influence.

- ✓ Engages emotion without moralising

It speaks to shared concerns—about jobs, sovereignty, economic security—without relying on guilt, fear, or crisis framing.

- ✓ Bridges ideological divides

Because it is grounded in shared interest—not worldview—it can be used by liberals, centrists, progressives, and even pragmatic conservatives.

- ✓ Creates momentum, not fatigue

It replaces defensive messaging with an ambitious story of action, relevance, and smart investment.

- ✓ Responds to the global realignment

As the U.S. retreats, others are stepping in. Countries like Mexico and Canada are not waiting—they are using this moment to assert themselves. Europe can—and should—do the same.

Two responses to conversations, which are adapted from the handbook, reflect this approach:

### Scenario 1: The Budget Sceptic

"ODA is valuable, but this year's budget is tight. We have to focus on priorities closer to home.

The FOMO response: "I agree entirely—we do need to focus on what strengthens Europe most. That's exactly why ODA is essential. ODA isn't a luxury—it's a competitive advantage. And one that directly supports our jobs, energy security, and long-term resilience."

Right now, our global competitors are using strategic investments to lock in trade routes, secure rare resources, and build influence where the next wave of economic growth is happening. Europe has a trade surplus with countries like Nigeria and Kenya—but we risk losing access if we step back. ODA isn't a luxury—it's a competitive advantage. And one that directly supports our jobs, energy security, and long-term resilience."

### Scenario 2: The Institutional Technocrat

"ODA is important, but politically it's hard to defend. It doesn't connect."

The FOMO Response-: "That's because we've been using the wrong frame. ODA isn't about helping the world—it's about keeping Europe in the game. When the U.S. pulls back, China and Gulf states step in. But that creates an opening for Europe to lead—if we're smart. Our Global Gateway initiative is already gaining traction, and ODA is the bridge between policy vision and real-world partnerships.

Let's not defend aid. Let's explain how it unlocks trade, supports innovation, and keeps Europe strong and relevant."

In essence, the two responses above stem from 6 rules.



The above rules require that you:

1. Set the tone. Open strong. Don't argue on your opponent's terms.
2. Frame ODA as a smart investment, not a moral duty. Show how it benefits Europe.
3. Stay calm and assertive. Inspire action through opportunity, not alarm.
4. Use real data and relatable impacts. Skip abstractions—show outcomes.
5. Acknowledge concerns, then pivot to how ODA is part of the solution.
6. Reframe change as protection—not disruption—of Europe's core strengths.

The FOMO frame resonates because it reflects today's emotional landscape. A strong narrative is only as compelling as the way it's communicated. This framing communicates confidence and knowledge of current affairs while recognising intrinsic concerns about ODA rather than ignoring them. It is a great idea to be able to respond in a way where the other person in the conversation feels that you understand their concern, as opposed to making them feel bad for owning it.

Yet, the FOMO framing also relied heavily on the transactional nature of ODA and the *quid pro quo* that the EU receives. At first glance, this may appear harmless, but what narrative is being encouraged when one does this? We all know that every competition has a winner and a loser, so if this narrative hinges on arguments positioning the EU as a winner, who is the loser? When the language of trade routes and access to rare resources is used, there is a semblance of language used in the colonial era that doesn't sit well in an age where we say we want to build genuine partnerships worldwide.

Advocating for ODA as the best way to ensure economic security in the EU, because it will expand access to the markets of the future, may result in a predatory system that seeks to reap what has been sown into a region. This, in turn, could lead to a host of problems which could fuel conflict and entrench corrupt and obscure practices. These and other concerns have already been identified in respect of the Global Gateway Initiative.<sup>8</sup> Another potential drawback of the FOMO framework is that it overlooks the importance of education, health, and social security as essential beneficiaries of Official Development Assistance (ODA). Addressing these areas is crucial for helping communities move toward a future where they are less dependent on ODA.

To effectively use the FOMO frame in narrative creation, it is essential to avoid reinforcing stereotypes related to colonial-era relationships. Additionally, one should not perceive the majority world merely as a territory to be conquered ahead of other competitors. Our partners and the communities in which they operate deserve reciprocal, egalitarian, and sustainable partnerships that guarantee the future of both regions' peoples, not just those of the EU.

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Key Concerns about the Global Gateway remain Unaddressed by the Commission' available at <https://counter-balance.org/publications/key-concerns-about-the-global-gateway-remain-unaddressed-by-the-european-commission>.

## The Value of Considering our Narratives

The conversations I have been a party to in the last 3 months have left me pondering on the two described approaches and others. I have wondered what type of narrative I want to present as I interact with various stakeholders in Brussels. I know we want to shift the focus to shared objectives while looking for viable solutions. I also know that we need to recognise that there is a danger in being considered out of touch with reality or elitist if we continue to rely on traditional appeals to morality, solidarity and international responsibility. So our narrative becomes essential, because a consistent narrative is what will win hearts and minds, which is eventually hoped to also lead to winning budget sceptics. Yet I believe that there is no single approach to take, but rather a blend of the two discussed herein and still rooted in our faith.

Any narrative we adopt to 'fit in' or because of the urgency of the matter may come back to haunt us in a few years. So, I have found myself asking these questions, and I leave you with them too:

1. What narrative will I still be proud of in five years?
2. What narrative will reflect my awareness of the dignity of those we work with in different parts of the globe?
3. What narrative will reflect our ethos as a Christian network?

Remember, our narratives don't just reflect our values, fears and hopes; they also shape them. In creating our narratives in our advocacy strategies, meetings, policy document submissions and even workshops, may we not lose sight of who we are and why we are doing what we do.