

Migration narratives in political debate and policy-making

Conceptualising and Operationalising
Work Packages 7 and 8

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Abstract

In this concept note, produced in the framework of BRIDGES' "Migration Narratives in Political Debate and Policy-making" (Work Package 7), we develop a conceptual and methodological framework for the analysis of how different narratives shape, and are deployed in, political debate and policymaking. In the first part, we set out the features and functions of narratives in public political debate and policy-making, highlighting the complex interplay between media and political narratives and narratives in more technocratic policy venues. Based on existing literature, we argue that narratives in different political and policy-making arenas are governed by different logics and, therefore, will engender different discursive styles ('lay/populist' versus 'technocratic'). In the second part, we analyse how political and policy actors respond to different narratives, setting out a four-way typology of government strategies for responding to (especially populist) narratives: embracing, adapting, rejecting, or ignoring (decoupling). Finally, in part three, we develop a unique method for empirically identifying these strategies.

Keywords: migration, narratives, policy-making

1. Introduction

Work Package 3 and the first part of Work Package 7 have focused on how migration narratives are articulated in the media. We now need to consider how these narratives are taken up in and influence political debate and policy-making. How do political actors process salient narratives on migration that emerge in the public domain and political debate? Moreover, what role do narratives play in the policy-making process, and how do they inform policy?

Of particular interest is the question of how often simplistic, emotive migration narratives circulating in sections of the mass media and political debate are processed in policy-making spheres. Popular, 'lay' narratives may imply quite polarising, unfeasible, or punitive measures, which are not underpinned by available experience and evidence on migration dynamics. Frequently, such narratives are inconsistent with liberal democratic norms, economic considerations, or international commitments (Hollifield 1992; 1999; Freeman 1995; Joppke 1998). We aim to elucidate how such popular, lay narratives 'move' across mass media coverage, political debate, and policy-making. In particular, how are the narratives circulating in mass media taken up or responded to in political debate, and in turn, how are political narratives taken up in policy-making spheres? Are such narratives embraced, or adapted, or overlooked, or explicitly rejected?

In order to understand these dynamics, the argument proceeds in three steps. First, we detail the underlying assumptions and definitions adopted, including the application of Jones and McBeth's (2010) Narrative Policy Framework and Schmidt's (2008) conceptualisation of the 'communicative' and 'coordinative' spheres in policy-making. Second, we introduce a distinction between 'lay' and 'technocratic' narratives (Boswell 2011) and indicate their key features and roles in communicative and coordinative spheres. This is important for conceptualising the differences between narrative styles in the respective spheres. The discussion in Section 3 unpacks the question of how narratives move or are taken up across different spheres. We explore the relationship between the media, politics and policy-making, laying the groundwork for an examination of how narratives travel across these arenas. Finally, in the fourth section, we consider the methodological implications and operationalisation of the approach.

2. Migration Policy Narratives

2.1 The Narrative Policy Framework

Work Packages 7 and 8 adopt the Narrative Policy Framework's (NPF) definition of a policy narrative. The NPF, first developed by Jones and McBeth (2010), has been applied to various areas of public policy and politics, including recycling (Lybecker, McBeth, and Kusko 2013), climate change (Jones and Song 2014; Jones 2014), Islamophobia (Clemons et al. 2020), US campaign finance reform (Gray and Jones 2016; Jorgensen, Song, and Jones 2018), sanctuary cities (McBeth and Lybecker 2018), and the narrative tactics of Donald Trump (Jones and McBeth 2020). However, it has not been applied to the analysis of the political debate on migration or immigration policy-making. The framework is built on several

assumptions about the policy domain that broadly correspond with those of the BRIDGES project. Firstly, the policy-making sphere is understood as socially constructed, with policy actors foregrounding certain dimensions of policy problems guided by their belief systems, ideologies, and public philosophies. Policy problems are communicated in the form of narratives, which share observable and identifiable structures. The framework identifies four narrative components comprising both the form and content of a policy narrative:

(1) **settings**, consisting of factors such as geography, laws, evidence and other policy consequential factors not captured in one of the other form elements;

(2) **characters**, consisting of victims who are harmed, or at least potentially so, villains who perpetuate the harm, and heroes who bring promise of alleviating the harm;

(3) **plots** that situate the characters relative to the setting and each other within space and across time¹; and,

(4) a **moral** of the story, which is a policy solution or a call to action. (Jones and McBeth 2020, 96)

One of the benefits of adopting this definition and operationalisation for the identification of narratives on migration is that it explicitly makes the link between narratives and policy preferences, capturing political actors' issue definition (the 'problem') and their justification and legitimisation of particular policy 'solutions'.

2.2 Policy-making Spheres and Lay vs. Technocratic Narratives

Aligning with the wider project, we also use Schmidt's (2008) conceptualisation of the 'communicative' and 'coordinative' dimensions of policy-making: the former referring to political communication in the public domain, and the latter to discourse among policy actors (see, also, Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore 2022, 9). This distinction is well established in the literature on politics and public administration, which sees these two spheres as governed by different logics. Politics (or the communicative sphere) can be characterised as the competitive mobilisation of public support by political parties through articulating rival political programmes. In this sphere, the target audience of communication is 'publics' or voters, whose support is crucial for achieving political power and thus delivering programmes (Edelman 1977). By contrast, policy-making (the coordinative sphere) is the activity of elaborating and implementing the collectively binding decisions that flow from these political programmes (Luhmann 1981) (Pogge 1990). Coordinative discourse is oriented at mobilising the engagement and coordinating the activities of those actors involved in delivering policies. It thus invokes a more specialised, 'technocratic' audience, typically public servants, private and third sector actors involved in service delivery, as well as the range of bodies scrutinising, reviewing, and advising on policy (Boswell 2011).

A key goal of this work package is to understand what types of narratives are most likely to be produced and adopted in these different spheres ('pervasiveness') and how this informs/impacts policy-making ('transformativity') (Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore 2022). As

¹ To identify narrative plots, we use Stone's typology of policy plots (Stone 2002, 138–45).

Boswell has observed (2011), different spheres will apply distinct criteria for what constitutes an appropriate narrative. Popular media and public-facing spheres of political communication (the communicative sphere) may expect or require simple, emotive narratives that tap intuitive beliefs and concerns about migrants and migration dynamics (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Boswell 2009a). By contrast, more technocratic venues (the coordinative sphere) may expect more detailed, sober, or explicitly 'evidence-based' narratives. Thus, for example, policy-making in public administration, or specialised fora for scrutiny, such as expert working groups or audit bodies, will be concerned with verifying the factual content of narratives and may want to avoid narratives with more dramatised and emotive content. We note that many venues may comprise a mix of communicative and coordinative discourse and thus may involve a mix of narrative styles. Examples include government press releases about policy or debates within parliamentary committees involving elected politicians and experts.

This distinction between what types of narratives may be legitimate or appropriate in different settings can be articulated in terms of two main narrative types: lay narratives and technocratic narratives. In existing research, a 'lay narrative' commonly describes 'lay' audiences (Pears 2016) or the narrator/producer of a narrative (Downing, Gerwens, and Dron 2022; Bogain 2020) as opposed to its content. For instance, a 'lay narrative' that emerges on social media refers to a narrative produced and disseminated by 'lay people', namely people not engaged in the elite production of narratives, such as politicians, policymakers, experts, journalists and researchers. By contrast, our concept of 'lay narratives' refers to certain features of the narrative: lay narratives are simple, intuitive, and often highly emotive stories designed to be accessible and compelling to a broad public audience. They are oriented towards mobilising public support, often based on their emotional appeal and cognitive accessibility. From the perspective of the media, such features may enhance the accessibility and appeal of their coverage to a wide audience (or its 'newsworthiness'). From the perspective of politics, these features may be associated with mobilising public support for particular policy positions, through appealing to strong values and emotions of target voters.

Lay narratives share some features with what we would identify as 'populist' styles of communication. Both lay and populist narratives are characterised by simplicity and urgency (Freeden 2017); they may involve a paucity of evidence and are likely to suggest that social problems can be addressed through straightforward and immediate interventions. In addition to these features, populist narratives are likely to involve an eschewal of expertise and a rejection of 'elites' and a direct appeal to the interests of 'the people' (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004). Populist narratives may emanate from both left- and right-wing political movements, although populist narratives on immigration are more typically associated with right-wing, anti-immigration positions.

'Lay' narratives (both populist and not) are understood as distinct from more 'technocratic' narratives. Technocratic narratives, as we saw, are oriented at coordinating the actions of those elaborating and implementing policy, and these audiences are likely to have different expectations about plausible and appropriate narratives. They may have a higher threshold for the evidence that needs to underpin claims (noting that this may be in the form of user or practitioner knowledge, administrative data, or technical knowledge, not necessarily research). And they are likely to expect more sober, factual, and detailed information. The main concern of actors in this coordinative sphere is to understand and deliver policy, and thus, they need

narratives that help them understand and act on key information about the policy problem and how best it can be addressed.

In Table 1, we set out the main characteristics we expect to observe in ‘lay’ narratives and ‘technocratic’ narratives in policy-making.

TABLE 1. Narrative Components

Types/ Components	Lay	Technocratic
Settings	Vivid, urgent, personalised – something that’s occurred/event, crisis	Panning out, generalisable features – involving data, legislative context/policy development
Characters	Personalised, polarised, moralising, blame attribution, responsibility	Abstracting from individuals/specific cases, talking about types of behaviours and conditions leading to those, focused on levers for addressing – characters will be institutions, governments, organisations
Plots	Dramatic, clear cause and effect, focus on individuals	Dryer, more complex, abstracting out/big picture
Moral	Simple solution, immediate/short-term, doesn’t acknowledge impediments, morally righteous	More complex, will take time, considers broader set of factors, less explicitly moralising, more ‘objective’ and less grounded in moral perspective, compromise, trade-offs, difficult decisions

We note that the correspondence between spheres and types of narratives is not always clear-cut. For a start, there may be considerable overlap in the content of lay and technocratic narratives circulating in the two spheres. Indeed, lay narratives may be simplified and accessible versions of technocratic narratives adapted for a wider audience. Similarly, technocratic narratives may be faithful attempts to translate lay stories into viable policy programmes. The distinction between lay and technocratic styles refers not to the content or substance of the narrative (its setting, character, plots, and morals), which may be consistent across lay and technocratic versions of the narrative; rather, the distinction is in the *style* of the narrative, as elaborated in Table 1.

The second important point to note is that lay and technocratic styles are not neatly coterminous with (respectively) communicative and coordinative spheres. Indeed, the communicative sphere may feature technocratic narratives as well as lay ones – for example, in the case of more sober broadsheet journalism; or where politicians focus on more technical

aspects of policy issues to build credibility. Similarly, the coordinative sphere may at times invoke lay narratives – for example, where public officials are under pressure to deliver high-profile, public-facing political pledges and thus invoke emotive narratives rather than sober, evidence-based ones. However, by and large, we would expect lay narratives to dominate communicative spheres and technocratic narratives to dominate coordinative spheres.

We will further elaborate on these distinctions in the methodology section, where we tease out the features of lay and technocratic styles across the four dimensions of narratives (settings, characters, plots and morals).

3. Processing Migration Policy Narratives

We now turn to the question of how migration narratives move between, or are ‘taken up’ in, the different arenas. We first need to distinguish between two sets of relationships: the first being the relationship between media narratives and political debate (both of which are part of the ‘communicative’ sphere we identified above); and the second is the relationship between this communicative dimension and the more coordinative sphere of policy-making.

3.1 Narratives in the Media and Political Debate (‘communicative’ sphere)

Thus far, we have alluded to how media narratives are ‘taken up’ or ‘responded to’ in the political sphere. However, it is important to stress that the relationship between media and political discourse is very much two-way. On the one hand, political leaders have a significant influence in shaping the narratives articulated in the media. Discursive institutionalist accounts suggest that politicians strategically mobilise ideas from the available repertoire of public philosophies that shape debates on policy issues (Schmidt 2008). They select, combine, and rework these ideas in order to resonate with the values and beliefs of their publics, and to galvanise support for particular agendas (Schmidt 2008; 2016; Boswell and Hampshire 2017). These political narratives are frequently the object of mass media reporting – indeed, a high proportion of the articles analysed in Work Package 3 were either triggered by or prominently featured speeches, statements, or other discursive interventions by politicians. Politicians represented 44% of the total number of quoted voices in traditional media across all six countries analysed. This figure increased to 60% in debates on migrant’s rights (Maneri 2023, 55).

Importantly, however, such media reporting is not necessarily a straightforward representation of political communication. Most obviously, the media will select and re-package political discourse to create interesting and topical coverage (Meyer 2002). But arguably more important is the extent to which dependence on the media influences how political leaders decide what to communicate. Astute politicians will develop a good understanding of how their ideas are likely to be picked up in the mass media. Their ability to communicate and thus mobilise support is crucially dependent on how their communications resonate with the media (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Koopmans 2004). This, in turn, depends on media perceptions of the ‘newsworthiness’ of their political communications. As such, successful politicians will

constantly be anticipating how their messages will land in different parts of the media and will have a keen sense of how the latter will interpret their potential appeal to their audiences.

This implies that the autonomy of political elites in defining dominant narratives is circumscribed by a form of reflexivity: the constant second-guessing by politicians of which types of narratives will resonate with publics. In crafting their messages, political elites are likely to be influenced by their understanding of the criteria of newsworthiness: novelty, drama, controversy, and human interest. The operation of this filter privileges more simple and compelling narratives, especially where politicians are targeting publics who are likely to read tabloid or low-brow media outlets. Drawing on the distinctions above, we might expect politicians keen to maximise the resonance of their communications to adopt 'lay' narratives, in part because they have better chances of being taken up in mass media.

Moreover, politicians will also look to the mass media for cues as to how their messages are landing, and, more generally, use media reporting as a gauge of public opinion (Koopmans 2004). Governments and political parties are constantly scanning media coverage to gain an understanding of the beliefs, goals, and priorities of the publics whose support they are seeking to win. This means that not only is the media influencing how they select and compose their narratives on migration; politicians are also using the media as a sounding board for how their messages are landing, as well as a crucial monitor of public attitudes (Boswell 2009b).

What do these insights imply for the question of how politicians 'respond' to media-articulated narratives on migration? First of all, as noted above, we need to acknowledge that politicians do not merely react to such narratives, they play a key role in forming them, and media narratives often take the form of (selective and adapted) reporting of political communications. However, the influence of political discourse on the media is circumscribed by the considerations outlined above: the reflexivity of politicians in how they filter narratives to meet expectations of newsworthiness; and their tendency to read mass media coverage as a gauge of public opinion. These factors suggest that politicians do not just shape media narratives: they are also deeply influenced by them.

Moreover, even where politicians have themselves shaped or influenced media narratives, mass media reporting frequently places politicians under pressure to craft a response. A breaking story or a TV reportage generates demands for a political reaction, requiring politicians to take a position – whether endorsing or rejecting the claims. This implicit or explicit pressure to respond means that politicians need to reflect on their positioning vis-à-vis media narratives: should they embrace or reject the claims, or attempt to ignore them altogether?

Where media narratives appear to have strong traction with the public, political parties may find it expedient to embrace these narratives. They may be keen to signal their sympathy with public concerns, to swing behind the values implicit in the narrative, and reassure the public with their commitment to addressing the issue. This is especially likely to be the case where politicians need to demonstrate a clear response to a perceived 'crisis' or political shock; where they are actively engaged in election campaigns; or where they are positioning themselves in a context of intensive party competition on migration issues (Bale et al. 2009; Odmalm and Super 2014; Meguid 2005). For instance, when faced with the 'threat' of a populist radical right (anti-immigration) challenger ahead of an election, mainstream parties might strategically swing behind more lay or populist narratives in order not to lose out electorally.

However, the question of ‘position-taking’ on media narratives becomes trickier where media narratives are potentially out of kilter with what are considered appropriate or responsible political positions. While populist or nativist political movements may feel quite comfortable in adopting polarised and potentially divisive migration narratives, mainstream politicians may be more reticent. They may risk losing more ‘moderate’ votes by aligning themselves with more extreme positions; and the adoption of more populist claims may undermine their reputation as being ‘serious’ or evidence-based, or of considering the welfare of all groups within their population. In this case, they may choose to dismiss or ignore an issue in an attempt to reduce its salience or adopt a more adversarial position and refute the claims of a competitor (Meguid 2005; Bale et al. 2009). Even political parties that have a clear electoral interest in attracting the votes of anti-migrant publics, for example, may balk at endorsing divisive narratives that portray their party as lacking moderation or gravitas.

The risks of being seen to align with more simplistic or divisive lay narratives become greater the more political debate is concerned with operationalising political programmes. This applies both to parties that are in government and need to implement their ideas, and to opposition parties that want to demonstrate their aptitude for government. Where the narratives they espouse are out of kilter with what they can feasibly do, they risk being exposed as hypocritical, incompetent, or unable to deliver. Indeed, the gap between lay and populist narratives and what can feasibly be delivered is a long-recognised feature of immigration policy in European countries (Boswell 2008; Castles 2004; Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002; Geddes and Pettrachin 2020). (Although in practice, as we know, it may be possible to sustain this disjuncture between rhetoric and practice quite effectively over a long period of time.)

These considerations suggest that there are a number of ways in which political actors may ‘respond’ to, or take a position on, the narratives conveyed in the media.

1. **Embracing.** Politicians may support or adopt the narratives portrayed in the media – indeed, as we saw, these narratives may originate from their own communications in the political sphere.
2. **Adapting.** Politicians may give qualified support to these narratives, whilst adapting key elements. For example, politicians may adopt the issue definition from a dominant narrative but propose an alternative policy solution.
3. **Rejecting.** Politicians may explicitly criticise, question, or reject narratives. This may be grounded in values or ideological differences, or a rejection of the factual claims.
4. **Ignoring.** Politicians may decide to overlook or disregard narratives, especially where they are inconvenient, placing them in an awkward position; or where they are deemed not worth commenting on, for example, because of their objectionable moral claims or paucity of evidence base. This may be a strategy to defuse the situation and diminish the salience of the narrative.

Which of these positions politicians take matters a great deal, as it will influence the success of the narrative in influencing policy decisions.

Under what conditions might we expect politicians to adopt one or more of these positions? Here, we return to the hypotheses we developed at the outset of the BRIDGES project. The first of the five hypotheses is of particular relevance to this issue:

Increased political salience of immigration engenders more lay (including populist) narratives, which governments will be under pressure to respond to/embrace.

There are, in fact, two main assumptions built into this statement. The first is that where migration issues are salient and contested, the narratives propounded by (especially more populist) media and political parties are likely to be more polarised, simplistic, and dramatised. And second, that under these conditions, governments are likely to feel compelled to respond to these narratives, including by embracing them.

We can now further elaborate and nuance this hypothesis, building on the analysis above. We propose adding two further expectations:

Where the media is deploying polarising and simplistic narratives and governments are concerned to signal their alignment with such narratives, they are likely to either embrace or adapt these narratives in their political communications.

By contrast, where these narratives are seriously out of kilter with a government's broader ideology or beliefs or their support base, or where governments are buffered from electoral pressures, they are likely to reject or ignore such narratives.

We will set out our approach to operationalising these questions in the methodology section below. In the meantime, we need to explore in more detail the role of narratives in policy-making.

3.2 Narratives in Policy-Making ('coordinative' sphere)

As noted above, we define the sphere of policy-making as the set of actors and institutions tasked with elaborating and implementing collectively binding decisions, or what Schmidt (2002; 2008) refers to as the 'coordinative' sphere. We also noted above that the narratives circulating in this sphere have a different purpose and role to those in the political sphere. Rather than oriented to the mobilisation of public support, coordinative narratives are about ensuring that policies effectively achieve their goals: that they steer the societal processes they are designed to influence (Boswell 2011). This means they need to be based on a reliable understanding of the motivations and characteristics of their 'target' populations – and thus more or less 'evidence-based' (though, of course, there may be a variety of forms of information or evidence that are seen as reliable and relevant, and these are not necessarily research or expert knowledge). It also means that these narratives need to be comprehensible and plausible to the range of actors involved in implementing policy.

Both of these requirements – the narrative's approximation to reliable knowledge about the behaviour of target populations and its plausibility to more specialised or technical actors – militate in favour of more sober, factual and detailed narratives rather than the simple and colourful accounts favoured in the mass media and political sphere ('lay' narratives). We are likely to find these more 'technocratic' narratives in the more detailed policy documents and reports produced by public administrations and specialised groupings engaged in the policy

process. We can also find them in the deliberations of committees tasked with scrutinising government performance and legislation, especially where these are relatively sequestered from the communicative sphere (noting that select committees in the British case, for example, may unexpectedly be thrust into the limelight where they are discussing contentious issues). These venues, therefore, provide a useful site for analysing coordinative discourses. Where such venues comprise a mixture of coordinative and communicative discourse, they are also interesting sites for exploring the overlaps and alignments/misalignments between the narratives operating in each sphere. For example, politicians espousing quite populist narratives may be scrutinised by more technocratic actors in select committee hearings, with their claims tested against different forms of evidence. Or officials or experts may be quizzed by politicians and exposed for failing to reflect lay concerns about policy issues (for example, in the case of immigration policy, see Boswell 2018).

Now as we suggested earlier, there is frequently a gap between the rhetoric governments adopt in the political sphere, and what they do in practice. Let us consider what this may signify for narratives across the communicative and coordinative spheres. In many instances, this gap may simply reflect that politicians are adopting a more accessible and compelling style of communication in public-facing communication (or what we termed 'lay' narratives), compared to the more technical and detailed communication required in the coordinative sphere ('technocratic' narratives). In some instances, however, we may see a more substantive 'decoupling' in the content and implications of narratives across spheres. For example, governments may advance quite restrictive narratives on migration in their public-facing speeches and parliamentary debate; whilst in practice, they implement policies based on more technocratic evidence about labour needs, resulting in more expansionist or liberal policies in practice (Castles 2004).

Work Package 7 is especially interested in the potential for this form of decoupling. In particular, we are interested in what happens to narratives as they are transposed across different spheres: from media to political debate, to policy-making. We will attempt to trace processes of decoupling or divergence across these spheres by comparing narratives in the communicative sphere with those advanced in the coordinative sphere. Part of the analysis will therefore involve comparing the narratives advanced in venues associated with each of these spheres: exploring how narratives dominating the communicative sphere are transferred/carried over into more coordinative spheres concerned with policy delivery.

In order to understand how narratives evolve as they move across these spheres, we are guided by the four-way typology outlined above. This captures different responses or position-taking by politicians as they process migration narratives circulating in the media. Politicians might embrace, adapt, reject, or ignore these narratives. We apply the same typology to classifying how the policy-making sphere might process narratives from the political sphere. Following the classification above, we can envisage the following forms of take-up:

1. **Embracing.** In this case, there is alignment between narratives in both spheres. This may be because the narratives dominating the public political sphere were already sufficiently plausible/evidence-based to also function in coordinative spheres (for example, where lay narratives were simplified versions of technocratic narratives, so the substance of the narrative is the same – even if the narrative style differs). Or it may be because the political debate is sufficiently nuanced/sober to already advance

more technocratic narratives (though we consider this to be unlikely in a politicised area such as migration policy).

2. **Adapting.** Here, coordinative discourse partially takes up the narrative but with some adjustments. For example, the coordinative sphere may embrace one or more dimensions (such as the moral of the story), but not others (such as the plot, or causal theory implied in the story).
3. **Rejecting.** In this case, the narratives are addressed but explicitly rejected by the policy sphere.
4. **Ignoring.** In this case, narratives across the two spheres do not correspond at all.

Thus, the four-way typology helps us to identify how narratives are adapted, adopted or overlooked as they move across communicative and coordinative spheres.

Again, it is worth recalling the hypotheses developed at the outset of the Work Package, which give us some cues about the conditions under which politicians and policymakers might adopt these different scenarios. Our second hypothesis was:

Predominance of populist narratives leads to diversification/polarisation of different narratives across actors and venues, especially where the latter are more technocratic or 'evidence-based'

This hypothesis captures a general expectation that where more restrictive, sensationalist or nativist narratives dominate the communicative sphere, there is likely to be greater divergence from narratives prevailing in the coordinative sphere. Put succinctly: more populist or nativist claims are difficult to redeem in technocratic policy-making settings – at least in liberal democracies. However, we need to nuance this claim based on the two further hypotheses we adopted at the outset.

Where immigration is politically salient AND governments are under pressure to deliver tangible outcomes, they are likely to decouple rhetorical commitment to populist narratives from more evidence-based practice

This hypothesis captures the point that governments adopting restrictive, sensationalist and nativist narratives in the political sphere may need to separate such narratives from the policies they adopt in practice. This is especially likely where they want to deliver particular policy outcomes (such as reducing migration or asylum flows). However, it remains open to empirical analysis whether such separation occurs either at the stage of codifying policy in policy statements; or at the subsequent stage of implementation. Thus, we may see instances where political narratives are adapted, rejected or ignored in the coordinative sphere. Alternatively, we may see scenarios in which political and policy-making narratives are closely aligned, but policy is then not implemented.

Finally, we are interested in exploring what we have called the 'cognitive constraint' (Boswell 2011):

Where policymakers base policy interventions on populist narratives, they may be exposed to a 'cognitive constraint' whereby expert or lay (experiential) knowledge exposes inconsistencies or inaccuracies in narratives.

We will be on the lookout for instances of this constraining effect in our analysis of the six national cases.

4. Methodological Considerations

How can we observe how media narratives are taken up in politics and policy-making, and thus how they evolve as they move across the spheres we examine? To operationalise this question, we first seek to map and describe the alignment/divergence of narratives across the spheres. This static analysis enables us to identify similarities and differences – but it does not reveal causal relationships between the spheres. For this, we draw on a number of other methods, which we outline below.

We start by mapping the political context, public salience, media attention and public opinion on migration over the 10-year period (see Appendix for a comprehensive overview of the research design and methods). We then map dominant migration narratives in the mass media. We distil the key narratives for each of our topics. We then analyse parliamentary debates to identify the articulation of narratives in public political debate.

Our next step is to identify correlation or alignment across media and political narratives. This is not the same as inferring causality. As we noted, the relationship between media and political narratives is highly complex and works in both directions. For now, our task is to identify the level of alignment:

1. **Embracing.** Do political narratives **mirror** media narratives? In other words, are they similar/identical in important respects? In this scenario, we would identify key elements of narratives shared across both spheres. Are they similar across all four dimensions (setting, characters, plot and policy solution)? If the answer is yes, then we can infer politicians are **embracing** media narratives (whether or not they are responding to them, or have influenced them themselves)
2. **Adapting.** Do political narratives reflect **modified** versions of them? Do they partially align, perhaps with important modifications or differences? In this scenario, we would identify some key elements shared, but others adapted or divergent across the four dimensions. If this is the case, we would infer that politicians are **adapting** narratives
3. **Rejecting.** Do they **argue against** them? Does political discourse suggest conscious criticism or rejection of them? In this case, we are not necessarily comparing narratives but identifying discourse that engages with them in a critical way. If such a response is

identified, we would see critical engagement with narratives – arguments being mobilised that question or **reject** them.

4. **Ignoring.** Finally, are media narratives simply **not mirrored** in political narratives at all? Perhaps political narratives bypass or overlook narratives that dominate media coverage. In this case, we are unable to pick up the media narratives at all – we find distinct narratives which were not present in media analysis. In this case, we might infer that politicians are consciously **ignoring** narratives.

Based on this mapping exercise, we can also start to infer patterns of influence across the spheres. To analyse this, we use three methods:

- A. Process-tracing focusing on the temporal sequence of media reporting and parliamentary debate. This is relevant for understanding which came first. Was the narrative already being communicated in political debate before it was taken up in the media, or vice versa?
- B. Media reporting of political discourse (or parliamentary mention of media narrative – though this is less likely). Does media reporting explicitly refer to/report on political pronouncements? This will clearly suggest that politics has influenced the media narrative.
- C. Interviews. Through qualitative interviews, we ask political actors how far they are influenced by particular media narratives.

In analysing political narratives and media narratives, we take account of the plurality of voices/perspectives/ideologies/positionalities in the communicative sphere by considering key parameters such as right/left, in-government/in-opposition, political affiliation of the media etc.

In the next step, we want to compare narratives in political debate to those in more coordinative venues. We draw on policy documents (white papers, green papers, reports, etc). We repeat the analysis as per above – but slightly adapted for these sources.

- **Embracing.** Do policy narratives **mirror** political narratives? Even if expressed in more technocratic language, is the narrative similar and is the proposed policy 'solution' the same? If the answer is yes, then we can infer that political narratives have directly informed policy-making
- **Adapting.** Do policy narratives reflect **modified** versions of political narratives? Do they partially align, perhaps, with a policy solution that is presented as the 'feasible'/'workable' alternative? In this scenario, we would infer that policy-makers are **adapting** political narratives
- **Rejecting.** Do they **argue against** them? Does policy discourse suggest conscious criticism or rejection of political narratives? In this case, we would see critical engagement with narratives – arguments being mobilised that question or **reject** them

- **Ignoring.** Finally, can we identify complete decoupling between narratives in political debate and policy discourse? In this case, we can infer that civil servants are consciously **ignoring or overlooking** narratives in political debates

Once again, based on this mapping exercise, we can also start to infer patterns of influence across the communicative and coordinative spheres. This data set is further supplemented by qualitative semi-structured interviews, in which we ask civil servants and officials how often polarising political discourse on migration issues influences their work and the priorities of their department.

As discussed, the expectation is that the further narratives travel along a spectrum of media to policy-making, the more technocratic they will become. We expect that in this process, there is likely to be a considerable amount of adaptation of narratives or decoupling.

5. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, in order to analyse how narratives circulating in mass media are taken up or responded to in the political debate, and in turn, how political narratives are taken up in policy-making venues, we must first understand the complex relationship between narratives in the media, political debate, and policy-making. Based on the literature, we have determined that the two discursive spheres are governed by different logics (Schmidt 2008). Politics (or the communicative sphere) can be characterised as the competitive mobilisation of public support by political parties through articulating rival political programmes. The target audience is 'publics' or voters, whose support is crucial for achieving political goals. Meanwhile, policymaking venues (the coordinative sphere) are oriented towards coordinating the activities of actors involved in policy delivery.

Consequently, we posit that the different spheres will apply distinct criteria for what constitutes an appropriate narrative. This can be articulated in terms of two narrative types: 'lay' narratives and 'technocratic' narratives. The former is oriented towards mobilising public support, whereas the latter is oriented toward coordinating the actions of those elaborating and implementing policy. While lay narratives may be simplified versions of technocratic narratives and technocratic narratives may be attempts to translate lay stories into viable policy programmes, we would expect lay narratives to dominate communicative spheres and technocratic narratives to dominate coordinative spheres.

Exploring the two-way relationship between media and political narratives, we have ascertained that political leaders have a significant influence in shaping migration narratives in the media (Maneri 2023). However, we argue that the autonomy of political elites in defining dominant narratives is circumscribed by a form of reflexivity. This suggests that the media influences how political actors select and compose narratives on migration, and that politicians do not just shape media narratives but are also deeply influenced by them. Moreover, as we discuss, media coverage frequently places politicians under pressure to craft a response.

We propose four strategies by which political actors will respond to media narratives on migration: by embracing, adapting, explicitly rejecting, or ignoring them. Where media

narratives appear to have strong traction with the public, political actors may find it beneficial to embrace these narratives. However, where media narratives potentially conflict with what is considered appropriate or political positions, they may choose to ignore them to reduce their salience or adopt a more adversarial position by rejecting them. Moreover, we argue that the risks of being seen to align with more simplistic or divisive lay narratives become greater the more political debate is concerned with operationalising political programmes.

Regarding what happens to narratives as they are transposed across communicative and coordinative spheres, we propose the same typology to classify how policy-makers might process narratives from the political sphere. We consider how politicians may adopt a more accessible style of communication in public-facing statements, compared to the more technical and detailed communication required in the policy sphere, explaining variations of narrative style ('lay' vs 'technocratic' narratives). However, we may also find governments invoke restrictive narratives on migration in the media and parliament; whilst, in practice, implementing more liberal policies, suggesting a decoupling of rhetorical commitment to populist narratives from more evidence-based practice. Finally, we posit that where lay (especially populist) narratives permeate policy venues, they may expose inaccuracies in narratives ('cognitive constraint').

The above framework and operationalisation represent an important step for the analysis of how narratives on migration are taken up in different political and policy-making spheres ('pervasiveness'), and how this informs/impacts policy-making ('transformativity') (Garcés-Mascreñas and Pastore 2022). This notwithstanding, there remains significant scope for further development of research in this field. For instance, we can envisage as a fruitful next step a follow-up comparative study that explores the extent to which policy proposals in narratives end in policy. What happens to a migration narrative in the long term, and are there feedback effects? If the proposed 'policy solution' is introduced in policy, is the issue resolved, and does the narrative disappear? If a solution is impossible, does the narrative sustain? Or does it recede of its own accord? In this regard, we support Garcés-Mascreñas and Pastore (2022) conclusion on the importance of the temporal dimension in explaining and gauging the impact of (migration) narratives and would urge the further development of (methodological) approaches to facilitate this research.

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Appendix. Research Design & Methods

The research for Work Package 7 was conducted in four phases.

1. Mapping Migration Narratives

1.1 Case Selection

Work Package 7 focuses on narratives on migration flows mirroring Work Package 3's subgenre 'arrivals/emergencies at the border'. Each country focuses on three events or episodes of intense political debate between 2012-2022. Two case studies were selected based on a comparative research design across the six countries collaborating on this research (Germany, UK, France, Hungary, Italy, and Spain): 1) the EU relocation scheme in 2015, and 2) the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022. The third case was selected based on the specific national context.

1.2 National Context & Background

We start by mapping the 'master narratives' on migration from a historical perspective, linking them to broader public philosophies or national paradigms. To chart changes over time but also have some indication of how narratives are linked to other factors, we also map political context, key events, and policy debates, including in response to events (possible independent variables), notably:

- Political dynamics (elections, referenda, the emergence of new political parties, etc.)
- Exogenous events related to migration flows/control (change in flows, focusing events)
- Broader societal conditions (e.g. economic shocks, wider debates on welfare, etc.)
- EU and geopolitical developments

1.3 Salience and Public Attitudes

To understand the context of public and political discourse on migration over the 10 years, we draw on Eurobarometer data on salience and European Social Survey data on public attitudes to migration. This is supplemented with national survey data on public opinion and issue salience.

1.4 Media Salience

We also conduct a rudimentary quantitative analysis to map the extent of media coverage over time. Based on keyword searches in a newspaper database, such as Nexis, we map the aggregate number of articles on immigration issues each month from 2012-2022 in three national newspapers (1 right-wing/populist, 1 progressive and 1 centrist). This allows us to compare media coverage over the 10 years (and around key events) with the salience and public opinion data.

2. Narratives in the Media ('communicative sphere')

Building directly on the analysis in Work Package 3, we conduct a light-touch media analysis of migration narratives on the three events in articles in three newspapers: 1 right-wing/populist newspaper, 1 left-wing/progressive newspaper and 1 centrist newspaper.

2.1 Document Selection

Identifying the peak period of coverage of the event (one or two weeks), we examine the articles in each newspaper to gain a sense of the dominant narrative(s). This could be a consolidated frame on how the newspaper presents the issue or a few recurring narratives. Approximately four articles are selected for each event from each outlet that best reflect the newspaper's position/the dominant narrative(s). This could be in breaking news stories, editorials or comment pieces detailing the newspaper's stance.

2.2 Data Collection (coding sheet provided)

Using a coding sheet specifically designed for the project, the dominant narrative(s) on each event are identified in each article. The articles are coded along the four dimensions of Jones and McBeth's (2010) definition of a policy narrative: 1) setting or context (domestic/international, institutions, policy setting); 2) plot of the story, based on Stone's 2002 typology of policy plots; 3) characters (heroes, villains, and victims); and 4) moral of the story, particularly in the form of proposed policy solutions. Data is also collected on political actors quoted/mentioned and other key actors (e.g. NGOs). A summary of the dominant narrative(s) in each article is compiled, across the four narrative dimensions, keeping an eye out for the 'master narratives' identified in phase 1.2 and narrative style ('lay' vs 'technocratic').

3. Narratives in Political Debates ('communicative sphere')

How are these narratives taken up in political debates, especially salient and populist narratives? How do politicians process salient migration narratives in the media: embrace, adapt, reject, or ignore?

3.1 Document Selection

We consider three types of parliamentary activities, which will yield relevant data: 1) parliamentary responses to focusing events (e.g. emergency debates); 2) regular parliamentary activity (e.g. Prime Minister's questions, Home Office questions); and 3) debates on new legislation. Documents and transcripts of debates are collected over three months, reflecting an initial response to events. No more than five parliamentary debates/plenary sessions are analysed per case study, and no fewer than three.

3.2 Data Collection (coding sheet provided)

As with the media narratives, a coding sheet is provided to identify the dominant narrative(s) in each debate/parliamentary session, which captures data on the venue, date, and name of each debate. Key interventions in the debates are coded along the four dimensions of a policy

narrative: setting, plot, characters, and moral/policy solution. Attention is paid to the main political leaders, e.g. Prime Minister, Interior Minister, and leaders of the opposition (i.e. 2-3 for each ideological position/political party). Attention is paid to common narratives across speakers, political parties, mentions of other key actors (NGOs, the public, EU institutions etc.), the appearance of 'master' narratives and narrative style ('lay' vs 'technocratic').

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Correlation/alignment of narratives across media and political debate ('communicative sphere')

We can now observe how media narratives are taken up in political debate by identifying correlation or alignment across the two datasets (media narratives and narratives in parliamentary debates). The level of alignment is identified by systematically comparing the data across the four narrative dimensions, utilising the typology: 1) embracing, 2) adapting, 3) rejection, and 4) ignoring (see p. 15-16 for details).

3.3.2 Patterns of influence in the 'communicative sphere' (inferring causality)

As a final step, we consider the inferred influence of narratives across the media and political debate. Three methods are applied to ascertain when and where a narrative emerged, its dissemination and the direction of travel (media \leftrightarrow political debate) to develop a plausible account of the emergence and dissemination of narratives (see also p. 15):

- A. Process-tracing
- B. Media reporting of political discourse (or parliamentary mention of media narratives)
- C. Interviews

4. Narratives in Policy-making ('coordinative sphere')

In the next step, we compare narratives in political debate to those in more coordinative venues.

4.1 Document collection

Several types of policy documents that may yield relevant data were identified, albeit with different names in different countries: 1) White papers on immigration (policy documents produced by a government that set out their proposals for future policies and legislation); 2) Green papers (consultation documents on policy produced by a government); and 3) Government responses to parliamentary scrutiny/committee reports. In this case, a government will likely be defending their policy proposals and position. Policy documents published within 18 months of the issue surfacing in political debate are considered.

4.2 Data collection

Code migration narratives in policy documents using the provided coding sheet (see 3.2). Note that not all components of narratives may appear in policy documents.

4.3 Data analysis

4.3.1 Correlation/alignment of narratives across political debate and policy-making

We can now observe how political and media narratives are taken up in policy-making by identifying correlation or alignment across the three datasets (media narratives, political narratives and policy narratives). Narratives are systematically compared across the four narrative dimensions, utilising the typology: 1) embracing, 2) adapting, 3) rejection, and 4) ignoring (see also p. 16). When analysing whether narratives in the 'coordinative sphere' align with those identified in the 'communicative sphere', it is important to consider the distinction between (a) variation in narrative styles ('lay' versus 'technocratic'); and (b) variation in the content of narratives across the four narrative components. The key point is that a difference in narrative styles (lay versus technocratic) does not necessarily mean that the narrative itself differs entirely, it may simply be the same narrative (or aspects thereof) expressed in different language.

4.3.2 Patterns of influence across the 'communicative' and 'coordinative' spheres

Finally, the data analysed in phase 4 is supplemented with data from semi-structured interviews with civil servants (approx. 6 per country, interview guidelines provided), during which the focus is on how media and political narratives influence their work and the priorities of their department.

Including a Gender/Intersectional Perspective

In line with the objectives of the BRIDGES project (see Gender Guidelines D2.3), Workage Package 7 and 8 include a gender and intersectional perspective in two distinct areas: 1) representations of gender/intersectional perspective in dominant narratives, and 2) representations of gender/gendered vulnerable groups in policy proposals. These themes were considered during data collection, analysis, and the interview process.

BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

BRIDGES: Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives is a project funded by the EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and implemented by a consortium of 12 institutions from all over Europe. The project aims to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues by focusing on six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To do so, BRIDGES adopts an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and is implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

The BRIDGES Working Papers are a series of academic publications presenting the research results of the project in a structured and rigorous way. They can either focus on particular case studies covered by the project or adopt a comparative perspective.

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