

Policy brief on the impact of narratives on policymaking at the national level

Saskia Smellie and Christina Boswell

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BRIDGES Policy Briefs 2

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Authors

Saskia Smellie is a Research Fellow in Politics at the University of Edinburgh. She specialises in the politics of migration, comparative immigration policy, and foreign policy. Saskia holds a PhD in Politics from the University of Edinburgh and studied German Studies and European and International Politics at the University of Birmingham, the Humboldt University Berlin, and the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include migration policy and politics, migration crises and diplomacy, ‘responsibility-sharing’ in Europe, and decision-making processes from a foreign policy analysis perspective. She teaches and lectures at honours level on Europe and international migration. Saskia has previously worked as a Public Relations and Policy Officer at the German Consulate General Edinburgh and has experience consulting the Scottish Government on migration policy after Brexit.

Christina Boswell is Chair in Politics and Vice Principal for Research at the University of Edinburgh. She is also a Fellow of the British Academy and former Chair of the Scottish Government’s Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population. Her most significant contributions include work on the role of narratives in migration policy, the symbolic and instrumental uses of expert knowledge in policy, the use of performance indicators and targets in immigration and asylum, and the role of ideas in political discourse on migration. Her work is comparative, with a focus on the UK, Germany and the EU. She has extensive experience in policy advice for EU institutions and international organisations, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the UN Global Commission on Migration.

Reviewers

Luca Barana and Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas

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Executive Summary

This policy brief was produced within the framework of the EU Horizon 2020 project [BRIDGES](#). It focuses on how migration narratives – the stories people tell about the causes and impacts of migration – shape and are deployed in political debate and policymaking. More specifically, it considers how the narratives on migration that emerge in the mainstream media are taken up in and influence political debate and inform policy.

In order to understand these dynamics, this policy brief draws on research on migration narratives in six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. The research compares how migration narratives in these countries ‘travelled’ between the media, political debate, and policymaking during two periods of intense debate: first, the 2015 European ‘migration crisis’, focusing on narratives related to the EU’s proposed relocation and quota schemes, and second, narratives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis following Russia’s invasion in February 2022. The analysis draws on extensive and systematic analysis of newspaper articles, parliamentary debates, and policy documents supplemented with data from interviews with officials.

The policy brief outlines six key findings, such as the role that the media played in setting the (humanitarian) narrative agenda in both cases, the strategic deployment of narratives by politicians to strengthen political agendas, and a lack of the anticipated rhetorical ‘decoupling’ between narratives on migration in the public political debate and policymaking. Based on the findings, this brief sets out four recommendations for officials and stakeholders to encourage a calm and evidence-based debate on immigration, including i) adopting a longitudinal approach to ascertain public salience and attitudes towards immigration, ii) depoliticising discourse on migration, iii) crafting narratives early in the emergence of new policy issues, and iv) circulating balanced and evidence-based narratives in public debate.

Introduction

The aim of the [BRIDGES](#) project, funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, is to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in the context of increased politicisation and polarisation in many European countries in recent years. Migration narratives - the stories people tell about the causes and impacts of migration - have a significant impact on media coverage of migration. But how do such narratives, in turn, influence political debate and policy-making? In this policy brief, we consider how the narratives on migration that emerge in the mainstream media are taken up in and influence political debate and policymaking.

Of particular interest is how often simplistic, emotive migration narratives circulating in sections of the mainstream media and political debate inform policymaking. Popular, 'lay' narratives may imply quite polarising, unfeasible, or punitive measures, which are not necessarily underpinned by available experience and evidence on migration dynamics. Frequently, such narratives are inconsistent with liberal democratic norms, economic considerations, or international commitments. This policy brief elucidates how such narratives circulate across mass media coverage, political debate, and policymaking.

In order to understand these dynamics, we draw on the findings of research on migration narratives in six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK). More specifically, we compare the analysis of how narratives 'travelled' between the media, political debate, and policymaking in these six countries during two periods of intense debate: first, the 2015 European 'migration crisis', focusing on narratives related to the EU's proposed relocation and quota schemes, and second, narratives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis following Russia's invasion on 24 February 2022.

Evidence and Analysis

The following discussion is based on a comparative analysis of six national reports drawing on the extensive and systematic analysis of narratives in a cross-section of national press coverage, over 150 parliamentary debates and over 50 extensive policy documents related to the European migration crisis and the Ukrainian refugee crisis. This was supplemented with interviews with officials in all six countries. More details on the methods, research process, findings and limitations can be found in the Comparative Report, six [National Reports](#), and our [Concept Paper](#), which form the basis for this policy brief.

How did narratives 'travel' across the media and political debate?

There was considerable evidence of the media setting the tone for narratives on the **European migration crisis**. This could be attributed to timing since the crisis peaked over the summer of 2015 when parliamentary business was in recess. This created a window for the media to set the agenda – and in all cases, politics was very responsive. This is most evident in the Spanish case, where the government initially went against dominant media narratives before backtracking. Political leaders and especially governments also adapted elements of these narratives. While media tended to emphasise humanitarian aspects, human interest stories

and immediate events, politicians often adapted these narratives to position themselves as responsible, patriotic, or statesman-like on the world stage.

There was also some divergence in the range and types of narratives in the media compared to political debate – especially in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Political debate tended to be more polarised and simplistic in its solutions than a generally quite humanitarian-oriented media. The exceptions to this were the UK and Hungary, where there was closer alignment between the media and political debate – to the extent that the two are indistinguishable. However, while the UK demonstrated a more pluralist debate – with distinct ideological groupings – in Hungary, there was only one dominant ideological position reflecting that of the government.

There was more alignment between narratives in the media and political debate on the **Ukrainian refugee crisis**, especially in the UK, Germany, France, and Italy. The media discourse was predominantly humanitarian, and once again, politicians in government and opposition adapted and responded to dominant media narratives, especially those drawing on established migration narratives, to demonstrate their (humanitarian) credentials and responsible /moral leadership. This is especially notable in the UK case, where under intense media scrutiny, the government was initially accused of miscalculating public support for Ukrainians before adopting a more humanitarian approach.

Overall, the Ukrainian refugee crisis was less polarised than the 2015 crisis. Ukrainians were referred to exclusively as refugees, irrespective of legal status. Women, children, and the elderly were the protagonists and ‘victims’ of the story, whilst men remained in Ukraine to fight, demonstrating a strikingly gendered dimension to the dominant narrative. While some left-leaning media outlets questioned the narrative of the exceptionalism of Ukrainian refugees (often depicted as ethnic Europeans and ‘real refugees’, compared with ‘fake’ asylum seekers or economic migrants in 2015), the political debate appeared to largely embrace this narrative, and in the Italian and German case, drove the notion of exceptionalism.

Hungary and Spain were outliers in the Ukrainian case, as the crisis was not framed as a migration issue in political debate, and there was no discernible narrative on Ukrainian refugees in parliament. This could be linked to the apparent consensus to support Ukrainians, resulting in other issues, such as energy security, becoming the focus of political discourse.

How did these narratives, in turn, influence policymaking?

In both cases, policy documents had a very different style and did not always feature clear narratives. This was especially the case where the EU relocation scheme did not result in legislation or clear policy change but was simply implemented through technical circulars or operational measures and where, in response to the Ukrainian crisis, the Temporary Protection Directive was activated at the EU level.

This notwithstanding, a key finding of the analysis of how narratives ‘travelled’ between public political debate and policymaking was that we did not observe the anticipated ‘decoupling’ between the two settings. Previous research would suggest that divisive or populist narratives are *not* redeemed in policy venues. However, this research provides evidence of political narratives following through from media and political debate into policy documents and proposals. In the case of the European migration crisis, where we had populist or restrictive

governments, they either did not implement clear policies (Hungary), they had sufficient clout to see their policies through without significant ‘drift’ from their public administration (the UK), or they changed course to align with less restrictive public opinion (Spain).

Meanwhile, in the case of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, we observed very few narratives in policy documents, which were either highly technical and operational (UK, France, and Germany), representing the omission of narratives in the policymaking but not ‘decoupling’ of narratives *per se*, or no circulation of migration narratives in politics or policy (Hungary and Spain). The exception was the case of Italy, which embraced the simplistic, vivid and dramatic humanitarian narrative from the media and political debate in policy venues.

For countries where media and political narratives were generally humanitarian, we observed a pattern countering expectations, namely a note of caution and concern surfacing in policy documents. This was notable in 2015 in the German and Italian cases and the UK following the government’s U-turn in 2022, where officials invoked some of the risks and constraints of welcoming high numbers of migrants. Such accounts drew on established and historical narratives about risks and ‘costs’ associated with large-scale and/or uncontrolled immigration.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Based on the data and conclusions, we would like to highlight six key findings and make four recommendations that national officials and stakeholders may wish to consider.

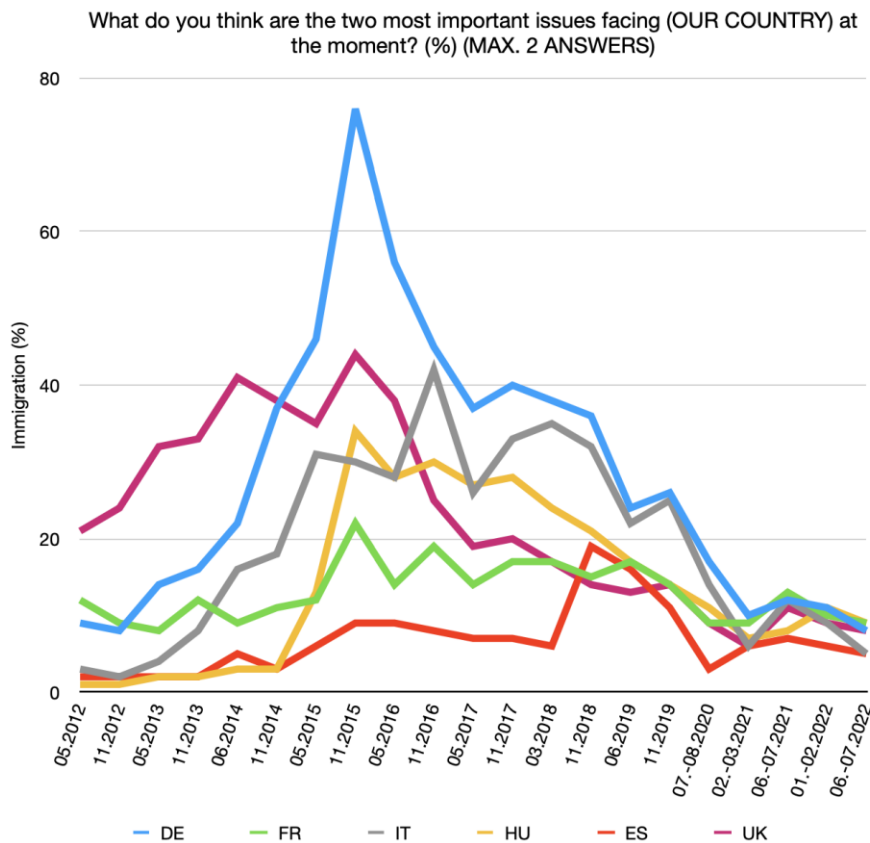
Finding #1. Immigration is not as salient as it once was

An analysis of Eurobarometer survey data on the salience of immigration issues among the public in the six countries between 2012 and 2022 revealed that immigration has become less salient in recent years. As illustrated by Figure 1, this data, supported by more fine-grained national surveys, suggests that, in most cases, the public is less concerned about immigration as one of the most important issues facing their respective country than a decade ago.

The salience of immigration was high in most countries during the peak of the European migration crisis in the autumn of 2015, with 76% of respondents in Germany stating it was one of the most important issues facing the country. The next highest was the UK, with 44% of respondents. However, salience was high in 2012 (21%), suggesting a less striking increase than in other countries. An increase in autumn 2015 was also observed in Hungary (34%) and Italy (30%). However, it peaked in Italy in 2016 (42% of respondents), corresponding with a 46% increase in first-time asylum applications that year. The comparative stability of the salience of immigration in France and Spain is also noteworthy. Strikingly, the low salience in Spain in 2015 suggests that immigration was not politicised until 2018, corresponding with an increase in asylum applications and the rise of the populist radical right party, Vox.

Finally, despite continued politicisation and polarisation of the issue area in most countries, public salience of immigration was comparatively low in all countries by autumn 2022.

FIGURE 1. Salience of Immigration ('our country') (2012-2022)



Source: Data extracted from the standard bi-annual Eurobarometer survey, issues 77-97.

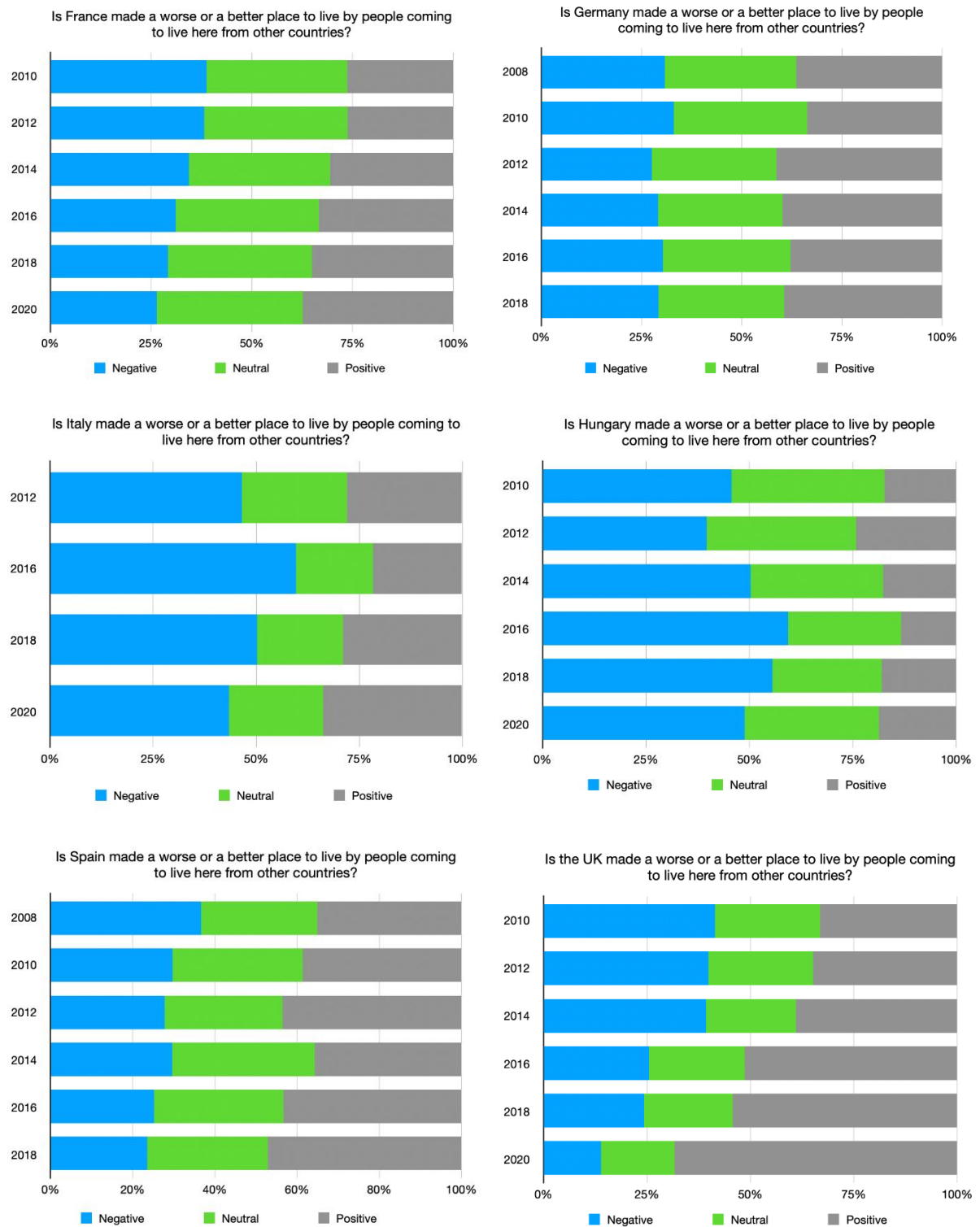
Finding #2. Public opinion on immigration has remained relatively stable or become more positive over time

Along similar lines, public opinion polling on attitudes towards immigration revealed some unexpected long-term trends. Figure 2 illustrates European Social Survey data gathered between 2008 and 2020. It focuses on the question: Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? The data reflects the percentage of responses that were generally negative (0-4 on the scale), neutral (5), or generally positive (6-10 on the scale).

Attitudes towards immigration were most negative in Italy and Hungary in 2016, with 59.4% of respondents in Hungary and 59.6% in Italy stating immigration had a negative impact. Public opinion has since become more positive, with 48.8% in Hungary and 43.4% in Italy, in 2020. The survey data on public opinion in Germany suggests relative stability of attitudes, with an increase in positive responses between 2010 and 2012 (33.7% to 41.3%). It is notable that responses in Germany were not significantly more negative during the height of the crisis in 2016 (only 1.2% more negative than in 2014). In France and Spain, attitudes appeared to be relatively stable and have become more positive over time. Most strikingly, attitudes towards immigration in the UK have become significantly more positive over the last decade. Just 13.9% of responses were negative in 2020, compared with 41.4% in 2010. Moreover, 68.3%

of responses were positive in 2020, compared with 33% in 2010 (see Smellie and Boswell 2023, for a more detailed discussion).

FIGURE 2. Public Opinion on Immigration, European Social Survey



Source: Data extracted from the European Social Survey rounds 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/>. Data was not available for all countries in all rounds.

Recommendation #1:

Based on findings #1 and #2, officials and policymakers should adopt a long term approach that draws on European and national survey data when gauging the importance of immigration issues for publics. Similarly, despite increased politicisation and polarisation in public political debate, a longitudinal view of public opinion towards immigration that draws on established opinion polling data can reveal unexpectedly positive attitudes.

Finding #3. Increased political salience of immigration engendered more lay (including populist) narratives

The analysis of the salience of immigration issues, public opinion and the media demonstrated that political salience is associated with more extensive media coverage and that much of this involved lay – including populist – narratives. This is hardly surprising, given that the mass media both articulates and shapes public opinion on political issues. Moreover, political debate was clearly polarised and fragmented in the case of the 2015 migration crisis, which was the subject of a wide range of narratives. This was especially the case at the height of public and media salience of immigration in the summer of 2015, where there was a proliferation of narratives in the media and political debate, often along ideological fault lines. However, the media and political debate converged more clearly around a humanitarian position following its prominent coverage of the death of Alan Kurdi.

In contrast, the relative consensus that existed on responses to the invasion of Ukraine resulted in fewer narratives. As the provision for refugees was less contested or contentious, it was less politicised. This resulted in fewer narratives emerging in the media and in political debate, reflecting the reduced need for narratives to mobilise public support around rival positions. This, in turn, buffered policymakers from pressure, allowing them to focus on more technical aspects of policy.

Recommendation #2:

If officials and policymakers want to encourage a calm and evidence-based debate on immigration, they should attempt to de-politicise discourse on asylum and immigration issues. This can be achieved by refraining from framing migration as a threat and providing evidence-based stories to build consensus on viable policy solutions.

Finding #4. Media set the (humanitarian) narrative agenda

The analysis suggests that the media had a significant influence on political debate, partly because of the timing of coverage in 2015 over the summer during parliamentary recess. Indeed, in the case of Spain (the 2015 case study) and the UK (the Ukrainian case study), our

analysis suggests that media narratives contributed towards a shift in government policy. However, contrary to most existing literature, these media narratives did not steer governments in a more restrictive direction: instead, the media influenced governments to adopt a more humanitarian approach.

This was especially the case with the media in France, Germany, Italy and Spain, which generally supported a more liberal and inclusive approach across both episodes (2015 and Ukraine). The exceptions were Hungary and the UK, where media and political narratives were more closely aligned – although in the UK, this alignment of media and politics was around distinct ideological positions (i.e., a pluralist debate). In contrast, in Hungary, a single (government) position dominated.

Some of the humanitarian media narratives had simplistic and polarised elements, presenting a clear story about villains, victims, and basic policy solutions. In this sense, they may be described as ‘polarising and simplistic’ – although not in the sense of right-wing populist narratives that are often the focus of migration narrative studies.

Recommendation #3:

The analysis highlights the importance of windows of opportunity for crafting narratives early in the emergence of new policy issues. Once developed, such narratives can become influential not just in media but also in political debate. Moreover, lay and populist narratives on immigration, whilst most commonly associated with far-right anti-immigration movements, can emanate from both anti-immigration and more liberal positions. Hence, there is a need for policymakers to seek to craft responsible, evidence-based narratives early in the process. Otherwise, the media will fill the narrative ‘gap’ and set the narrative agenda, often disseminating lay or oversimplified stories.

Finding #5. Most divisive and populist narratives emerged in political debate

In most countries, overtly populist positions were more likely to be associated with political parties rather than the media. Indeed, dominant national media coverage, in right-centre- and left-wing media outlets, across both the 2015 crisis (especially after the summer) and Ukrainian refugee crisis, tended to be more humanitarian and inclusive than some of the narratives perpetuated by (right-wing populist) parties.

We also found examples of the adaptation of media narratives by governments and political leaders. This often took the form of modifying narratives about moral responsibility to signal the leadership qualities of incumbents, or to draw attention to their records in government. Politicians shaped, responded to and strategically deployed media narratives to bolster their political positions and foreground their track record.

Recommendation #4:

Building on the previous recommendations, officials and stakeholders should refrain from adopting the language and rhetorical devices instrumentalised in party political competition. They should seek to disseminate evidence-based stories on the challenges as well as the opportunities that migration provides and encourage the circulation of more balanced and less divisive narratives in public debate.

Finding #6. Political debate and policy-making venues are not narratively distinct

This finding countered expectations from the literature that there would be ‘decoupling’ between narratives in public political debate and policy settings. Beyond the predicted difference in narrative styles, we did not see a significant difference in narrative content. This may be partly a reflection of the two case studies selected. In most of the countries we analysed, the media and political debate were already largely aligned in their goals, and these were, in turn, broadly consistent with government policy. Thus in France, Germany and Italy, the media were calling for responses that broadly matched the goals and positions of their respective governments. In Spain (2015 crisis) and the UK (Ukraine), as we have seen, governments fairly swiftly adapted their policies to align with dominant narratives in the public debate, so no pronounced divergence emerged. And in Hungary, media, political and policy narratives were strongly aligned, given the lack of media/political freedom.

However, we also saw some limited – and intriguing – divergences in the content of narratives. In both Germany (2015 crisis) and Italy (Ukrainian case), the public administration introduced narrative elements that were missing from the public political debate. In both cases, these narratives reflected more pragmatic and cautious approaches that tapped into longstanding narratives but also introduced a more reflective note into often simplistic media and political narratives. In particular, in the German case, we see organisational beliefs about the potential burden and risks of absorbing large numbers of refugees tempering some of the more idealistic rhetoric in the public debate. This again reverses mainstream expectations from the literature about public administrations needing to decouple their more ‘liberal’ approaches from more restrictive and populist expectations in the public and political debate. Here, the liberal dimension emanates from the public debate, with the calls for more caution emanating from policy-makers.

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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 Policy Briefs are a series of recommendations to advise EU and national governments on strategic policy actions taking on board the results of the project.

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