

Comparative analysis of migration narratives in political debate and policymaking

Cross-national report

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Abstract

The concept of 'narratives' has gained traction in migration research across the social sciences in recent years. However, we still know comparatively little about how narratives on migration influence public political debate and policymaking. This report, produced in the framework of BRIDGES Work Package 7, analyses how different narratives on migration shape and are deployed in political debate and policymaking. It investigates how political actors process salient narratives on migration that emerge in the public and political domain and how they inform policy. In order to understand these dynamics, we draw on six national reports on migration narratives in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. We compare the analysis of narratives during two periods of intense debate: first, the 2015 European 'migration crisis', focusing on narratives related to EU relocation, and second, narratives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022. Deploying a unique methodology to trace government strategies for responding to narratives, we trace how narratives were embraced, adapted, overlooked, or explicitly rejected by actors in political debate and policymaking venues. The analysis draws on extensive and systematic content analysis of newspaper articles, parliamentary debates, and policy documents supplemented by interviews with officials. Key findings include the role that the media played in setting the (humanitarian) narrative agenda in both cases, the strategic deployment of narratives by political actors to strengthen political agendas, and a lack of the anticipated rhetorical 'decoupling' between narratives in the public political sphere and policymaking venues.

Keywords: migration, narratives, politics, policymaking, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Spain, United Kingdom, comparative analysis

Acronyms

AfD	Alternative for Germany
Brexit	Britain's exit from the European Union
CDU	Christian Democratic Union
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CSU	Christian Social Union of Bavaria
DE	Federal Republic of Germany
ES	Kingdom of Spain
ESS	European Social Survey
EU	European Union
FDP	Free Democratic Party
FR	French Republic
HU	Hungary
IT	Italian Republic
MPB	Moral Panic Button
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NPF	Narrative Policy Framework
PEGIDA	Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West
SAR	Search and rescue operations
SPD	Social Democratic Party
TPD	Temporary Protection Directive
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WWII	Second World War

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1. Introduction

1.1 Key Questions

The concept of 'narratives' has gained traction in migration research across the social sciences in recent years (e.g. Triandafyllidou 2018; Sigona 2018; Sahin-Mencutek 2020; Boswell 2011; Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011; see also Boswell et al. 2021), but we still know comparatively little about how narratives on migration influence political debate and policymaking. In BRIDGES Work Package 7, we consider how the narratives that emerge in the mainstream media¹ are taken up in and influence political debate and policymaking. 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 policymaking 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 policymaking 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). This report aims to elucidate how such popular, lay narratives 'move' across mass media coverage, political debate, and policymaking. In particular, we analyse how the narratives circulating in mass media are taken up or responded to in political debate and, in turn, how political narratives are taken up in policymaking venues. Are narratives – including more 'lay', emotive stories – embraced, adapted, overlooked, or explicitly rejected by political and policymaking actors?

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. The analysis draws on our [Concept Paper](#) (Boswell and Smellie 2023) and the [National Reports](#) prepared by each of the national teams (Gerő et al. 2023; Bonelli, Celoria, and Pastore 2023; Smellie 2023; Reindorf and Vollmer 2023; Pasetti, Güell, and Ramos 2023; Moncada 2023).

1.2 Research Design

In order to understand how narratives 'travel' across different political and policy spheres, we start by setting out a number of concepts and theoretical assumptions guiding our analysis.

¹ For a comprehensive overview of migration narratives in the media see Maneri's (2023) 'A Comparative Analysis of Migration Narratives in Traditional and Social Media', and the national reports produced within the framework of BRIDGES Work Package 3.

We then develop some expectations about how these may influence the movement of narratives.

We start by defining the concept of ‘narrative’. Our analysis deployed Jones and McBeth’s (2010) Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). 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 time; and,
- (4) a moral of the story, which is a policy solution or a call to action. (Jones and McBeth 2020, 96)

The main benefit of applying this definition of a narrative is that it explicitly links narratives and policy preferences, capturing political actors’ issue definition (the ‘problem’) and their justification and legitimation of available policy ‘solutions’.

In order to understand how such narratives ‘move’ across spheres, we apply Schmidt’s (2008) conceptualisation of the ‘communicative’ and ‘coordinative’ spheres of policymaking. The former refers to political communication in the public domain, in the media or in Parliament; the latter refers to discourse among policy-makers. A key goal of our research is to understand what types of narratives are most likely to be (re)produced and adopted in these different spheres (‘pervasiveness’) and how this informs/impacts policymaking (‘transformativity’) (Garcés-Mascreñas and Pastore 2022, 7–10).

TABLE 1. Narrative style across narrative components

Types/ Components	‘Lay’ Narratives	‘Technocratic’ Narratives
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 posit that two distinct ‘ideal types’ of narratives, governed by different logics, characterise the different discursive spheres (Boswell and Smellie 2023). The first type, ‘lay’ narratives, comprise of simplistic, accessible, and emotive stories, which political parties utilise to mobilise and galvanise support from ‘publics’ and voters (in the ‘communicative’ sphere). The second type is referred to as ‘technocratic’ narratives that are comparatively sombre, complex and evidence-based, orientated towards steering and coordinating policy delivery in policy venues (the ‘coordinative’ sphere) (Boswell 2011).

We then developed a number of expectations about how narratives are likely to move across communicative and coordinative spheres. These need to be informed by a theory of the relationship between media, political discourse and policy-making.

First, we understand the relationship between the media and political discourse as mutually constitutive. As ascertained in Work Package 3, political leaders shape the narratives in the media (Maneri 2023). Conversely, the media frequently takes up and adapts these political narratives to generate news stories. Thus, in crafting their messages, political elites are influenced by their understanding of the criteria of ‘newsworthiness’. 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 via the media. 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 2009). Based on the distinctions above, we would expect politicians keen to maximise the resonance of their communications to adopt ‘lay’ narratives, in part because they have a better chance of being taken up in the media.

Even where politicians have shaped or influenced media narratives, mass media reporting frequently pressures politicians 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. Where media narratives appear to have strong traction with the public, political parties may find it expedient to **embrace** or **adapt** these narratives, to signal their sympathy with public concerns, swing behind the values implicit in the narrative, or demonstrate their commitment to addressing the issue. This is especially likely where politicians must demonstrate a clear response to a perceived ‘crisis’; during election campaigns; or when positioning themselves in a context of intensive party competition on migration issues (Bale et al. 2009; Odmalm and Super 2014; Meguid 2005). These considerations suggest the following expectations:

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

However, ‘position-taking’ on media narratives becomes trickier when media narratives are potentially out of kilter with what is considered appropriate or responsible political positions. While populist or nativist political movements may feel comfortable adopting polarised and divisive migration narratives, mainstream politicians may be more reticent. They may risk losing more ‘moderate’ votes and undermine their reputation as being ‘serious’ or evidence-based. In this case, they may choose to **ignore** an issue in an attempt to reduce its salience

or adopt a more adversarial position by **rejecting** the claims of a competitor (Meguid 2005; Bale et al. 2009).

Next, we turn to the question of how more populist narratives move between communicative and coordinative spheres. 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).

Therefore, based on the above analysis, we can refine our expectations on how narratives ‘travel’ between the media and political debate (the communicative sphere) as follows:

Where the media is deploying polarising and simplistic narratives and governments are concerned about signalling 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.

As noted above, narratives circulating in policymaking venues (coordinative sphere) have a different purpose than those in the political sphere. Rather than oriented to the mobilisation of publics, coordinative narratives are about ensuring that policies effectively achieve their goals (Boswell 2011). This means they need to be based on a reliable understanding of the motivations and characteristics of their ‘target’ populations, more or less ‘evidence-based’, and plausible to the range of specialised and technical actors involved in implementing policy. This suggests more sober, factual and detailed narratives rather than the simple accounts favoured in the media and political debate (‘lay’ narratives). These ‘technocratic’ narratives are likely found in the more detailed policy documents produced by public administrations.

Thus a general expectation is 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 sphere². Put succinctly, in liberal democracies, more populist or nativist claims are difficult to redeem in technocratic policymaking settings. Thus we can assume the following:

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’

² Note that ‘lay’ narratives may emanate from both left- and right-wing political movements and, as we will see from the empirical analysis, are not necessarily anti-immigration. However, populist narratives on immigration are more typically associated with right-wing anti-immigration positions (see Boswell and Smellie 2023, p. 6-9 for a more detailed discussion).

However, as mentioned, there is frequently a gap between governments' rhetoric in the political sphere and what they do in practice. This gap may reflect that politicians are simply adopting a more accessible **style** in public-facing communication ('lay' narratives) compared to 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 the communicative and coordinative spheres. For instance, governments may advance restrictive narratives on migration in public whilst implementing policies based on more technocratic evidence about labour market needs, resulting in more expansionist policies in practice (Castles 2004). Thus, we can nuance the expectation above based on two further hypotheses:

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 is especially likely where governments 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 policymaking 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.

1.3 Methodological Considerations

As mentioned, this research is especially interested in what happens to narratives as they are transposed across spheres: from media to political debate to policymaking. We 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. Thus, the analysis focuses on comparing the narratives invoked 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.

To operationalise this research, we develop and deploy a new methodology for analysing how narratives on migration 'travel' across the media, political debate and policymaking. A four-way typology helps us to identify how narratives are adapted, adopted or overlooked as they move across communicative and coordinative spheres. In particular, we explore how far narratives on migration are **embraced**, **adapted**, explicitly **rejected** or **ignored** in political and technical settings.

This approach is applied to compare the diffusion and impact of narratives during three episodes of intense political debate between 2012 and 2022. The focus is on events or debates

on arrivals/immigration crises at the border to complement the research undertaken in BRIDGES Work Package 3. The first two events were selected based on a comparative research design and are the focus of this report: migration narratives on 1) the European Union's (EU) relocation and quota schemes during the so-called European 'migration crisis'³ in 2015 and 2) responses to the Ukrainian refugee crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These two cases were selected as, in both instances, the 'crisis' context instigated a public political debate on migration that impacted (to varying degrees) all six countries. The third case study focuses on a case specific to each country's national context, set out in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Case studies

Country	Case study 1	Case study 2	Case study 3
France	EU relocation & quotas (2015 European 'migration crisis')	Ukrainian refugee crisis	The Aquarius vessel
Germany	EU relocation & quotas (2015 European 'migration crisis')	Ukrainian refugee crisis	Humanitarian crisis following the fire in Moria
Hungary	EU relocation & quotas (2015 European 'migration crisis')	Ukrainian refugee crisis	Role of Hungarian NGOs in the Russian-Ukrainian war
Italy	EU relocation & quotas (2015 European 'migration crisis')	Ukrainian refugee crisis	SAR operations and the criminalisation of NGOs
Spain	EU relocation & quotas (2015 European 'migration crisis')	Ukrainian refugee crisis	Rescue boats in the Mediterranean and the Aquarius
United Kingdom	EU relocation & quotas (2015 European 'migration crisis')	Ukrainian refugee crisis	'Small boat' arrivals across the English Channel

A three-phased approach was applied to the research. In phase one, the research teams conducted an analysis of secondary literature to identify long-standing 'master' narratives on migration in each respective country. Political and policy developments relevant to migration policy were mapped out, including endogenous and exogenous shocks, key policy debates and new legislation. Public and media salience of immigration issues between 2012-2022 was also mapped out using Eurobarometer data and national surveys to identify peak periods of

³ The European 'migration crisis' is referred to in quotation marks to highlight the contested and socially constructed nature of the 'crisis' context. An understanding of the European 'migration crisis' as a period of multiple crises - of policy and of governance, as opposed to people - has gained traction among migration scholars (Geddes 2019; Guiraudon 2018; Trauner 2016; Triandafyllidou 2018). As demonstrated in this report, the crisis took different forms in the six European countries analysed.

salience relative to the key events and policy debates. Finally, public opinion data was gathered using the European Social Survey and national opinion polling data for the same timeframe (see section 2.3 for details).

In phase two, qualitative content analysis was applied to identify the dominant narratives on migration in the media and political debate (the ‘communicative’ sphere). Media narratives were identified in articles published in right-wing, progressive, and centrist newspapers covering the political spectrum of print media in each country (mirroring Work Package 3). Data was gathered predominantly from editorials/comment pieces published by each respective newspaper during peak periods of coverage to capture their editorial positions. A total of 238 articles were coded and analysed in depth. Articles were identified via newspaper databases in each country, including Nexis and Factiva.

TABLE 3. Primary sources

	<i>Progressive, left, liberal</i>	Newspapers <i>Centrist, conservative</i>	<i>Right, populist</i>	Parliamentary documents	Policy documents
France	Libération	Le Monde (centre, left)	Le Figaro	Parliamentary debates	circulars, official press releases & interviews
Germany	Spiegel	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	Bild	Parliamentary debates & press releases	Policy proposals, supporting documents & responses
Hungary	HVG.hu	24.hu (centre, left)	Magyar Nemzet (pro- government)	Statements, interpellations, parliamentary speeches & questions	n/a ⁴
Italy	Il Fatto quotidiano	Il Corriere della sera	Il Giornale	Parliamentary debates	Ministers’ hearings, policy documents, parliamentary reports assessing government policies
Spain	El País	El Mundo	La Vanguardia (local, centre right)	Parliamentary debates	Motions, migration plans, policy reports, royal decrees, orders, royal decree- laws, organic laws, & agreements
UK	The Guardian	The Times	Daily Mail	Parliamentary debates	Ministerial reports, migration strategies, Select Committee hearings & government responses to reports

Source: author’s own elaboration from national reports

Dominant narratives in the political debate were extracted from transcripts of parliamentary debates, parliamentary questions and statements. Analysing parliamentary debates facilitated

⁴ The Hungarian research team were unable to access relevant policy documents. Refer to the Hungarian national report for a discussion of the methodological challenges for the Hungarian country case study (Gerő et al. 2023, 2–6).

the analysis of the correlation/divergence of narratives advanced along ideological cleavages, and by executives, opposition parties, and cabinet members/representatives of different ministries. Once again, the focus was on debates in direct response to events, usually within a three-month timeframe. Over 150 transcripts of parliamentary debates and questions were analysed. Debates were identified using keyword searches on official parliamentary websites. At this stage, the two data sets (media and political debates) were compared, and the four-way typology was applied (embracing, adapting, rejecting or omission) to analyse the correlation/divergence of narratives between the media and political debate.

In phase three, dominant narratives in policy (the 'coordinative' sphere) were identified by coding policy documentation. This included annual reports published by interior ministries, immigration strategy papers, white papers or other policy documentation on immigration produced by officials on behalf of governments. The primary purpose of the documents selected was to steer policy output, and the intended audience was policy experts and stakeholders. Given the breadth of intervening variables between drafting policy proposals and policy output, a decision was made not to analyse primary or secondary legislation. More than 49 detailed policy documents were coded and analysed. Data on narratives in the coordinative sphere was further supplemented with data gathered from 30 semi-structured interviews with officials, policy experts, and politicians⁵. This third data set was compared with the two from the 'communicative sphere' (media and political debate) and the four-way typology applied to analyse how narratives travelled between the two spheres.⁶

The remainder of this report is structured in four parts. The following section sets the scene, providing context for the subsequent analysis of the case studies. It starts by comparing long-standing 'master' narratives on immigration in all six countries, highlighting commonalities and unique national narratives on migration. Key political changes (endogenous factors) between 2012-2022 are then identified, including party political dynamics and the rise of populist radical right parties in the six country case studies. Migratory challenges (exogenous factors) facing European countries during this period are also mapped out, specifically in relation to the two comparative case studies: first, the 2015 European 'migration crisis', and second, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The section concludes by comparing data on the salience of immigration issues and public opinion between 2012-2022 in each national context.

Sections three and four focus on the analysis of the two comparative case studies: narratives on the EU relocation and quota scheme in 2015 and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022. In each case, we compare how the narratives circulating in the media are taken up or responded to in political debate and, in turn, how political narratives are taken up in policymaking settings. It should be noted, however, that further findings can be found in the national reports relating to the third country-specific cases. The final section returns to the hypothesis outlined above and sets out key insights and findings from the comparative analysis. It also acknowledges

⁵ Interviews conducted: 5 in France, 8 in Germany, 5 in Hungary, 4 in Italy, 2 in Spain, and 6 in the UK. Access to officials who work on immigration policy is notoriously difficult (see Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz 2018). Variation in the number of interviews across country case studies was a result of this challenge (refer to the national reports for details).

⁶ Please refer to BRIDGES Working Paper 19 (Boswell and Smellie 2023), for an in-depth discussion of the conceptual approach and operationalisation of this research, including the coding process and application of the four-way typology of strategies in response to salient narratives.

one or two limitations of the research before making suggestions of areas for further investigation.

2. Background and Political Context (2012 – 2022)

2.1 Key ‘Master’ Narratives on Migration

We start by considering the main ‘master’ narratives on migration within our six countries, which provided the context for the narratives that emerged around our two episodes. Master narratives are shaped by national public philosophies (Favell 1998), such as Republicanism in France and Multiculturalism in Britain, colonial histories, and past experiences as ‘traditional’ countries of immigration (UK, France, Spain), emigration (Italy, Hungary), transit countries (Italy) or new destination countries (Germany). According to discursive institutionalist accounts, political actors will strategically mobilise ideas from the available repertoire of public philosophies to shape debates on policy issues (Schmidt 2008). Moreover, actors will adapt these ideas to resonate with the values and beliefs of the public to galvanise support for political agendas (Schmidt 2008; 2016; Boswell and Hampshire 2017). Thus, ‘master’ narratives will likely set the scene for political and policy debate on our two comparative case studies and will underpin or be adapted to justify and legitimise policy approaches and interventions.

Drawing on the national reports, several established ‘master’ narratives on migration can be mapped across the six country case studies. Intriguingly, cross-country commonalities in ‘master’ narratives can be observed. That is not to say they are indistinguishable across countries, but rather, the underlying ideas and metaphors are similar yet adapted to fit the specific national context. These narratives fall broadly into one of three frames, illustrated in Table 4: securitarian, humanitarian, and utilitarian narratives.

2.1.1 *Securitarian narratives*

A securitisation frame characterises the first group of ‘master’ narratives. A narrative identified in multiple countries is the ‘**crisis**’ or ‘**emergency**’ narrative, particularly prevalent in the Italian and British cases but also observed in other national contexts. The narrative depicts *migration as crisis*, and, in turn, calls for specific ways to govern migration, often associated with crisis management mechanisms (Cantat, Pécoud, and Thiollot 2023). In frontline and transit countries, the narrative can often be associated with a particular area of the country experiencing higher pressures from arrivals, such as the southern border of Spain (Ceuta and Melilla). However, it has been increasingly argued that the discourse of crisis has become a permanent fixture of migration governance in Europe – a narrative of a so-called ‘perma-crisis’ (Geddes 2019).

A related narrative is the ‘master’ **narrative of invasion** (Comte 2021). The invasion narrative invokes images of the ‘hordes at the gates’ or a siege metaphor and sets strong boundaries of inclusion/exclusion (‘Us’ versus ‘Them’). This narrative was identified in both frontline/transit countries (Italy, Spain, Hungary) and destination countries (Germany, UK, France). In Italy, it is associated with the idea that Italy has been shouldering a disproportionate burden in

managing migration flows due to its geographical location and has been abandoned by the EU (Bonelli, Celoria, and Pastore 2023). Meanwhile, in the UK, it has regained prominence since 2018 in debates on irregular sea arrivals in ‘small boats’ across the English Channel (Smellie 2023).

TABLE 4. Master narratives on migration in comparative perspective

Country/ Narratives	FR	DE	HU	IT	ES	UK
Securitarian						
Crisis/emergency	x	x	x	x	x	x
Invasion			x	x		x
Threat (criminals/ terrorists)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Threat (social cohesion)	x	x	x			
Sovereignty/ border control		x	x	x	x	x
Humanitarian						
Moral/legal responsibility	x	x			x	x
Solidarity among Member States		x	x	x		
Solidarity with migrants/refugees	x	x	x	x	x	x
Welcome culture		x			x	
Utilitarian						
Economic benefit (labour market, demographics)		x	x		x	x
Economic burden	x	x	x	x	x	x
Organisational/ technocratic		x	x			

Source: author’s own elaboration from national reports

Another prevailing security narrative in multiple countries is the **migrants as threat narrative**. Iterations of this narrative depict migrants as criminals (e.g. ‘illegal’ migrants) and potential terrorists, often linked to criminal networks, smuggling and human trafficking. In addition to national security, migrants are also portrayed as threatening the economy, social cohesion and stability, and welfare systems, resulting in calls to protect ‘Us’ from ‘Them’. A variation of this narrative juxtaposes ‘genuine’ refugees with economic migrants seeking a better life, described as ‘bogus asylum seekers’ or ‘economic refugees’ (*‘Wirtschaftsflüchtling’* and *‘Scheinasylant’* in German), who take advantage of liberal asylum policies and become a ‘burden’ on welfare states.

Another long-standing security discourse identified in multiple countries focuses on the perceived threat (irregular) migration poses to **border control and security**. In the UK and Hungary, this narrative is associated with national sovereignty in the context of European

influence. It argues that control of borders is a central concept of sovereignty; thus, states must have control of their own borders to fulfil their role as a nation-state, and sovereignty should not be ceded to supranational (EU) institutions (Wiener 2000; Biersteker and Weber 1996). In other cases, it is more closely linked to external EU borders and EU security (sometimes referred to as 'Fortress Europe').

According to the national reports, these security 'master' narratives have prevailed in national migration discourses over time. Moreover, they are invoked by governments and political parties on both the centre-left and centre-right.

2.1.2 Humanitarian narratives

A shared humanitarian 'master' narrative foregrounds **moral leadership and legal responsibility**. In the German case, this is associated with the universal right to asylum set out in the Refugee Convention and German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*). Germany has a historical responsibility and should show moral leadership in Europe (Reindorf and Vollmer 2023). However, in the UK, this narrative is more closely linked to a perceived humanitarian tradition of offering sanctuary to those fleeing persecution (Smellie 2023). In addition to a narrative invoking **solidarity with migrants and refugees**, another shared humanitarian narrative invokes **solidarity among EU Member States**, calling for support to frontline countries experiencing high migratory pressures (Thielemann 2003). Finally, a distinct narrative on the **welcome culture** of host societies was identified in public discourse in Germany and Spain.

2.1.3 Utilitarian narratives

The final category of common 'master' narratives, termed 'utilitarian narratives', shares some similarities with Triandafyllidou's (2018) 'rationalisation frame' in her analysis of discourse on the 2015 refugee crisis. These narratives tend to weigh costs and benefits to justify particular policy positions, building on notions of 'rationality', efficacy and efficiency. For instance, more expansionist/liberal policies are justified by emphasising the contribution migrants make to the economy by filling labour market shortages (UK, Germany, Spain, Hungarian opposition parties) and meeting the challenges of an ageing population (Germany, Spain). In this light, immigration is portrayed as demand-driven and an important resource in a globalised and competitive world.

2.1.4 Unique narratives

Several 'master' narratives stand out as specific to national contexts. For instance, the 'non-narrative' on immigration in Spain. This is characterised by the lack of a clear and stable discourse on immigration issues at the national level. According to Pasetti, Güell, and Ramos (2023, 5), this is historically due to a "national imaginary which is unwilling, and/or incapable, of tackling the issue of the Spanish (multiple) identity (which a debate on immigration would trigger) [and] parties' interest in preventing the politicisation of the issue".

Meanwhile, narratives on migration and integration in Germany have historically been influenced by an ethnonationalist understanding of citizenship and the nation-state (*jus sanguinis*) (Brubaker 1992). The 'guest worker' narrative in Germany in the 1950s/60s assumed that post-Second World War labour migrants would return to their country of origin.

This narrative was sustained by the ‘master’ narrative that Germany was ‘not a country of immigration’. It was not until the Independent Commission of Immigration published its report in July 2001 that Germany as a ‘country of immigration’ became an accepted discourse.

In contrast, historically, discourses in France have focused on the integration of migrants based on principles of Republicanism and *jus soli* (Favell 1998; Brubaker 1992). Most recently, this has taken the form of debates on secularism, specifically on religious dress and symbols in public spaces. However, according to the French report, there have been few identifiable ‘master’ narratives focusing specifically on immigration as opposed to integration issues in recent years and since the 2015 migration crisis (Moncada 2023).

Finally, in Hungary, a unique narrative has dominated government discourse on immigration issues in recent times, which has taken the form of a conspiracy narrative (Gerő et al. 2023). The narrative accuses Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros and NGOs associated with him of encouraging asylum seekers and migrants to travel to Hungary.

2.2 Key Political Developments (2012 – 2022)

Public and political discourses on migration are also influenced by national political dynamics (elections, referenda, the emergence of new political parties, etc.) and broader societal conditions (e.g. economic shocks and wider policy debates). The well-documented rise of populist radical right (anti-immigration) parties in Europe over the past decade is of particular relevance (see, for example, Odmalm and Super 2014; Bale 2013; 2014; Dennison and Geddes 2019). As we have seen, when faced with the ‘threat’ of a populist radical right (anti-immigration) challenger or intensive party competition on migration issues ahead of an election, mainstream parties might strategically swing behind more lay or populist narratives in order not to lose out electorally.

2.2.1 Political developments (relevant endogenous factors)

The Hungarian analysis contends that in order to understand the production and circulation of migration narratives in **Hungary**, it is integral to consider the changes that have occurred in the political system in recent years, specifically the shift to electoral authoritarianism. These changes began following the landslide victory of the right-wing populist (anti-immigration) Fidesz party in the 2010 elections but accelerated following the 2015 ‘migration crisis’. The government started dismantling legislative and policymaking processes, minimising opportunities for scrutiny and consultation and excluding opposition parties from regulating immigration policies.

These changes also saw the implementation of government-controlled communication (propaganda) technology: the so-called Moral Panic Button (MPB) pushed Hungary towards an informational autocracy, whereby the legitimacy of the regime relies on the hegemony of the government’s information/media system (see Gerő et al. 2023). Significantly, immigration played a central role in generating threat narratives disseminated via government channels, suggesting the strategic instrumentalisation of immigration narratives by the regime.

The rise of the populist radical right also played a role in elections and campaigns in the **German** context. Notably, the far-right populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) won 4.6% of the national vote in elections in 2013 and 7 seats in the European Parliament elections the following year. Initially identifying as a Eurosceptic party akin to UKIP in the UK, by the summer of 2015, the party was campaigning on an anti-immigration platform and increasingly associated with the PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) protest movement. While the party did not maintain its initial electoral success, the AfD is a strongly anti-immigration actor, which has recently gained support once more, especially at the state (*Länder*) level, and has had a lasting impact on the German political landscape.

This notwithstanding, **German** politics remained relatively stable, with Chancellor Angela Merkel leading two Grand coalitions between the conservative CDU/CSU and social-democratic SPD (2013-2017 and 2018-2021). However, following the elections in 2017, immigration, specifically refugee policy, played a pivotal role in the breakdown of coalition negotiations for a so-called Jamaican-coalition⁷, which left the country without a government for 6 months (Smellie 2018). Ultimately, a new Grand coalition was negotiated. After 16 years as Chancellor, Merkel was succeeded by Olaf Scholz and a coalition led by the centre left-social democrats (SPD) in December 2021.

In contrast, **Italy** saw seven governments over the ten-year period and a shift in policy focus from labour migration to asylum and border controls. The emphasis became asylum reception and preventing people from reaching Italy through cooperation with third countries and restricting SAR operations (Bonelli, Celoria, and Pastore 2023). Cooperation with Libya, in particular, gained momentum during the centre-left Gentiloni government (2016-2018). The 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum was renewed by the Democratic Party and the Five Stars Movement coalition in 2019 and again by the right-wing Meloni government in 2022. The criminalisation of NGOs involved in SAR operations also began in 2017. The right-wing populist Northern League-Five Star Movement coalition (2018-2019) marked a restrictive turn when Interior Minister Salvini implemented the so-called 'closed ports policy', which denied NGOs involved in SAR operations authorisation to dock, leaving rescued migrants at sea for days or even weeks. Moreover, the Salvini Decree in 2018 excluded asylum seekers from accessing integration services, lowering reception standards. However, in 2020, a new decree adopted by the centre-left government restored access to integration and welfare services for asylum seekers, demonstrating the politicisation of immigration issues during this timeframe.

The most significant development in **Spain** was the shift from a centre-right government led by Mariano Rajoy of the People's Party (2011-2018) to a centre-left government led by the Socialist Party under Pedro Sánchez in July 2018. This led to changes in integration policy, specifically an increase in migrant and refugee rights. However, immigration policies, covering entry policy, border management and returns policy, remained unchanged. Both the centre-right and centre-left governments focused on border security, particularly in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, and externalising migration controls to countries of origin and transit. Moreover, despite relative stability, Pasetti, Güell, and Ramos (2023) argue that securitised narratives and an identitarian discourse started to gain traction in public political

⁷ A coalition between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) along with its sister party the Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU), liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), and the Green party.

debate in conjunction with the rise of the far right-wing Vox party, which won 12 seats in the Andalusian regional election in 2018, and 10.26% of the vote in the 2019 general election.

France also saw a slow but gradual rise of the far-right in mainstream politics. Far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round of the presidential election in 2002 by focusing on immigration issues. Two decades later, his daughter, Marine Le Pen, of the far-right anti-immigration party, the National Rally (formerly the National Front), repeated the achievement in 2017 and 2022. She was defeated by President Emmanuel Macron by only 30 and 17 percentage points, respectively, who succeeded Françoise Hollande's centre-left presidency (2012-2017). The rise of the far-right in France came on the heels of Islamic terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, which killed at least 130 people, and another in Nice in July 2016. Anti-immigration sentiment among the public was stoked when it emerged that some of the Paris attackers had entered the EU among the flow of migrants and asylum seekers from Syria, and the perpetrator of the Nice attack was Tunisian.

Despite eight governments and five Prime Ministers, the **UK** was consistently led by centre-right governments (with a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition from 2010-2015). No fewer than four immigration acts were ratified; the first two (the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts) established the so-called "hostile environment for illegal migrants", which targeted irregular entry and stay. The subsequent Nationality and Borders Act 2022 notably restricted rights based on entry into the country and laid the foundations for 'outsourcing' asylum processing to Rwanda, which was further codified in law under the recent Illegal Migration Act 2023.

Nevertheless, Brexit marked the most significant development. Led by the right-wing populist UKIP party, which received the greatest number of votes of any party in the 2014 European Parliament elections (27.5%) and 12.6% of the vote in the 2015 general elections, immigration was central to the debate ahead of the Brexit referendum in June 2016 (Dennison and Geddes 2018). The Leave campaign advanced the narrative of "taking back control" of the UK's borders from EU institutions. Meanwhile, Prime Minister David Cameron tried to negotiate access to in-work benefits for EU nationals, politicising EU migration as a drain on the UK's welfare system. Brexit marked the end of EU free movement but also the introduction of a new points-based immigration system and a settlement scheme for EU residents.

In addition to the national political contexts, exogenous events also provide important background for the emergence, dissemination and impact of migration narratives, including changes in migration flows, migration 'shocks' and geopolitical developments. The two crises investigated in this research represent arguably the two largest migratory challenges (exogenous shocks) European countries faced between 2012 and 2022.

2.2.2 European 'migration crisis' in 2015

In 2015, over 1.2 million first-time asylum applications were lodged in the EU, double the number of the previous year (Eurostat 2016). The so-called European 'migration crisis' threw the challenges of asylum and refugee provision in the EU into stark relief. Migratory pressures along the eastern Mediterranean and western Balkan migration routes significantly increased, with hundreds of thousands of migrants transiting Member States such as Italy and Hungary. The need for intra-EU solidarity and a common solution to the crisis was debated at the launch of the European Agenda on Migration in May 2015, including the proposal to relocate asylum

seekers from Member States experiencing a high influx of arrivals and the introduction of a quota scheme to share the 'burden' of asylum seekers.

On 24 August 2015, the German government announced that it had suspended the Dublin regulation for Syrians, meaning they would no longer be returned to the first country through which they entered the EU. A few days later, Chancellor Angela Merkel's famous "*Wir schaffen das*" speech cemented Germany's 'open door' policy approach. By the end of the year, over 890,000 asylum seekers had registered in **Germany**. Germany's approach was highly contested within the centre-right-led coalition government and criticised by opposition parties, in particular, the far-right AfD, by neighbouring countries for increasing migrant flows along the Balkan route ('pull factor') and even at the supranational level for acting unilaterally outside of the Dublin Regulation. Meanwhile, irregular arrivals along the central Mediterranean route into **Italy** and Malta continued to climb.

In response to the perceived 'existential threat' to European integration, Germany and France pushed for a European solution, calling for the European Commission to move forward with a mandatory relocation scheme to relieve pressure on first countries of arrival. This reflected a change in position in **France**. In May 2015, French President François Hollande stated that he supported a fairer distribution of refugees among EU Member States but that mandatory quotas were unacceptable. However, by 4 September 2015, Hollande had become a leading proponent of quotas and France and Germany presented a unified front in pushing for a pan-European solution to the crisis.

On 9 September 2015, the European Commission proposed the emergency relocation of 120,000 asylum-seekers and the launch of a mandatory relocation scheme to share responsibility among Member States. The attempt to introduce a mandatory relocation mechanism proved politically unfeasible due to divergent preferences among Member States. The Visegrad Group, in particular, opposed any mandatory distribution of asylum-seekers.

Prior to 2015, **Hungary** was not a destination or transit country for asylum seekers. However, that summer, an estimated 180,000 asylum seekers crossed into Hungary. In the third quarter of 2015, Hungary received 26% of first-time asylum applications lodged in the EU (Eurostat 2015). The unprecedented numbers were considered a significant threat by the far-right Hungarian government. However, instead of engaging in multilateral or supranational measures to reduce pressure on the country, Hungary closed its borders with Serbia and Croatia, built a 175km razor wire fence, and introduced strict sanctions on irregular border crossings. Viktor Orbán's government continued to block EU-led measures to address the crisis, arguing that "the [refugee] problem is not a European problem. The problem is a German problem" (Euronews 2015).

On 14 September, the Justice and Home Affairs Council on migration adopted a Decision for the temporary and exceptional relocation of 40,000 persons needing international protection from Italy and Greece, which was later extended to 120,000, effectively rejecting proposals for a mandatory mechanism in favour of a one-off scheme. The Council also called for improved reception capacity (hotspots) in Greece and Italy. The EU's introduction of 'hotspots' for the reception of migrants represented a significant challenge for **Italy**, and the initial reception of migrants was characterised by substandard living conditions and several breaches of migrants' fundamental rights.

Meanwhile, **Spain** and the **UK** were not experiencing comparatively high numbers of asylum applicants, and both countries, led by centre-right governments, explicitly opposed the relocation quotas proposed by the European Commission in May 2015. The Spanish government argued that quotas risked creating a ‘pull factor’ and that, as an EU-border country, **Spain** was already facing harder challenges and doing more to control immigration than other Member States. However, following a meeting between Prime Minister Rajoy and German Chancellor Merkel, the Spanish government announced a dramatic U-turn, accepting an allocation of 14,931 refugees, making it the third destination country in the EU relocation scheme.

The **UK** received only 3% of first-time asylum applications lodged in the EU in 2015 (Eurostat 2016). As a non-Schengen country with an ‘opt-out’ on common asylum and migration policies, the government declared it would not participate in any mandatory or voluntary relocation measures or the proposed quota scheme. However, two weeks after Germany suspended the Dublin regulation and days after the image of Alan Kurdi went viral, it succumbed to internal political pressures. It announced that the UK would resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees during the parliament (over five years), in addition to the regular asylum route.

Against this backdrop, we investigate the dominant narratives in the debate on EU relocation in 2015 in the six national contexts in section 3.

2.2.3 Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022

The second crisis analysed was the Ukrainian refugee crisis. On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a military invasion of Ukraine. The war displaced over 14 million people, with over 6 million crossing borders to seek international protection. The EU and Member States condemned Russia’s aggression, issuing sanctions and providing military, financial, humanitarian, and political support to Ukraine. The EU also reacted quickly to the refugee crisis as people fled the war. The European Commission proposed the implementation of Council Directive 2001/55/EC – the so-called Temporary Protection Directive - on 2 March 2022. In an unprecedented move, on 4 March, the EU Council unanimously voted for Decision (EU) 2022/382, activating the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time.

The directive was adopted in 2001 to support the EU in case of a mass influx of displaced people. It sets out obligations for Member States and rights for refugees, including a residence permit, access to the labour market, education and welfare services, accommodation, and freedom of movement within the EU. The mechanism, which requires a qualified majority in the Council to be activated, was proposed by the European Parliament in response to the European ‘migration crisis’ in 2016. However, the proposal was not supported, suggesting a significant disparity in responses from EU Member States to the two migration crises. According to the UNHCR, as of 19 December 2023, of the 6,335,100 Ukrainian refugees recorded globally, 5,931,500 are registered for the EU temporary protection or similar national protection schemes in Europe.

Given its geographical position, **Hungary** was significantly impacted by the Russian-Ukrainian war. An estimated 4 million border crossings from Ukraine were recorded by December 2023. However, according to UNHCR, 61,455 Ukrainian refugees were in Hungary, and only 39,895 had been granted temporary or related protection. It is also noteworthy that the crisis started

only two months before the Hungarian general elections in April 2022, and campaigning was already in full swing.

Apart from neighbouring Poland, which welcomed an estimated 1.6 million, **Germany** took in the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, estimated at a little over one million (UNHCR 2024). Led by Scholz's liberal-left coalition government (SPD with the Greens and FDP), Germany demonstrated a clear commitment to supporting Ukrainian refugees.

In **Spain**, the centre-left government offered protection beyond the scope of the EU directive. Alongside Ukrainian nationals, stateless and non-EU citizens with long-term Ukrainian residence permits, Spain extended protection to Ukrainian residents in Spain before February 24, 2022, to non-EU citizens with temporary residence in Ukraine, and to irregular Ukrainians in Spain. Moreover, Pasetti, Güell, and Ramos (2023) suggest that the Ukrainian refugee crisis marked a shift in international protection in Spain in the form of enhanced collaboration between the government and NGOs.

Heading up the EU Council presidency at the time, **France** announced its intention to propose the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive during the 3 March meeting of EU interior and justice ministers on 27 February 2022. Like Hungary, the crisis occurred ahead of the French presidential elections in April 2022, and candidates, especially on the far-right, instrumentalised the situation as part of their election campaigns. France offered protection to a little over 100,000 Ukrainians under the directive in 2022.

Italy had issued 175,000 permits by March 2023, ranking sixth among EU countries for temporary protection. The high number of arrivals significantly impacted the Italian reception system. The centrist Draghi national unity government gave a new political actor (the Civil Protection Department) responsibility for reception, and family/community-based reception and accommodation were encouraged for the first time.

As the **UK** had left the EU, it was no longer a party to the Temporary Protection Directive – one of the EU directives the UK had originally opted into. Initially, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's right-wing government lagged behind the EU and public sentiment in supporting Ukrainian refugees. However, following internal and external pressure, three legal routes for Ukrainians to reach the UK were set up in a matter of weeks. As of March 2023, 224,000 visas had been issued: 67,200 under the Ukraine Family Scheme and 156,800 under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, and a further 24,500 Ukrainians had been granted permission to remain in the UK (Home Office 2023).

The dominant narratives on Ukrainian refugees in our six country cases are examined in section 4.

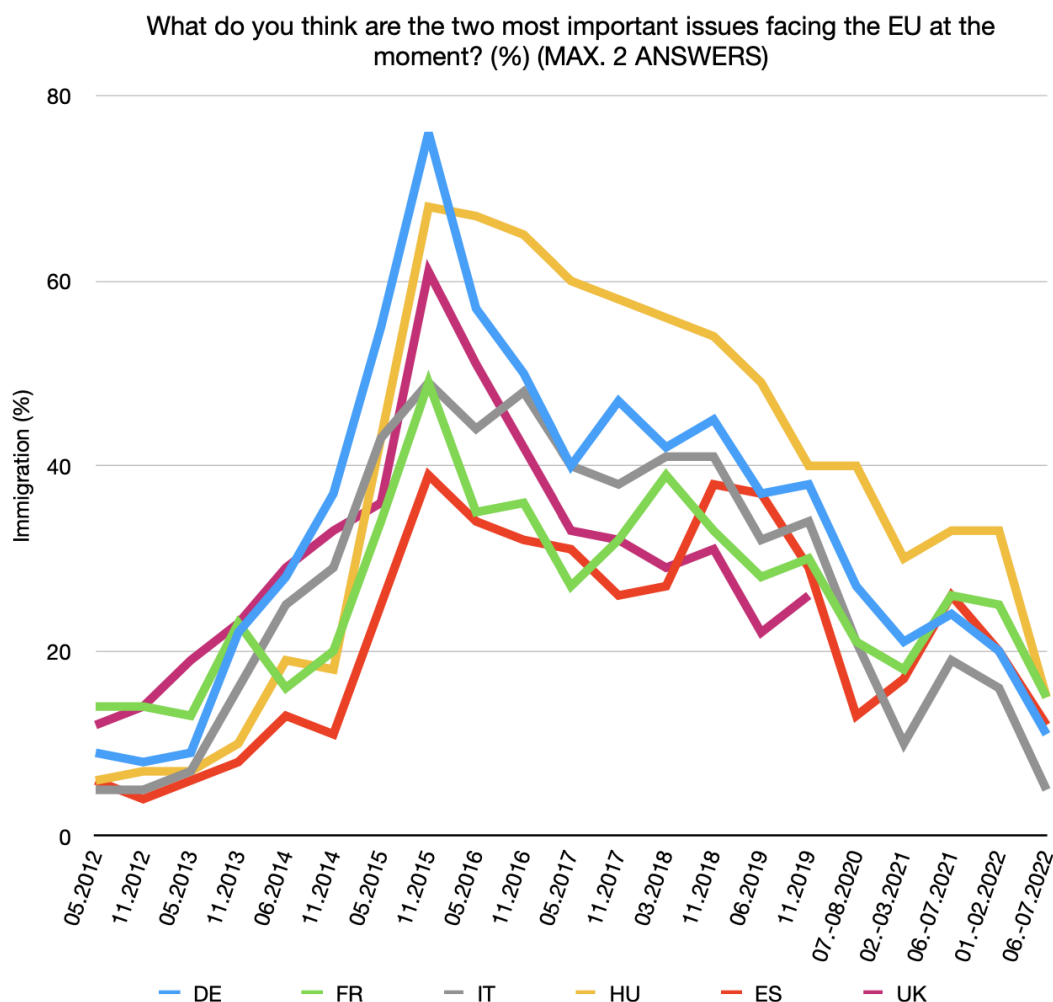
2.3 Saliency and Public Opinion (2012 – 2022)

An overview of the saliency of immigration issues among the public and in the media, as well as public opinion on immigration, provides additional context on the emergence, dissemination and impact of narratives on migration during these two 'crises'.

2.3.1 Salience of immigration among the public

Drawing on data from the bi-annual Eurobarometer survey from 2012-2022, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the salience of immigration as one of the two most important issues facing either the EU or each of the six countries, respectively.

FIGURE 1. Salience of immigration (EU) (2012-2022)



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

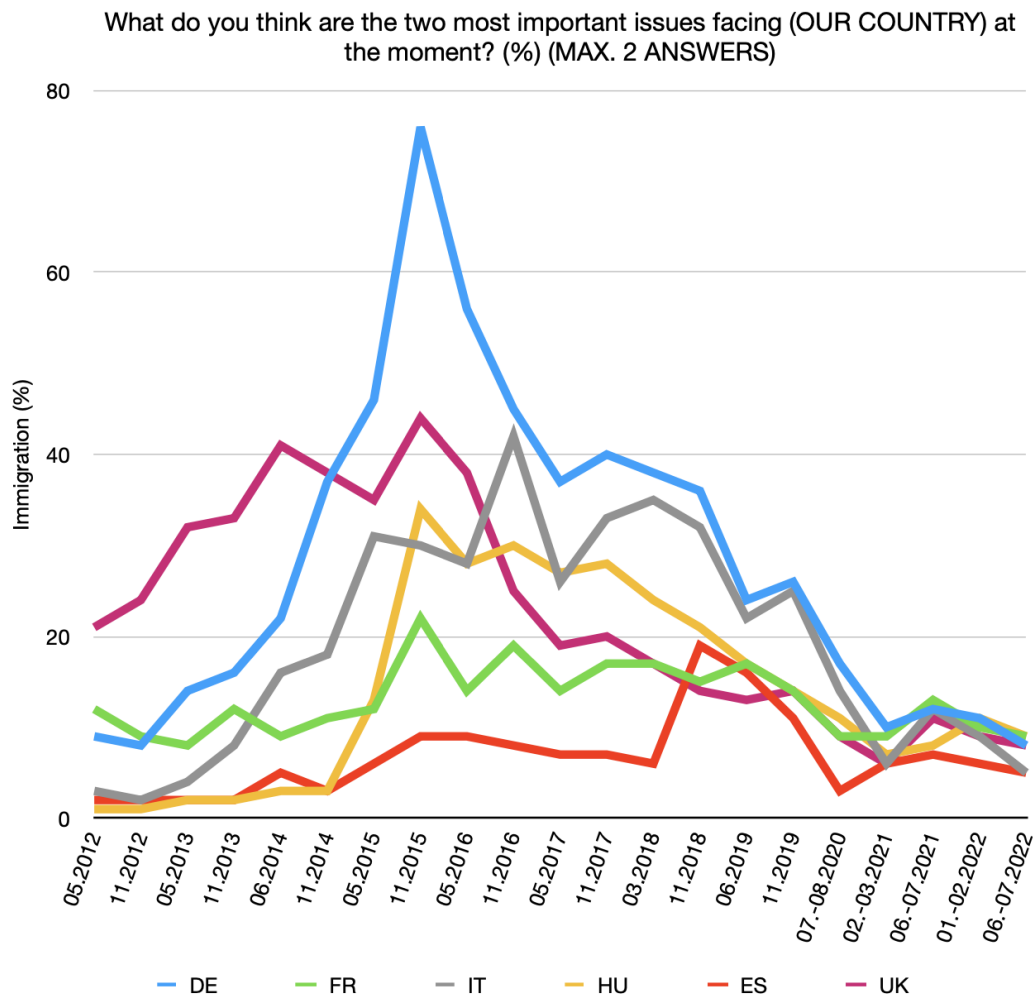
A similar pattern in responses can be observed across all six countries in relation to the EU, depicted in Figure 1. Unsurprisingly, we can observe a significant peak in the salience of immigration as an issue facing the EU in the autumn of 2015. In Germany, 76% of respondents stated that immigration was one of the two most important EU issues in November 2015. Respondents in Spain reflected those least concerned about immigration at the time, with only 39% mentioning immigration.

The most apparent variation in the salience of immigration as an EU issue can be observed in the Hungarian case. Whilst the number of Hungarians claiming that immigration was one of the most important issues in autumn 2015 (68%) did not reach the same levels as in Germany,

it remained higher for longer than in the other five Member States, only starting to drop significantly in the second half of 2018.

Overall, however, we can observe considerable similarities in the salience of immigration as an issue facing the EU. By the summer of 2022, the salience of immigration had dropped in all countries to similar levels as in 2013, suggesting that the Ukrainian refugee crisis was not necessarily perceived as a salient EU issue⁸.

FIGURE 2. Salience of Immigration ('our country') (2012-2022)



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

Eurobarometer data on the salience of immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the country, illustrated in Figure 2, tells a more variegated story across the six country case studies. Applied to the national context, we can observe considerable variation across countries and over the ten-year period. Here the salience of immigration as an issue facing

⁸ Note that due to Brexit, there was no available data on the UK after autumn 2019.

Germany in November 2015 considerably exceeds that of the other countries (76% of respondents).

The next highest was the UK with 44% of respondents stating immigration was an issue facing the country. However, the salience of immigration was already at 21% in early 2012 and remained consistently high, suggesting a less striking increase in response to external events during the European 'migration crisis' when compared with the other countries.

An increase in the salience of immigration in the summer/autumn of 2015 can also be observed in Hungary (34%) and Italy (30%). However, salience peaked in Italy the following year, with 42% of respondents citing immigration as an issue facing the country in November 2016. This could reflect the 46% increase in first-time asylum applications in Italy, up from 83,245 in 2015 to 121,185 in 2016 (Eurostat 2017).

The comparative stability of the salience of immigration in France and Spain is also noteworthy. Whilst we can observe a slight spike in France in November 2015 (21%), the issue salience remained relatively stable over the ten-year period. Strikingly, the low salience of immigration issues in Spain in 2015 suggests that immigration was not politicised in public discourse during the height of the European 'migration crisis'. Meanwhile, the spike in November 2018 supports the analysis that immigration issues were increasingly politicised following a stark increase in asylum applications in Spain and the rise of the populist radical right party, Vox, in 2018.

Regarding the Ukrainian refugee crisis, the comparatively low salience of immigration issues in all six countries in 2022 is conspicuous. This suggests that the Ukrainian crisis was not necessarily framed as an immigration issue in national discourses and that other endogenous and exogenous factors were perceived as more important issues facing each respective country at the time, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. At first glance, this is especially counterintuitive in the case of Germany, which welcomed a high number of Ukrainians in 2022, and Hungary, which experienced unprecedented numbers of border crossings in the direct aftermath of Russia's invasion. This will be explored in greater detail in section 4.

2.3.2 Salience of immigration in the press

While not directly comparable across the six countries, the analysis of media salience provides some tentative insights.

In Germany, a peak in media coverage was observed in the summer months of 2015, corresponding with the death of Alan Kurdi, the deaths of 71 refugees in a lorry, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's "*Wir schaffen das*" speech on August 31. The Ukrainian refugee crisis also represents a peak in media coverage of immigration issues, with the EU decision to invoke the Temporary Protection Directive receiving particular attention.

The analysis of the media in Italy shows high media salience of immigration issues in the summers of 2015, 2017 and 2018. The trend gradually slowed down in 2019 and 2020, but coverage of immigration issues increased again in January and November 2022. Similarly, significant peaks in media coverage of immigration issues were observed in the Spanish press in the summers of 2015 and 2018, and in March/April 2022.

A peak in media coverage of immigration issues was identified in France in the autumn of 2015 but not in 2022 in relation to Ukraine. However, this could be attributed to the researcher's focus on irregular border crossings, whereas Ukrainians entered France regularly under the Temporary Protection Directive.

In Hungary, the analysis observed a peak in coverage of immigration in all three newspapers in 2015. However, whilst media salience on immigration issues had declined by 2016, the government-led newspaper continued to focus on immigration issues, reflecting the pattern of the public salience of immigration in Hungary illustrated in Figure 2.

In the UK, significant spikes in immigration-related media coverage were seen during the 2015/2016 migration crisis. However, this trend does not directly correspond with public salience. News coverage was still increasing in 2016, whilst public salience peaked in September 2015. Similarly, an increase in coverage of immigration issues in August 2020 corresponded with the lowest levels of salience on immigration, with the public expressing concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic and the economy instead.

Taken together, a tentative finding is that in 2015, public salience of immigration and media coverage of immigration issues appear to correlate. However, in 2022, despite increased coverage of immigration issues in the UK, Italy, Spain and Germany, this did not correspond with a peak in the salience of immigration issues among the public. This again suggests that despite media coverage, the Ukrainian crisis was not necessarily perceived as an immigration issue among the public or other issues were considered more important at the domestic level.

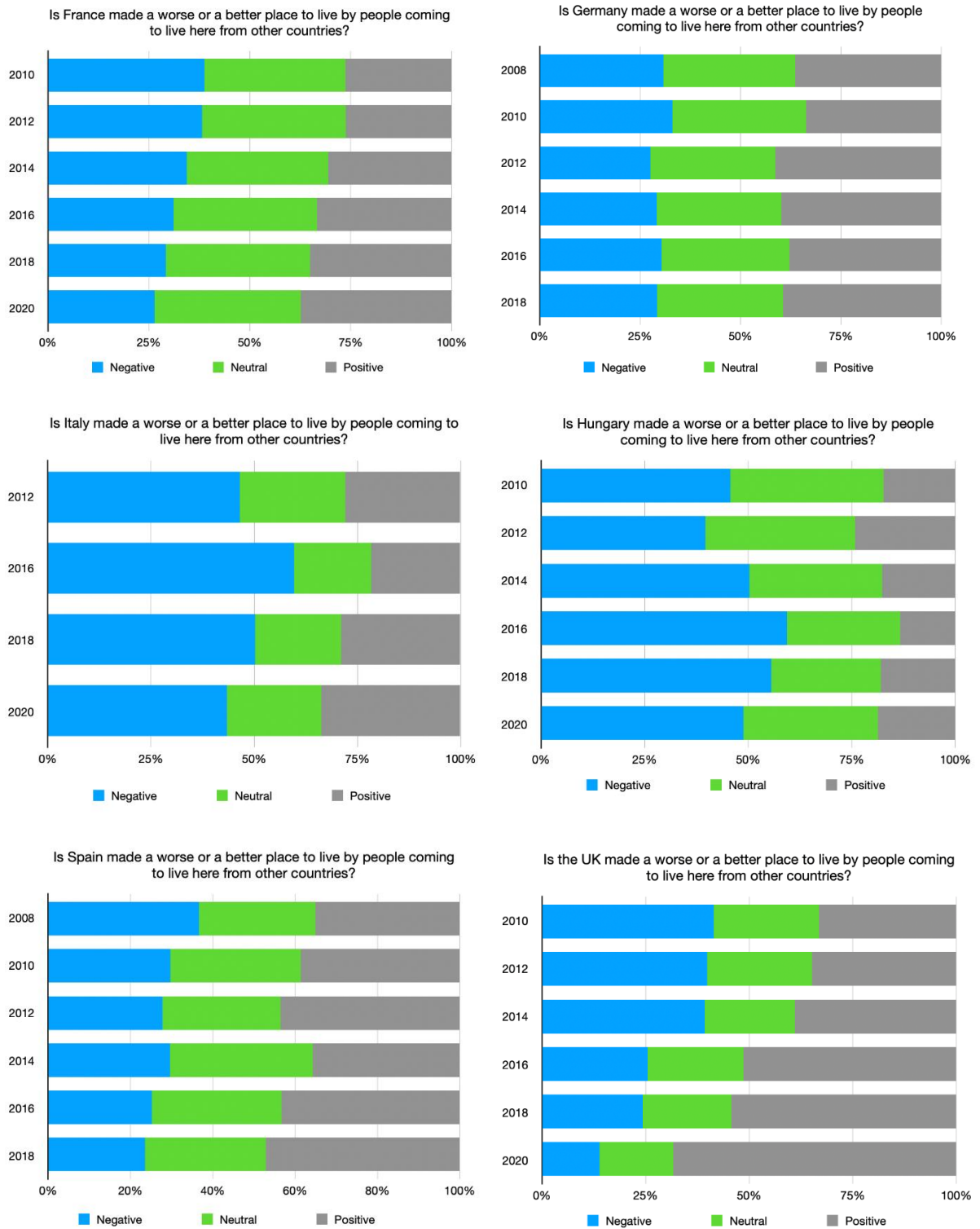
2.3.3 Public Opinion Data from the European Social Survey

An analysis of public opinion on immigration over the ten-year period may shed further light on the context of the two migration crises.

Figure 3 illustrates European Social Survey data gathered in rounds between 2008 and 2020 from each of our case study countries. 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 respondents whose responses to the question was 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, during the European 'migration crisis', 59.4% of respondents in Hungary and 59.6% of respondents in Italy stated that immigration had a negative impact. Public opinion has since become more positive, with negative responses coming in at 48.8% in Hungary and 43.4% in Italy, in 2020. The survey data on public opinion in Germany suggests relative stability of attitudes towards immigration, with an increase in positive responses between 2010 and 2012 (33.7% compared with 41.3%). It is notable that attitudes were not significantly more negative during the height of the migration crisis in 2016, with an increase in negative responses of only 1.2%.

FIGURE 3. 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.

In France and Spain, attitudes appear to be relatively stable and have become more positive over time. While attitudes in Spain were more negative between 2012 and 2014, in the last two rounds, more respondents selected the positive end of the scale. In France, attitudes towards

immigration have become consistently more positive from 2014 onwards. However, the most striking pattern can be observed in the British case, where attitudes have become significantly more positive over the last decade. Just 13.9% of people responded in the negative in 2020, compared with 41.4% in 2010. At the same time, 68.3% of people responded positively in 2020 compared with 33% in 2010.

3. Case Study 1: European ‘Migration Crisis’ 2015 & EU Relocation

3.1 Background

As illustrated above, the European ‘migration crisis’ affected our six case study countries in different ways. Italy was the first port of call for migrants reaching the EU from North Africa along the central Mediterranean route and a focus of the EU’s ‘hotspot’ approach and relocation scheme. However, a centre-left government called for greater intervention at the EU level, including urgent reform of the Dublin regulation and returns policy to facilitate a more equitable distribution of responsibility for asylum provision.

Hungary was another main point of entry for migration flows along the Western Balkan route, with migrants predominantly transiting the territory to other EU Member States. Like the other Visegrad Group leaders, Viktor Orbán’s right-wing populist government starkly opposed relocation or mandatory quotas and called for the renationalisation of borders and immigration policy, while accusing the EU of failing to provide a common solution.

Germany became a country of destination, welcoming over 800,000 asylum seekers in 2015, and temporarily suspending the Dublin regulation for Syrian nationals to manage pressures at the Bavarian-Austrian border. The centre-right coalition government led by Merkel drove calls for a pan-European solution to the crisis, including the externalisation of EU border controls and an EU relocation and quota system to share responsibility for the provision of asylum seekers across Member States.

Meanwhile, Spain experienced comparatively low asylum pressures in 2015 (approx. 1.2% of the EU total of first-time applications). The right-wing government initially rejected the relocation quotas – but oversaw a striking U-turn in its approach in early September following a visit from Merkel, the image of Alan Kurdi going viral and the mobilisation of cities and civil society. Similarly, France’s President François Hollande had repeatedly claimed he would not support mandatory quotas. However, by early September, he represented a unified front with Merkel in favour of relocation and refugee quotas across the EU.

Meanwhile, with an opt-out on common measures, the UK centre-right government declared it would not participate in mandatory or voluntary relocation or quotas, focusing instead on resettlement from the MENA and migrants trying to reach the UK via the Eurotunnel from camps in and around Calais, France. Nevertheless, the salience of immigration issues was at an all-time high by the autumn of 2015, placing the government under immense pressure to act.

As we shall see, these distinct settings influenced quite different dynamics in how the issue was covered in the media and political debate, as well as how these ‘communicative’ narratives were picked up in the policy sphere.

3.2 Communicative Sphere (Media and Political Narratives)

The communicative sphere, as we saw, incorporates both media coverage of migration, as well as the treatment of migration in political debate. Media and political narratives in the six countries show interesting variations.

3.2.1 Germany

German media coverage of the crisis tended to focus on human suffering and the need for Germany to adopt a generous humanitarian response in line with its historical moral obligations. Indeed, even the right-wing tabloid *Bild* launched a campaign promoting refugee reception. Coverage both emphasised Germany’s particular responsibilities, but also criticised other EU countries for failing to shoulder their duties. This humanitarian narrative drew heavily on well-established ‘master’ narratives around Germany’s particular responsibilities to refugees and was shared across media of different ideological perspectives.

It is interesting to note that media positioning on this issue pre-dated and likely influenced the Chancellor’s welcoming messaging, which crystallised in her address on 31 August 2015 and “*wir schaffen das*” comment, which became the core mantra of Germany’s *Willkommenskultur*. While the government adopted a broadly similar approach emphasising moral obligation, the German analysis shows that its narrative was more focused on Germany overcoming challenges in order to carry out its moral duty. The messaging was one of patriotism and heroism in the German response, and the need to lead by example – rather than a straightforward imperative to alleviate suffering, as was more prominent in the media reporting.

There were a range of dissident political voices that opposed the government’s approach. These included political narratives around the need to reinstate border controls, as well as the notion that Germany was displaying weakness in absorbing so many refugees and not requiring other EU countries to play their part.

3.2.2 Hungary

As we saw, Hungary, in some ways, represents an outlier case: with an authoritarian government exercising considerable control over both the media and parliament, there was less scope for a divergence in narratives across these different spheres. This is borne out in the analysis of media and political narratives. Media narratives are very pro-government, and supportive of Fiedsz’s position on the refugee crisis. The populist media portrays the EU as a puppet of Soros, and acting against the interests of the Hungarian people. It is firmly opposed to relocation quotas, which are seen as undermining the state’s attempt to control migration and terrorism.

Political narratives are broadly aligned, but with less of a focus on the immediate issue of relocation. In that sense, there is the same tendency that we saw in the German case to ‘pan

out' from the immediate episodes, which are the focus of media attention, with the focus instead on broader aspects linked to the migration debate, such as terrorism, human trafficking, labour market shortages, demographic decline and 'European identity'. However, in all cases, narratives are in line with the government's position.

The lack of plurality in either media or political narratives reflects the strong influence of the government; indeed, as the Hungarian analysis notes, opposition parties and media were not seen as significant enough to feature in (pro) government narratives as enemies of the Hungarian people.

The Hungarian case arguably suggests the limitations of analysing narrative 'travel' in authoritarian settings, where the government has effectively captured parliamentary and media debate. However, it provides an interesting backdrop for analysing populist governments in liberal democratic systems, as we shall see in the UK case.

3.2.3 *Italy*

In Italy, there was extensive media coverage of the EU relocation scheme, with reporting generally positive about the role of the EU. Criticism frequently focused on a lack of burden-sharing by Member States – suggesting a desire for more action from the EU, rather than less. In political debate, the key narrative was that migration could only be managed if addressed at the EU level. Italy was presented as a victim, with relocation a means of regaining control. Right-wing opposition parties placed stronger emphasis on the need for corollary measures to manage migration more rigorously, and to enforce returns.

There was some evidence that political narratives had set the tone for those of the media. The notion of relocation as a solution was strongly communicated in parliamentary debate in June 2015, and appeared to be picked up in media coverage, strongly influencing the content of narratives.

The Italian study found that while media debate focused on the immediate crisis, political debate tended to pan out to consider broader ramifications of the European 'migrant crisis'. For example, politicians placed more emphasis on broader geo-political context, including the role of the EU. This suggests that politicians may adapt media narratives in a way that pins them to broader political agendas – what we could term a strategic use of narratives to reinforce their political messaging and positioning. Such strategic deployment may be a means of highlighting their record or competence in government, or critiquing that of incumbents.

Strikingly, the analysis found that while populist elements could be found in both arenas, political discourse tended to be more divisive and provocative than media narratives. In particular, far-right parties presented often partial and unfeasible moral positions and solutions in their narratives. By contrast, media outlets were more responsible in their coverage. This in part appears to reflect the generally moderate positioning of Italian media (or at least the outlets analysed in the study), in comparison to the media in some of the other case studies.

3.2.4 *Spain*

Spanish media was fairly consistent in critiquing the government's rejection of the EU relocation scheme. News outlets focused on humanitarian, human rights and legalistic

narratives, which emphasised Spain's EU and international treaty obligations. The media emphasised the need for an urgent response to the humanitarian crisis. There were some variations across outlets, but our analysis identified a general alignment around this humanitarian approach.

Political debate displayed many similar features, including a focus on EU cooperation and a humanitarian approach. However, over the summer of 2015, the government initially argued against the quota proposals, which were seen as penalising countries at the borders of Europe. The government's narrative over that period focused on Spain's claimed success in implementing effective migration management, especially in contrast to Italy. Political debate in Spain also wove in more technocratic narrative elements.

The government oversaw a significant change in approach in early September. This was in large part driven by media coverage of Alan Kurdi, which resonated strongly with Spanish public opinion. The political shift also coincided with a visit from Angela Merkel, which sharpened the focus on the discrepancy between the Spanish government's antagonistic approach to burden-sharing in comparison to many of its (western) European partners. In this sense, Spanish political narratives can be said to have been strongly influenced by media narratives, which were capturing and amplifying the views of a wider Spanish public and party political debate. As the Spanish case study analysis puts it, the media set a 'discursive boundary' for political narrative: the humanitarian frame proved more compelling than the government's initial narrative around minimising Spanish involvement with EU burden-sharing.

Similar to the Italian case, the Spanish case study also suggests that political narratives were more polarised, vivid and heterogenous than media ones; but also that political narratives displayed more technocratic elements.

3.2.5 *France*

As with the Spanish and Italian media, French media coverage was largely supportive of the EU relocation scheme. Indeed, the EU, as well as France and Germany, are singled out for praise, while the 'villains' of the piece are Spain (at least until their September shift in approach), as well as Hungary and the Visegrad countries who were opposing resettlement.

There was generally a strong alignment of media and political narratives. However, parliamentary debate was more strongly – indeed almost exclusively – focused on praising the role of France in the crisis. Political debate was likely to be more patriotic and focused on France, in contrast to media coverage which often mentioned the Franco-German alliance and their collective role.

Parliamentary narratives were also more likely to advocate strengthening external borders, on which there was near unanimous agreement. These debates also called for increasing returns, reflecting a generally more restrictive and cautious approach. The media was more likely to favour regularisation as a solution. This echoes the divergence observed across both Spanish and Italian media and political spheres, with the media generally aligning behind a more humanitarian and progressive approach.

In terms of the mutual influence of media and political narratives, the French analysis notes that there was an opportunity for the media to influence narratives, given the hiatus in

parliamentary business over the summer of 2015. Thus, the media was able to set the agenda over August 2015, shaping subsequent discussions of the crisis in political debate.

3.2.6 UK

The UK, in some ways, presents another outlier to the other cases, but in a way that is distinct from the Hungarian case. In the UK, we see close alignment between media and political narratives but variegated according to ideological lines. Thus, we have the right-wing and centre-right media closely aligned with the UK government's (Conservative Party) position; while the centre-left media closely coheres with the (Labour Party) opposition narrative.

For both of these ideological groupings, there is evidence of intensive mutual influence across media and political narratives to the extent that narratives are almost indistinguishable. Thus there is very limited evidence of adaptation or obvious omissions in the narratives being picked up across media and political debate. The cleavage is generally in terms of ideological positioning rather than between media and party political discourse.

However, there are some areas of alignment in media and political debate across the ideological spectrum. This includes narratives about the UK's leadership in relation to humanitarian aid and its attempts to address the causes of the crisis. This humanitarian narrative, which invokes 'master' narratives about the UK's international role, features more prominently in political narratives than media ones. This finding reflects a pattern similar to the case studies outlined above, whereby political actors tend to swing behind more patriotic narratives that foreground the country's noble and heroic response.

However, there is divergence across the ideological spectrum in terms of the moral of the story. Pro-government media and the government itself swing strongly behind a long-established UK narrative about the perceived 'pull factor': a fear that adopting generous policies, including participation in an EU relocation scheme, would send a signal to potential migrants, encouraging them to reach Europe/the UK. By contrast, centre-left media and the Labour Party favour participating in the relocation scheme and are not concerned about a pull factor.

3.3 Coordinative Sphere (Policy Narratives)

As we would expect, the coordinative sphere portrayed the crisis in a much less vivid and dramatic way, preferring to pan out from individualised stories and invoke statistics to capture the issues, and placing the crisis in a historical and geographic context. Indeed, the treatment of the crisis shed many of the narrative elements of the communicative sphere, or at least invoked them only implicitly or indirectly. For example, it is often difficult to identify any 'villains'.

It is also worth noting that the type of policy document analysed varied across countries. In some cases, we analysed preambles to legislation or policy proposals which were fairly high level. In others, there was no clear policy proposal emanating from or linked to the national response to the 'migration crisis', in which case the national teams analysed more operational circulars or guidelines adopted by the public administration.

3.3.1 *Germany*

The German case study found that policy narratives are more pragmatic and tempered than political narratives. As we would expect, the style of narratives tended to be dryer, abstracting from vivid and individualised narratives and invoking broader settings and data.

However, while policy narratives mirrored the preoccupation with humanitarian suffering and Germany's moral responsibility, they also invoked familiar German concerns about constraints and risks. These included the social and economic strain that the large inflows placed on Germany and on its asylum system; the fact that many migrants did not have a well-grounded claim to asylum and might seek to stay in Germany without authorisation; and the potential for criminality amongst some migrants. Thus, as the case study points out, policy narratives display a 'duality' of humanitarian obligation alongside the need to prevent abuse and address the challenges created.

In interviews, officials noted that political leaders and civil servants were very much attuned to media coverage, often viewing this as a proxy for public opinion. This can be seen in the travel of narratives through the media to politics and then into policy documents. Indeed, there is fairly close alignment and follow-through of communicative narratives into the coordinative sphere. However, the country analysis suggests that policy narratives did temper some of the more sweeping ethical and humanitarian narratives, reminding its audiences of challenges and the need for caution – very much in line with historically entrenched narratives around perceptions of the broader (negative) impacts of large-scale immigration in Germany.

3.3.2 *Hungary*

In the Hungarian case, we would anticipate close alignment between political narratives and those displayed in policy documents. This is because both spheres are dominated by the government, with substantive divergence effectively suppressed.

Moreover, as in the case of France, there was a lack of new policies in response to the crisis, with any measures limited to operations. Indeed, the Hungarian team was unable to identify any policy documents linked to the migration crisis, even in the form of circulars implementing operational decisions. For this reason, it is not possible to present a clear analysis of the how narratives travelled across communicative and coordinative spheres, given the lack of any documentation underpinning measures in the latter sphere.

3.3.3 *Italy*

Policy narratives in Italy were broadly aligned with political narratives conveyed by the government. As we would expect, they focused more on practical and operational concerns, and the implementation of control policies than setting out broad ideological positions. They also highlighted the complexity of the solutions required, as we would expect. These features all reflected anticipated differences in narrative styles.

However, there was some adaptation in terms of the content of narratives. Interestingly, some policy narratives wove in ideas of migrants as 'villains', reflecting far-right narratives that had not been identified in the government's political narratives. This may be because policy actors were immersed in more pragmatic and restrictive narratives about the risks of large-scale

immigration and the challenges in migration management. However, solutions suggested by right-wing populist political actors were explicitly rejected in such policy narratives.

3.3.4 Spain

As we noted, government politicians in Spain already wove a number of technical elements into their narratives in the communicative sphere, and these were also reflected in policy narratives. Indeed, there was close alignment in the content of policy narratives, which picked up and implemented the direction set by the government in the communicative sphere.

However, the policy narratives we analysed were almost exclusively technical and shed most of the features of narratives that were evident in the communicative sphere. There was a clear emphasis on strategic and operational considerations rather than the moral concerns that pervaded the communicative sphere. This may in part reflect the very operational nature of the policies being set out. It may also reflect the fact that consensus around the humanitarian approach and rather limited coverage of restrictive approaches in the communicative sphere meant that there was less need to mobilise support behind policy approaches. In other words, broad consensus in the political sphere meant that policymakers were relatively buffered from political pressure, and did not need to develop compelling narratives to justify their positions to their audiences. Policymaking discourse remained very practical and operational.

3.3.5 France

Similar to the other cases, policy documents in France were very operational, with a focus on implementing resettlement programmes through providing accommodation and support, and encouraging local initiatives to welcome new migrants. The measures set out in the circulars being analysed were very much oriented towards delivering support at national and local level, rather than diagnosing broader historical or international causes or locating responses within a wider setting. These documents wove in elements that were overlooked in communicative discourse, such as budgets, legal codes, national and local administrative responsibilities, and so on.

These documents were not picked up in the media, and it is unlikely that their authors anticipated a need for alignment with political narratives, beyond their responsibility to implement the measures agreed and communicated by their political leaders. In essence, then, French policy in this area was highly technical and operational, without any evidence of a need to win over an audience through justifying the approach.

3.3.6 UK

As with the other cases, policy documents in the UK adopted a much more technocratic style, invoking data and operational detail and covering a broader range of policy considerations. There was also some divergence from political narratives in that policy documents did not focus as much on foreign aid and the UK's international role and responsibility – though that is likely to reflect the fact that policy was developed in the Home Office (rather than the departments responsible for foreign policy and development aid).

However, the substance of the narratives remained broadly aligned with those of government political discourse: notably, the notion that relocation might create a 'pull factor', and a focus

on foreign aid and resettlement as policy solutions. This alignment with (government) political narratives demonstrates the close follow-through from media and political debate into policy documents on this issue.

3.4 Conclusions

In general, we see quite considerable alignment in narratives across the media, political debate and policy documents in this case.

3.4.1 How do narratives 'travel' across the media and political debate?

There is considerable evidence of the media setting the tone for narratives on the European 'migration crisis'. This is partly because of timing: the crisis reached its peak over the summer months when parliamentary business was in recess. This created a window for the media to set the agenda – and in all cases, politics appears to have been very responsive to this. This is most evident in the Spanish case, where the government initially went against dominant media narratives but then backtracked in the face of criticism. But it is also evident in Italy and France, where governments subsequently picked up on key narratives that had been established in the media over the first few weeks of coverage of the 'crisis'.

However, political leaders and especially governments also adapted elements of these media narratives. While the mass media tended to emphasise humanitarian aspects, human interest and immediate events, politicians often modified these narratives to position themselves as responsible, patriotic and statesman-like on the world stage. Incumbents also deployed these narratives to foreground their positive track record. In general, then, political actors deployed media in strategic ways, to bolster their political positions.

There was also some divergence in the range and types of narratives in the media compared to political debate, especially in the cases of France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Political debate tended to be more polarised, vivid and often simplistic in its solutions. This was in contrast to reporting in the mass media, which was generally quite 'responsible' and humanitarian-oriented.

The exceptions to this are the UK and Hungary, where there was much closer alignment between the media and political debate, to the extent that the two were indistinguishable. However, while the UK demonstrates a more pluralist debate with the media and political debate bunched into distinct ideological groupings, in Hungary, there was only one, dominant ideological position reflecting that of the government.

In summary, the analysis across our six cases identified a close inter-relation between narratives deployed in the media and political debate. And, moreover, it suggests a distinct tendency of the media to set a (in most cases) humanitarian tone.

3.4.2 How do these narratives, in turn, influence policymaking?

As anticipated, policy documents display a very different style, and in some ways it is difficult to 'read through' narratives from the communicative to the coordinative sphere. This is likely

to be especially true for this case study given that in most countries, the relocation scheme did not result in legislation or clear policy change. Rather, measures to deliver refugee relocation and reception were implemented through quite technical circulars or operational measures.

Thus we did not observe the type of 'decoupling' anticipated, where populist and restrictive rhetoric in the communicative sphere were not redeemed in policy practice. This is because in the cases where we did have populist or restrictive governments, they either did not implement clear policies (as in the case of Hungary); or they enjoyed sufficient clout to see their policies through without significant 'drift' from their public administration (the case of the UK). In other words, they were able to steer their public administration to adopt similarly populist policies. In a third scenario (Spain), the government changed course to align with its less restrictive public opinion, rather than risking sustaining an unpopular position. Thus in none of these cases did we see restrictive or populist discourse decoupled from more lenient narratives in the coordinative sphere.

In fact, we see elements of the opposite effect: for those countries where communicative narratives were generally humanitarian and favouring relocation, we see a note of caution and concern surfacing in policy documents (notably in the German and Italian cases, which invoke some of the risks and constraints). Such elements pick up on established and historical narratives about risks and 'costs' associated with large-scale and/or uncontrolled immigration. Thus we can infer that organisational cultures of migration management are influencing how government and their civil servants are narrating the issues, even if these narratives are not always surfacing in public political debate.

TABLE 5. How narratives on the 2015 migratin crisis and EU relocation were processes in communicative and coordinative spheres

	Communicative sphere			Coordinative sphere	
	Media narratives	Political narratives	Media ↔ Political	Policy narratives	Communicative sphere ↔ Coordinative sphere
France	Pro-EU & relocation, humanitarian <i>Lay</i>	Pro-EU & relocation, patriotic, <i>Lay</i>	General alignment . Media narratives shaped the political debate (adaptation).	Operational, <i>Technocratic</i>	Communicative narratives omitted in policy documents.
Germany	Humanitarian master narrative <i>Lay</i>	Humanitarian & patriotic (national duty) <i>Lay & technocratic</i>	Humanitarian media narratives embraced in political debate.	Humanitarian, also constraints & risks (master narratives). <i>Technocratic</i>	General alignment . Evidence of policy narratives tempering sweeping humanitarian narratives in comm. sphere.
Hungary	EU as a puppet of Soros, anti-EU <i>Lay</i>	EU as a puppet of Soros, anti-EU, pan-out/broader. <i>Lay</i>	Pro-government alignment	n/a	Outlier. Expectation of complete alignment due to gov. control.
Italy	Pro-EU, responsible <i>Lay</i>	Pro-EU, divisive, polarised <i>Lay</i>	Pro-EU political narratives embraced in media. Strategic adaptation of media narratives by politicians.	Operational, with some populist elements based on risks. <i>Technocratic</i>	Broad alignment . Evidence of policy narratives tempering sweeping humanitarian narratives in comm. sphere.
Spain	Humanitarian, critique of gov. <i>Lay</i>	Humanitarian, anti-relocation, polarising, divisive <i>Lay & technocratic</i>	Strategic adaptation of media narratives in political debate (gov. U-turn on relocation).	Strategic & operational. <i>Technocratic</i>	Close alignment . Policy narratives largely operational – consensus on humanitarian approach buffered policymakers from pressure.
UK	Pro-EU on left, anti-EU on right <i>Lay</i>	Pro-EU on left, anti-EU on right <i>Lay</i>	Close alignment along ideological lines	Operational, with populist elements based on constraints. <i>Technocratic</i>	Close alignment .

4. Case Study 2: Ukrainian Refugee Crisis 2022

4.1 Background

As previously outlined, our second comparative case, the Ukrainian refugee crisis, prompted a different institutional and policy response from our six case study countries than the earlier European ‘migration crisis’. The migration ‘shock’ following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was met with a swift and coordinated EU response and, significantly, a consensus across Member States in support of provision for Ukrainian refugees. This was exemplified by the unanimous vote in the Council activating the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive for the first time.

Despite growing anti-immigration sentiment in the aftermath of the 2015 crisis, Germany’s new centre-left coalition under Chancellor Olaf Schulz welcomed over a million Ukrainians. In Spain, the policy and institutional response of Pedro Sanchez’s centre-left government was fast, coordinated, and effective, offering temporary protection well beyond the scope of the EU’s directive. Italy was also one of the main recipients of those fleeing Ukraine, led by Draghi and his centrist national unity government. French President Macron welcomed over 100,000 Ukrainians within the year. Even the Hungarian anti-immigration Fidesz government toed a humanitarian line and supported the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive.

Meanwhile, having left the EU, the UK’s right-wing (and increasingly populist) government under Prime Minister Boris Johnson was initially slow to respond to the displacement crisis, focusing on the high politics of military support for Ukraine. A significant increase of ‘small boat’ arrivals across the English Channel since 2018 had placed irregular migration back at the top of the political agenda, with a distinctly securitised and restrictive perspective (tackling ‘illegal migration’). However, under intense (internal and external) political pressure, the government soon introduced new legal routes for Ukrainians fleeing war to reach the UK.

Considering the wider context in all six countries, we saw that the salience of immigration issues in spring 2022 was significantly lower than in the summer/autumn of 2015. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that public opinion on immigration had rebounded to pre-2015 levels and, in some cases, attitudes had become more positive towards immigration.

We explore how these distinct settings influenced the dynamics of how the issue was covered in the media and political debate, as well as how these ‘communicative’ narratives were picked up in policy settings.

4.2 Communicative Sphere (Media and Political Narratives)

As detailed above, the communicative sphere incorporates both the media and political debate. As we will see, both venues tended to disseminate similar narratives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

4.2.1 Germany

German media coverage and political debate were overwhelmingly in support of the provision for Ukrainian refugees and the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. Once again, the media focus was on human interest stories and the need for a generous humanitarian response. Ukrainians were referred to as refugees across the board, irrespective of legal status. Moreover, stories of human suffering incorporated a strong gender dimension in their portrayal of 'victims', focusing on the plight of women, children, and the elderly, especially in the right-wing tabloid *Bild*.

Intriguingly, in contrast to 2015, Germany's moral and historical obligations were less narrativised and rather presumed as given. In political debate, there is no discussion of overcoming obstacles, akin the Merkel's "*wir schaffen das*" speech in 2015, or whether Germany should or can help. This leaves room to embrace and adapt the established leadership in Europe narrative whilst overlooking any challenges of large-scale migration.

A narrative on the geographical proximity of the conflict, as well as cultural, ethnic, and religious similarities between Germans and Ukrainians, emerged in the media and was picked up in political debate. This narrative was embraced by all political parties without exception or adaptation. According to the German analysis, the activation of the Protection Directive at the EU level removed any need to justify or legitimise the exceptional response to Ukrainian refugees in political debate. Only (left-leaning) media questioned or rejected the narrative of Ukrainian exceptionalism.

Despite considerable alignment in narratives in the two venues, this suggests that the media engaged with more diverse narratives. In contrast, the lack of plurality in political narratives reaffirmed the established political consensus on supporting Ukrainian refugees.

4.2.2 Hungary

Hungary is once again somewhat of an outlier. With the right-wing authoritarian government controlling communication, very little variation in narratives is discernible. However, in contrast to 2015, media narratives in this case adopted a predominantly humanitarian tone. Pro and non-governmental outlets expressed support for Ukrainian refugees through a humanitarian or solidarity narrative.

Ukrainians were portrayed as the "real refugees" compared with (economic) migrants from outside of Europe. Moreover, they were presented as not posing a threat to Hungary, unlike 'possible terrorists' travelling to Europe from further afield. As in the German case, a gendered dimension was evident in the framing of the protagonists of the story, where 'victims' were women and children, and men stayed behind in Ukraine, defending their homes ('heroes').

Pro-government media also invoked a peace narrative calling for an end to the war. This addressed the economic impact of the war on energy prices and linked migration to broader government agendas, including Hungarian sovereignty in international affairs and security policy, often critical of international political actors. Orbán was frequently presented as the hero, saving Ukrainians and helping the European people. Meanwhile, there was little variation in narratives in the non-government media, and any criticism of the government was restricted to the misleading use of statistics in government communications.

Significantly, the refugee issue was not featured in parliamentary discourse. The analysis poses that given the consensus on the need to support Ukrainian refugees across parties, irrespective of political affiliation, neither Fidesz nor other members of the parliament deployed the issue to strengthen their political position. Consequently, the Ukrainian refugee crisis did not surface in parliamentary debate, and political discourse focused mostly on the impact of the war on energy security and gas prices.

4.2.3 Italy

The Italian analysis identifies considerable media coverage on Ukraine and strong homogeneity across media narratives. All coverage adopted a humanitarian tone, focusing on dramatic human-interest stories and portraying Ukrainian refugees, usually women and children, as 'victims'. The story's moral in all coverage was a call to action to support Ukrainian refugees, including the duty of European countries to open their borders. Even traditionally right-wing anti-immigration news outlet *Il Giornale* adopted a humanitarian tone.

The analysis found that while media debate focused on the immediate crisis, political debate tended to be more structured and complex and considered the broader implications of the war. However, political narratives largely mirrored the humanitarian frame, emphasising the victimisation of women and children and their 'harmlessness' to the Italian people. Here, a parallel can be drawn with the first case on relocation, namely that government politicians appeared to strategically adapt and deploy (humanitarian) media narratives to justify policy approaches and reinforce their political agendas.

There is also some evidence to suggest that political narratives set the narrative tone. Government narratives on EU solidarity and the role played by Italy, and a right-wing populist narrative depicting Ukrainians as 'real refugees', fleeing a 'real' war, compared with 'false refugees' or 'economic migrants' arriving in Italy by boat, featured in parliamentary debate and appeared to be subsequently picked up in the media. This analysis supports the earlier finding that while populist elements featured in both arenas, political discourse - driven by far-right parties – tended to be more divisive and provocative than media narratives, with even the right-wing populist newspapers ignoring such narratives.

4.2.4 Spain

Spanish media invoked an unusually positive narrative in response to the displacement crisis. Similar to Germany and Italy, the emphasis was on the humanitarian duty to receive and help refugees, especially women and children. However, on this occasion, the media focused on the exceptional solidarity demonstrated by multiple stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, at the national, regional and local levels, as well as the unprecedented policy and institutional response of both Spanish and EU policymakers.

Narratives were relatively homogenous across media outlets. Generally, coverage focused on the war itself, combining lay elements on the threat Russia poses and the plight of refugees, with data and more strategic analysis. The main exception was criticism of the difference in policy response between the 2015 crisis and the Ukrainian crisis. While right-leaning newspapers attributed this to utilitarian and security issues, left-leaning and centrist newspapers criticised the apparent double standards.

Notably, there was little observable politicisation. For instance, no references were made to integration issues, capacity, security threats, or control measures/deterrence. Thus, humanitarian discourses dominated the media debate, disregarding previously dominant narratives on border security or migration flows.

The political debate in Spain represented an outlier akin to Hungary – namely, no narrative on migration was observed. On the occasions that the far-right VOX raised immigration issues, it was not in relation to Ukraine but a vague (populist) reference to the threat of irregular migration. The analysis suggests that the lack of a migration narrative can be attributed to the focus on the National Plan for the Ukraine crisis, which covered sector-specific measures. Thus, parliamentary debate predominantly revolved around energy security and its impact on the Spanish economy, welfare system, and society.

This notwithstanding, the Spanish team identified ideational humanitarianism framed by the broader context of the war paradigm in media and political discourses. Examining the omission of media narratives in the political arena, they describe a process of “downgraded adaptation”. The political arena appeared largely impervious to media discourse on Ukrainian refugees because there was substantial agreement among parliamentary groups in support of provision for Ukrainian refugees. Consequently, the focus of parliamentary debate was on more salient and contentious issues of ‘high politics’.

4.2.5 France

As with the other cases, French media coverage was largely humanitarian. France was portrayed as the main hero for welcoming Ukrainian refugees (‘victims’), setting an especially patriotic tone. Russia and Putin represented the main ‘villains’, alongside secondary ‘villains’, including Hungary and the UK, for not welcoming enough refugees. Presidential candidates, ahead of the April 2022 elections, also featured in the coverage and were supported/criticised for their position on Ukraine, largely along ideological lines.

There was a strong alignment of media and political narratives. In contrast to the previous case, political narratives on Ukraine panned out to include a stronger focus on the EU and more detailed engagement with the Temporary Protection Directive, and portrayed the EU as a ‘hero’ alongside France. Parliamentary narratives were also more pluralistic due to the presidential elections, reflecting variations on (secondary) characters.

This heterogeneity was also reflected in the proposed policy solutions. In addition to general support for the Temporary Protection Directive, the political centre also called for the reception of refugees by local authorities and private individuals. At the same time, the centre-right advocated for strengthening external borders and humanitarian and military support. The media was more likely to favour refugee reception, humanitarian aid, and support for neighbouring countries. This reflects observations across the Italian media and political sphere, with the media generally aligning behind a more humanitarian and progressive approach.

As for the influence of narratives, the parliamentary debates on Ukraine analysed occurred after the elections. The analysis points out that this delay could go some way to explaining the similarity of narratives in the media and political debate, since politicians would have had the opportunity to embrace and adapt media narratives ahead of debates in parliament.

4.2.6 UK

Similar to the other cases, British media coverage was overwhelmingly humanitarian. In contrast to 2015, discourses referred to those fleeing Ukraine as 'refugees', irrespective of legal status. Moreover, the primary 'victims' were depicted as women and children 'deserving' of protection. Russia and Putin featured as the 'villains'. The media was also highly critical of the government, which was cast as a secondary villain due to its (initially) limited response and 'miscalculation' of public sentiment on Ukrainians. Even the typically anti-immigration tabloid, the *Daily Mail*, called for safe and legal routes for Ukrainians to reach the UK.

Once again, we see a very close alignment between media and parliamentary narratives. However, on this occasion, narratives did not as clearly diverge along political cleavages. While opposition party narratives most closely mirrored humanitarian media narratives that were critical of the government, they were also disseminated by members of the Conservative party who did not hold office. Thus, divergence was observed between the executive and the legislative. Home Secretary Priti Patel, in particular, invoked securitised and threat narratives.

The use of historical analogy comparing the situation to WWII, served to emphasise the severity and urgency of the crisis. Indeed, a dominant narrative in the communicative sphere invoked the UK's 'long and proud history' of offering protection to those fleeing persecution. The master narrative appears to have been adopted both by the opposition/media to call for the government to do more and by the government to legitimise its approach. This suggests the strategic adaptation and deployment of narratives to strengthen political agendas.

As for the mutual influence of narratives, the media made frequent references to statements made in parliament. However, there was also some evidence to suggest that the media set the narrative tone. The government was accused of needing to have its 'arm twisted' in the media and was under close media scrutiny from day one. Whilst initially invoking more securitised narratives, by 1st March 2022, there appeared to be a public and political consensus in support of welcoming Ukrainians to the UK. The government became highly responsive, highlighting its agility and flexibility and explicitly rejecting critical narratives of overt bureaucracy.

4.3 Coordinative Sphere (Policy Narratives)

As with the previous case, the coordinative sphere portrayed the crisis in a much more technical way, tending to pan out from individualised stories and deploying statistics and data, geographic and broader policy contexts to describe the issues at hand. Indeed, policy narratives were devoid of many of the narrative elements identified in communicative narratives.

4.3.1 Germany

A relatively small number of proposals for new laws or changes to existing regulations were made in Germany in response to the Ukrainian crisis. Of these, most concerned the status of Ukrainians vis-à-vis the ordinary asylum procedure or residency, and access to the labour

market, welfare, and education. These documents were found to be vastly technocratic and, in contrast to 2015, mainly devoid of narrative elements.

This would suggest little overlap between narratives in the communicative sphere and coordinative narratives, with the latter focused on operational issues without the political pressure of contested or contentious policies. More significantly than this disparity in style, there is also a divergence of *content* in the respective narratives. While key characters – Ukrainians as heroes and victims, Russia as the villain – are featured, all other narrative components diverged: settings, plot, and policy solutions. This would suggest the omission of communicative narratives in policy settings. The analysis, however, revealed one exception: the narrative of Ukrainians as exceptional and deserving refugees due to their ethnic and cultural proximity, which originated in the media and was taken up in the political debate, also appears in policy documents.

The interviews with officials shed light on this relationship. Although German politicians generally paid attention to media narratives as an indicator of public opinion, in the case of Ukraine, this was not the case. One civil servant described the broad humanitarian consensus in the media and political debate as self-evident, stating that the Ukrainian refugee crisis was an operational but not a communicative challenge.

4.3.2 Hungary

In the Hungarian case, we would once again anticipate close alignment between political narratives and those displayed in policy documents, especially with regard to Ukrainians posing no threat to Hungary and the gendered dimension of the representation of Ukrainians as 'real refugees'. This is because both spheres remained dominated by the government.

Furthermore, once again, no new policies were proposed, and no policy documents linked to Ukrainian refugees were identified. However, according to the interviews, two issues dominated the coordinative sphere following the outbreak of the war. Firstly, how the existing legal framework could be modified to create legal routes for Ukrainian refugees, and secondly, what structures should be used to coordinate support for Ukrainians. The latter introduced a new character to the prevailing narrative, namely civil society.

4.3.3 Italy

Policy narratives in Italy were broadly aligned with the main humanitarian/victim-based narrative conveyed by the government, regardless of which government was in power. They focused more on practical guidelines and operational considerations on reception measures than the communicative narratives. They also highlighted the wider migration context and captured the complexity of the situation, reflecting anticipated differences between communicative and coordinative narratives. However, despite these more technical aspects, the settings remained vivid and urgent with a focus on emergency-driven solutions, suggesting a mix of both lay and technocratic narrative styles.

According to the interviews, the policy response was influenced by how the crisis was framed in public political debate, especially the media. However, there was also evidence of the coordinative sphere reframing the narrative agenda. By the end of March 2022, the Interior Ministry had adapted a dominant communicative narrative to emphasise the structural need

for EU solidarity. This adaptation appears to have been taken up by the coalition government in parliament in April 2022. This illustrates the performative power of technocratic narratives produced at the policy production level that parties in power may wish to strategically deploy to demonstrate their ability to deliver on policy.

4.3.4 Spain

Despite narratives in the media, the political arena in Spain was characterised by a lack of a clear migration narrative on Ukrainian refugees. The absence of narrative content is reflected in the coordinative sphere. Policy documents were nearly entirely technical, drawing heavily on legal and operational considerations, and largely devoid of narrative elements. Indeed, the measures targeting Ukrainian refugees found almost no discursive articulation in the policy-making arena.

The only narrative components identified included characters. The documents uniformly acknowledged Ukrainian refugees as 'victims' and emphasised the role of minors and women as especially vulnerable. The moral of the story also mirrored the media, with legal documents reaffirming the Spanish government's unwavering commitment to Ukrainian refugees. However, these elements generally took the form of dry technocratic narratives based on data, evaluations of the normative framework, and assessments of reception capacity.

As with the previous case, the omission of a narrative may reflect the highly operational nature of the policies. However, the lack of a migration narrative in political debate would suggest the need to provide any moral justification for the policy approach was mute. A humanitarian consensus in the media and the lack of political contestation imply that policymakers were entirely buffered from any pressure to develop compelling narratives to justify their positions or approaches. Consequently, policy discourse was nearly entirely operational.

4.3.5 France

Similar to the other cases, policy documents in France are very operational, with a focus on reception measures, capacity and integration of Ukrainian refugees. The measures set out in the circulars analysed focused on policy delivery at the national and local levels and incorporated very few narrative components. The only exceptions were the focus on temporary protection, aligning with the wider communicative discourse, and the representation of Ukrainians as the 'victims'. All other characters were implicit, such as administrations and stakeholders as 'heroes', and other narrative elements were absent entirely.

The circulars did, however, introduce factors not addressed in the communicative narratives, including accommodation for new arrivals, access to healthcare and employment, language learning and other integration issues. Republican values were also mentioned, hinting at French national public philosophy, which underpins the country's approach to integration. However, we can conclude, once again, that French policy on Ukrainian refugees was highly technical and operational, without any evidence of the deployment of narratives to justify or garner support in the policymaking sphere.

4.3.6 UK

As with the other cases, policy documents in the UK adopted a much more technocratic style and the dominant narratives in the communicative sphere did not feature. However, there was broad agreement on villains, victims, and heroes, and the operational considerations reflected the policy solutions put forward in the government's political discourse. This implies a case of omission as opposed to decoupling since the narratives remained aligned if not mirrored.

More strikingly, interviews with officials suggested that the broad consensus in support of Ukrainian refugees in the communicative sphere had a significant impact on the UK's policy approach. According to interviews, the Home Office had no plans to bring Ukrainians to the UK until public and political support swung heavily in support of provision for Ukrainians. Under intense public and media scrutiny, the government U-turned, and the Home Office set up three new visa schemes for Ukrainians in a matter of weeks.

This suggests that the high political salience of the crisis put the government under pressure to deliver policy outcomes in line with public sentiment. It also implies that under immense pressure to deliver tangible policies in a short period of time, policymakers were buffered from the more restrictive narratives invoked in the political debate. Moreover, the broader consensus around an inclusive approach took priority over (minority) calls for a more limited approach on how to respond to the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

4.4 Conclusion

We see considerable alignment in narratives across the media and political debate. However, in this instance, narratives tend to be omitted from policy documents.

4.4.1 *How do narratives 'travel' across the media and political debate?*

There was significant 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 overwhelmingly 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 intense media and public scrutiny appears to have contributed to a government U-turn and the implementation of a comprehensive humanitarian approach to Ukraine, including the introduction of three visa programmes for Ukrainian refugees.

Overall, the Ukrainian refugee crisis appeared less narrativised and polarised than the 2015 crisis, with little divergence in narratives along ideological lines. According to the German analysis, the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive at the EU level removed any need to justify or legitimise the exceptional response to Ukrainian refugees in political debate. Consequently, the political narratives were comparatively homogenous. However, this was not the case in France, in the context of a presidential election, or in Italy, where the political debate, driven by far-right discourse, appeared more divisive and provocative compared with a 'responsible' media.

In all cases, Ukrainians were referred to exclusively as refugees, irrespective of legal status. Women, children, and the elderly were featured as 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 (in most cases) appeared to largely embrace this narrative, and in the Italian and German case, drove the notion of exceptionalism.

Hungary and Spain represent significant outliers in this case, as the Ukrainian crisis was not framed as a migration issue in political debate. Consequently, there was no discernible narrative on Ukrainian refugees in parliament. This could be linked to the apparent consensus in support of provision for Ukrainians, resulting in other issues, such as energy security, taking priority in public political discourse.

4.4.2 How do these narratives, in turn, influence policymaking?

Similar to the previous case, policy documents displayed a very different style and did not always feature clearly identifiable narrative elements. This was especially the case where, in response to the Ukrainian crisis, the Temporary Protection Directive was activated at the EU level.

In the case of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, we observe very few narratives in policy documents, which were either highly technical and operational (UK, France, and Germany), representing the omission of narratives in the coordinative sphere 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 narratives.

Across most cases, a broad humanitarian consensus emerged across media and political narratives. Meanwhile, few narrative components could be identified in policymaking venues. This may reflect the very operational nature of the policies being set out. However, it may also reflect the fact that the consensus around the humanitarian response to Ukrainian refugees and rather limited coverage of restrictive approaches in the communicative sphere meant that there was less need to mobilise support behind policy approaches.

In other words, a broad consensus in the political sphere meant that policymakers were relatively buffered from political pressures and did not need to develop compelling narratives to justify their positions to their audiences. Thus, policymaking discourse remained very practical and operational.

TABLE 6. How narratives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis were processed in communicative and coordinative spheres

	Communicative sphere			Coordinative sphere	Communicative sphere ↔ Coordinative sphere
	Media narratives	Political narratives	Media ↔ Political	Policy narratives	
France	Humanitarian, patriotic <i>Lay</i>	Humanitarian, pro-TPD, divisive <i>Lay</i>	Broad alignment .	Operational <i>Technocratic</i>	Communicative narratives ignored in policymaking.
Germany	Humanitarian, pro-TPD, responsible <i>Lay</i>	Humanitarian, pro-TPD, patriotic, homogenous <i>Lay</i>	Media narratives embraced in political debate	Operational <i>Technocratic</i>	Alignment on Ukrainian 'exceptionalism'. Omission (humanitarian consensus buffered policymakers).
Hungary	Humanitarian, patriotic (pro-gov) <i>Lay</i>	Broader issue linkage – no migration narrative	Omission of migration in political debate (pro-gov humanitarian consensus)	n/a	Outlier. Expectation of complete alignment due to gov. control
Italy	Humanitarian, pro-TPD, responsible <i>Lay</i>	Humanitarian, divisive & provocative <i>Lay</i>	Political narratives embraced in the media. Strategic adaptation of humanitarian media narrative by politicians.	Operational with lay elements. <i>Technocratic & lay</i>	Broad alignment . Government embraced technocratic policy narrative
Spain	Humanitarian, pro-TPD, welcome culture <i>Lay</i>	Broader issue linkage – no migration narrative	Omission of migration in political debate (humanitarian consensus)	Limited narrative content <i>Technocratic</i>	Omission (humanitarian consensus buffered policymakers).
UK	Humanitarian <i>Lay</i>	Humanitarian <i>Lay</i>	Close alignment . Strategic adaptation of media (& master) narrative by politicians.	Operational <i>Technocratic</i>	Limited alignment . Omission (humanitarian consensus buffered policymakers).

5. Key Findings and Implications

In the final section, we return to the initial hypotheses of the Work Package, and explore how far the findings outlined above meet or defy the expectations set out. We then go on to summarise some additional findings not captured in the hypotheses and reflect on the merits and limitations of our methodological approach.

5.1 Hypotheses

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

Our background analysis of the salience of immigration in public opinion and the media did indeed demonstrate 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.

We also found that in most countries, overtly populist positions were more likely to be associated with political parties rather than the media. Indeed, dominant national media coverage across both the 2015 crisis (especially after the summer) and Ukrainian refugees tended to be more humanitarian and inclusive than some of the narratives perpetuated by (right-wing populist) parties. This was especially the case with the media in France, Germany, Italy and Spain, which were generally supportive of 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, as noted earlier, 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.

5.1.2 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.

The analysis did indeed suggest quite substantial embracing of media narratives by governments. Indeed, as we saw, the media had a significant influence on political debate, in

part because of the timing of coverage 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 depicting significant support for migrants among the public contributed towards a change 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. Some of the humanitarian media narratives had simplistic and polarised elements, presenting a clear story about villains, victims, and a rather basic ‘moral of the story’. In that 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.

We also found interesting 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. Adopting a more temporal lens, we observed instances of politicians not only shaping media narratives, reflecting the findings from Work Package 3 (Maneri 2023); but also responding to and strategically deploying media narratives in parliament to bolster their political positions and foreground their track record.

5.1.3 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.

Our findings on this are again somewhat mixed. On the one hand, we certainly saw instances of governments ignoring narratives that were out of kilter with their chosen stance. This was especially the case where these narratives were associated with rival ideological positions and aligned with opposition parties. However, where there was broad consensus across media outlets, it was far more challenging for governments to ignore or reject such narratives. Again, the U-turns made by the Spanish and UK governments are good examples of the power of media narratives in influencing changes to policy approaches. We should, of course, note that this influence on political debate reflects widespread assumptions that the media represents public opinion: it is this assumed alignment of mass media and public views that gives the media such traction in political debate.

As we saw above, we also found some evidence of governments ignoring media coverage because they were buffered from electoral pressures, notably in the case of responses to Ukrainian refugees. However, this form of ‘ignoring’ of narratives did not reflect a disparity of positions (‘decoupling’) – but rather the fact that the consensus position was so overwhelmingly shared that there was no need for narratives to be mobilised to convince detractors or mobilise support for policy decisions. As previously noted, this appeared to be particularly the case where the implementation of EU directives removed any need for justification of policy approaches at the domestic level, resulting in more technical policy documents.

5.1.4 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 reflected an expectation that there would be disparities between narratives in different spheres, especially given the distinct styles prevailing in communicative vs. coordinative spheres. Indeed, we saw, as expected, a striking disparity in narrative styles across these spheres. This was to the extent that, in many cases, we could identify only limited narrative components in policy documents, rendering the application of narrative analysis quite challenging.

Beyond the predicted difference in styles, however, we did not see significant disparities in narrative content across communicative and coordinative spheres. 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 (Ukrainian case), as we have seen, governments fairly swiftly adapted their policies to align with dominant narratives in the communicative sphere, 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 communicative sphere. In both cases, these narratives reflected more pragmatic and cautious approaches that tapped master 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 communicative sphere. This again reverses mainstream expectations from the literature about public administration needing to decouple its more ‘liberal’ approaches from more restrictive and populist expectations in the communicative sphere. Here, the liberal dimension emanates from the communicative sphere, with the calls for more caution emanating from policy-makers.

5.1.5 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.

Our findings on this hypothesis overlap with the discussion above, regarding divergences in narratives across different spheres. As we noted above, there is some evidence of ‘reverse’ decoupling: namely, the adoption of somewhat more cautious narratives and approaches in policy documents, compared to more expansive and liberal positions in media and political debate.

Indeed, as we noted earlier, the more restrictive populist narratives in the media and political debate tended to be weaker across these two case studies (with the exception of Hungary). Thus, it was politically feasible for governments to overlook or ‘ignore’ such outlier narratives, and they had stronger incentives to align their positions with more humanitarian approaches.

5.1.6 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.

Given the points above about the lack of dominant (right-wing) populist narratives in the two cases, we did not observe the kind of cognitive constraint anticipated above. We did, however, observe a moderate or weak cognitive constraint emanating from policy documents in the direction of tempering more idealistic humanitarian approaches to refugee reception. As we saw, this was most prominent in the case of the German public administration, which noted the considerable risks and burden implied by absorbing refugees in response to the 2015 crisis, and in the case of the Italian administration, which called for a more comprehensive EU approach to help absorb Ukrainian refugees. Both strands had been largely absent or underdeveloped in the communicative narratives we analysed.

5.2 Final Insights

Beyond exploring these broader hypotheses, our comparative analysis aimed to shed light on the particular issue of how narratives 'move' across spheres. We were keen to explore what types of narratives were most likely to be (re)produced and adopted in these different spheres ('pervasiveness') and how this informed policy ('transformativity') (Garcés-Mascreñas and Pastore 2022, 7–10).

Firstly, we note that – for the two comparative case studies examined – media narratives were generally more liberal and humanitarian than we might have expected (especially than we anticipated in the case of the 2015 refugee crisis). Indeed, with other case studies (e.g. those that triggered more polarised responses, or with more extensive policy implications), our conclusions may have been quite different. These humanitarian media narratives were generally picked up and replicated in political debate – with the exception of some right-wing political parties (in all countries) and, under some circumstances, right-wing governments (Hungary, and the UK and Spanish governments, at least initially – see findings above). Thus in both cases, there is evidence to suggest that the media set the narrative agenda.

Moreover, somewhat counterintuitively, we see a tendency of the media to set (in most cases) a humanitarian tone and a (humanitarian) narrative agenda. This is in large part attributed to the timing of the peak of the 2015 crisis during the parliamentary recess and, in 2022, to a broad consensus that emerged across media and the political arena supporting Ukrainian refugees. In most cases, political actors were all too keen to pick up on these stories, adding in narrative elements that depicted them as statesmanlike, responsible and influential on a global stage. This was most striking in relation to narrative 'plots': in media and the political debate, plots seem to be constructed along structural lines, with government parties and pro-government predominately invoking Stone's (2002) 'stories of control' and opposition parties and pro-opposition news disseminating 'stories of decline', 'stymied progress' or 'conspiracy'. This suggests that irrespective of political orientation, the structure of a narrative is adapted by politicians to support and validate their position.

We also found that where there was a very strong consensus on the need for a (humanitarian) approach, policy documents did not appear to require narratives to mobilise coordinative action. The rationale and broad goals of the policy appeared to be largely taken for granted, obviating the need to invoke master narratives to galvanise support. This was most striking in the case of responses to Ukrainian refugees, where the provision for refugees was less contested or contentious and thus less politicised. As a result, fewer narratives emerged to mobilise public support and, in most cases, left policymakers to focus on the technical and operational details of policy delivery. As one official put it, the humanitarian consensus on Ukraine was strongly anticipated, so from the outset, the Ukrainian refugee crisis posed an operational but not communicative challenge.

Finally, it is worth reiterating a key finding: we do not see evidence of the type of ‘decoupling’ anticipated in the literature, where populist and restrictive rhetoric in public political debate is not redeemed in policy practice. In fact, we see elements of the opposite effect where civil servants tempered more humanitarian narratives in political debate or the media with caution and concern regarding large-scale migration, implying a ‘cognitive constraint’ in the opposite direction to the expectations set out in our hypothesis. Thus, we can infer that organisational cultures of migration management influence how governments and their civil servants narrate the issues, even if these narratives are not always surfacing in public political debate.

It is important to acknowledge that these unexpected findings have much to do with the case study selection and limitations due to selecting a specific timeframe. In this comparative study, we have focused on the two case studies that were ‘shared’ across our six countries. In both cases, as we have seen, the episodes prompted a media and political response which may be considered to be more liberal and inclusive than other (recent) episodes related to irregular migration and refugee flows. We had anticipated that this would be the case with Ukraine, given the strong narrative around refugees as victims of Russian aggression and the resonance with 20th-century lines of East-West conflict as well as World War II. We were more surprised that this more liberal approach also characterised mainstream media responses to the 2015 crisis, especially in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. However, this could be attributed to the focus on the peak of the crisis in the summer/autumn of 2015, since we anticipate that by early 2016, the humanitarian narratives that dominated the public political debate in most countries had become significantly more restrictive. An alternative approach would have been to focus on the country-specific cases selected by each of the national teams, though we note that this would not have allowed the comparative approach adopted in this paper.

Finally, we want to reflect on the methodology we adopted. This was, to our knowledge, the first attempt to trace how narratives ‘move’ across different spheres. It involved analysing variations in narratives across the spheres of media, politics and policy by focusing on narrative components. We were aware that this would not provide an exhaustive answer to the question of ‘causality’ in the direction of movement: in other words, which spheres are setting narrative agendas and influencing take-up in other spheres. That said, we were able to gain some insights into these dynamics because of the temporal sequence of narratives prevailing in the media and political debate, especially in the case of the 2015 crisis. Moreover, our interviews provided additional insight into the influence of media narratives on political debate and policymaking. Both of these aspects allowed us to infer a fairly strong direction of travel from media to political debate. However, we are reluctant to extrapolate on this effect beyond the

cases studied, as narrative influence may well work in the other direction (from policy to media) in other cases. Indeed, Maneri (2023) argues that the direction of narrative travel is impacted by the circumstances surrounding an event, including the agency of the narrator.

We also want to acknowledge some of the methodological limitations of the analysis. Notably, the Hungarian case highlighted the difficulties of analysing narrative 'travel' across spheres and venues in authoritarian settings, where the government has effectively captured parliamentary and media debate. The Hungarian team found that the narratives in these respective spheres were difficult or impossible to distinguish. Moreover, the Hungarian team faced challenges during the data collection stage, as policy documents on migration issues were not made publicly available within the constraints of an information autocracy. This meant that there were limitations to the comparability of the data, especially with regard to the coordinative sphere. The teams also struggled to secure interviews with officials, due in part to elections but also due to the reticence of civil servants to speak to researchers about such a polarising and politicised policy area.

As noted above, we were also constrained in tracing narratives across different spheres by the absence of narrative components in many of the policy documents we analysed. This absence in some ways is a finding in itself: the absence of observable narratives, as we suggested, implies there is limited pressure to persuade and galvanise support for particular approaches. However, in some of the national settings this also reflected the very technocratic and operational nature of policies on resettlement, which were not preceded by broader legislation or programmatic announcements. Thus, it was difficult to trace the movement of narratives across spheres where narratives were simply not present. For future research, this challenge might suggest the need to select episodes associated with clear policy changes, which would provide opportunities for more systematic narrative analysis.

Finally, our analysis suggests the utility of further research that continues to develop innovative methodologies for tracing narratives. For instance, as mentioned we can envisage as a fruitful next step a follow-up comparative study that explores the extent to which the policy solutions (moral of the story) in dominant narratives mirror actual policy output. 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? Similarly, if a policy solution is impossible, does the narrative prevail, or does it recede of its own accord?

The UK case within the context of Brexit would provide an intriguing case in point, whereby the salience of immigration appeared to significantly decline among the public after the Brexit referendum. However, the 'take back control of immigration' narrative appears to have re-emerged in recent years in relation to 'small boat' arrivals. Meanwhile, the Italian case indicated a cyclical pattern, or 'flip-flopping' between securitarian and humanitarian discourses, as a common feature of migration narratives since the 2015 European 'migration crisis' (Bonelli, Celoria, and Pastore 2023). In this regard, we support Garcés-Mascareñas' and Pastore's (2022) conclusion on the importance of the temporal dimension in explaining and gauging the impact of (migration) narratives in political debate and policymaking and would urge the further development of (methodological) approaches to facilitate this research.

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BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

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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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