

# The impact of narratives on EU policymaking

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## Abstract

This report investigates the main migration narratives circulating on media, political debates, and policy venues within the European Union (EU) over the past decade. It focuses on two significant migration events: the 2015 “refugee crisis” and the 2022 activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for those fleeing Russian aggression against Ukraine. Specifically, the research aims to understand which narratives have shaped in the media, the EU political debate, and policymaking for each of the two cases, and assess to which extent and manner these have circulated across these three domains. To do so, it relies on a qualitative discourse analysis of more than a hundred texts produced by the EU institutions. This report presents the main results of such analysis. First, it provides an overview of the theoretical and methodological framework, and of the reflections that led to the case selection. Then, it offers a detailed analysis of the dominant narratives during the 2015 refugee crisis and the 2022 activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. Finally, it reflects on the circulation of narratives across the three arenas considered for the analysis, by paying attention to the pervasiveness and transformativity of these narratives, and ultimately evaluate their potential implications for policy output.

## Acronyms

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| ALDE     | Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe                     |
| DG-DEVCO | Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development |
| DG-HOME  | Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs                |
| ECR      | European Conservatives and Reformists                             |
| ENF      | Europe of Nations and Freedom                                     |
| EPP      | European People's Party   |
| EU       | European Union  |
| EUR      | Euros   |
| FRONTEX  | European Border and Coast Guard Agency                            |
| GUE      | Confederal Group of the European United Left                      |
| ID       | Identity and Democracy  |
| JHA      | Justice and Home Affairs  |
| MNS      | Migration Narrative Success                                       |
| MS       | Member State  |
| NGL      | Nordic Green Left   |
| NGO      | Non-governmental organisation                                     |
| NPF      | Narrative Policy Framework  |
| S&D      | Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats                  |
| TPD      | Temporary Protection Directive                                    |
| UK       | United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland              |
| UN       | United Nations  |
| UNHCR    | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees                     |
| US       | United States of America  |
| WWII     | Second World War  |

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# 1. Introduction

Migration has been one of the pivotal matters of contention at the European level over the last decade. Interrelated issues like the functioning of the Common European Asylum System, the cooperation with external partners on migration management or the activation of emergency responses to displacement crises taking place in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood have dominated the debate among Member States of the European Union (EU) and its institutions. At the same time, the discourse around migration has assumed heavily politicised tones in many instances, opening the way to fierce **competition among different narratives** about the most suitable European policies to introduce, especially in response to specific developments such as the increase in the number of irregular arrivals at the EU external frontier on the Mediterranean Sea.

Against this background, this report aims to analyse how **narratives on migration** shape and are deployed in the media, the EU political debate and policymaking. To this end, it focuses on mapping the dominant narratives articulated at the EU level around two major migration cases over the last ten years: the debate around the opportunity to introduce a relocation scheme during the so-called “**refugee crisis**” in 2015<sup>1</sup> and the activation of the **Temporary Protection Directive** for those fleeing the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

The objective of this research is thus to investigate how narratives in the EU political and policy debates develop and shape each other and how much they interact with the narratives circulating within the national media debates. By comparing the results of the three levels of analysis (media, political, and policy), the intent of this work is to ascertain the presence or lack of **alignment between the dominant narratives** across the three domains. The ultimate aim is to assess whether and to what extent, in particular, simplistic and emotive migration narratives, which often circulate in the media across Europe, are reiterated by EU political actors in their discourses and whether and how they are processed in EU policymaking venues, with potential implications for policy output.

The report is structured as follows. In the following section the Theoretical and Methodological framework of the research is presented. The third section is dedicated to the illustration of the

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<sup>1</sup> The expression 'refugee crisis' saw extensive use in 2015 within European discussions on migration, employed by media and political figures to refer to the rising migration flows into the continent. Often used interchangeably with phrases like 'migrant crisis' or 'migration crisis', its prevalence peaked notably during the month of September, the period under our analysis. As Goodman, Parker and Naper point out, its use was sparked in particular by the dissemination of poignant photographs depicting the lifeless body of young Alan Kurdi, with this shift in focus to 'refugees' fostering movements of solidarity across Europe (see: “How a photograph of a drowned refugee child turned a migrant crisis into a refugee crisis: A comparative discourse analysis”, in *for(e)dialogue*, 2018, 2(1), 12-28). Conversely, the word 'crisis', first seen in newspapers in April 2015 after multiple shipwrecks in the Mediterranean sea, persisted unchanged throughout the year. Such an emergency-oriented depiction of the situation, often labeled as 'Europe's' refugee crisis, framed the events primarily as a challenge for the European countries receiving migrants rather than for the migrants themselves, thus reinforcing the perception of Europe being besieged, in line with Hage's notion of a continent under siege (see: 'Etat de siege: A dying domesticating colonialism?' in *American Ethnologist*, 2016, 43(1), 38-49). Goodman, Sirriyeh and McMahan note that this narrative prioritized European security over migrant lives (see: “The evolving (re)categorisations of refugees throughout the 'refugee/migrant crisis'”, in *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 2017, 27(2), 105–114). Such dual rhetoric encapsulated in the expression 'refugee crisis' reflected the coexistence of two opposite interpretive frames in narrating the related facts; as Triandafyllidou elucidates, one emphasises humanitarian concerns for those attempting to reach Europe and one leverages Europeans' apprehension of an invasion, with the latter dominating the conversation (see: “A 'refugee crisis' unfolding: 'real' events and their interpretation in media and political debates”, in *Journal of immigrant & refugee studies*, 2018, Vol. 16, No. 1-2, 198-216).

case selection and to the motivations that led to the identification of our primary sources among documents produced by EU institutions. The fourth delves into the trends in public salience and news coverage of migration and asylum between 2011-2022. The fifth section introduces the dominant narratives during the “refugee crisis” in 2015 and discusses the movement of those same narratives among the media, political and policy spheres. The same approach is dedicated in the sixth section to the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive in 2022. Lastly, the concluding remarks propose a tentative comparative perspective on the two cases.

## 2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this work relies on Jones & McBeth’s (2010) **Narrative Policy Framework (NPF)** and Schmidt’s (2008) conceptualisation of the communicative and coordinative spheres of policymaking, as further elaborated in Boswell and Smellie (2023): the former refers to political communication in the public domain (political sphere), and the latter to discourse among policy actors (policy sphere). The **political sphere**, according to the authors, is the arena where political actors engage the public about the necessity and appropriateness of policies. Conversely, the **policy sphere** is defined as the one where policy actors engage one another about what policy to adopt. Each sphere, Schmidt argues, develops its own discursive process in the way in which ideas are conveyed, i.e., a *communicative discourse* in the political sphere and a *coordinative discourse* in the policy sphere. By extension and building on the work of Boswell and Smellie (2023), this work refers interchangeably to a communicative / political sphere and a coordinative / policy sphere. The main distinction between the two discursive spheres is constituted by the audience towards which speeches or acts are directed: the larger public for the former and other policymakers for the latter. Within this context, it is possible to delve deeper into the analysis of discourse by focusing on the narratives conveyed.

Then, Jones and McBeth’s (2010) work on **policy narratives** has been integrated to complete the framework. They define four dimensions of policy narratives, i.e., *setting*, *characters*, *plot* and *moral of the story*:

- the *characters* may be the victims who are harmed, the villains who perpetuate the harm, and the heroes who bring promise of alleviating the harm;
- the *plot* situates the characters relative to the setting and each other within space and across time;
- the *moral of the story* is a policy solution or a call to action;
- the *setting* refers to contextual factors such as geography, laws, evidence and other policy consequential factors not captured in one of the other elements.

Specific attention in the analysis has been dedicated to tracing how characters are defined, also in terms of *gender*, *nationality*, and *class*. These three dimensions have been increasingly considered together in the literature that investigates patterns of dominance and subordination in all dimensions of social life, including discourse (Jackson 2015, Zvogbo and Loken 2020). Since **migration narratives are central in the Othering process** that constructs and



reproduces racist, gender-biased and class-biased representations, it is crucial to pay attention to them when looking at how characters (and especially migrants) are framed. Therefore, the analysis looks also at whether (and how) the different narratives frame the migrants or asylum seekers as victims, heroes, or villains also based on their gender, nationality, and social class, and not only based on the reasons for migrating (e.g., war or economic difficulties).

A distinction between narratives incorporated in our work is also based on the *style* that they adopt. As introduced by Boswell (2011) and further developed in Boswell & Smellie (2023), the style varies across different domains and spheres: the media as well as the political debate (*communicative* sphere) tend to rely on **lay narratives** (i.e., simplistic, intuitive and often highly emotive stories, aimed at garnering public support), while policy-making venues (*coordinative* sphere) usually require **technocratic narratives** (i.e., more sober, factual, and detailed information).

A further integration in our framework was provided by the work of Stone (2012) on the concept of *plot* as an essential element of policy narrative construction. The author distinguishes among different kinds of storylines that are likely to emerge when emphasising policy problems: **stories of power** and **stories of change**. Stories of power are further differentiated into *stories of control* or *helplessness*, while stories of change are mostly composed of *stories of decline* or *rising/progress*. According to the author, stories of decline are particularly used by political actors in tandem with stories of control to show how things are going wrong, but that there is hope for improvement mostly through actions taken and promises made by the *narrator* of the story. This conceptualisation has proven particularly useful in order to better grasp the politicised nature of several narratives about migration in the EU, especially those framing the increasing number of irregular arrivals mainly as a problem – if not a threat to security – to resolve.

In terms of *setting*, the main contextual factor to be considered is the distinction between the levels of analysis, i.e., a national versus a European level. This research is explicitly focused on narratives produced at the EU level of analysis, examining the voices expressed by national media and European actors and institutions on events that had repercussions on European policymaking. More specifically, the setting is here interpreted as including the *who*, *where*, and *when* of discursive production. The **who** includes the type of narrator, i.e., the individual person, media outlet, or institution that produced the document and adopted specific narratives within it, including their political orientation, when applicable. The **where** includes references to the platform in which the document was released (e.g., website, social media, or the physical venue of a speech), as well as the geographical contexts to which its content is referred, while the **when** refers to the historical moment in which the text was produced, taking into account the contextual events that may have directly or indirectly influenced the discourse. By providing the context in which each narrative is built, the geographical and institutional setting has the capacity to affect all the other dimensions of policy narratives production.

Lastly, Garcés-Masareñas and Pastore's (2022) work on **Migration Narrative Success (MNS)** has been incorporated to understand and conceptualise the movement of narratives across the media, political, and policy spheres. According to the authors, narrative success can be analysed by looking at what types of narratives are most likely to be produced and adopted in the different spheres (*pervasiveness*) and how the narratives inform and impact policymaking (*transformativity*).

These considerations formed the departing point for the analysis of the communicative and coordinative discourses at the EU level. However, the analysis also kept an **inductive approach** in looking for other ways in which narratives are composed, remaining open to introducing new narratives specific to a particular case study.

Drawing on this methodological framework, the research looks at three different spheres: **the media, the political sphere, and the policy sphere**. Looking at an autonomous EU media sphere poses a challenge due to the peculiarities of EU-wide media outlets and their instrumental use by EU politicians, along with the lack of a European public per se. For this reason, the departing points for the discourse analysis of media were the results of the national level media analyses – performed by national research teams - based on Jones and McBeth's narrative components, in terms of identification of the predominant narratives.

A triangulation of methods and data was then adopted to increase the reliability of the results of the research into the political and policymaking spheres. A **qualitative discourse analysis** of key documents was conducted through the application of a codebook created deductively (based primarily on Jones & McBeth's four narrative components) but enriched inductively with the aim of charting alignments/divergences between the narratives across the different spheres. For this part of the research, the Software for Qualitative Data Analysis Atlas.ti was used to facilitate the coding and visualise the results of a large number of documents. In addition, nine **semi-structured qualitative interviews** with EU policy officials – conducted in September 2023 – have complemented the data collected to better understand how dominant narratives about salient migration events traverse spheres and shape political discourse and policy-making at the European level.

In order to investigate whether and how these narratives are processed in the political and policy debates, a comparative analysis of data across the different spheres has been conducted to identify similarities or differences and establish, without inferring causality, the presence or lack of alignments of dominant narratives. Particular attention has been devoted to the responses of politicians and policy-makers to the circulation of competing narratives, taking into account the peculiarities of each case study. Because there are different ways in which policy actors may respond to narratives, we have adopted a four-dimensional typology – **embracing, adapting, rejecting, and ignoring** – which helps identify how narratives are adapted, adopted, or ignored as they move into different spheres<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. The EU political and policy spheres: case and texts selection

We have investigated two major events focused on "refugee arrivals", which has been identified as one of the main journalistic sub-genres (Maneri 2023) particularly relevant for the EU: 1) **the 2015 EU relocation programme**, which was discussed at the EU level as a

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed exploration of such processes, see: Boswell, C., Smellie, S. (2023). Migration narratives in political debate and policy-making. Conceptualising and Operationalising Work Packages 7 and 8. *BRIDGES Working Paper 19*, Horizon 2020, available at <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/migration-narratives-in-political-debate-and-policy-making/>.

response to the refugee crisis along the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes and the Balkan routes; and 2) Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, resulting in the first-ever **activation of the 2001 Temporary Protection Directive** to enable orderly management of and ensure immediate and temporary protection to Ukrainians fleeing the country.

Both focusing events were highly debated both at the Member States and EU levels and led to the proposal of **EU policy initiatives**: the 2015 relocation scheme and the activation in 2022 of the EU Temporary Protection Directive. Moreover, both events have allowed us to observe how migration narratives have evolved in the EU political and policymaking spheres over the past ten years.

In order to better understand the circulation of narratives at the EU level, the research draws on an analysis of dominant narratives in **media outlets at the national level** in five Member States (France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Hungary) and the United Kingdom. As mentioned above, a comprehensive analysis of the media sphere at the EU level has proved to be challenging due to the particular configuration of outlets with a European reach. Preliminary research has shown that major EU-wide media outlets (e.g., Politico Europe, EUObserver, Euractiv) mainly report the voices and views of stakeholders, without contributing to shaping any narrative. This is confirmed by data emerging from the interviews with EU officials, who in most cases referred to **the national debates as potentially more influential** vis-à-vis relevant discussions within the European political and policymaking spaces. As a DG-HOME official acknowledged during the interview, “the Commission endeavours to be closer to the national debates taking place in individual member countries”<sup>3</sup>, deeming them more relevant. Our work has therefore built on media analysis carried out by research teams at the national level, focusing on the dominant narratives that emerged in relation to the two cases analysed within the respective media spheres, in newspapers of different political orientations (right, centre, left), with particular attention to those that are most relevant to the European dimension.

The analysis of competing narratives at the EU level focused then on the political and policy sphere. Among the **documents** analysed through coding, the following categories have been identified for each of the two spheres in relation to the two focusing events.

Political sphere:

1. motions for parliamentary resolutions proposed by parliamentary groups and members;
2. press releases, speeches and statements of the European Commission;
3. speeches, statements and remarks of the European Council;
4. press releases of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview conducted by researchers from VUB-Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 19 September 2023.

Policy sphere:

1. proposals, communications, recommendations and action plans of the European Commission;
2. conclusions, declarations and statements (of informal meetings) of the European Council;
3. conclusions and decisions of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Councils;
4. legislative resolutions of the European Parliament.

Clearly distinguishing the spheres to which the cited sources belong has proved particularly complex, given the **hybrid nature of the EU decision-making** structure and bodies, which place it somewhere between an intergovernmental and a federal model, as well as the sharing of competences with its Member States in the field of border management and asylum policies.

Therefore, while the selected documents may have both a communicative and coordinative function, their predominant purpose and intended audience determined their categorisation: disseminating information to the wider public or aligning policies among key decision-makers. With regard to the political sphere (*communicative discourse*), sources that are primarily addressed to **European citizens** or EU-wide and national media outlets were included, e.g., press releases, as well as speeches, remarks and statements by institutional representatives in their personal capacity. Parliamentary motions were also included in the political sphere. For the policy sphere (*coordinative discourse*), we have included texts and acts whose main purpose is to propose, inform, guide, and **implement European policies**, often in 'coordination' with the other institutions to which most of them are addressed.

As can be seen from the lists above, the selection has focused on the main institutions of the EU: European Council, Council of the EU, European Commission and European Parliament. We have not taken into account statements and documents issued by the consultative institutions due to their relatively reduced impact on the political and policy-making spheres (Hönnige and Panke, 2013).

Key texts for both spheres were identified by employing specific keyword search filters to assess their relevance to the respective case study topics. The time span considered was approximately one month for both cases: **September 2015 and March 2022**. Both periods were identified as particularly meaningful for the consideration of salient elements that emerged in the political and policy debates in relation to the two cases. Specifically, the time limits set for the analysis include:

- the German-French proposal on September 4 on a mandatory relocation scheme to the meeting of heads of State and government on September 24 setting the agenda on externalisation, for 2015;
- the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February to the publication of the Commission's 10-point action plan on 28 March, for 2022.

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We extended the selection to an additional week, until 6 October 2015 (for case 1) and until 6 April 2022 (for case 2), to ensure that key relevant documents published soon after were also included. Based on the timeframe and the text selection process, a total number of one hundred eight documents were retrieved, fifty-four for each case.

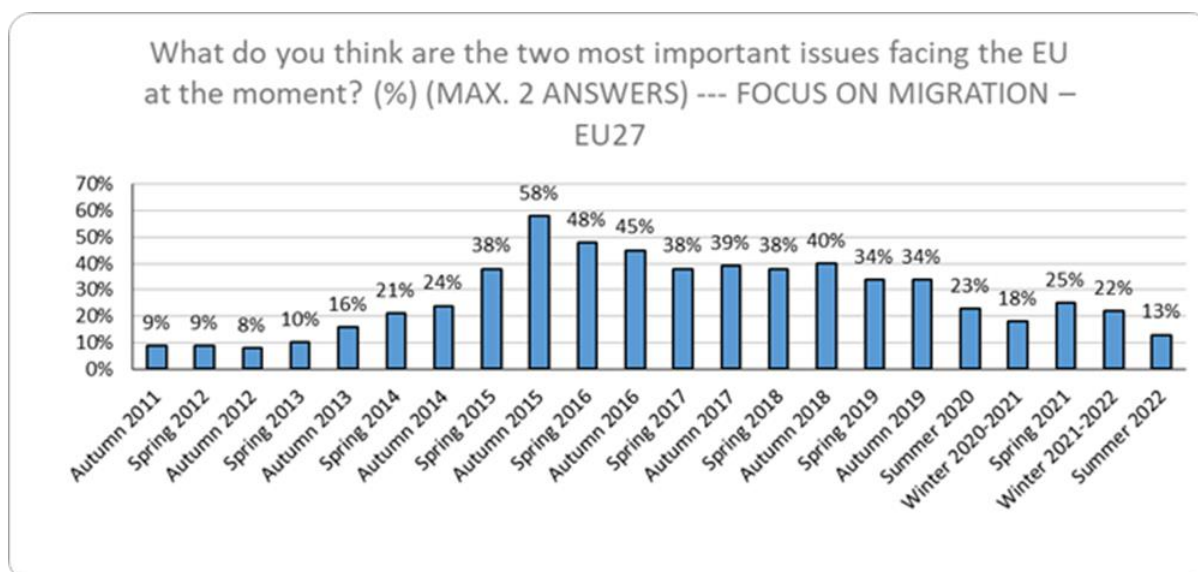
## 4. Saliency and news coverage of migration and asylum in the EU

The **saliency of migration in public opinion** in the 27 Member States of the EU has not been constant between 2011 and 2022. This period has witnessed an intensification of public attention on migratory issues in Europe, due to, among other elements, the increase of irregular flows through the Mediterranean Sea and the lengthy attempts to reform European policies on migration and asylum. At the same time, the saliency of asylum and migration has peaked at specific moments, usually associated with a widespread perception of emergency. The analysis of such patterns has been instrumental in the choice of the case studies for this report.

The Standard Eurobarometer opinion polls illustrate these trends in EU-wide public saliency of migration. The opinions around the relevance of migratory issues in Europe have been tracked by asking respondents to indicate **the two most important issues facing the EU** at that moment. These polls are then a suitable tool to understand when the European public has invested particular attention to a specific topic, in this case, migration.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the public saliency of migration **peaked in the Autumn of 2015**, when 58% of respondents indicated that migratory and asylum issues were one of the two most pressing priorities that needed to be tackled by the EU. Not coincidentally, this enhanced focus on migration coincided with heated debates at the European level during the so-called “refugee crisis”. In particular, during the second half of 2015 EU Member States were engaging in a prolonged and politically-sensitive negotiation around the introduction of a mandatory relocation scheme for asylum-seekers, while the number of refugees and migrants reaching the EU external frontier was peaking at its highest level.

**FIGURE 1: Salience of migration in the European Union (2011-2022)**



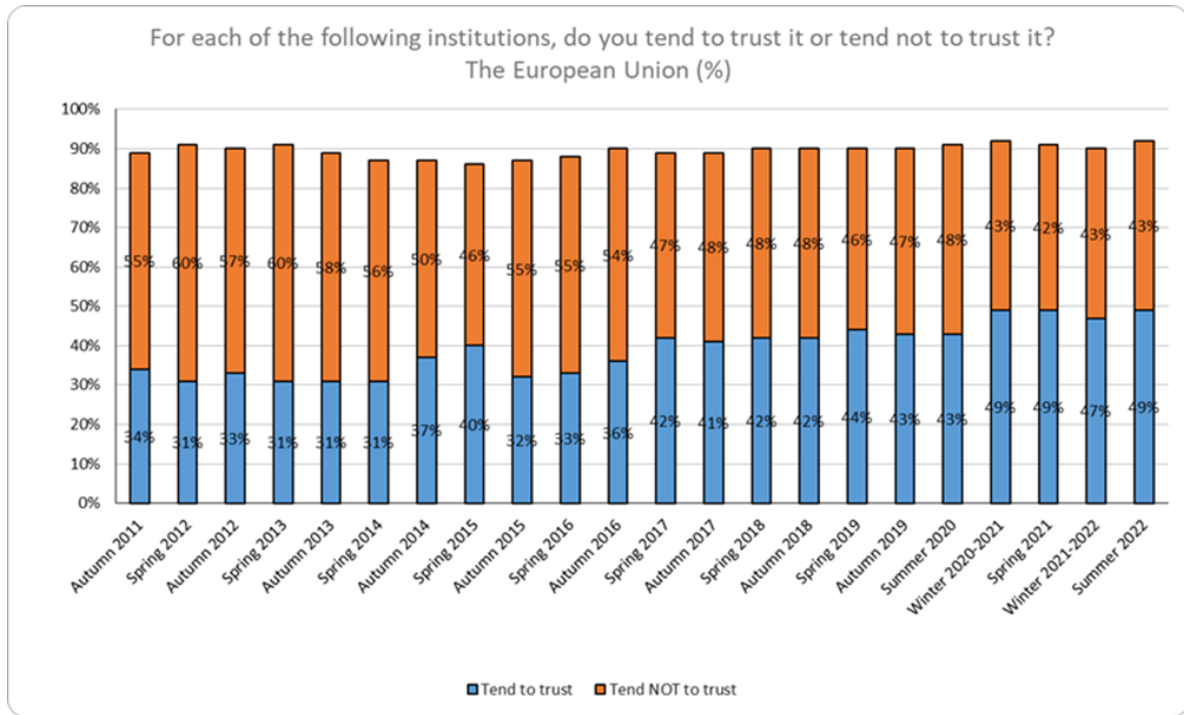
Source: Data extracted from the standard bi-annual Eurobarometer survey, issues 76-97.

While opinion polls conducted by Eurobarometer confirm how public salience of migration tends to correspond to **moments of perceived emergency** for the EU, it also shows that an increasing trend in the attention to these matters was already consolidating in the years before. Starting from 9% in Autumn 2011 – the lowest point reached in these surveys – the salience of asylum and migration had been growing over the years, with a significant intensification over 2015 (from 24% in Autumn 2014 to 58% twelve months later).

After the peak of the refugee crisis, public salience in the EU has remained higher in comparison to previous years and then gradually descended to 18% during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021. However, between 2016 and 2019, public attention on migration **remained quite significant (over 30% in each survey)**, despite a decisive decrease in the number of irregular arrivals in Europe, first on the Eastern Mediterranean Route towards Greece and then, after the summer of 2017, also on the Central Mediterranean Route towards Malta and Italy. Against this background, we have thus selected the refugee crisis also to better understand the circulation of competing narratives in the EU institutions at a time of heightened public attention.

Public salience of migration has also been accompanied by the **wavering trust of the public in the EU**. As illustrated by Figure 2, public trust in the EU has been gaining ground again since 2019, following several years when it had remained stable at around or below 40%, even if the public salience of migration was declining, as illustrated above. Notably, however, during the autumn of 2015 (one of the periods covered by our analysis), a decrease in trust to 32% was observed, when migration's salience peaked at 58%. Obviously, migration is not the only factor determining feelings of trust in the EU. However, the role of narratives shaping European policy output on such a sensitive topic appears even more important due to this trend in public trust, especially looking at the case for the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive in 2022, which took place at a time when the European public was looking to the EU institutions with deeper confidence than in the past.

**FIGURE 2: Trust in the European Union (2011-2022)**

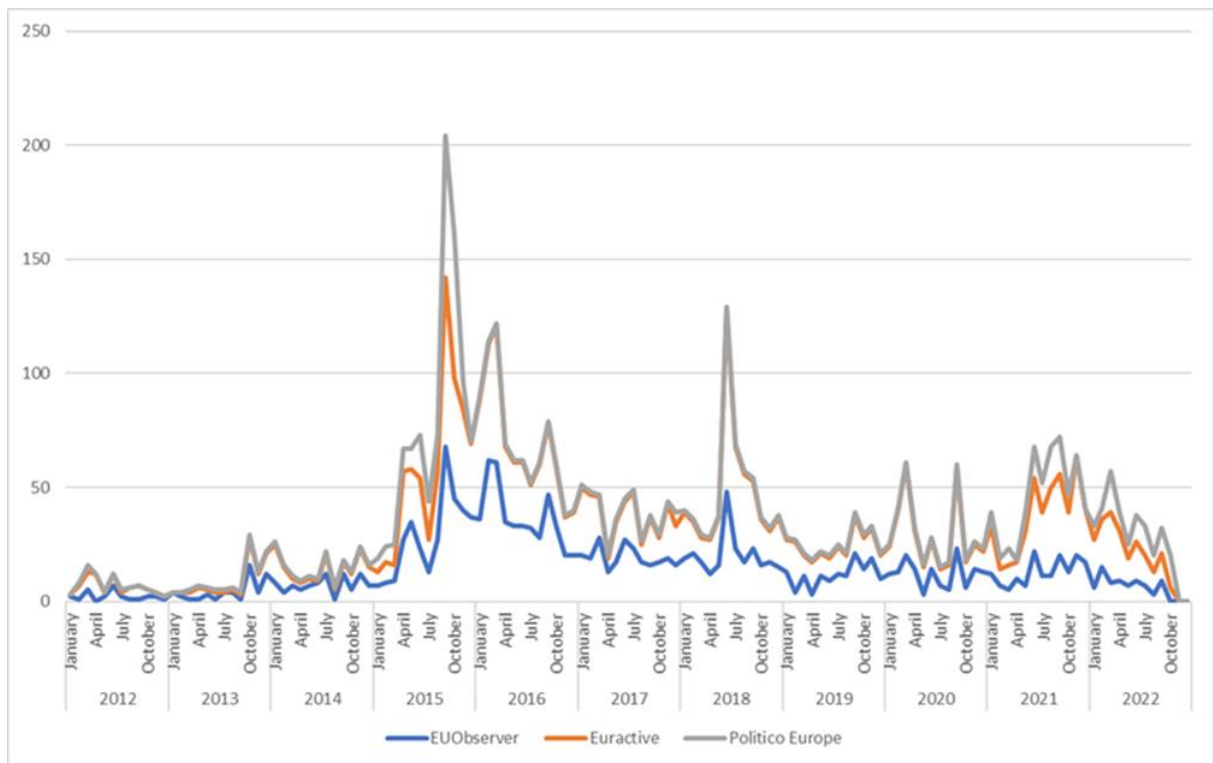


Source: Data extracted from the standard bi-annual Eurobarometer survey, issues 76-97.

Trends in the salience of migration and asylum are only partially reflected by **the news coverage in EU-wide media outlets** over the same period. Specifically, our investigation focused on the monthly count of articles from three relevant media outlets – Euractiv, EUObserver and Politico Europe – aimed at engaging a European audience. This scrutiny encompassed migratory issues from 2012 to 2022. While the circulation of these outlets is still limited and debates on migration have been mainly shaped by national media (see section 3), looking into their news coverage can provide some insights on how policy-makers in the EU – and especially in Brussels – have been exposed to this topic.

Figure 3 shows how news coverage in these three media decisively **peaked in the second half of 2015**. In particular, September 2015 saw 204 articles dedicated to migration and asylum, the highest level ever, while EU policy-makers were frantically negotiating a relocation scheme. The number of articles first descended, then plummeted over the following months: from 161 in October to 40 in December 2016, after the EU-Turkey Statement had been agreed in March 2016.

**FIGURE 3: News coverage of migration and asylum in EU-wide media (2012-2022)**



Source: EuObserver, Euractive and Politico Europe, via authors' elaboration

However, while public salience remained quite stable over the following years, news coverage on migration **bounced back significantly in 2018**, especially after the new Italian government led by Giuseppe Conte took office in June 2018 and started to introduce highly restrictive policies against immigration, hindering search-and-rescue activities in the Mediterranean Sea carried out by NGOs. In June 2018, data collected from Euractiv, EuObserver and Politico Europe show that they covered the issue with 129 articles.

Interestingly, comparable levels of news coverage were not reached in 2022 while the displacement of people from Ukraine was unfolding. On the contrary, the number of articles explicitly addressing migratory issues actually **decreased** over this period. This trend does not imply that the displacement of millions of Ukrainian refugees was not extensively covered by media at the European level. However, it was not framed and addressed as a matter strictly related to migration, as also confirmed by our analysis of dominant narratives circulating in the national media and EU institutions at that time (see section 5).



## 5. Narratives in Political and Policy spheres: the EU relocation scheme (2015)

### 5.1 Background and setting of the case study

Between 2014 and 2015, a surge in migration, particularly from Syria, generated increasing pressure along the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes, prompting debate on **the need for an intra-EU relocation scheme**, which gained momentum after the launch of the European Agenda on Migration in May 2015. On 25 August 2015, Germany suspended the Dublin Regulation for Syrians, initiating an 'open door policy' that led to more than 890,000 asylum seekers entering the country during that year alone.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, irregular arrivals increased in Italy and Malta along the Central Mediterranean route. Fearing for European integration, Germany and France advocated for a European solution, proposing a mandatory relocation scheme on 4 September, which was opposed by the members of the Visegrad Group, raising national sovereignty concerns.

On 9 September, the **European Commission** proposed emergency relocation for 120,000 asylum-seekers through a mandatory scheme. The proposal soon faced political feasibility challenges due to divergent views among Member States. On 14 September, **the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA)** Council adopted a temporary relocation decision for 40,000 individuals from Italy and Greece, rejecting the mandatory mechanism. The Council urged Greece and Italy to enhance reception capacity through hotspots, expanding the temporary mechanism to 120,000 asylum-seekers on 22 September. This was framed as a temporary derogation from the Dublin Regulation, relocating 15,600 from Italy, 50,400 from Greece, and an additional 54,000 in a second phase by September 2016, with the option confirmed for Member States to opt-out in case of sudden inflows. Concurrently, in an effort to show solidarity with third countries facing similar challenges, the Commission put forth a proposal for an EU resettlement scheme of 20,000 asylum seekers to be safely transferred to the EU and distributed among its Member States.

Faced with internal deadlock, EU leaders recognised the **externalisation of migration policies** as a more viable solution. In an informal meeting on 23 September, heads of State and governments outlined their priorities, including cooperation with Turkey and countries of transit in the Western Balkans, *de facto* acknowledging the impracticality of an internal mandatory relocation scheme and paving the way for policy developments with external partners. In November 2015, the EU Emergency for Africa Trust Fund was launched to address root causes of migration, coinciding with enhanced collaboration with the Western Balkans on migration management. On 29 November the Joint Action Plan with Turkey was activated, starting to delegate to Ankara the management of Syrian refugees stranded in its territory and intensifying cooperation to curb irregular entries from Turkey into Greece.

Given this context, our investigation seeks to examine the prevailing narratives within the media landscape of EU member states, tracing the evolution of the debate around the relocation and resettlement schemes from the German-French proposal on 4 September to the informal meeting of heads of States and governments on 23 September 2015. The ultimate

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<sup>4</sup> Bundesministerium des Inneren [BMI] (2016): 890.000 Asylsuchende im Jahr 2015. Press release from 30.9.2016, Berlin: BMI.

goal is to assess the salience of these narratives within the communicative and coordinative spheres at the EU level: this entails examining whether, to what extent, and in what manner such narratives have surfaced and **impacted EU policy discourse** and decision-making processes.

The documents analysed for this case were released by the EU institutions **between 1 September 2015 and 6 October 2015**, a timeframe selected for its critical relevance to our research. As outlined above, this period coincided with a phase in which the refugee crisis and the proposed relocation and resettlement scheme, central to the political and media debate of Member States, also took centre stage in EU institutional discussions and deliberations. The selection of the historical timeframe and of the producers of the documents (i.e., the EU institutions) also delimitates the contextual *setting* in which narratives have emerged. A further contextual distinction is visible based on the nature of the narrating voice (especially between an individual or collegial narrator), and on the political orientation of the narrator (especially in the media and the political arenas),

## 5.2 The media arena at the national levels

As previously highlighted, our analysis delves into the development of narratives around the refugee crisis and the proposed relocation and resettlement scheme within and across three different arenas: media, political debate, and policy-making. The examination started within the media domain, where prevalent narratives were identified at national levels, serving as a starting point for scrutinising the EU's political (communicative) and policy (coordinative) domains, with the aim of discerning potential convergences and divergences.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, narratives circulating in 2015 are grouped into three macro-areas, according to the *moral of the story*, i.e. the proposed policy solution: narratives against an EU policy solution; narratives in favour of an EU policy solution; cross-cutting narratives not aligned with either of the previous two categories. The analysis highlights a vivid debate in 2015 regarding the prospect of implementing a relocation scheme or alternative policy measures, which is reflected by the emergence of multiple competing narratives. This variety is only partially mirrored in the other case study examined in this report (see Section 6 for media narratives on the displacement crisis in Ukraine).

Two main narratives opposing a common European response to the refugee crisis were identified in national media. One is **Relocation and resettlement as a pull factor**, a narrative based on the assumption that the establishment of a European relocation and resettlement scheme works as an incentive for migration. It therefore suggests that governments should not support such a scheme as it may attract more migrants and asylum seekers to Europe. It is mainly shared by right-wing and populist newspapers in the UK and Italy and mostly employs a 'lay' narrative style.<sup>5</sup> According to this narrative, the villains are mainly identified as the EU,

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<sup>5</sup> As previously mentioned, lay narratives, similarly to populist styles of communication, prioritize simplicity, urgency, and may lack robust evidence, proposing straightforward solutions to social issues. On the other hand, technocratic narratives demand higher evidence standards and rely on detailed, factual information. Although these styles might overlap in some contexts, lay narratives typically dominate public communication, while technocratic ones prevail in policy coordination. For a conceptualization of narrative styles, see: Boswell, C., Smellie, S. (2023). Migration narratives in political debate and policy-making. Conceptualising and Operationalising Work Packages 7 and 8. BRIDGES Working Paper 19, *Horizon 2020*, available at <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/migration-narratives-in-political-debate-and-policy-making/>

the national left-wing parties, and the ‘bogus’ refugees. The heroes are the political actors opposing the establishment of the relocation and resettlement scheme, and the victims are the EU Member States that are “invaded” by migrants.

A second narrative, named **Securing borders**, argues that migration and border management are (or should be) national matters. According to this narrative, largely supported by right-wing and populist newspapers, every country has the right and duty to defend its borders and its identity. Consequently, the EU should not decide for the Member States on border issues and the Schengen treaty should be suspended or revised. The villains are mainly identified in the EU, especially the European Commission as an unelected technocratic body, and Germany at the time of the proposal. The heroes and the victims are those Member States resisting the EU “mafia”, such as the UK, Hungary, and Italy

A variation of this narrative shifts the focus from national borders to the external borders of the EU, calling for a European solution. In this variant, the villains are the Member States who oppose a greater role for the EU in managing the protection of the external borders, as well as the EU itself for its lack of commitment; the first-arrival Member States are the victims and/or the heroes, having to manage the border pressure on their own; the perception of the EU is reversed (becoming the hero) when it commits to the first-arrival Member States. The moral here is reversed, making the narrative in favour of an EU solution, calling for a greater role for the EU in securing external borders by strengthening FRONTEX or other agencies. This variant may seem to overlap with the following narrative (*Security as a moral duty*); however, it focuses on EU borders and the risk of invasion rather than on the imperative of saving and hosting asylum seekers.

Three main narratives have emerged from the media analysis, which promote joint EU policy solutions. A first narrative, named **Solidarity as a moral duty**, is based on the assumption that Europeans share moral values that compel the EU and its Member States to save and receive refugees and migrants. It often recalls the past emigration history from the European countries that are now mainly migrant destinations. This narrative is employed both by right-wing and left-wing newspapers in many of the countries under analysis, but with slight differences in interpretations, and especially in identifying the “limits” of the moral duty. The villains are mainly the EU Member States that refuse to support an EU agreement. Sometimes, in the most leftist newspapers, the villain is also the EU, which acted “too little too late”. The heroes are the EU and the Member States that share the moral duty, and those actors behind the EU proposals. The victims are the migrants who tragically drown, like the young Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian child found lifeless on a Turkish shore on 2 September 2015. In the progressive newspapers, migrants and asylum seekers/refugees tend to be represented in the same way. Particularly in the UK, France, and Italy, these news outlets adopt a lay style in depicting the tragedy of migration and the subsequent need to help the migrants/refugees. The progressive and centrist newspapers in Italy insist on a more technocratic description of the barriers and borders reintroduced between Member States and the need to increase intra-EU solidarity.

A second narrative with a pro-EU moral, identified as **Divisions among Member States**, emphasises the lack of responsibility sharing among Member States as the main challenge hampering a European solution to the refugee crisis. It insists that the burden of migratory pressure should be shared among EU Member States and that there must be a mandatory EU

relocation and resettlement programme based on fair and balanced rules. While very similar to the previous narrative, this one is mostly focused on the divisions between Member States as the problem and on how a few Member States are left alone rather than on the moral dimension of solidarity. The villains are the Member States that act selfishly. These are mostly associated with the Visegrad group, especially Hungary, and, in Italian newspapers, also with the UK, Denmark and Germany. The heroes are the EU institutions and actors supporting a shared solution. The victims are the EU Member States most affected by the arrivals, namely Greece and Italy, who are left with all the burden. This narrative is supported by conservative and populist newspapers, mainly in Italy, which argue that all the pressure is on a few Member States (including Italy) and that the other Member States must take their share of the responsibility.

In a variant of this narrative, circulated mostly by leftist French newspapers, the roles change. Notably, the first-arrival Member States are referred to as villains. They are blamed for not complying with the Dublin Regulation, allowing asylum seekers to move across borders to other Member States. In this reversed scenario, France and Hungary, receiving migrants from Italy and Greece, are cast in the role of victims.

***Giving voice to asylum seekers*** is a narrative that, among those supporting an EU policy response, focuses on giving asylum seekers a voice, treating them as agents and, most importantly, as human beings no matter their origin. It focuses on the hard journeys they face, their living conditions and persecutions in the countries of origin and transit, and the way in which they are treated at EU hotspots. According to this narrative, asylum seekers should be welcomed and hosted in a dignified way. The moral dimension is similar to the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative. However, here the focus is on the asylum seekers' agency and on the conditions in which they are hosted, and space is given to their voices and individual stories. As far as character roles are concerned, on the one hand, anti-migration governments, particularly those committed to erecting walls and fences, and national and EU institutions and officials associated with the creation and management of hotspots and 'detention camps' are identified as the villains. On the other, the heroes are the NGOs, progressive parties, and countries offering a decent reception to asylum seekers, who assume the dual role of heroes and victims.

Finally, two main narratives have been identified in the media analysis with no clear alignment with either of the two previous categories: ***Hierarchy of asylum-seekers*** and ***Externalisation***.

The first narrative refers to asylum-seekers as not all worthy of acceptance by the EU. As it suggests, among those seeking asylum, some are truly fleeing war and are therefore considered legally refugees worthy of acceptance; others are referred to as 'bogus' refugees and are described as 'criminals', 'human traffickers', 'terrorists' or simply 'economic migrants'. Mostly shared both by centrist and right-wing/populist newspapers, this narrative is used in support of stricter rules at the EU level, i.e., a greater EU role in establishing common rules, including a relocation and resettlement scheme and a return policy, and the need for a shared application of these rules. The villains are the 'bogus' refugees, the smugglers, and the human traffickers; the Member States of first arrival and their border officials could also be considered villains for not enforcing EU rules. The heroes are the EU officials or Member States who call for stricter rules. The victims are the 'genuine' refugees.

A variant of this narrative has a reversed moral, which in this case turns against the EU's relocation and resettlement scheme, associating it with the risk of 'pull factor'. This variation is based on the assumption that a welcoming EU would also encourage the arrival of bogus refugees, i.e. economic migrants and criminals. Similarly to the *Relocation and resettlement as a pull factor* narrative, it therefore suggests that the EU scheme should not be supported even for deserving migrants. The style can be lay or technocratic, depending on the moral of the story. The technocratic style is often used to describe the shortcomings of the registration process in the hotspots of the Member State of first arrival, pointing to a 'faulty implementation of EU rules'.

The **Externalisation** narrative refers to the refugee crisis as something that is caused and needs to be solved outside the EU's borders, focusing on the need to address its root causes in the migrants' countries of origin, including the conflicts that force people to leave (such as in Syria), or to support safe transit countries (such as Turkey) in managing refugees within their territories. Furthermore, it underscores the necessity to identify a list of safe third countries to which asylum seekers and migrants can be returned without risking their lives. With reference to the war in Syria, the villains are the EU and non-EU countries that do not work for a solution to the war, such as the US, the UK, Australia, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. The victims are the asylum seekers and migrants, while the heroes are those countries, inside and outside the EU, and other actors who do everything to end the war. In this narrative, the EU does not play a prominent role. When focused on safe third countries (mainly Turkey), this narrative varies in the way characters are assigned roles. The villains are the Member States that do not act in line with the agreements established with such countries, e.g. Greece. The heroes are the EU institutions that negotiate such agreements as workable solutions. The victims are the asylum seekers as well as the Member States that risk collapsing under the weight of arrivals.

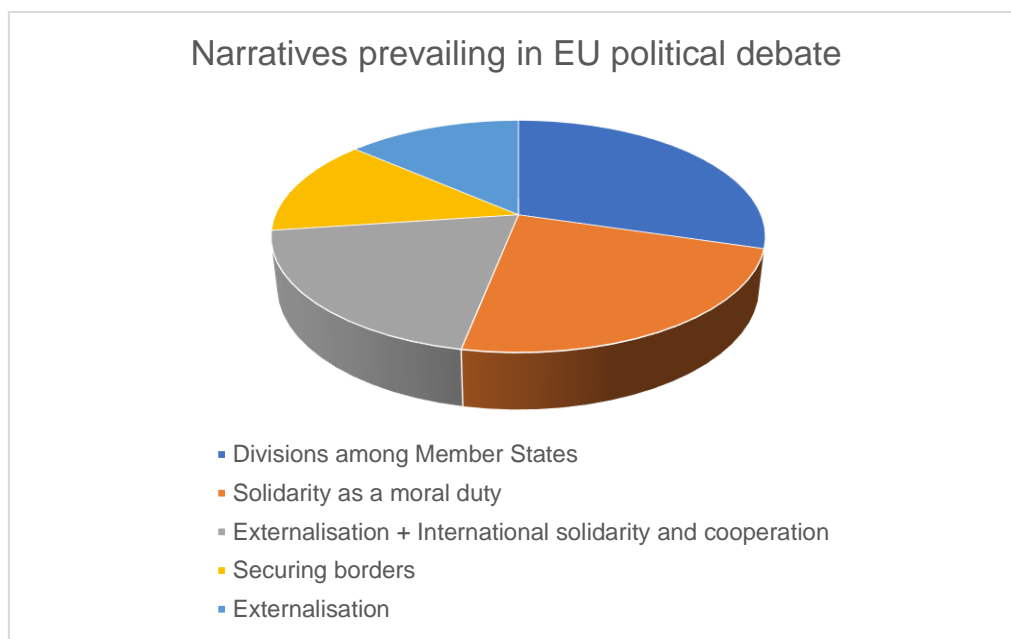
### 5.3 Narratives in EU political debate (communicative sphere)

As previously clarified, the communicative sphere encompasses discussions occurring at the political level within and between EU institutions and representatives. In the specific context of the 2015 case study, the focus is on the refugee crisis and proposed solutions to address it, notably the relocation and resettlement schemes for asylum-seekers. 43 documents were analysed to identify dominant narratives in this sphere; these included 18 parliamentary motions for a resolution, 14 press releases, speeches, and statements from the Commission, 10 speeches, statements, and remarks from the European Council, 1 press release from the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council.<sup>6</sup> Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the most frequently recurring narratives:

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<sup>6</sup> The comprehensive list of documents analysed from the communicative sphere is available in Appendix 3.

**FIGURE 4: Narratives prevailing in EU political debate (2015)**



Source: author's elaboration.

The narrative ***Divisions among Member States***, as highlighted earlier, refers to the need for responsibility sharing among EU Member States and holds a slight predominance in this sphere. Considering that the main EU-level response to the 2015 refugee crisis focused on proposing a relocation and resettlement scheme, it is unsurprising that internal divisions were identified as the main challenge hindering the adoption of a common solution. Discussions on the feasibility of asylum-seekers' distribution therefore prevailed within European political debate.

However, this prevalence is not straightforward: other narratives recur significantly, too. This diversity can be explained by the fact that the EU's response to the crisis was often framed as 'comprehensive,' addressing it from various perspectives, which are reflected in the plurality of narratives that emerged in this sphere. Simultaneously, it mirrors the variety of narratives that emerged in national newspapers in relation to migration in Europe in 2015, reflecting different political ideologies, moral considerations and perceptions of responsibility on the issue. This supports the hypothesis proposed by Boswell & Smellie (2023), which suggests that increased political salience of migration issues leads to the emergence of a diverse array of narratives (often lay in style), with which political figures may feel compelled to engage, by either embracing or adapting them in their communication.

Closely following the narrative of *Divisions among Member States* is the ***Solidarity as a moral duty*** one, which, as discussed earlier, stresses the imperative of rescuing and hosting asylum seekers. It prominently features in this sphere. Securitarian tones are recurrent, too<sup>7</sup>: these are

<sup>7</sup> The term "securitarian tone" applied here relates to the concept of "securitization" in political discourse. Developed by the Copenhagen School of Critical Security Studies, this concept denotes the process of social construction of a given issue through securitarian speech acts. Specifically, it refers to resorting to a specific political frame – the "security prism" – by politicians and security officials, who depict regular political matters as security threats aiming to leverage collective fears in order to reinforce their authority. See: Campesi, G. (2011). The Arab Spring and the

explicitly conveyed by the **Securing borders** narrative and implicitly evoked in the **Externalisation** one: the support to origin and transit countries to curb migratory flows to Europe and address the root causes of migration is indeed framed as a critical strategy for securing both EU borders and the lives of refugees. Notably, a new narrative has surfaced within this sphere: **International solidarity and cooperation**. It can be seen as an adaptation of *Externalisation*, with which it shares the moral of the story, calling for enhanced collaboration with external partners. However, it diverges by employing a less securitarian tone and placing a greater emphasis on solidarity. The two narratives together represent the third most recurrent one in this sphere. On a final note, the coexistence of security-oriented and solidaristic narratives confirms the dynamic interplay of alarmist and pietist tones in representing migration, as it is documented in literature, including in EU politics and policy debates.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 offers insights into how the above narratives intersect with the other variables considered in the analysis, namely the characters' roles and nationality, the moral of the story, the plot, the style, and the narrator.

**TABLE 1: Narrative components – political debate (2015)**

| MACRO-NARRATIVE   | CHARACTER ROLE |                             |         | CHARACTER NATIONALITY         | MORAL OF THE STORY                 | PLOT             | STYLE              | NARRATOR                         |
|---|----------------|-----------------------------|---------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
|   | Hero           | Victim                      | Villain |                               |                                    |                  |                    |                                  |
| <b>Divisions among Member States</b>  | EU             | Frontline MS                | Some MS | Syria                         | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic       | Justice and Home Affairs Council |
| <b>Solidarity as a moral duty</b>   | EU             | Refugees and asylum seekers | EU      | Syria                         | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic / Lay | European Parliament              |
| <b>Externalisation + International solidarity and cooperation<sup>9</sup></b> | EU             | Origin and third countries  | EU      | Syria                         | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic       | European Council                 |
| <b>Securing borders</b>   | EU             | Frontline MS                | Some MS | Afghanistan / Albania / Syria | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic       | European Council                 |

Crisis of the European Border Regime: Manufacturing Emergency in the Lampedusa Crisis. *EUI-RSCAS Working Papers 59*, European University Institute (EUI), Robert Schuman Centre of Advanced Studies (RSCAS). Research has extensively explored the securitization of migration policy. For a detailed examination of how this evolution historically occurred within the context of the European Union, see: Lavenex, S. (2001). The Europeanization of Refugee Policies: Normative Challenges and Institutional Legacies. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Wiley Blackwell, vol. 39(5), 851-874.

<sup>8</sup> See: Ieracitano, F, Vigneri, F. (2018). In 'their' words and in 'our' words. A comparison between European policies, media narratives and migrants' testimonies of landings in the Mediterranean. *Language, Discourse and Society*, 6(11), 62-82.

<sup>9</sup> As previously explained, the 'Externalisation' and 'International solidarity and cooperation' narratives can be combined as they both underscore the necessity of enhanced collaboration with external partners (moral of the story).

|                 |    |                             |    |       |                                    |                  |              |                     |
|-----------------|----|-----------------------------|----|-------|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| Externalisation | EU | Refugees and asylum seekers | EU | Syria | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic | European Commission |
|-----------------|----|-----------------------------|----|-------|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|---------------------|

Source: author's elaboration.

**Mirroring** the findings from the media analysis, frontline Member States emerge as the main victims in the *Divisions among Member States* narrative, bearing the consequences of intra-EU divergences on migration management. Consequently, some (non-frontline) Member States take on the role of the main villains due to their reluctance to share responsibility. The EU, by virtue of proposing a refugee relocation scheme, assumes the role of the main hero. Similarly, the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative **aligns** with the media portrayal: refugees and asylum seekers are depicted as the primary victims, while the EU plays a dual role as both the main hero and the main villain for inconsistently upholding one of its founding principles: solidarity.

Refugees and asylum seekers appear as the primary victims in the *Externalisation* narrative, mirroring the media landscape, too. This victim role shifts to origin and third countries when this narrative is combined with *International solidarity and cooperation*, which, as mentioned earlier, relies on more solidaristic tones. Unlike media discourse, the EU takes on a prominent role when narratives focused on externalizing crisis management surface in political debate: here, it is mostly depicted as the hero. As shown in the table, though, the EU also features as the main villain in this rhetoric; however, such instances are significantly less frequent compared to the occurrence of the EU in the hero role. This dual representation is more balanced in the *Securing borders* narrative, in line with the media sphere. Here, the EU is shown as both the main hero for supporting front-line Member States in border operations and as the main villain for perceived inadequacies in these efforts.

Regarding migrants' **nationality**, Syria is the country of origin most frequently mentioned in political debate, also shaping the main geographical **setting** addressed by the narratives on the "refugee crisis" circulating in this domain. This can be explained by the public attention at the time to the civil war in the country, the high number of Syrian nationals in the sea and land arrivals, as well as the high percentage of access of Syrian asylum seekers to international protection across the EU.<sup>10</sup> However, even when present, references to migrants' ethnicity are significantly limited, comprising only a very small portion of the analysed content. No significant details emerge in relation to the gender, age, and social class of the characters.

In terms of the **moral of the story**, all the narratives in the communicative sphere lean towards advocating a pro-EU policy solution. This inclination is particularly evident when considering that the analysed content originates from EU institutions and political representatives. As much of the discussions in this sphere focus on proposals for solutions to the crisis to bring it back under control, the **plot** predominantly revolves around stories of control. The **style** is primarily, though not overwhelmingly, technocratic. Notably, the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative adopts both technocratic and lay language evenly. A lay style emerges in this narrative especially when emphasizing the heroism of EU citizens providing aid to asylum seekers. An

<sup>10</sup> European Asylum Support Office (2015). *Latest asylum trends – 2015 overview*, available at <https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/public/LatestAsylumTrends20151.pdf> (latest consultation: 11 October 2023)



illustrative example can be found in Motion for a Resolution No. B8-0835/2015 presented on 7 September 2015 by the GUE/NGL parliamentary group, who

'pays tribute to the numerous people's initiatives and local authority initiatives across Europe that have been providing support to refugees in the absence of EU and governmental support and leadership; acknowledges that these initiatives show that many citizens wish to live in a Europe of solidarity where refugees and migrants are welcome; welcomes in particular the setting-up of a network of 'refugee cities' in Spain, and encourages local authorities to follow this example'<sup>11</sup>.

Further insights of interest for this research emerge from analysing the main narratives circulating in this sphere with a focus on their **narrator**. This term denotes the author of the content advancing a given narrative and may refer to either an EU institution in its entirety or individual members within this institution.

While *Divisions among Member States* is generally the prevailing narrative, it yields to *Solidarity as a moral duty* when the **European Parliament** serves as the narrator. This solidarity frame presents variations across the political spectrum. It prevails in left-wing and progressive groups like GUE-NGL (the left) and the Greens, and remains significant in the socialist (S&D), liberal (ALDE), and conservative (EPP) groups. However, it disappears when motions are authored by conservative and right-wing groups such as ECR and ENF, which are traditionally anti-immigration. The Parliament also embraces alarmist narratives, albeit to a lesser extent. Noteworthy, the *Securing borders* narrative is also associated with traditionally progressive groups such as the Greens and S&D. This association arises from motions co-authored by all the groups that constituted the parliamentary majority supporting the Juncker Commission in 2015, which also included more moderate and conservative parties, specifically ALDE and EPP. Moreover, progressive parliamentary groups strategically adopted securitarian tones at times to underscore the inefficacy and amorality of strict policies – such as border patrolling and readmission agreements with third countries – that they deemed lethal. They also utilized these tones to warn of the risks associated with the proliferation of a security-based rhetoric, emphasizing the potential reinforcement of an alarmist portrayal of migrants as dangerous subjects and its implicit societal implications in terms of fear and xenophobic attitudes. In these instances, a **rejection** of narratives referred to securitisation and externalisation, originally identified in the media landscape, may be noted. An emblematic example of this is Resolution No. B8-0837/2015 of 7 September 2015, where the Greens group

'regrets the excessive militarisation of efforts to resolve the refugee crisis by some Member States; believes that the focus on the military fight against smugglers, the destruction of their vessels, the enhanced patrolling and the building of walls and fences at external borders makes it even more dangerous for people fleeing war and persecution to reach Europe and forces them even more to resort to smugglers;

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<sup>11</sup> Motion for a Resolution to wind up the debate on the statements by the Council and the Commission pursuant to Rule 123(2) of the Rules of Procedure on migration and the situation of refugees (2015/2833(RSP)), available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-8-2015-0835\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-8-2015-0835_EN.html) (latest consultation: 12 November 2023).

considers, in addition, that this sends the wrong signal, i.e. that asylum seekers represent a security threat, which can be countered by military means<sup>12</sup>.

The same applies to the *Externalisation* narrative, sometimes adopted by progressive groups with the aim of criticising EU institutions and Member States for investing in cooperation with authoritarian regimes as a strategy to prevent irregular crossings or for considering including some neighbouring countries in the list of safe third countries where to return migrants landed in the EU. In the same motion, the group also

‘Calls on the Commission and the Member States to immediately suspend cooperation on preventing irregular migration and improving border controls with third countries such as Eritrea and Egypt, border controls that are actually turning back refugees, and suspend any financial assistance to such regimes in light of UN and NGO reports on human rights abuses; rejects the proposals from the Member States to set up asylum centres in third countries and to involve Northern African countries and Turkey in European search and rescue operations with the aim of intercepting refugees and bringing them back to African and Turkish soil’<sup>13</sup>.

There could be an additional explanation for the adoption of securitarian tones by progressive parliamentary families, when it is not for rejection. According to one of the interviewees, a civil servant from a Luxembourg working in the relevant Permanent Representation and serving as an adviser to the Justice and Home Affairs Council, narratives embraced by centre-left parties may tend to adhere to those prevailing in rightist language. This inclination is attributed to a concern about potential vote loss. As the interviewee argues:

‘The problem is they [far right] are the winners in elections. For all the others who are pro-migrants, the solidarity approach and open migration are losing votes. For me, this explains the dynamics of why we are going more toward the right with a very close agenda towards migration. How to counter, this is the responsibility of the politicians, of the media, because if you look at the news, they always report negative cases. I think we have a negative perception about the topic of migration that is getting stronger and stronger.’<sup>14</sup>

While security and externalisation frames are significant also for the other narrators, especially the **European Council**, *Solidarity as a moral duty* is not a prominent narrative in EU institutions other than the Parliament. The **European Commission** frequently features *EU response to refugee crisis*, a category inductively created to refer to narratives emphasizing comprehensive measures, including but not limited to the relocation scheme, introduced by the Commission in response to the crisis. Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, when serving as the narrator, the **Justice and Home Affairs Council** – the configuration of the Council of the EU convening the relevant national ministers – embraces only the *Divisions among Member States* narrative. This sheds light on how policy **settings** are interpreted differently within various EU institutions and how this variation in understanding leads to the adoption of distinct narratives, with some

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<sup>12</sup> Motion for a resolution to wind up the debate on the statements by the Council and the Commission pursuant to Rule 123(2) of the Rules of Procedure on migration and refugees in Europe (2015/2833(RSP)), available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-8-2015-0837\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-8-2015-0837_EN.html) (latest consultation: 11 October 2023).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*

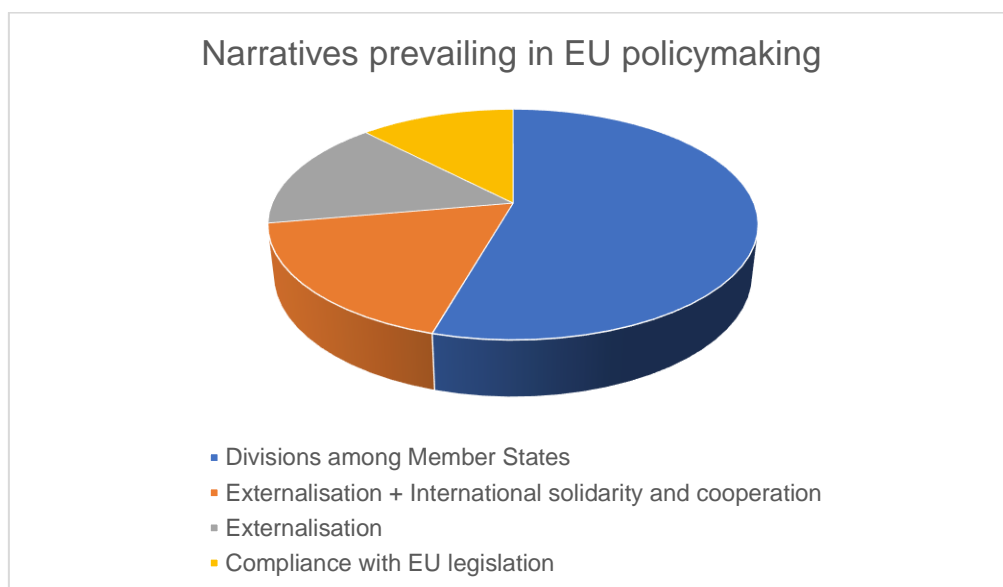
<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted by researchers from VUB-Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 15 September 2023.

institutions focusing on internal divisions, while others stressing the comprehensiveness of the measures already in place or the necessity to invest in the external dimension.

## 5.4 Narratives in EU policymaking (coordinative sphere)

The coordinative sphere refers, as we elucidated above, to the policy-making domain, more specifically to the EU venues in which deliberations are taken and policies developed to address specific issues. In the context of the 2015 refugee crisis, most of such policies focused on the proposal for a refugee relocation and resettlement scheme. 11 documents related to EU policymaking were analysed to identify dominant narratives; these comprise 5 proposals for regulations from the Commission, 2 decisions and 1 conclusion from the JHA Council, 2 parliamentary resolutions, and 1 statement from a European Council informal meeting.<sup>15</sup> The most frequently recurring narratives within this sphere are visually represented in Figure 5.

**FIGURE 5: Narratives prevailing in EU policy debate (2015)**



Source: author's elaboration.

The ***Divisions among Member States*** narrative prevails also within the coordinative sphere, presenting even a heightened emphasis compared to its presence in the communicative one. This clear-cut predominance is not surprising in the EU policy development process of the time, primarily focused on the definition of an asylum-seekers relocation and resettlement scheme as a central element of the EU's policy response to the refugee crisis. Additionally, a new and noteworthy narrative, ***Compliance with EU legislation***, has emerged inductively. This narrative focuses on urging Member States to implement EU asylum legislation, especially the Dublin Regulation, the Schengen acquis, and the Common European Asylum Framework, with the aim of reducing divergences and establishing common asylum rules. It can therefore be seen as an **adaptation** of the *Divisions among Member States* narrative when this surfaces in the coordinative sphere. However, aggregated data for the two narratives have

<sup>15</sup> The comprehensive list of documents analysed from the coordinative sphere is available in Appendix 3.

not been presented, as these diverge in many of the narrative components, as will be detailed further on.

The externalisation dimension, portrayed with securitarian nuances in the *Externalisation* narrative and more solidaristic tones in the *International solidarity and cooperation* one, is prominently taken up also in policy-making. This recurrence can be attributed to the significance that externalisation held in EU migration policy at the time, being presented as a fundamental part of the EU's comprehensive approach to the phenomenon. In contrast, the dimension of solidarity, especially towards the lives of refugees and migrants, occupies a rather peripheral position in the coordinative domain: while it wasn't completely **ignored**, *Solidarity as a moral duty* does not emerge as one of the most recurrent narratives in this sphere. Similarly, despite being embraced in some instances, securitarian tones are rather nuanced in EU policymaking, mostly evoked in the externalisation narratives, with dedicated security-related frames being irrelevant in this domain.<sup>16</sup>

The narrowing range of narratives in policymaking during a period of heightened political salience of migration supports the hypothesis proposed by Boswell & Smellie (2023): when migration becomes a salient political issue and policymakers face pressure to deliver tangible results, they tend to differentiate between the narratives adopted in political discourse and the policies they aim to implement. However, upon further examination, as detailed later on, it appears here more like an adaption rather than a complete separation between narratives in political debate and policymaking. Table 2 provides a glimpse into the intersections of the aforementioned narratives with other variables included in the analysis, encompassing characters' roles and ethnicity, the moral of the story, the plot, the style, and the narrator.

**TABLE 2: Narrative components – policymaking (2015)**

| MACRO-NARRATIVE  | CHARACTER ROLE |                            |                       | CHARACTER NATIONALITY         | MORAL OF THE STORY                 | PLOT             | STYLE        | NARRATOR                         |
|--|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|
|  | Hero           | Victim                     | Villain               |                               |                                    |                  |              |                                  |
| <b>Divisions among Member States</b>   | EU             | Frontline MS               | All MS / Frontline MS | Afghanistan / Eritrea / Syria | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic | European Commission              |
| <b>Externalisation + International solidarity and cooperation<sup>17</sup></b> | EU             | Origin and third countries | n/a                   | Syria                         | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic | European Council                 |
| <b>Externalisation</b>   | EU             | Origin and third countries | n/a.                  | Syria                         | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic | Justice and Home Affairs Council |

<sup>16</sup> The *Securing borders* narrative was identified only twice among the 37 text extracts coded during the analysis.

<sup>17</sup> As previously explained, the 'Externalising the crisis' and 'International solidarity and cooperation' narratives can be combined as they both underscore the necessity of enhanced collaboration with external partners (moral of the story).

|                                |        |                             |                  |     |                                    |                  |              |                  |
|--------------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|------------------|-----|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------|
| Compliance with EU legislation | All MS | Refugees and asylum seekers | All MS / Some MS | n/a | In favour of an EU policy solution | Story of control | Technocratic | European Council |
|--------------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|------------------|-----|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------|

Source: author's elaboration.

The hero's role is generally assumed by the same characters as in the communicative sphere, with the only exception being the *Compliance with EU legislation* narrative, which is not significantly recurrent in the political debate. However, when the main narratives are introduced into the policy domain, variations arise, particularly concerning the victim and the villain. In the case of ***Divisions among Member States***, the main villains encompass all Member States, including, perhaps unexpectedly, the frontline ones. This insight sheds light on how this narrative is **adapted** when surfacing in the coordinative sphere. Notably, it is also adopted to stress the responsibility of first-arrival Member States that seek assistance without fulfilling their obligations, such as migrants' registration, identification, and fingerprinting as mandated by the Dublin Regulation. The alignment with the variant of this narrative similarly observed in the media sphere is noteworthy. An illustrative example is found in European Parliament Resolution No. P8\_TA(2015)0306, in which the Parliament warns that

'if Italy or Greece does not comply with the obligation referred to in paragraph 1, the Commission may decide, having given the Member State concerned the opportunity to present its views, to suspend this Decision with regard to that Member State for a period of up to three months. The Commission may decide once to extend such suspension for a further period of up to three months'<sup>18</sup>.

In the ***Externalisation*** narrative, the victim role is primarily associated with origin and transit countries. Since these narratives are embedded in public legal documents, externalisation cannot be solely portrayed as a strategy to block irregular migrants in these countries. Consequently, this narrative undergoes **adaptation** when it enters the coordinative sphere, emphasising the need to support such external partners in addressing internal turmoil as well as migrant displacements. In doing so, this narrative seems to lean toward solidaristic nuances, thus further aligning with the one on ***International Solidarity and Cooperation*** (see above). Notably, in both narratives, the villain role is not explicitly attributed to any character. Considering the data's origin from official EU sources, it is unlikely that the Union or its Member States are referred to as villains, for example, for delegating responsibilities outside EU territory. Nor are external scapegoats in a context such as that of EU institutions, which, until then, had avoided populist rhetoric, at least in official legal acts.

With regard to the **nationality** of migrants, Syrian stands out again as the most frequently mentioned nationality. However, similar to what emerged in the communicative sphere, references to this aspect are of marginal relevance. This minimal degree of contextualization underlines an **alignment** of politics and policy narratives with those recurring in the media, which tend to strip the migrant's experience of its historical dimension, focusing solely on the

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<sup>18</sup> European Parliament legislative resolution of 9 September 2015 on the proposal for a Council decision establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece (COM(2015)0286 – C8-0156/2015 – 2015/0125(NLE)). Available online at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0306\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0306_EN.html) (latest consultation: 12 November 2023).

act of crossing and landing<sup>19</sup>. No significant data emerged regarding the gender, age, and social class of the characters.

In the EU policy-making domain, the technocratic **style** is preponderant, as is the **plot** promoting a Story of control. This is not surprising: official policy documents are aimed to define solutions to bring the situation back under 'control'; for this reason, they are expected to adopt 'technical' language compared to the style adopted in policy debate. This confirms that narratives tend to become more technocratic when they enter policy venues. The **moral of the story** is entirely in favour of an EU policy solution.

The prominent prevalence of the *Divisions among Member States* narrative in the coordinative sphere is evident regardless of which institution assumes the role of **narrator**. However, it becomes particularly pronounced when the **European Parliament** takes on this role. In contrast to the communicative sphere, the Parliament leans towards this narrative significantly more than to the *Solidarity as a moral duty* one. This presumably depends, as argued earlier, on the focus of EU policy coordination in 2015 primarily revolving around defining and approving a system for the relocation and redistribution of asylum seekers among Member States. In contrast, the frames focused on externalising crisis management (namely, the *Externalisation* and *International solidarity and cooperation* narratives) maintain a relatively marginal presence in the policy documents authored by the Parliament. However, these narratives exhibit significant recurrence when the narrator role is assumed by the three other institutions.

When the **European Council** holds this role, a significant recurrence of the *Compliance with EU legislation* narrative is also noted, in particular when calling for the application of existing EU asylum rules, including the Dublin Regulation, by all Member States, as in the below excerpt of Statement No. 673/15:

'The orientations agreed today must be complemented by the transposition and implementation by Member States of the rules of the Common Asylum System. In this context it is important to create the conditions for all Member States to participate fully in the Dublin system'<sup>20</sup>.

Looking at the European Council, another narrative surfaces as one of the most prevalent in the coordinative sphere: *Hierarchy of asylum seekers*. This narrative, rather marginal in the context of the political debate, is **embraced** here in a similar manner as in the media sphere, where it is used to stress the imperative of countering migrant smuggling and distinguishing between 'genuine' asylum seekers and 'irregular' economic migrants. It also recurs in instances involving the **Justice and Home Affairs Council**. This institution, in particular, embraces this narrative to emphasize the urgent need for implementing a rapid migrant identification mechanism at the EU's external borders – primarily in Italy and Greece. The goal is to swiftly distinguish individuals with a legitimate right to asylum from those designated for repatriation.

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<sup>19</sup> Malkki, L. (1996). Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. *Cultural Anthropology*, 11(3), 377-404.

<sup>20</sup> Closing statement of the Informal meeting of EU heads of state or government on migration, 23 September 2015. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/09/23/statement-informal-meeting/> (latest consultation: 11 October 2023).

As an illustration, we propose the following excerpt from JHA Council Conclusion No. 12002/1/15.

'In parallel, as this decision enters into force, it is crucial that robust mechanisms become operational by 16 September in Italy and Greece to ensure identification, registration and fingerprinting of migrants; to identify persons in need of international protection and support their relocation; and to identify irregular migrants to be returned. To ensure that the process remains efficient and manageable, reception will be duly organised so as to temporarily accommodate people in line with the EU acquis until a decision is quickly taken on their situation. When voluntary return is not practicable and other measures provided for in the Return Directive and in the Handbook on return are inadequate to prevent secondary movements, detention measures in line with article 15 of the Return Directive should be applied urgently and effectively. In order to achieve an effective return policy, the policies referred to at paragraph 11 are of utmost importance in this context'<sup>21</sup>.

When the **Commission** assumes the role of narrator, only two narratives emerge – unsurprisingly, *Division among Member States* and *Externalisation*, with the former significantly outweighing the latter.

## 5.5 Narratives across spheres: a comparative analysis

The comparison between the media, political and policy-making domains provides valuable insights into the dynamics of divergence or convergence of the narratives as these cross between the three venues at the EU level.

In the communicative sphere, the *Divisions among Member States* narrative revolves around the lack of responsibility-sharing hindering the adoption of a common solution, thus **mirroring** the way it unfolds in the media arena. In the political domain, it holds a slight edge over other narratives, which recur at significant levels, too. This indicates a plurality of dimensions mobilised in the public discourse on migration, which reflects the multifaceted and divergent stances evident both nationally and at the EU level. As the context shifts to the coordinative/policymaking sphere, its emphasis intensifies, reflecting the heightened policy-centric discourse. Frontline Member States, initially victims, become villains, spotlighting their responsibilities in fulfilling obligations. As elaborated further on, this shows how the narrative is adapted in policy debate.

With regard to the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative, the European Parliament, serving as the narrator, accentuates it in the communicative sphere, **aligning with a more humanitarian tone**. Nevertheless, as the narrative surfaces in the coordinative sphere, its prominence diminishes. This shift implies a change in focus from a discourse centred on moral duty to a more pragmatic orientation in policy-making. In this context, narratives involving externalisation and securitarian approaches gain traction and are more likely to garner agreement from Member States, presenting themselves as more viable solutions able to unlock the policy development process.

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<sup>21</sup> Presidency conclusions of the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 14 September 2015. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21906/st12002-re01en15.pdf> (latest consultation: 11 October 2023).

The *Externalisation* narrative undergoes an evolution within the coordinative sphere, where it exhibits a more pronounced convergence with the narrative of *International solidarity and cooperation*. In doing so, it then distances itself from the way it appears in the media and communicative domains, where it holds more securitarian tones. Although both narratives share the moral of **externalising migration management as a policy solution**, the coordinative sphere introduces a subtle yet discernible solidaristic nuance. This adaptation emphasises a convergence of narratives with an enhanced emphasis on collaboration with external partners, who presumably need to appear distinct from being merely delegates of EU policy in formal legal acts.

In the coordinative sphere, a new narrative surfaces – *Compliance with EU Legislation*. This narrative stresses the need of implementing EU asylum legislation, indicating a shift towards a more legal and regulatory discourse in policy-making. It can be viewed as a **readaptation** of the *Division among Member States* narrative as this emerges in policymaking, where there is a heightened emphasis on responsibility rather than on internal solidarity, presumably arising from the anticipation of oppositions that the latter is more likely to encounter.

Closely related to the above is the fact that, as previously seen, the *Divisions among Member States* narrative introduces a nuanced shift in character roles when it emerges in the coordinative sphere, where frontline **Member States are portrayed not solely as victims but also as villains**. This divergence from political debate underscores a more intricate policy-focused discourse, aiming for more pragmatic and workable solutions. Within policymaking, expressions of solidarity towards frontline Member States are counterbalanced by allegations of their non-compliance with their obligations under existing rules, accentuating their responsibilities for the perceived strain on the EU asylum framework. Notably, the concurrent emergence of the 'Compliance with EU legislation' narrative holds, as seen, significant weight in this adaptation. This shift appears to be an effort to break the deadlock in the relocation debate within the communicative sphere. Noteworthy, the two-fold role attributed to frontline Member States in policymaking reflects the duality that this narrative shows in its variant in the media domain, where an emphasis also emerges on the responsibilities and obligations of all Member States, including the most pressured ones.

Still in the coordinative sphere, there is a shift in victimhood from refugees to origin and transit countries in the *Externalisation* narrative, suggesting that this undergoes adaptation compared to how it is framed and presented in the media and communicative sphere. This shift aligns with a more solidaristic perspective, as noted earlier, emphasising the importance of **supporting external partners** grappling with internal turmoil and migration displacement, rather than referring to them as delegates of EU's migration policies. This confirms that the narrative takes on a more cooperative stance when it enters the policymaking arena, emphasising collaboration and support for external partners facing the impacts of migration.

## 5.6 Circulation of narratives

The comparative analysis of the three arenas suggests that most of the main narratives undergo **adaptation** as they surface in each domain. In particular, a closer look at the policymaking venue reveals that, although there isn't significant divergence in terms of which narratives prevail, they tend to adapt to the specific purpose of the sphere. In the coordinative one, the purpose involves the pursuit of pragmatic and viable policy solutions capable of



addressing intra-EU divisions, considering the context where EU policy functioning still heavily relies on unanimity. This adaptation could explain why the emphasis on intra-EU solidarity is counterbalanced by a focus on fulfilling responsibilities in asylum matters and on the implementation of the relevant EU legal acquis, including by frontline Member States. Concurrently, **solidarity seems to shift towards the external dimension of migration**, framed in this sphere as fair collaboration with partner countries, presumably to make it more appealing. Such contextual factors – related to the policy and the geographical context in which narratives emerge – also shed light on how the *setting* evolves when narratives move across sphere.

The narrative style, too, tends to align with the primary function of policy debate – coordinating among decision-makers on policy output. While a **technocratic style** is prevalent in the communicative sphere, the language shifts to almost exclusively technical in the coordinative one, with minimal presence of lay or populist styles. This underscores the trend where narratives tend to adopt a more technocratic tone upon entering policy arenas. Such observations provide insights into on how certain types of narratives are adopted and adapted across spheres, a process that – as previously explained – is referred to in the wider BRIDGES project as *pervasiveness*<sup>22</sup>.

While these adjustments may appear minor, they might play a crucial role in averting certain policy solutions from being influenced and shaped by the rhetoric circulating in the media and political domains. A Slovakian civil servant, who served as Justice and Home Affairs counsellor in Brussels between 2015 and 2021, appears to affirm this perspective. When asked for his views on the potential impact of political debates and narratives on the framing of the relocation scheme proposal in policymaking, his response was explicit in referring to the adherence to pre-existing plans rather than the interference of narratives circulating in the other spheres:

‘I think this line of policymaking was determined ahead. There were actually the Commission documents, the European Agenda for Migration that was presented by the Commission in a meeting. So, it has been obviously worked on for very long and it already contained all the major policy ideas of the Juncker Commission’<sup>23</sup>.

Other interviewees have provided opposite perspectives, clearly referring to the impact of frames circulating in particular in the media sphere. Italy’s Stefano Manservigi, a high-level EU official at the time, was queried about the reasons behind choosing to forge a pact with **Turkey**. He responded in the following terms:

‘the nature of the emergency [...] and the [...] clash among Member States would have prevented to do anything. And therefore it was managing emergency. And from the central Mediterranean, you know, what was driving whatever action were the images of the media of people dying in the sea’<sup>24</sup>.

The differing opinions gathered on this matter highlight the challenge of drawing definitive conclusions about whether and how narratives shape policymaking – what we previously

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<sup>22</sup> For the concept of ‘pervasiveness’, see: Garcés-Masareñas, B., Pastore, F.. (2022). Migration Narrative Success. *BRIDGES Working Paper*, Horizon 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Interview conducted by researchers from VUB-Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 31 August 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Interview conducted by researchers from VUB-Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 15 September 2023

referred to as *transformativity*<sup>25</sup>. Various factors might have played a role, contributing to a more intricate and multifaceted reality. As discussed earlier and exemplified in Manservisi's response, the acknowledgement of deep-seated divisions among Member States, impeding a solidarity-based solution, have also intervened and presumably prompted relevant EU institutions to prioritise regulatory and externalisation-focused measures to address the unfolding emergency.

## 6. Narratives in Political and Policy spheres: the activation of the TPD (2022)

### 6.1 Background and setting of the case study

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a military invasion of Ukraine, to which the EU reacted strongly by condemning the aggression, issuing sanctions against Russia, and intervening through military, financial, humanitarian, and political support to Ukraine. The invasion has triggered the displacement of around 15 million people<sup>26</sup>, with more than 5 million crossing the Ukrainian border with Poland, Hungary and Romania, causing the “fastest growing refugee crisis in Europe since WWII”, according to the UNHCR.<sup>27</sup> The EU reacted promptly to the refugee crisis. After solicitation by the Home Affairs ministers, the Commission proposed to implement **the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)** on 2 March 2022. On 4 March, the EU Council adopted Decision (EU) 2022/382 with a unanimous vote, activating the TPD<sup>28</sup>.

The Directive was adopted in 2001 (Council Directive 2001/55/EC) with the aim to help the EU in cases of mass influx of displaced people when there is a risk that the EU Asylum System is unable to bear the brunt of the arrivals, and the mechanism needs a qualified majority in the Council to be activated. The European Parliament called for the implementation of the Directive already in 2016, to cope with the refugee “crisis”, but the mechanism was not activated in that case<sup>29</sup>. Instead, **the TPD was activated for the first time ever in 2022**, to cope with the Ukraine war. The Directive foresees a series of obligations for the EU countries (except Denmark which however adopted a similar national protection scheme) and rights for the refugees, including a residence permit, access to employment, education, social welfare and medical care access, freedom of movement within the EU, and access to accommodation and

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<sup>25</sup> For the concept of ‘transformativity’, see: Garcés-Mascareñas, B., Pastore, F. (2022), op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> IOM. *MRS No. 77 - Internally displaced and immobile people in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022: Older age and disabilities as factors of vulnerability* Reliefweb <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/mrs-no-77-internally-displaced-and-immobile-people-ukraine-between-2014-and-2022-older-age-and-disabilities-factors-vulnerability#:~:text=Since%20February%202022%2C%20one%20third,%2C%202022%3AAnnex%201>.

<sup>27</sup> UNHCR. (2022, June 6), <https://www.unhcr.org/hk/en/73141-ukraine-fastest-growing-refugee-crisis-in-europe-since-wwii.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection. ST/6846/2022/INIT.

[https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L\\_.2022.071.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2022%3A071%3ATOC](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2022.071.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2022%3A071%3ATOC)

<sup>29</sup> European Parliament. “Revision of the Temporary Protection Directive”. *Legislative train schedule*. 20/11/2019. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-revision-of-the-temporary-protection-directive>.

banking services<sup>30</sup>. Each Member State is free to extend or expand the content of the protection<sup>31</sup>.

On 21 March 2022, the **European Commission** released the Operational Guidelines<sup>32</sup> for the application of the Directive and, on 23 March, it published a solidarity platform<sup>33</sup> that supports both EU nationals and Ukrainians with practical information on how to apply the EU rules and guidelines. On 28 March, the Commission released a 10-point action plan<sup>34</sup> to strengthen European coordination on receiving displaced people from Ukraine. By October 2022, approximately 7.3 million refugees were registered within EU Member States, with Poland having the largest number of arrivals (1.6 million) but a lower number of remaining people (1.4 million)<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, in Hungary, 1.3 million people crossed the border between February and October 2022, but only 30,000 received temporary protection. On the other hand, Germany was the top country in terms of granting special visas (660,000), followed by the Czech Republic (430,000)<sup>36</sup>.

Within the timeframe chosen for the analysis (**24 February – 6 April 2022**), the EU institutions addressed the question of asylum seekers fleeing Ukraine in a variety of fora, arguing in favour of the activation of several instruments to help Ukraine and the EU Member States to cope with the displacement crisis, often including the issue of solidarity towards refugees within wider discussions on the war.

As already highlighted for case 1, the selection of the timeframe and of the producers of the documents delimitates the contextual *setting* in which narratives have emerged. A further contextual distinction is visible based on the nature of the narrating voice and on the political orientation of the narrator, as shown in the following paragraphs.

## 6.2 The media arena at the national levels

The analysis of the national media has allowed us to identify salient narratives on the question of asylum seekers fleeing Ukraine and on the subsequent debate on the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive and other ad hoc instruments. Right-wing, left-wing, and

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<sup>30</sup> European Commission. "Temporary Protection". *Migration and Home Affairs*. Last accessed on 14/11/2023. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en).

<sup>31</sup> Fragomen. *Worldwide/Ukraine: Temporary Protection Status - Country-Specific Updates*, 08/11/2023. <https://www.fragomen.com/insights/european-unionukraine-temporary-protection-status-country-specific-updates.html>

<sup>32</sup> European Commission. *Communication from the Commission on Operational guidelines for the implementation of Council implementing Decision 2022/382 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection 2022/C 126 I/01*. C/2022/1806. Brussels: 21/03/2022. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022XC0321%2803%29&qid=1647940863274>

<sup>33</sup> European Commission. *EU Solidarity with Ukraine*, last accessed on 14/11/2023. [https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/index_en)

<sup>34</sup> European Commission. *The 10-Point Plan for Stronger European Coordination on Welcoming People Fleeing the War from Ukraine*. Brussels: 28/03/2022. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/The%2010-Point%20Plan-For%20stronger%20European%20coordination%20on%20welcoming%20people%20fleeing%20the%20war%20from%20Ukraine\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/The%2010-Point%20Plan-For%20stronger%20European%20coordination%20on%20welcoming%20people%20fleeing%20the%20war%20from%20Ukraine_en.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Reliefweb. "The Ukrainian Refugee crisis: Providing Important Historical Context for the Current Situation", 06/10/2022.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/poland/ukrainian-refugee-crisis-providing-important-historical-context-current-situation>

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*.

centre-leaning newspapers were considered to trace how narratives have changed based on the political position of the news outlets.

The narrative mostly shared by all political affiliations is the one that promotes **Solidarity as a moral duty**. This narrative assumes that Ukraine and the Ukrainian people are very close to Europe both geographically and culturally, and that thus the EU and the European people have a moral responsibility to support their fellow neighbours, not just for the sake of saving Ukraine from invasion, but also to save a larger Western/European democratic model. To emphasise this solidarity, this narrative contrasts the Russian *villain* with the European *heroes* who are saving the Ukrainian *victims*. Closely linked to this narrative, newspapers affiliated with all political sides often share a humanitarian narrative that emphasises **Giving voice to asylum seekers**. This narrative is particularly powerful in the media sphere, as news articles provide the perfect venues to tell the stories of people fleeing the war, insisting on the individual suffering of vulnerable asylum seekers, especially women and children. While the characters generally reproduce the same pattern as the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative, sometimes this narrative tries to shake the consciousness of those countries that do not show (enough) support for Ukraine by including them among the—temporary—villains.

Despite the wide multipartisan support towards the people fleeing the war in Ukraine, far-right newspapers also present securitised narratives that shift the attention towards border protection and the need for a stricter selection of refugees. The **Securing Borders** narrative hints at the risks for the EU system to be “invaded” or “submerged” by more refugees than the system can withstand. However, this narrative remains careful in not portraying the asylum seekers as the *villains* of the story. Instead, it insists on an abstract idea of threat at the border, with the European frontline countries being depicted as the *victims*. Closely linked to this narrative, and often presented as a way to prevent the risk of invasion, is the narration of a **Hierarchy of asylum seekers**. This narrative aims to warn the European population, as well as the national and European institutions, of the risk that ‘bogus’ refugees are trying to illegally enter the Union and take advantage of the circumstances. By referring to the international and European legislation, this narrative emphasises how protection and solidarity should be guaranteed only to those who possess the qualifications to be accepted.

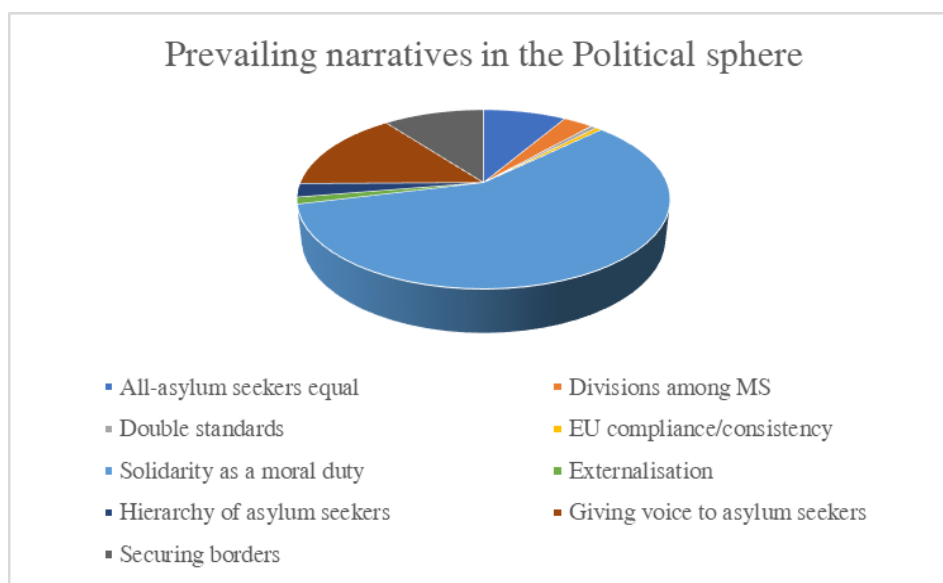
In strong opposition to this narrative, some centrist and leftist newspapers denounce what are referred to as **Double standards**. This narrative often compares the 2015 and 2022 “crises” to show how forms of discrimination were applied by the EU and EU Member States to different categories of asylum seekers in the two historical events, but also towards Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian nationals in the 2022 crisis. Different from all the other narratives, the *villains* of the *Double standards* narrative are the EU institutions for their hypocritical approach, and especially their attitude towards the Visegrad group in 2022 compared to 2015. Instead, those NGOs, countries, individuals, private and public actors that support non-discriminatory initiatives towards all asylum seekers (i.e., the *victims*) are the *heroes* of the narration.

### 6.3 Narratives in EU political debate (communicative sphere)

For the political sphere, 44 documents were analysed in relation to the Ukrainian case; these included 9 parliamentary motions for a resolution, 27 press releases, speeches, and statements from the Commission, 4 statements and remarks from the European Council, and

4 press releases from the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council.<sup>37</sup> The predominant narrative identified in these documents is *Solidarity as a moral duty*, followed by *Giving voice to asylum seekers*, *Securing borders*, and *All-asylum seekers equal*<sup>38</sup>, as shown in figure 6. The *plots* consist equally of stories of control and decline, i.e., the situation is described as dramatic (decline), but the EU is presented as always reacting efficiently and coherently (control). The most employed *hero* is the EU, the *victims* are primarily the refugees/asylum seekers fleeing from Ukraine, but also the Frontline member states. The villain is clearly Russia even when is not directly mentioned (see table 3).

**FIGURE 6: Narratives prevailing in EU political debate (2022)**



Source: author's elaboration.

The *solidarity as a moral duty* narrative is by far the most present in this sphere. It is the only narrative employed by the JHA Council, and the most prevalent in the European Council and the European Commission, which employs this narrative in a continuous and compact way throughout the timeframe taken into consideration. While the *hero* is predominantly the EU, this narrative employs different kinds of heroes, including all Member States, the frontline Member States, the European people and non-EU states that have offered their support—such as frontline non-EU countries like Moldova, but also more distant countries like Canada and the US for their humanitarian commitments. The *villain* is clearly Russia, while the *victims* are the asylum seekers fleeing the war, and the reference to Ukrainian nationality and/or residence

<sup>37</sup> The comprehensive list of documents analysed from the communicative sphere is available in Appendix 4.

<sup>38</sup> This narrative was identified and categorised in the media analysis conducted for case 1. It did not find a similar correspondence in the media analysis for this case. However, it was inductively identified in the EU political and policy debate through a qualitative discourse analysis of the texts (this narrative is further described in the next paragraphs).

is always indicated. Sometimes, the asylum seekers are also categorised with reference to their professional background<sup>39</sup>, their age<sup>40</sup>, and in very few instances their gender<sup>41</sup>.

**TABLE 3: Narrative components – political debate (2022)**

| MACRO-NARRATIVE                            | CHARACTER ROLE                   |   |                                  |                               | MAIN NARRATOR                       | MORAL OF THE STORY                 | MAIN PLOT                   | MAIN STYLE   |
|--|----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
|  | Main Hero                        | Main Victim                             | Victims' nationality / residence | Main Villain                  |                                     |                                    |                             |              |
| <i>Solidarity as a moral duty</i>          | EU                               | Asylum seekers / refugees               | Ukraine                          | Russia                        | EU Commission; EU Parliament Groups | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control, decline and rising | Technocratic |
| <i>Giving voices to asylum seekers</i>     | Undefined ; EU; EU/ Frontline MS | Asylum seekers / refugees               | Ukraine                          | Russia                        | EU Parliament Groups                | In favour of an EU policy solution | Decline                     | Technocratic |
| <i>Securing borders</i>                    | EU / undefined                   | Asylum seekers / refugees; frontline MS | Ukraine                          | Russia                        | EU Commission; EU Parliament Groups | In favour of an EU policy solution | Decline                     | Technocratic |
| <i>All-asylum seekers equal</i>            | EU                               | Asylum seekers / refugees               | Ukraine                          | Undefined (implicitly Russia) | EU Parliament Groups                | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control and decline         | Technocratic |
| <i>Divisions among MS / Burden sharing</i> | Undefined                        | Asylum seekers / refugees               | Ukraine                          | Undefined                     | EU Parliament Groups                | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control and decline         | Technocratic |
| <i>Hierarchy of asylum seekers</i>         | EU                               | Asylum seekers / refugees; frontline MS | Ukraine                          | Undefined (implicitly Russia) | EU Commission; EU Parliament Groups | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control and Decline         | Technocratic |
| <i>Externalisation</i>                     | Frontline EU MS; EU              | Asylum seekers / refugees               | Ukraine                          | Russia                        | EU Parliament Groups                | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control and decline         | Technocratic |
| <i>Double standards</i>                    | Undefined                        | Asylum seekers / refugees               | Ukraine                          | EU; Ukrainian authorities     | EU Parliament Group                 | In favour of an EU policy solution | Decline                     | Technocratic |
| <i>EU compliance / consistency</i>         | All MS                           | Asylum seekers / refugees               | Undefined                        | Undefined                     | EU Parliament Groups                | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control                     | Technocratic |

The second most present narrative in the political sphere is *Divisions among MS / Burden Sharing*<sup>42</sup>, which shares some elements with the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative. It insists on the moral duty from the part of the EU and the EU Member States to have a common

<sup>39</sup> For example, on March 22, the Commission launched a one-stop-shop to support researchers of Ukraine, a portal to support researchers in looking for housing and job opportunities. On April 6, the Commission published a press release in support of its recommendation to facilitate recognition of professionally qualified refugees so to facilitate their access to the job market in Europe.

<sup>40</sup> This narrative is very vocal in emphasizing the need to protect child refugees.

<sup>41</sup> These isolated references mostly call against gender discrimination or for women's protection.

<sup>42</sup> This narrative was identified and categorised in the media analysis conducted for case 1. It did not find a similar correspondence in the media analysis for this case. However, it was inductively identified in the EU political and policy debate through a qualitative discourse analysis of the texts.

European response that does not create divisions and does not put all the pressure on the frontline Member States. However, the emphasis here is on the importance to share the burden to *prevent* divisions rather than to underline how existing divisions undermine a common response. In this context, the *victims* are both the asylum seekers and the frontline Member States, while the EU emerges as the predominant *hero*. In this sphere, this narrative has been employed only in the European Parliament. A deeper understanding of the *setting* is crucial to contextualise the use of this narrative. One motion for resolution is presented on February 28 by the ECR<sup>43</sup>, EPP, Greens, GUE/NGL, Renew, S&D and it explicitly “urges the Council to equally divide the responsibility for the reception of the refugees”<sup>44</sup>. It is one of the first debates held by the Parliament after the start of the war, and it focuses on the unity of the Member States and how measures should continue to be taken in the spirit of solidarity. Another motion, presented in April by the ECR, insists more on the necessity that the burden is shared and that “all sectors of society must be involved in solving these problems, from local, regional, national and European authorities to civil society”. The motion implicitly recalls the pitfalls of the Common European Asylum System and the problems deriving from the divisions among Member States in previous moments of migratory pressures:

‘Stresses that countries that host fewer refugees from Ukraine should share the costs related to managing the refugee influx with those Member States that are overburdened; recalls, in this regard, the proposal by Frans Timmermans from 2016 to pay EUR 250 000 for each person not admitted and stresses that this indicator should now be positive, i.e. EUR 250 000 for each person admitted, in order to ensure adequate living conditions for women and children fleeing because of the war in Ukraine’<sup>45</sup>.

If the previous narratives focused on the European dimension of solidarity and burden sharing, another group of narratives centres more on the asylum seekers, their stories, and their categorisation. The ***Giving voice to asylum seekers*** narrative mostly emphasises the tragedy of fleeing the war, with a particular attention to children, professionals, and in a lesser extent women. This narrative is reproduced by groups of different political fronts in the European Parliament: GUE/NGL, Greens, Renew, EPP, S&D, ECR, and ENF. Within the Commission, this narrative is mostly employed by the President in a lay style, which seems to try to convey a sense of solidarity by narrating the stories of people fleeing from bombs, “holding hands, crying silently”, or “marching long hours in the snow”, showing “immense courage”. In these narrations, often the heroes are the European people, such as the “warm-hearted Romanian people” or the “Slovak people for their outstanding efforts”. Despite the increased attention to the asylum seekers’ stories, they are always referred to as the *victims* that need help, the objects of action, and not as the *heroes* of the story, which remain mostly the EU and the frontline Member States. This aspect shows a slight change of focus of the same narrative in the EU level compared to the media sphere, where it emphasised the subjectivity and agency of the asylum seekers.

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<sup>43</sup> The ECR and EPP groups are those with most MEPs among the sponsors of this motion.

<sup>44</sup> European Parliament. *Motion for a Resolution to wind up the debate on the statement by the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy pursuant to rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the Russian aggression against Ukraine*. (2022/2564(RSP)). 28/02/2022.

<sup>45</sup> European Parliament. *Motion for a Resolution to wind up the debate on the statements by the Council and the Commission pursuant to rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the EU’s protection of children and young people fleeing the war in Ukraine* (2022/2618(RSP)). B9-0213/2022. 05/04/2022.

The **All-asylum seekers equal** narrative follows the general pattern of the EU as the *hero* and of the refugees/asylum seekers as the *victims*. However, while it calls for the need to not discriminate based on “social or ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, ability or migration status”<sup>46</sup>, including “transwomen and Ukrainian conscientious objectors”, it almost all the time employs nationality or residency references to refer to the Ukrainians, or non-Ukrainians fleeing from Ukraine. This narrative was not identified in the media analysis, it was thus inductively introduced by observing the nuances between the different narratives dealing with categorizing the asylum seekers. *The All-asylum seeker equal* narrative is mostly employed in the Parliament by the GUE-NGL group, but also by the Greens, the EPP, Renew, and the S&D. It is also employed in a limited way by the European Commission and the European Council.

Conversely, the **Hierarchy of asylum seekers** narrative emphasises the distinction between who is admissible and who is not. It emphasises who can receive temporary protection and provides guidelines to border guards to conduct controls so as to, on one side, “help those fleeing the war” and on the other maintain “a high level of security checks” to halt those people not fitting in the categories identified for temporary protection<sup>47</sup>, and provide repatriation assistance to the MS (especially through Frontex)<sup>48</sup>. The differentiation between categories of asylum seekers is especially evident in a motion for resolution presented by the Identity and Democracy (ex ENF) group at the European Parliament, which:

‘Encourages the Member States to establish verification procedures with regard to the authenticity of Ukrainian passports, in order to avoid abuses and ensure that support and protection for citizens who need them is not weakened.’

14. Reiterates that third-country nationals coming from Ukraine and who are not eligible for temporary protection must be assisted in returning safely to their countries of origin<sup>49</sup>.

The **Double standards** narrative represents the opposite side of the argument of a *Hierarchy of asylum seekers*. It emerges only in the political sphere in two instances, yet its argument is worth being taken into consideration, especially because it **embraces** the same narrative from the media domain. This narrative is supported only in the European Parliament by the Left group, which tries to address the problem of the discrimination of the category of people that can access the temporary protection, by condemning “the detention of international students fleeing Ukraine”<sup>50</sup> and regretting “that Ukrainian men of a prescribed age are prohibited by the

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<sup>46</sup> European Parliament. *Motion for a Resolution to wind up the debate on the statements by the European Council, the Council and the Commission pursuant to Rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 24-25 March 2022, including the latest developments of the war against Ukraine and the EU sanctions against Russia and their implementation (2022/2560(RSP))*. B9-0210/2022. 05/04/2022.

<sup>47</sup> European Commission. *Press Release. Ukraine: Commission proposes temporary protection for people fleeing war in Ukraine and guidelines for border checks*. Brussels: 02/03/2022.

<sup>48</sup> European Commission. *Press Release. Ukraine refugees: Operational guidelines to support Member States in applying the Temporary Protection Directive*. Brussels: 18/03/2022.

<sup>49</sup> European Parliament. *Motion for a resolution to wind up the debate on the statements by the Council and the Commission pursuant to Rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the EU's protection of children and young people fleeing the war in Ukraine (2022/2618(RSP))*. B9-0212/2022. 05/04/2022.

<sup>50</sup> For more contextualization on this event see Okeowo, Alexis. 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-foreign-students-displaced-by-war>



Ukrainian authorities from fleeing the war”<sup>51</sup>. The following quotation from the same motion is worth reproducing in full because it is the only instance in the documents analysed in which the *villain* is the EU:

‘Calls on the EU to cease its role in funding the construction and operation of migrant detention facilities inside Ukraine; recalls that these detention facilities are sites of multiple human rights violations, where it is commonplace that those who have been subjected to pushbacks and summary returns from EU Member States have their asylum applications ignored and are placed indefinitely in EU-funded detention facilities by the Ukrainian authorities; highlights, with particular concern, the case of the detainees at the Zhuravychi Migrant Accommodation Centre, where at least 35 Afghans, Bangladeshis, Cameroonians, Indians, Pakistanis and Sudanese are being held unable to flee the war; calls for the immediate release of all such detainees and for the Ukrainian authorities to ensure their safe passage to the EU’<sup>52</sup>.

The **Securing borders** narrative emphasises the threats that the crisis is bringing to the European structure, reception capacity, and the burden on the frontline MS, which are often referred to as victims. These threats include smuggling and trafficking (ID/ex ENF), the risk of the European system being overwhelmed by massive influxes of people (European Commission), and in particular the neighbouring countries of Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Czech Republic (European Commission; The Left; ECR; EPP; Greens; Renew; S&D), but it also emphasises the threats and pressures on women and children asylum seekers (The Left, ECR). While insisting on the security dimension, this narrative still supports a European solution (i.e., the EU as the hero), and identifies the asylum seekers as the main victims.

The narrative of **Externalisation**<sup>53</sup> is almost absent in the political sphere. It assumes that the pressure is too much on the European frontline states, and that therefore cooperation with third countries is necessary to find a solution. The *heroes* are equally the EU and the frontline states. It is shared by the EPP, Greens, GUE/NGL, Renew, Non-inscrits, S&D. This narrative considers cooperation with third parties as in parallel with the activation of the temporary protection directive, so that the moral of the story does not entail externalising the entirety of the responsibility. One instance of the latter interpretation of this narrative is however present in a motion for resolution presented by four *non-inscrits* members, in which preference for “countries neighbouring Ukraine to host refugees” is justified “to keep the distance between separated family members to a minimum and facilitate return once peace has been restored”<sup>54</sup>.

Lastly, the inductive analysis of the communicative discourse has led to the identification of an additional narrative that was named **EU compliance/consistency**. This narrative is employed

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<sup>51</sup> European Parliament. *Motion for a resolution to wind up the debate on the statements by the European Council, the Council and the Commission pursuant to Rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 24-25 March 2022, including the latest developments of the war against Ukraine and the EU sanctions against Russia and their implementation (2022/2560(RSP))*. B9-0201/2022. 05/04/2022.

<sup>52</sup> European Parliament. *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> This narrative was identified and categorised in the media analysis conducted for case 1. It did not find a similar correspondence in the media analysis for this case. However, it was inductively identified in the EU political and policy debate through a qualitative discourse analysis of the texts.

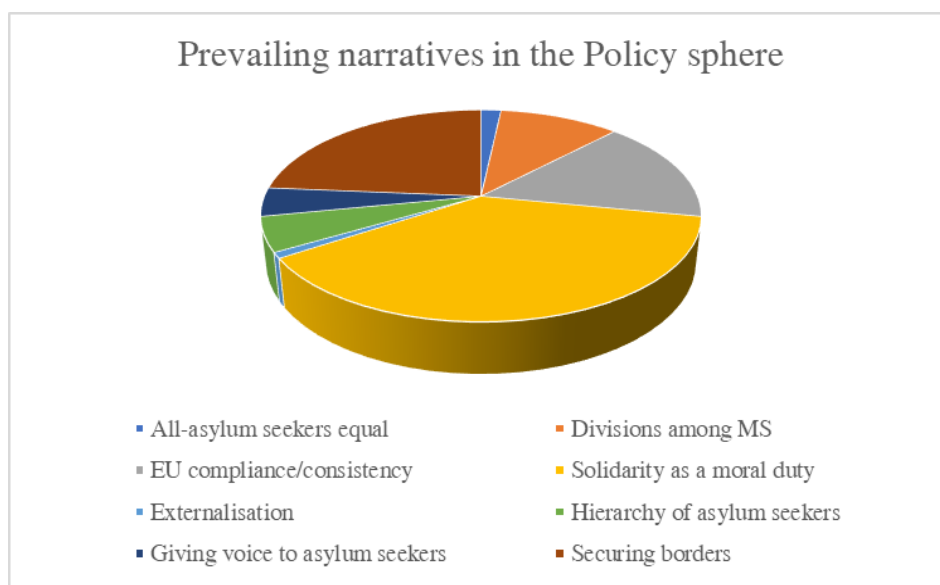
<sup>54</sup> In the same motion it is also asked to lift sanctions against Poland and Hungary “in the context of them hosting Ukrainian refugees”. European Parliament. *Motion for a Resolution pursuant to Rule 143 of the Rules of Procedure on lifting sanctions against Poland and Hungary in the context of them hosting Ukrainian refugees, Jérôme Rivière, Gilbert Collard, Nicolas Bay, Maxette Pirbakas*. B9-0133/2022. 02/03/2022.

mostly in support of the need to adopt *ad hoc* measures for the Ukrainian case, showing how extraordinary measures are in line with previous European commitments and legislation. In the political sphere, this narrative has been employed only once in the European Parliament in a motion for resolution presented by the ECR group in support of the protection of children and young people, by stressing how EU laws and international commitments on the rights of the child and other instruments should be the point of reference for the EU support to the member states.

## 6.4 Narratives in EU policy debate (coordinative sphere)

In order to identify dominant narratives in the EU's coordinative sphere, 10 documents related to policy discussions on the inflows of Ukrainian asylum seekers were analysed, namely: 3 communications, 2 proposals for a Parliament resolution, 1 proposal for a Council decision and 1 action plan from the Commission; 1 parliamentary resolution; 1 conclusion and 1 declaration from the European Council. The predominant **narrative** in this sphere is *Solidarity as a moral duty*, followed by the narratives of *Securing borders*; *EU compliance – consistency*; *Divisions among MS /Burden sharing*, as shown in figure 7.

**FIGURE 7: Narratives prevailing in EU policy debate (2022)**



Source: author's elaboration.

The *plots* consist mostly of stories of control, followed by stories of decline. Differently from the communicative sphere, here the emphasis on control is more present, as the documents are focused on policy proposals and practical measures to cope with the emergency. The *hero* remains the EU, the *victims* are the refugees/asylum seekers from Ukraine, but emphasis is also given to the EU member states as victims, followed by the frontline MS. The *villain* remains without doubts Russia even when not explicitly mentioned (see Table 4).

**TABLE 4: Narrative components – policymaking (2022)**

| MACRO-NARRATIVE                            | CHARACTER ROLE    |   |                                       |  | MAIN NARRATOR                 | MORAL OF THE STORY                 | MAIN PLOT           | MAIN STYLE           |
|--|-------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
|  | Main Hero         | Main Victim                                     | Victims' main nationality / residence | Main Villain                           |                               |                                    |                     |                      |
| <i>European Solidarity</i>                 | EU                | Asylum seekers / refugees; EU MS / frontline MS | Ukraine                               | Undefined (implicitly Russia)          | European Commission           | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control             | Technocratic         |
| <i>Securing borders</i>                    | EU                | EU MS   | Undefined                             | Undefined (implicitly Russia)          | EU Commission                 | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control and decline | Technocratic         |
| <i>EU compliance / consistency</i>         | EU                | EU MS / Asylum seekers                          | Undefined                             | Undefined (implicitly Russia)          | EU Commission                 | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control             | Technocratic         |
| <i>Divisions among MS / Burden sharing</i> | EU                | Asylum seekers / refugees; EU MS / Frontline MS | Ukraine                               | Undefined                              | EU Commission                 | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control             | Technocratic         |
| <i>Hierarchy of Asylum seekers</i>         | EU                | Asylum seekers / refugees                       | Ukraine                               | Undefined                              | EU Commission                 | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control             | Technocratic         |
| <i>Giving voice to asylum seekers</i>      | EU / Frontline MS | Asylum seekers / refugees                       | Undefined                             | Undefined (implicitly Russia)          | EU Commission                 | In favour of an EU policy solution | Decline and control | Mixed                |
| <i>All-asylum seekers equal</i>            | EU / frontline MS | Asylum seekers / refugees                       | Ukraine                               | Belarus; undefined (implicitly Russia) | EU Parliament / EU Commission | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control and Decline | Technocratic / Mixed |
| <i>Externalisation</i>                     | EU                | Asylum seekers / refugees                       | Ukraine                               | Undefined                              | EU Commission                 | In favour of an EU policy solution | Control             | Technocratic         |

Source: author's elaboration.

In the coordinative discourse, the ***Solidarity as a moral duty*** narrative remains the most used, especially by the Commission, but also by the European Parliament and the European Council. Similarly, even if the main *hero* remains the EU, many “European” heroes are mentioned, such as the Member States, the frontline states, the European people, non-EU states, and also EU agencies. The depiction of *victims* and *villains* also **embraces** the same narrative in the communicative sphere, but the EU Member States are more often identified as victims together or in alternation with the asylum seekers.

The ***Securing borders*** narrative plays an important role in the policy sphere. Compared to the communicative sphere, where this narrative was mostly employed in the European Parliament and only less in the Commission, here the European Commission emerges as the main narrator. Also, differently from the political sphere, it slightly shifts the identification of the main *victims* from the asylum seekers to the EU Member States—including frontline Member States and it is used to concretely justify the measures proposed. The narrative brings back the attention from the asylum seekers to the EU, and it insists on the risks for the Member States to “manage the flows of displaced persons fleeing from Ukraine in a controlled and effective way”. For example, the narrative focuses on the threats to those “bearing the consequences

of receiving displaced persons”, i.e., the EU Member States, and on the need to maintain “strong external borders”,<sup>55</sup> by helping “border guards manage arrivals efficiently, while maintaining a high level of security”<sup>56</sup>.

Another narrative employed more strongly in the policy rather than the political sphere is the **EU compliance/consistency** one. The available measures that the EU can use to cope with the situation are presented as not enough to “address migration challenges” because of the “urgency” of the situation. In emphasising this, the narrative often co-occurs with the *Securing borders* one when talking about the necessity to adopt measures in support of the Member States<sup>57</sup>. This narrative is widely used by the EU institutions to show how new proposals are incremental and consistent with previous EU policies. The preamble of the intermediate policy documents, i.e., those that are likely to be transformed in legislation, necessarily contextualise the proposals in line with the corpus of the existing EU legislation. Moreover, this narrative emphasises the rationality of the instruments proposed, both in terms of cost efficiency and interoperability, hinting at the intent to convince the audience that there is no waste of European resources, an aspect that is often raised in anti-EU argumentations in the national debates that the EU has tried to counter<sup>58</sup>. Not surprisingly, stories of *control* are predominant in this kind of narrative, and the EU and its agencies emerge as the uncontested *heroes*, while the *victims* are mostly the EU Member States, including frontline ones.

The **Divisions among Member States / Burden sharing** narrative in the policy sphere is mostly employed by the Commission. The objective is the same as the other sphere, i.e., to emphasise the need to take responsibility from the part of the EU and the EU MS. The EU remains the *hero* and asylum seekers and EU Member States the *victims*. The following quotation from a Commission Communication of 23 March 2022 best shows its unifying intent: “The EU is facing unprecedented challenge, and it is through collective strength that it will respond to those who need our help, in line with our values and the European way of life”<sup>59</sup>. Also, in the Commission 10-point Plan, it emphasises how the EU will share the burden with the Member States: “The efforts of Member States to address the immediate and long-term scale of this challenge will need to be supported financially at Union level<sup>60</sup>”.

The **Giving voice to asylum seekers** narrative finds a limited space in the policy debate compared to the political one. It is however worth emphasising because it is the only narrative in both the coordinative and communicative discourses that employs a mixed *style* rather than a technocratic one. It focuses on the categories of people fleeing from Ukraine (mostly children

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<sup>55</sup> European Commission. *Proposal for a COUNCIL IMPLEMENTING DECISION establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection*. Interinstitutional File: 2022/0069(NLE), Brussels: 2 March 2022.

<sup>56</sup> European Commission. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “European Solidarity with Refugees and those Fleeing the War in Ukraine”*. COM(2022) 107 final. Strasbourg: 08/03/2022.

<sup>57</sup> European Commission. *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 and Regulation (EU) No 223/2014 as regards Cohesion’s Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE)*. Brussels: 08/03/2022.

<sup>58</sup> Simic, Nikola. 2019. “Is the EU a Waste of Money?”. *European Investment Bank*. <https://www.eib.org/en/podcasts/eu-myth>

<sup>59</sup> European Commission. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “Welcoming those fleeing war in Ukraine: Ready Europe to meet the needs”*, COM(2022) 131 final. Brussels: 23/03/2022.

<sup>60</sup> European Commission. *The 10-Point Plan for Stronger European Coordination on Welcoming People Fleeing the War from Ukraine*. Brussels: 28/03/2022.

and women) and the need to safeguard their rights and needs. Like in the political sphere, this narrative differs from the one employed in the media as the *heroes* remain the European actors, while the asylum seekers are the object of action, the *victims* that need help. In this sense, *decline* is mostly emphasised but often followed by a story of having the situation under control thanks to the EU instruments.

The ***All-asylum seekers equal*** narrative also finds very limited room in the policy debate. It was retrieved only twice, once by the European Parliament in its collegiality, and once by the European Commission, emphasising the necessity to treat all asylum seekers equally, irrespective of their nationalities. The European Parliament insists on reminding:

‘All Member States of their responsibility to respect the fundamental rights of all asylum-seekers seeking safety in the Union, irrespective of their nationalities, and to stop push-backs; condemns the racism experienced by African and Middle Eastern students who have been prevented from boarding buses and trains in Ukraine to reach the border or stopped at the border and thus prevented from seeking safety’<sup>61</sup>.

Few days later, the European Commission **adapt** this narrative, by emphasising the need to treat all asylum seekers in the same way, but only referring to people fleeing the Ukraine war, not asylum seekers in general. This is particularly visible in the following quotation:

‘But there are many different categories of entrants. These include returning EU citizens, those granted international protection by Ukraine, including many Belarusians who had fled the Lukashenko regime, and students and workers from countries worldwide. It is of paramount importance that those fleeing from Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, without exception, are treated with full respect and care’<sup>62</sup>.

This passage implicitly shows the shift from the assumption that all asylum seekers are equal to the premise that on the contrary there is a ***Hierarchy of asylum seekers*** based on the country of origin or nationality. This narrative is more often reproduced in documents pertaining to the policy sphere, emphasising who is specifically able to receive temporary protection, as in European Commission’s proposal 2022/0069 (NLE) of 2 March 2022<sup>63</sup>, which provide the technical rules that define:

“Ukrainian nationals residing in Ukraine who are displaced as of 24 February 2022 following the military invasion by Russian armed forces on that date;

Third-country nationals or stateless persons legally residing in Ukraine who are displaced as of 24 February 2022 following the military invasion by Russian armed

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<sup>61</sup> European Parliament. *European Parliament Resolution of 1 March 2022 on the Russian Aggression against Ukraine (2022/2564(RSP))*. P9\_TA(2022)0052. 01/03/2022.

<sup>62</sup> European Commission. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “European Solidarity with Refugees and those Fleeing the War in Ukraine”*. COM(2022) 107 final. Strasbourg: 08/03/2022.

<sup>63</sup> European Commission. *Proposal for a COUNCIL IMPLEMENTING DECISION establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection*. Interinstitutional File: 2022/0069(NLE), Brussels: 2 March 2022.

forces on that date and who are unable to return to their country or region of origin in safe and durable conditions because of the situation prevailing in that country<sup>64</sup>.

[...]

Family members of the above two categories of people, in so far as the family already existed in Ukraine at the time of the circumstances surrounding the mass influx, regardless of whether the family member could return to his or her country of origin in safe and durable conditions<sup>65</sup>.

According to these guidelines, all those fleeing the war who are “not covered by temporary protection will receive protection and shelter, and then helped to find a safe way home”<sup>66</sup>.

In both the *All-asylum seekers equal* and the *Hierarchy of asylum seekers* narratives, the main *victims* are the asylum seekers, and the main *hero* is the EU. In terms of *villains*, the *Hierarchy of asylum seekers* narrative fails to clearly identify one—whether explicitly or implicitly—while the *All-asylum seekers equal* one blames both Russia and the Lukashenko regime in Belarus, by emphasising how also Belarusians that were granted international protection in Ukraine and are now fleeing the war are to be treated equally.

The **Externalisation** narrative is almost absent also from the coordinative discourse and it looks at role of external actors and the need to cooperate with them. It specifically refers to the EU’s assistance package (*hero*) and support to Moldova, including “support for safe passage and repatriation of third country nationals to their countries of origin from neighbouring countries”<sup>67</sup>.

## 6.5 Narratives across spheres: a comparative analysis

All documents from the political and policy spheres at the EU level present the same *moral of the story*, i.e., **they are in favour of an EU solution to the Ukraine refugee crisis**, and specifically are in favour of the activation of the automatic temporary protection. The *Solidarity as a moral duty*, *Securing borders*, *Giving voice to asylum seekers*, *Hierarchy of asylum seekers* narratives that were identified in the media arena find space both in the EU political and policy sphere. The *Double standards* narrative is replicated from the media sphere only in

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<sup>64</sup> As the text further specifies, “[t]his could include persons enjoying refugee status or equivalent protection, or who were asylum seekers in Ukraine at the time of the events leading to the mass influx. Third- country nationals who were legally residing in Ukraine on a long-term basis at the time of the events leading to the mass influx should enjoy temporary protection regardless of whether they could return to their country or region of origin in safe and durable conditions” (ivi, p. 2).

<sup>65</sup> As further detailed in the document, “[i]n line with Council Directive 2001/55, a family member is considered as the spouse of the above two categories of people or his or her unmarried partner in a stable relationship, where the legislation or practice of the Member State concerned treats unmarried couple in a way comparable to married couples under its law relating to aliens; the minor unmarried children of the of the above two categories of people or of his or her spouse, without distinction as to whether they were born in or out wedlock or adopted; other close relatives who lived together as part of the family unit at the time of the circumstances surrounding the mass influx, and who were wholly or mainly dependent of the above two categories of people” (ivi, p. 3).

<sup>66</sup> European Commission. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “European Solidarity with Refugees and those Fleeing the War in Ukraine”*. COM(2022) 107 final. Strasbourg: 08/03/2022.

<sup>67</sup> European Commission. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “European Solidarity with Refugees and those Fleeing the War in Ukraine”*. COM(2022) 107 final. Strasbourg: 08/03/2022.

the political sphere, and specifically in the European Parliament. The *Divisions among Member States/Burden sharing, All-asylum seekers equal, Externalisation, and EU compliance/consistency* narratives, that are present in both the political and policy sphere, did not find a previous correspondence in the documents of the media sphere.

The *style* is mostly **technocratic** for both spheres. Only the *Giving voice to asylum seekers narrative* in the coordinative sphere presents a prevalence of a mixed style between the technocratic and lay one.

Among the different narratives employed, the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative emerges as the most salient in all spheres and among all institutions, i.e., **the European Council, the JHA Council, the Parliament, and the Commission**. Precisely as it was employed in the media sphere at the national levels, also for the EU institutions this narrative assumes that there is a European ethos that is shared by all EU Member States and European people, and that Ukraine is considered as part of this shared community of values. Consistently, the refugees / asylum seekers are mostly<sup>68</sup> presented as the *victims* of the narration, with the EU as the predominant *hero*, and Russia as the clear *villain*<sup>69</sup>. The same categorisation of characters is generally valid for all the identified narratives, both in the political and policy spheres. Moreover, the category of refugees / asylum seekers is mostly associated with the Ukrainian nationality/residence reference, and the measures proposed and adopted consist in ad hoc solutions specifically designed to support asylum seekers fleeing Ukraine, as it was explicitly shown in the *Hierarchy of asylum seekers* narrative.

Accordingly, the underscoring *plot* of all narratives is that the EU is facing a dramatic contingent crisis because of the Russian aggression of Ukraine (*story of decline*) and that the situation might drastically deteriorate if action is not taken. At the same time, and mostly because of the gravity of the crisis, the EU is presented as having the willingness and capacity to react efficiently and coherently, so as to reduce the consequences of the war (*story of control*). While both spheres employ the plot dyad *decline-control*, the coordinative discourse **adapt** the plot to emphasise more the element of control, as the documents are more focused on the EU policy proposals and practical measures to cope with the emergency through both existing and new instrument. . Conversely, in the political sphere the objective is slightly more lenient towards showing how serious the situation is and in convincing the audience on the necessity for the EU to deploy resources.

A slight difference between spheres is also present in terms of the **pervasiveness** of narratives. While both spheres share the prevalence of the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative, the other predominant narratives in the **political sphere** are *Giving voice to asylum seekers, Securing Borders, and All-asylum seekers equal*. Conversely, the other predominant narratives in the **policy spheres** are *Securing borders, EU compliance / consistency, and Divisions among Member States / Burden sharing*, showing how the policy debate is more centred on the EU rather than on the asylum seekers, both in terms of risks for the European asylum system and of the need to employ measures that are in line with the established corpus of EU legislation. This shift is visible also in the definition of the *victims*. In the political sphere, for all

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<sup>68</sup> Sometimes, the EU Member States, and especially the frontline Member States, emerge as the victims alongside the asylum seekers.

<sup>69</sup> In most quotations, Russia is not explicitly mentioned. It is however always mentioned at least once in each document, so that even when the villain remains "undefined" in a paragraph, it implicitly refers to Russia.

narratives the main victims are the asylum seekers fleeing Ukraine. In the policy sphere, the second (*Securing borders*) and third (*EU compliance / consistency*) narrative in terms of pervasiveness both present the EU Member States as the main victims.

Other distinctions can be observed in terms of characters. In the policy sphere, for example, the depiction of the EU Member States or those at **the frontlines as victims** is widespread throughout different narratives, while in the political sphere, these portrayals are mostly employed in the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative. Moreover, the political sphere encompasses a plethora of narrators, including diverse European Parliament groups, various stakeholders from the Commission, the European Council, and even voices originating from non-European countries, such as President Zelenski of Ukraine and President Trudeau of Canada. Among these voices, the European Parliament groups are the main narrators in the communicative discourse, and especially with regards to the narratives on *Giving voices to asylum seekers*, *All-asylum seekers equal*, *Divisions among Member States*, *Externalisation*, *Double standards*, and *EU compliance/consistency*. Conversely, the European Commission is the main voice in the coordinative sphere in all narratives except for the *All-asylum seekers equal* one.

## 6.6 Circulation of narratives

The analysis has demonstrated a prevalent trend of **narrative consistency** and fluid transition from the national media to the EU level, and at the EU level between the political and policy spheres. This cohesiveness is evident not only in the substantial bipartisan agreement in support of common European solutions, but also in the swift progression of legislative procedures and the subsequent policy outcomes.

In both spheres, the **European Commission** maintains a unified position, advocating both the narrative of *Solidarity as a moral duty* and the *Securing borders* narrative. The European Union is consistently presented as having control over the situation, with a recurring narrative centred on solidarity. There is a tendency to employ stories of decline when describing the invasion and the current situation, contrasted with stories of control and progress in relation to EU measures. Regardless of the specific narrator, whether it be the Commission collectively, an individual Commissioner, Vice-Presidents, the High Representative, or the President, the European Commission has consistently addressed the matter as a unified entity. The **European Council** and the **JHA Council** exhibit a similar pattern of narrative consistency.

Divergent narratives, however, surface within the **European Parliament**, primarily in the form of resolutions proposed by parliamentary groups in the political sphere. This underscores the role of the Parliament as a platform where narratives originating at the national level, within the realms of politics, public discourse, and media, find replication, challenge, or at the very least, acknowledgment within the European Parliament.

Moreover, some narratives have circulated across all three spheres (media, political, and policy) in the forms of **embracing** and **adaptation**, while others have been **ignored** in one or more of the spheres under analysis. The *Giving voice to asylum seekers*, for example, while present in all spheres, has been **adapted** from the media to the other spheres. While the media sphere tended to emphasise the subjectivity and agency of the asylum seekers, the political



and policy spheres have shifted the focus towards the EU agency, while transforming the asylum seekers as the objects of action.

The *Double standard* narrative circulated from the media to the political sphere (in the Parliament), while it was **ignored** in the policy sphere. Conversely, the *All-asylum seekers equal* narrative was not identified in the media, but in the political and policy spheres it was **embraced** without substantial differences. Similarly, the *Externalisation*, while absent in the media, was **adapted** in its very limited circulation among the political and policy spheres. Only in one instance in the political sphere within the European Parliament this narrative proposed to externalise the responsibility to host asylum seekers to non-EU countries, while in the other cases, both in the political and policy sphere, it has **adapted** its meaning towards a synonym of international cooperation which does not imply an externalisation of responsibilities. While used in a limited way if not absent in the Ukraine case, the *Double standard* and *Externalisation* narratives offer room for reflection on how counter-discourses usually used in by two opposing political factions (left-leaning the former and right-leaning the latter) are still visible despite a united and almost unanimous approach towards the Ukraine war.

Despite these nuanced differences in the circulation of narratives, the *Solidarity as a moral duty* narrative is uncontestedly hegemon in the media, political, and policy spheres. The narrative has transited across spheres without substantial changes and has been **embraced** by all voices almost unanimously. The monopolistic pervasiveness of the narrative allows to infer some reflections related to its **transformativity**. The Temporary Protection Directive, i.e., the main policy output under analysis, was activated within days from the start of the war, with almost unprecedented multipartisan support in the field of migration management. Similarly, further operational measures were implemented with unanimous support along the timeframe considered. In this context, it is hard not to observe a correlation between the pervasiveness of the narrative in the national media, the EU political and policy spheres, and the ease with which the idea of solidarity was transformed in policy outputs. The circulation of the solidarity narrative was facilitated by the absence of concurring counter-narratives advocating against an EU solution. On the contrary, all other narratives, while expressing nuances in the form of characters, plots, and underlying assumptions, concurred in promoting a European response. Even the most divergent narrative, i.e., the *Externalisation* one, was almost completely **rejected** or still employed under the umbrella of an EU action.

What supposedly has facilitated the circulation of the solidarity narrative is the contingency of the Ukraine war. Specific reference to the categories of Ukraine nationals / residents and thus the limited scope of the policy outputs has guaranteed unanimous support without triggering a wider reflection on how to improve the Common European Asylum System—at least during the timeframe considered. As underlined by one Member of Parliament interviewed for this research<sup>70</sup>, the geopolitical dimension of the war added to the sentiment of urgency and necessity that conduced to the rapid adoption of the TPD and the subsequent measures.

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<sup>70</sup> Interview conducted by researchers from VUB-Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 19 September 2023.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The analysis carried out in this report has focused on the main narratives circulating in the EU political and policy debates, drawing on media discourses at the national level, in two specific moments: the “**refugee crisis**” in September 2015 and the activation of the **Temporary Protection Directive** in March 2022. In both cases, the EU was apparently facing unprecedented challenges to a sustainable functioning of its Common European Asylum System.

While it is beyond the scope of this report to investigate through a **comparative lens** the patterns followed by narratives in terms of pervasiveness and transformativity under circumstances so different, the analysis of the alignment/misalignment of similar narrative components in 2015 and 2022 suggests a number of thought-provoking findings and insights for further research.

First, a slight difference between the two events emerges when looking at the movement of narratives from one sphere to the other. In 2015, the competition among a significant number of diverging narratives advocating policy outcomes in favour or against an EU-wide solution has produced a **nuanced adaptation** of narrative components when moving from the political to the policy discourse. The reason behind this adaptation can be identified in the European institutions' concern to signal their alignment with the polarising narratives developed by the media (Boswell and Smellie 2023). However, the institutions then sought to frame the divergent positions expressed in public discourse into more practical and feasible policy solutions, thus slightly differentiating the narratives adopted in political communication from the policies they intended to develop. In this sense, the narrative components would be adapted to bridge the gap between these polarised views and the practicality required to achieve concrete policy outcomes.

On the contrary, the solidarity response towards Ukrainian refugees did not fuel the same amount of debate in Europe: the media, EU politicians and policy-makers tended to show a **certain degree of consistency** in pushing narratives promoting the activation of the TPD, and broadly speaking, a response based on solidarity. Outlier narratives against solidarity-inspired policies were so distant from the ideology of EU institutions vis-à-vis the Russia aggression, that they were **rejected** and **ignored**, to a point of not even appearing in political communications, seemingly confirming Boswell and Smellie's hypothesis.

This general convergence on the **Solidarity as a moral duty** narrative in 2022 was likely facilitated by the absence of a true counter-narrative. For instance, while in 2015 versions of the **Externalisation** narrative are quite present in both the political and policy debates, advocating for solutions outside Europe, the same argument is almost absent when looking at the displacement crisis from Ukraine. Overall, our research suggests that in 2022 the message of solidarity to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees has not been framed as a *migration issue* at all, facilitating its adoption in all spheres and making the search for external solutions less demanding. This reflection has key implications in terms of evaluating the success of narratives on migration, which should be further investigated.

Our analysis on 2015 seems also to corroborate the hypothesis that “increased political salience of immigration engenders more lay (including populist) narratives which governments


will be under pressure to respond to/embrace” (Boswell and Smellie 2023): in a moment of heightened public attention towards migration in September 2015, lay narratives were competing to inform key policy responses at the EU level. Interviews with EU official also underline how impactful the circulation of populist narratives on the policymaking process was in that period. A lay style could be found not only in populist narratives denouncing the consequences of migration on Europe, but also in other narratives highlighting the welcoming attitudes of European citizens, the true heroes of the story (***Solidarity as a moral duty***).

Despite the prevalence of a technocratic style in coordinative discourse (see below) and the mitigating effects of institutional factors (***Compliance with EU legislation***), lay narratives advocating against the introduction of a mandatory relocation scheme seem to have prevailed in terms of transformativity, as no such mechanism has been approved. On the contrary, ***Externalisation*** narratives have been quite successful, as the external dimension of migration and asylum policies has become the main driver of EU’s measures from that point onward, starting with the launch of the EU Emergency for Africa Trust Fund and the EU-Turkey Statement in the months immediately following our period of analysis.

The difference between the two cases is clear also when it comes to the dominant narrative in 2015, ***Divisions among Member States***, which has pervaded the political sphere and – even more so – the policy debate. In our second case, not only this previously dominant narrative appears much less relevant in the EU political and policy discourse, but it also assumes a nuanced meaning, pointing at the prevention of division among Member States on key policy solutions, and not at solving pre-existent divergences among European countries. This difference is probably explained by the broader agreement that the activation of the TPD received quite early by all relevant European stakeholders, showing the strengthened transformativity of narratives promoting a solidarity-based response.

Another insight emerging from our research revolves around the adoption of **security-inspired tones**, especially in lay narratives. The element of (in)security – usually associated with framing migration as a threat – is incorporated in different narratives adopted in both spheres at the EU level in 2015 (*Securing borders*; *Externalisation*). However, seven years later a comparable *Securing borders* narrative, while present, does not employ the tones of an “invasion” and does not depict the refugees as threats, even if concretely it aims at similar solutions: stronger border security and a stricter application of the rules for granting the refugee status. Overall, in both cases a technocratic style emerges as dominant when narratives reach the policymaking domain, with a minimal presence of lay and populist narrative components. The research thus underscores, at least partially, the initial hypothesis of BRIDGES on the decoupling between rhetorical commitment of policymakers to populist narratives from a more evidence-based approach in the development of policies.

While these concluding glimpses at a comparative analysis provide a number of interesting insights into elements contributing to the success of certain narratives in specific moments, this study cannot (and does not intend to) conclusively establish whether and to what extent there was an actual causality in the impact from one sphere on the other, and from one event to the other. Rather, the main objective has been to encourage reflections on the potential dynamics behind the reshaping of narratives as they move in different spheres, without determining their specific direction. Nonetheless, the presence of recurrent traits in narratives



in both cases, still characterised by nuanced, if not divergent, meanings, surely deserves further investigation.

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## Appendix 1. Codebook

| GROUP                          | CODE  |
|--------------------------------|---|
| SPHERE                         | Coordinative<br>Communicative   |
| SET-NARRATOR:<br>JHA COUNCIL   | JHA Collegial<br>JHA Individual- President<br>JHA Individual- Other   |
| SET-NARRATOR:<br>EU COMMISSION | COM Collegial<br>COM Individual- President<br>COM Individual- Commissioner<br>COM Individual- Other   |
| SET-NARRATOR:<br>EU COUNCIL    | EUR COUN Collegial<br>EUR COUN Individual- President<br>EUR COUN Individual- Other<br>EUR COUN All MS of EU-28 / EU-27  |
| SET-NARRATOR:<br>EU PARLIAMENT | PARL Collegial<br>PARL Individual- President<br>PARL Individual- MP<br>PARL Individual- Other<br>PARL Group (EPP)<br>PARL Group (S&D)<br>PARL Group (Renew/exALDE)<br>PARL Group (Greens)<br>PARL Group (ID/exENF)<br>PARL Group (ECR)<br>PARL Group (GUE-NGL)<br>PARL Group (EFDD)<br>PARL Group (Non-Inscrits)<br>PARL Other (specify)*   |
| SET-CONTEXT                    | N.A. (descriptive à including where/when)   |
| SET-GENRE                      | Communicative/Press release<br>Communicative/Speech<br>Communicative/Statement<br>Communicative/Remark<br>Communicative/Address<br>Communicative/Motion<br>Coordinative/Proposal<br>Coordinative/Communication<br>Coordinative/Recommendation<br>Coordinative/Action plan & guidelines<br>Coordinative/Statement<br>Coordinative/Conclusions<br>Coordinative/Decision<br>Coordinative/Resolution<br>Coordinative/Regulation |



|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | Coordinative/Directive   |
| PLOT- Stories of Change                    | <p>Story of decline</p> <p>Story of decline (stymied progress)</p> <p>Story of decline (illusory progress)</p> <p>Story of rising/progress</p> <p>Other</p>  |
| PLOT- Stories of Power                     | <p>Story of helplessness</p> <p>Story of control</p> <p>Story of control (conspiracy)</p> <p>Story of control (blame-the-victim)</p> <p>Other</p>  |
| MORAL OF THE STORY                         | <p>Support to EU policy</p> <p>Against EU policy</p> <p>Other</p>  |
| STYLE                                      | <p>Lay</p> <p>Technocratic</p> <p>Mixed (lay/technocratic)</p> <p>Other</p>  |
| CHARACTER/ROLE:<br>Hero / Villain / Victim | <p>EU</p> <p>EU MS</p> <p>EU MS (all)</p> <p>EU MS (some)</p> <p>EU Agencies</p> <p>European people</p> <p>Frontline MS</p> <p>Asylum Seekers / Refugees</p> <p>Migrants</p> <p>Non-EU states</p> <p>Belarus</p> <p>Russia</p> <p>Smugglers/traffickers</p> <p>National authorities</p> <p>Undefined</p> |
| CHARACTER/ AGE                             | <p>Old</p> <p>Adult</p> <p>Child</p> <p>Other</p>  |
| CHARACTER/GENDER                           | <p>Male</p> <p>Female</p> <p>Other</p>   |
| CHARACTER/OTHER                            | <p>Class</p> <p>Profession</p> <p>Family</p>   |
| CHARACTER/<br>ETHNICITY-<br>NATIONALITY    | <i>descriptive</i>   |

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|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| MACRO-NARRATIVE | Relocation and resettlement as a pull factor<br>Securing borders<br>Solidarity as a moral duty<br>Divisions among Member States / Burden Sharing<br>Giving voice to asylum seekers<br>Hierarchy of asylum seekers<br>All-asylum seekers equal<br>Externalisation / International solidarity and cooperation<br>Double standards<br>EU consistency / Compliance with EU legislation |
|-----------------|--|

## Appendix 2. Interviews

| <b>Code</b> | <b>Organisation/Role</b>   | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Date</b>       |
|-------------|--|---------------|-------------------|
| EU_I_1      | European Parliament,<br>MEP (EPP)  | Woman         | 19 September 2023 |
| EU_I_2      | Council of the EU,<br>Official   | Man           | 01 September 2023 |
| EU_I_3      | Luxemburgish civil service,<br>Civil servant                                     | Man           | 15 September 2023 |
| EU_I_4      | Slovakian civil service,<br>Civil servant  | Man           | 31 August 2023    |
| EU_I_5      | European Commission,<br>Stefano Manservisi (former DG<br>DEVCO Director general) | Man           | 15 September 2023 |
| EU_I_6      | European Commission,<br>DG HOME Official   | Woman         | 19 September 2023 |
| EU_I_7      | Justice and Home Affairs Council,<br>JHA Counsellor of EU Member State           | Man           | 23 September 2023 |
| EU_I_8      | European Commission,<br>DG HOME Official   | Woman         | 29 September 2023 |
| EU_I_9      | European Commission,<br>DG HOME Official   | Man           | 29 September 2023 |

## Appendix 3. Primary sources: Case 1 (2015)

### EU Political sphere documents

#### Council of the EU (JHA)

1. \_\_\_\_ (2015, September 14). Relocation of 40 000 refugees from Greece and Italy agreed by Council. [Press release]. Brussels.

#### European Commission

\_\_\_\_ (2015, September 4). Opening Remarks of First Vice-President Frans Timmermans and Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos at Kos Press Conference. [Speech]. Brussels.

2. \_\_\_\_ (2015, September 7). Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos following his visit to Austria. [Speech]. Vienna.
3. \_\_\_\_ (2015, September 9). Refugee Crisis: European Commission takes decisive action. [Press release]. Strasbourg.
4. \_\_\_\_ (2015, September 13). European Commission Statement following the temporary reintroduction of border controls by Germany, particularly at the German-Austrian border. [Statement]. Brussels.
5. \_\_\_\_ (2015, September 14). Statement of the European Commission following the Extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council. [Statement]. Brussels.
6. \_\_\_\_ (2015, September 15). European Commission Statement following the temporary reintroduction of border controls by Austria, particularly at the Hungarian-Austrian border. [Statement]. Brussels.
7. \_\_\_\_ (2015, September 17). Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos during his visit to Hungary. [Speech]. Budapest.
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11. \_\_\_ (2015, September 23). Managing the refugee crisis: Immediate operational, budgetary and legal measures under the European Agenda on Migration [Press release]. Brussels.
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# BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

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

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