Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives: **BRIDGES key findings**

Berta Güell and Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas (Coord.)

BRIDGES

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1. An introduction to the BRIDGES project: towards a holistic understanding of the production and impact of migration narratives

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Interpretations are what determine responses much more than raw facts. This is true in all societal fields but in migration this is particularly evident. Despite the undisputable relevance of numbers for migratory processes and their consequences, interpretations are more and more related to broader problems such as anxiety about states' perceived inability to control migration; fears about national identity and core values; or concerns about growing socioeconomic inequalities. Regardless of more evidence-based technocratic accounts, these anxieties often lead to symbolic policy decisions with major political and societal consequences. A paradigmatic example of the importance of narratives on migration is the different response to the European 2015 and 2022 refugee crises. While in 2015 Europe said enough after few months and a little bit more than one million refugees, in 2022 more than 5 million refugees were not even perceived as a crisis and temporary protection was immediately given on a collective basis. The different responses had to do with different interpretations about geographic and cultural proximity but also about whose war (in Syria and Ukraine) was perceived to be.

To understand how facts turn into narratives and narratives into individual and collective responses, BRIDGES focused on the causes and consequences of migration narratives, thus we looked not only at migration narratives as such but also and particularly at the processes behind. With this purpose, we coined the concept of 'migration narrative success' (MNS), which refers to the capacity of a particular narrative to become dominant over others (for a detailed explanation of the concept, see Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore

2022). MNS includes two dimensions: first, the narrative's capacity to colonise the specific communication sphere where (and for which) it was originated to spill over to other spheres, for instance from traditional media and social media or between media and politics (what we called pervasiveness); and second, the narrative's capacity to actually shape attitudes or behaviours, at the individual or collective level (called transformativity). Starting from the concept of MNS, our key question was under what conditions particular narratives become more successful, compelling or enduring than others and to what extent what is said, how, by whom and to whom, when and where explain part of this success.

WE LOOKED AT THE PROCESSES BEHIND NARRATIVE PRODUCTION AND IMPACT. AS FOR NARRATIVE PRODUCTION, WE EXAMINED HOW NARRATIVES DEVELOP IN MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

With this purpose, we looked at the processes behind narrative production and impact. As for narrative production, we examined how narratives develop in media and social media. Our goal was not only to identify the main dominant migration narratives but more in general to explore which storytellers are key, what circumstances favour the emergence of certain narratives and how these stories spread within and across media spheres. In terms of narrative production, BRIDGES also looked at the role of alternative voices and their capacity to challenge, bunker or displace exclusionary narratives. Here too our purpose was not only to map the main narratives but to understand actors' strategies and identify the main success factors. Finally, we have also considered under what conditions narratives have emerged and gained traction in the political debate. A key question here was to explain the increasing dominance of popular and "lay" narratives, characterised by simplistic and emotive accounts, over more technocratic narratives.

As for narrative impact, to which we dedicated the second part of the project, BRIDGES analysed how narratives determine individual attitudes and policy responses. In particular, this led us to consider how individuals receive and process different (and often contradictory) narratives. Making use of experimental methodologies and from a social psychological perspective, we have explored the transformative power of testimonial narratives about immigration and their capacity to influence how we feel and think about migration. The project also looked at the impact of EU-funded information campaigns on the decision-making processes of potential migrants. The question was not only to consider whether these campaigns reach their declared goals (i.e., deter irregular migrants) but particularly how their messages interrelate with local narratives on migration and Europe. The final purpose was to understand the weight of different narratives in the final decision to migrate. Finally, the project has also looked at how narratives shape policy responses. A key question in this case was whether narratives in public

political debate and policymaking diverged – from more divisive and populist narratives to more technocratic accounts – and what this meant in terms of policy responses.

Apart from enhancing the understanding of the processes behind migration narratives, BRIDGES aimed as well to contribute to the co-creation of alternative textual and visual narratives together with civil society organisations as well as artistic and media actors, with particular attention to the inclusion of migrants' voices. With this purpose, we produced a multi-language toolkit with key rules for civil society organisations on how to build alternative and more inclusive narratives with capacity to change public debates. We also organised the photojournalist exhibition Out of Frame to reflect on the role of photojournalism in reiterating or subverting dominant media narratives on migration. During the last year of the project, we organised a two-fold Hip Hop contest, involving an open international call for a mural painter and another for a rap singer. Hip Hop was chosen as an expression of urban culture, often linked to marginalised groups with an immigrant background and with strong power of social transformation.

APART FROM ENHANCING THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROCESSES BEHIND MIGRATION NARRATIVES, BRIDGES AIMED TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE CO-CREATION OF ALTERNATIVE TEXTUAL AND VISUAL NARRATIVES TOGETHER WITH CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AS WELL AS ARTISTIC AND MEDIA ACTORS.

All this would not have been possible without building bridges (therefore the project acronym) between different areas of knowledge and methodologies, by adopting an interdisciplinary research approach and involving experts from disciplines as diverse as Political Science, Media Studies, Sociology, History and Social Psychology. But we had to build conceptual and methodological bridges also between different stages of narrative development, including the analysis of narrative production and its impact on individuals and policymaking. Finally, the project created bridges between research and practice, by involving researchers, policymakers, cultural associations, journalists, civil society organisations and migrant communities in the project activities. The attempt to build all these bridges translated into a strong consortium of 12 partners, including 8 academic institutions, 2 policy-oriented think tanks and 2 civil society organisations.

We write this publication at the end of the project. It has been three very intensive years, full of interesting discussions, research and mutual learning. This publication has a two-fold objective. First, to summarise the main take-aways of the project for a broader audience, from policymakers and civil society actors to interested citizens, migrants and non-migrants alike. The main academic findings and the more theoretical discussions and contributions are being gathered in a Special Issue to be published in the coming months. Second, this publication is also an invitation for the reader to

go to the more in-depth BRIDGES publications and outputs, consisting of 32 Working Papers with national and comparative results, 3 policy briefs, a paper with guidelines on how to include the gender perspective in the analysis of migration narratives, 7 op-eds reflecting on more pressing issues connected to current public and political debates, a toolkit on how to create more inclusive narratives and several multimedia outputs, from 9 infographics to 11 videos and 3 podcasts. All this with the strong belief and wish that our project helps to enhance more inclusive and informed debates on migration in a moment when increasing polarisation, xenophobic stances and highly symbolic policies threaten to prevail.

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BRIDGES Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

IN A NUTSHELL

Who we are and what are our goals

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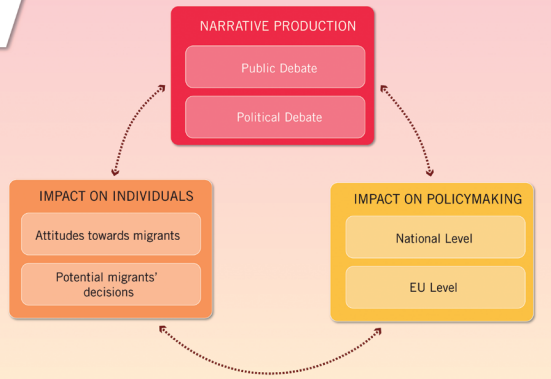
BRIDGES is an EU-funded research project partnered by 12 universities, think tanks, research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations, involving more than 45 experts.

Building BRIDGES between:

- Areas of knowledge and methodologies
- The study of narratives' production and impact
- Research and practice on migration issues

Why some narratives become dominant over others?



MAIN GOALS

The project aims to understand the production and impact of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues, with an interdisciplinary and co-production approach.

ACADEMIC
Analysing why some narratives become dominant over others in the public sphere

POLICY
Fostering evidence-based policy decisions on migration issues

SOCIAL
Creating spaces for dialogue between the actors involved in narrative production

MAJOR OUTPUTS

Publications
Working Papers
Policy Briefs
Gender Guidelines
Toolkit for CSOs

Events
Policy-oriented events
Stakeholder workshops
Webinars & public talks
Final Conference

Multimedia
Podcasts
Videos
Infographics

Co-production
Muralism contest
Rap music contest
Photojournalism exhibit

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101004564.

2. Crafting narratives of migrants within the limitations of the media system

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Understanding the stories we hear about migration – and how they are produced – is crucial, as they shape the way we think and feel about people on the move. To unravel this narrative engine, in Work Package 3 (WP3) we conducted an in-depth study across six countries – Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the UK. Our goal was not only to identify common narratives (What) but also to explore what circumstances favour the emergence of certain narratives (When), how these stories spread (Where), and which storytellers are key (Who). In this way, the complex interplay of factors behind narratives shaping public perceptions and policy discussions on migration can be appreciated.

What: Types of stories

Most research on migration narratives lumps everything together, but migration stories are tailored to specific situations. We grouped them into three categories: stories about refugees arriving, debates on migrant rights, and narratives following terror attacks involving migrants as victims or as alleged perpetrators. Each of these has its own set of constraints and opportunities for storytelling.

Refugee arrival stories: The 'problem for Us' and 'problem for Them'

When it comes to refugees arriving in a new country, the most common narrative is framed as a threat. People often see refugees as a challenge to the economy, security, legality, social cohesion, and health – a 'problem for us.' On the flip side, there is another narrative that paints refugees as victims, facing suffering, rights violations, or racism – a 'problem for them.' Sometimes, the story takes a middle ground, presenting migration as a problem

for both the host society and refugees, blaming a third country or migrant smugglers. This approach calls for a 'rational' solution, distancing itself from arguments about human rights or threats. Positive stories about migration are rare, mostly highlighting people in the receiving society doing good for refugees. In contrast, refugees are often portrayed as out-of-control masses or groups, either involved in negative behaviour or as passive victims. Metaphors of natural disasters, war, and border violations are frequently used.

Debates on migrants' rights: Cultural angles and negative consequences

In discussions about migrants' rights, similar themes emerge, but there is a twist. People with a foreign background are less often seen as victims and more as beneficiaries or profiteers. Despite debates usually starting from proposals for restrictive measures, European media and politics often overlook or downplay the negative consequences of such laws. Nativist and cultural perspectives that draw boundaries of belonging take centre stage in some countries. Even when narratives paint a positive picture of the majority helping migrants, the focus is often on assimilation or tolerance, implying a negative view of cultural diversity. An implicit intersection of origin, religion, and gender is used to revisit the theme of the threat posed by male (Muslim) immigrants to white women and European values of gender equality. The lack of high-profile events and consequences commanding the chronicle of ongoing events on the ground makes debates receptive to public initiatives promoted by the media, politicians, or activists, giving birth to narratives that can change the conversation.

Narratives after terror attacks: Making sense of catastrophe

When it comes to narratives following terror attacks, there is a different structure. These stories focus on the impact, attempts to make sense of the catastrophe, overcoming trauma, and preventing similar incidents. Explanations and proposed solutions play a crucial role here. Explanations can be 'strategic,' linking the catastrophe to a general issue related to immigration, or 'tactic,' linking it to specific circumstances unrelated to wider issues. Solutions can be 'Them-oriented,' concentrating on ways to police, restrict, or repress the attackers' milieu, or 'Us-oriented,' magnifying or promoting cooperation, solidarity, and heroism. In jihadist terror attacks, strategic explanations and Them-oriented solutions often go hand in hand, aligning with the dominant security paradigm. These become the preferred frames of right-wing politicians, newspapers, and social media users, while moderate or liberal politicians and newspapers tend to balance tactic and strategic explanations and Us- and Them-oriented solutions. In the white supremacist attack in Italy, however, Them-oriented solutions and strategic explanations were used to target and blame the victims' background, not the community of the attacker, and tactic explanations (such as the

assailant's 'madness' or personal issues) were unusually widespread, somehow absolving the sin of the son of the nation. Terror attacks, disrupting normality and violating the intangibility of territory, call for the re-establishment of symbolic order. A common reaction is the reaffirmation of the national ideal, contrasting it with the counter-identity of the enemy and embracing master narratives of the nation's values that reproduce its cultural identity. The emotional resonance of exceptional, dramatic incidents makes narratives originating in that context powerful symbols available for storytellers in other times, places, and sub-genres.

When: The impact of context

While power dynamics strongly influence narrative production, circumstances also play a role in determining dominant stories. A crisis, like a dramatic episode during refugee arrivals or a terror attack, could potentially lead to new and transformative narratives challenging the usual approach to immigration and asylum. However, unexpectedness and disruption alone are not enough to bring in new narrative directions. The legal and symbolic framework of Fortress Europe, which distinguishes between community members and those who do not belong, continues to favour narratives in the threat frame. Terror attacks, elevating the incumbent government to the role of protector of its citizens, further strengthen this frame. The rise of populist and right-wing parties and movements makes politicians wary of appearing 'weak' and losing the support of a perceived 'intolerant' public opinion. For many, the alternative seems to be either capitalizing on fear or advocating for 'reasonable,' 'rational,' technocratic solutions that fuel narratives in the hybrid frame. This frame acknowledges migrants as victims but insists on keeping them at bay.

THE LEGAL AND SYMBOLIC FRAMEWORK OF FORTRESS EUROPE, WHICH DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND THOSE WHO DO NOT BELONG, CONTINUES TO FAVOUR NARRATIVES IN THE THREAT FRAME.

Where: Platform specificities and flows

Different platforms for narrative dissemination vary in the kind of narratives they convey and how they interact with each other. The main factor influencing narratives amplified by newspapers is political orientation. TV news, on the other hand, is more consistent across channels, with a particular inclination towards emotive reporting. Social media, often stereotyped as a breeding ground for xenophobia and conspiracy theories, presents a polarized site of political contestation. Messages arousing high-activation passions, whether anti- or pro-immigrant, are favoured by algorithmic selection. However, social media rarely introduces new narratives. Instead, it often serves as a contentious, if often ironic, rebuttal – or alternatively, a simple replication – of traditional media narratives. Traditional media, in turn, remediates social network content according to its own news values and hierarchy of access. They pick up iconic

stories, quote political actors and celebrities, and even report about everyday people's messages, especially when they embody the national community reacting in solidarity to a terrorist attack, rallying in the streets, or indulging in hate speech. Besides these scripted roles, non-accredited voices are often ignored by newspapers or TVs. Even when users on Twitter and Facebook coalesce into a grassroots networked framing, collectively telling their version of the story, they are overlooked by traditional media.

Who: The faces of storytelling

In the hierarchy of news media access, politicians take centre stage as the primary disseminators of narratives, often shaping the vocabulary surrounding migration. In contrast, immigrants and people on the move, who are central to the events studied, rarely find themselves as narrators, especially when expressing opinions. Social media presents a more diverse range of voices, with activists and celebrities playing significant roles, while migrants remain notably absent. Politicians are prominent but not always dominant. Among them, right-wing political leaders are a staple of mainstream and digital platforms, exerting a lasting influence in discussions. Their strategies, characterized by organization, funding, message coherence, and events creation, set them apart as 'political entrepreneurs of security.' In contrast, 'political entrepreneurs of rights,' including NGOs and migrant advocates, face resource challenges. People with an immigrant background, especially those on the move, cannot imagine similar possibilities. On top of that, journalists not only find it difficult to access victims of dramatic incidents during arrivals but tend to consider them not reliable enough, relying instead on established organizations and institutions.

The agency of actors is probably the most important factor in steering the direction of narratives. Political statements, decisions by governments and judicial bodies, deliberate media activation, and even powerless actors taking to the streets or challenging the status quo can bring narratives to new places. Additionally, the novelty of an event and the originality of a previously silenced point of view can challenge dominant storytelling. However, frame reversal (where the incident is retold with opposite implications) and frame crystallization (a new synthesis that allows business-as-usual to continue) are always lurking, possibly taking storytelling back to the customary rhetoric.

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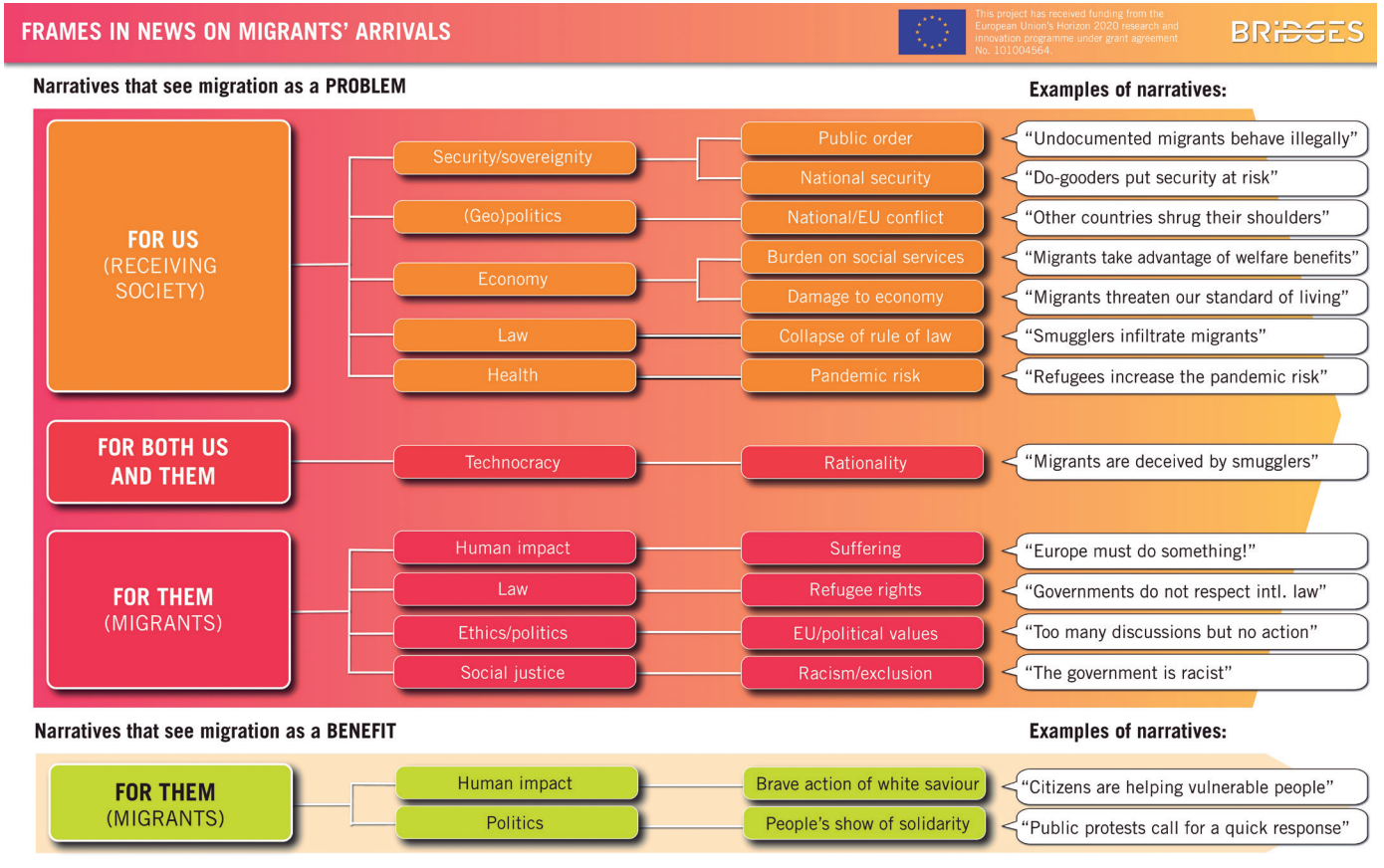

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NO-ONE IS
ILLEGAL
HUMANS NOT NUMB
STOP I
PEOPLE
NEED H

3. Innovative strategies against exclusionary narratives

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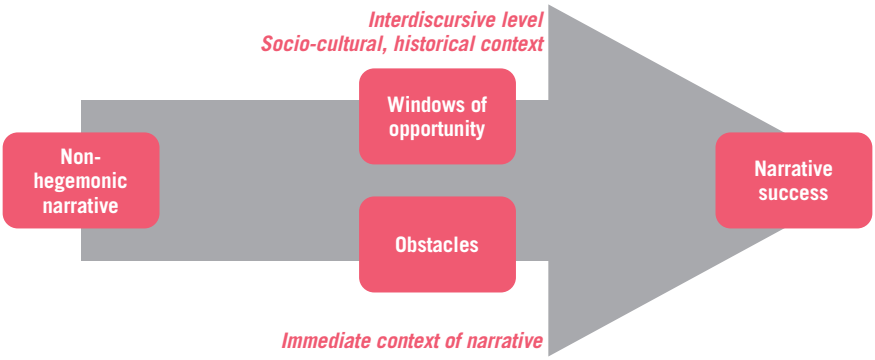
Alternative narratives can seem difficult to hear amid the overwhelmingly negative discourse surrounding migration. This is a problem inasmuch as less dominant and less foregrounded narratives are crucial to an inclusive democracy, hearing the voices of marginalised groups and individuals beyond paternalistic structures and practices of benevolently 'speaking on their behalf' and generously 'giving them a voice'. Often, such alternative narratives are tied to the voices of those with less power, resources or access to the media. Pluralist societies benefit from the diversification of narratives, from the challenging of hegemonic narratives by counter-narratives. Liberal democracy and public discourse need the broad participation of all parts of the population in order to develop solutions to pressing issues that, ultimately, have high levels of legitimacy across economic, cultural, religious or ethnic cleavages. An important part in this is the work NGOs are doing in developing and fostering alternative migration narratives as well as actively countering xenophobic narratives.

In Work Package 4 (WP4), our research into alternative migration narratives from 2015 onwards highlighted key narratives as well as those who develop and foster them (civil society organisations, NGOs, ethnic immigrant minorities, etc.) in Germany, Italy and Spain. Our work began by identifying and mapping organisations that were founded during or after the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 and understanding their aims and motives, organisational structure, resources, communicative strategies and narrative deployment as well as alliances.

The mappings of the three countries encompassed a total of 44 initiatives (14 for Germany, 15 for Italy,

15 for Spain) for three distinct sub-genres 'arrivals and management of borders', 'citizenship, regularisation and integration', and 'terrorism and violent attacks' (Güell 2023; Pogliano and Frisina 2023; Rheindorf 2023). In choosing the 6 initiatives for in-depth case studies (2 per country), we coordinated across participating countries to ensure that (a) different kinds of organisations would be covered and (b) initiatives with high impact and narrative success would be analysed. The analyses show that (1) such narratives, even when they arise from marginalized positions, have a chance of succeeding, (2) that there is more than one way for narratives to achieve success, and (3) that there are exogenous and intrinsic factors that make such success more likely. The dynamics of this process through non-hegemonic narratives are hindered or facilitated by obstacles and windows of opportunity, respectively, and are situated in a multi-level contextual space, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1: Narrative success in context



Source: Own elaboration

"Running into a wall"

The cross-country results (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023) reveal that civil society initiatives and NGOs have a wide range of innovative/alternative ideas, strategies, and narratives to work with, but that activism often ends with the lack of political will or financial resources, thus leading to shrinking capacities (burned out), frustration and resignation (little or no change). The phrase "running into political or administrative walls" adequately captures this impression but also highlights the significance of strategies to mobilise, co-opt or make allies of existing political/administrative structures, as in the case of *Seebrücke's* Safe Havens network in Germany.

Mobilising, combining or bundling forces – as in the prominent cases of *Seebrücke*, or *Stop Mare Mortum* and *RegularizaciónYa* in Spain – is a decisive factor for their success. Larger and highly diverse platforms are often sluggish, prone to dissolve or become unmanageable due to internal conflict, lengthy deliberation or other features of their structures. Strategies for mitigating these risks are crucial to the resilience of such organisations and the narratives they produce. In their own ways, all initiatives studied have struggled with these obstacles, either because they forged tenuous alliances between pre-existing organisations that eventually faltered (e.g., the Italian platform *Io Accolgo*) or because they bypassed pre-existing organisations to tap into local potentials of activism (*Seebrücke*). Either strategy represents a challenge and requires familiarity with the local political and societal structures as well as communication skills. However, it can work extremely well in situations that seem like a dead-end, political stalemates that have not moved in years, or highly polarised debates.

Bottom-up organising and mobilising – i.e., from local to regional to national levels – can be an effective way to communicate more directly and successfully in local contexts than a fixed national campaign. This does not require the complete absence of centralised structures in the NGOs; working groups or committees may coordinate local chapters, provide cohesion at the national level, and facilitate exchanging experience. Ultimately, the combination of bottom-up and top-down forms of organising is exemplified by *Seebrücke's* agile management and communication strategies as well as its flexible approach to migration narratives, combined with key centralised elements and steering practices.

"For the right reasons"

As diverse as they are, the intrinsic drivers behind all initiatives studied might be summarised under the heading of social injustice, albeit at several distinct levels: privileges held (and jealously guarded) by an autochthonous population or the white/European population; mismatch between demographic realities and their representation in democratic, social or media structures; discriminatory laws and policies; and, behind this, ignorance or lack of awareness that fuels or underpins stereotypes, xenophobia and racism; political apathy and inaction in the face of injustice or suffering; the tendency to look away rather than face uncomfortable truths.

"Crucial decisions about who can represent"

We found critical success factors regarding the membership composition and/or its perception from the outside, in relation to the specific aims and strategies of the initiatives. Apart from highly relevant ethical considerations

of, e.g., who speaks for or on behalf of migrants, representing an organisation, we noted the strategic effect of membership composition: a predominantly white/autochthonous membership may be beneficial to reaching a particular goal, if it matches the communicative strategies used (as exemplified by *Seebrücke*), but would be a major stumbling block in other cases. Conversely, a predominantly migrant membership may be crucial to authentic and persuasive representation and positionality, if it matches the initiative's aims and strategies (as exemplified by *RegularizaciónYa*).

"Windows of opportunity"

INITIATIVES NEED TO CAREFULLY SELECT AND COMBINE ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES TO WORK WITHIN A SPECIFIC NATIONAL CONTEXT AND POLITICAL MOMENT. THIS MAY INVOLVE STRATEGICALLY FOREGROUNDING ONE TYPE OF NARRATIVE FOR A PERIOD OF TIME, WHILE BACKGROUND MORE THE OTHER TYPE.

A third important finding indicates that windows of opportunity are critical success factors regarding the timing of narrative production. When windows of opportunity present themselves, being able to seize them quickly and effectively may depend on having at one's disposal the necessary resources. Keeping the momentum of success seems equally related to capacities and funding; many initiatives face the threat of 'fizzling out' after initial successes or once their initial window of opportunity closes. Thus, it is important to distinguish time-sensitive opportunities from structural ones, and to strategise accordingly.

"Stories that fit the context"

Regarding the content of migration narratives, initiatives need to carefully select and combine alternative narratives and counter-narratives to work within a specific national context and political moment. This may involve strategically foregrounding one type of narrative for a period of time, while background more the other type; for example, a visionary counter-narrative about achieving long-term change globally may need to be backgrounded – but still retained – in order to achieve immediate narrative success with a short-term-oriented alternative narrative, or vice versa.

In conclusion, we note that alternative, more inclusive narratives as well as more inclusive discursive practices, launched and propagated from non-hegemonic positions, can be successful under specific conditions and using context-aware strategies in windows of opportunity as they arise. This is precisely why there is no one-size-fits-all approach to successful campaigns, making it difficult to discern such patterns. A cross-European perspective, although limited to case studies, demonstrates the value of understanding national contexts in developing communicative strategies for non-hegemonic narratives on migration.

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4. Breaking down walls: The impact of immigrants' personal stories on our views about migration

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It seems that both informal and formal discussions on the topic of immigration often lead to heated debates, especially among people holding different ideologies and points of view. This is not surprising given that narratives about migration (e.g., news stories, political debates, testimonies on social media, etc.) that fuel stereotypes and negative views about migrants have become so ubiquitous. In this context, it is vital to understand how immigrants' own personal stories bring back a sense of humanity, as these stories can help us connect with these individuals, their experiences, and their particular ways of seeing the world.

As part of Work Package 5 (WP5), in two online social psychological experiments conducted in Spain and Hungary (Pizarro et al., 2023), we have explored the transformative power of testimonial narratives about immigration and their effects on how we feel and think. The results of these studies provide us with revealing insights that can help us better understand the lives of migrants, transform our attitudes, and also, bridge the gap between different points of view.

The good, the bad and… The hero? The character does matter

Some immigration stories or accounts leave us with a bad taste in the mouth, as we may feel pity, impotence, or anger for what is being told and the social meaning of it (e.g., when reading about institutional abuses to immigrants). Other stories, however, might touch our soul in a very positive way, as they inspire us or elicit positive emotions (e.g., when hearing about overcoming of strong adversities). It is important to ask why this happens and what effects these narrated accounts have.

Our research shows that when we come across immigration testimonies (vs. informational news reporting, for instance), a process of identification with the story's protagonist happens, and we see their story from their point of view. Moreover, when we immerse ourselves in a testimonial story, a chain of emotional reactions kicks in, and all these processes bring about interesting attitudinal effects.

In the experiments we conducted, participants read the testimony of an immigrant and the struggles the protagonist endured to find a job and maintain their family. Importantly, the testimonies varied in terms of three types of features: (1) what was made salient (i.e., focusing on a person who either took advantage of social assistance programs, was a victim of discrimination, or showed great resilience in the face of adversities), (2) who told the story (first-person or third-person), and (3) the country of origin of the protagonist (high vs low stigma). Across both experiments, we found that reading testimonies of immigrants suffering discrimination or overcoming various adversities had a particularly strong power to connect the reader with the protagonist of these stories. That is, when the story's theme deals with injustices and resilience (vs. profiteering social assistance programs), we identify ourselves with the immigrant protagonist and start seeing the world from their perspective. What is more, the effects of these testimonies were not limited to this type of connection; these types of stories also influenced the readers' attitudes and behavioural intentions. Specifically, readers who felt a stronger connection with the protagonist of the story were more likely to share this story with others on the internet, to volunteer their time, and to contribute financially to help all migrants. This is of particular importance, as these results show that exposure to a single immigrant's story has positive effects that extend to an entire social group – in this case, to *all* immigrants.

READERS WHO FELT A STRONGER CONNECTION WITH THE PROTAGONIST OF THE STORY WERE MORE LIKELY TO SHARE THIS STORY WITH OTHERS ON THE INTERNET, TO VOLUNTEER THEIR TIME, AND TO CONTRIBUTE FINANCIALLY TO HELP ALL MIGRANTS.

The domino effect: How your feelings affect your thoughts and intentions

A significant aspect of the results from both of our studies is the presence of a domino effect. This effect starts with the way we connect with the protagonist, and involves how we feel, what we think and, eventually, how we want to help. First, the framing of the testimony directly affects how we feel. For example, a story that shows clear examples of discrimination and victimisation can make you intensely angry while also increasing your empathy for the person suffering these injustices. On the other hand, a story of heroism and overcoming adversity can generate self-transcendent emotions, such as making you feel moved and in awe. In both cases, these effects lead to attitudinal changes involving more positive views towards migrants and greater intentions to help them.

But there is more: Our results show that the stronger you identify with the protagonist, the more deeply you think about this person and their story, and the less counterarguments you think of in processing the story. In other words, it is as if our brain focuses on the story with greater attention and does not engage in any counterarguments. This means that even if the information in the testimony is new, surprising, or unpleasant, you still pay close attention to it and recognize its value.

What does it take to make a successful testimonial?

Another important finding relates to the narrative voice used and the cultural origin of the protagonist of the testimony, what we would call 'narrative devices'. The pattern of our results was clear: whether a testimony was told in the first or third person, and whether it included immigrants from more or less stigmatised ethnic/national origins (e.g., either from Morocco or Ecuador, and either from Syria or Ukraine, for the Spanish and Hungarian experiments, respectively), the pattern of results did not vary. It seems then that what is key in how immigrant testimonials affect us is the theme of the story told by the protagonist, and the protagonist's own behavioural characteristics. In other words, the narrative framing of a protagonist as a victim or a hero, in contrast to the framing of a protagonist as an abuser of social welfare programs.

WHAT IS KEY IN HOW IMMIGRANT TESTIMONIALS AFFECT US IS THE THEME OF THE STORY TOLD BY THE PROTAGONIST, AND THE PROTAGONIST'S OWN BEHAVIOURAL CHARACTERISTICS.

Indeed, the fact that neither the narrative voice nor the cultural origin has an impact on the readers might seem somewhat counter-intuitive. It certainly forces us to rethink preconceived ideas we might have about how narratives influence our opinions. Nonetheless, the results suggest that it is more important to create compelling, memorable narratives that move individuals to connect with the protagonist. Who is telling the story (1st or 3rd person) or the cultural group of the protagonist seem rather secondary.

The readers of testimonials

Finally, our studies have uncovered fascinating insights into who is most captivated by the testimonials and why. By studying a diverse and large group of people across Spain and Hungary, we have discovered some intriguing patterns.

It is not just about your political views. What really matters is how often you interact with people from different backgrounds and your underlying attitudes. We found that those who regularly interact with stigmatized groups, such as

people from other cultures or ethnic backgrounds, and who generally hold less prejudice towards immigrants, are the ones most deeply drawn into these stories. Additionally, it is the outgoing and curious individuals, and naturally more open to new experiences, those who build the strongest connections with the narratives and their characters. And here is something noteworthy: being prone to negative emotions like fear, anxiety, or worry – a trait known as neuroticism – does not seem to influence how we engage with these stories. In short, our engagement with narratives is shaped not just by the story itself, but by who we are, by who we know and how we view others. It is a fascinating glimpse into the power of storytelling and our diverse responses to it.

Focusing on what is important: What can be done with this?

To conclude, we consider it relevant to underline important considerations derived from these studies. For this reason, we would like to speak to everyone who produces narratives about migration and, additionally, to those who consume, read, and distribute them. Among them, we can list NGOs, journalists, politicians, policymakers, disseminators, writers, and many more who use social media. To all of them, we dedicate this final section.

Create real, human, and relatable narratives

When creating immigration narratives, we can highlight the personal journey, the struggles, the triumphs, the highs, and the lows. We can create stories where the protagonist is human and relatable. What is more, we can even appeal to intense and complex emotions. Whether highlighting injustice and resilience or accomplishment and achievement, transformative testimonials are those that evoke real feelings. We believe that immigration testimonials should bring divergent points and people closer together and help us transcend political or cultural differences.

Let us keep our minds (and hearts) open

Let us engage with narratives as we would with a new acquaintance: with an open-minded perspective that enables us to recognise shared human experiences. Let us set to comprehend the emotions elicited by these stories and explore the ways in which they resonate with our own feelings. This way, we have more opportunities to discover common ground with the characters of these stories, bringing us closer to their world. Even when faced with disagreement over certain elements of a narrative, this approach allows us to learn from diverse perspectives, contributing to a reduction in cognitive polarisation.

We expect that the results of this Work Package will prove beneficial in a global landscape characterized by contrasting perspectives on immigration. In this context, immigration narratives could function as 'narrative vaccines' and, as such, they can provide doses of empathy to immunize against prejudice and mitigate differences among social groups.

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TESTIMONIAL MIGRATION NARRATIVES

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Synthesis of the main findings

The main conclusion of the experiment, based on the perceptions and the reactions of the interviewees, is that **some naratives can generate emotions** in the interviewee that lead to **identification** and in general, more **positive attitudes** towards migration as a whole. The results are comparable in both countries.

COUNTRIES:

Spain

1,502 people born in Spain whose parents were also born in the country.

Hungary

960 participants, born in Hungary and whose parents were also born in the country.

METHODOLOGY:
In each experiment, participants read one of 12 possible testimonies:
1. Frame 3X (threat vs victim vs hero)
2. Group 2X (low and highly stigmatised ethnic groups)
3. Narrative voice 2X (1st versus 3rd person)

2,046 interviewees, exposed to three main narratives:

THE PROFITEER
"…**However**, it seemed to me that it was **too many hours** and that **it was a very heavy job** (…) In the future, (…) I want to **continue receiving some social benefits** (…)"

No engagement

X

THE VICTIM
"…always **looked down on me** because of my **physical appearance** and made a lot of jokes (…) In the future, I would like to have a job with **better financial conditions** (…)"

Engagement that leads to:

V

THE HERO
"…**I always worked hard**… **I learned a lot** and thanks to that, **I started teaching new workers** (…). In the future, I would like to **continue my training** to get a better job (…)"

Engagement that leads to:

V

SOCIAL CONNECTION WITH THE PROTAGONIST

FEELING MOVED BY THE TESTIMONY

MORE PROFOUND THINKING

LESS DISPROVING ARGUMENTS

This results in more:

POSITIVE ATTITUDES TO MIGRANTS

HELPING INTENTIONS TO MIGRANTS (E.g. DONATIONS AND VOLUNTEERING)

5. Can the EU impact migration narratives? A comparative research of Afghan migrants in Turkey and potential migrants in the Gambia

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Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)

Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud
Institute for Social Research (ISR)

Through migration information campaigns, EU policy-makers seek to convince migrants not to come irregularly to Europe. Within the context of Work Package 6 (WP6), we looked at how the deterrence messages promoted in EU-funded information campaigns have interrelated with local narratives on migration and Europe (Trauner et al 2023; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud, 2023; Brekke et al 2023a; Brekke et al 2023b). Our case studies were potential migrants in the Gambia and Afghan migrants in Istanbul, Turkey. More generally, we looked at how information campaigns and narratives potentially influence the decision-making processes of our study participants in these two countries.

Dominant narratives on migration and Europe

Through focus groups and interviews, we first examined the dominant narratives on migration and Europe held by Gambian and Afghan participants. We inquired their associations on the subjects of 'migration' and 'Europe', and the sources of information upon which they rely for information on these topics.

In the context of the Gambia, we identified a positive narrative on migration. For Gambian participants, migration is generally seen as a life-changing opportunity for the individual concerned as well as for his or her family and community left behind. Migration is perceived as providing a solution to an often-difficult life situation marked by poverty and a lack of prospects (in terms of advancing professionally, gaining the means to finance a marriage, or starting a business). In the Gambia, individuals who successfully migrate to Europe,

regardless of the type of migration, were considered lucky or privileged. They are seen to likely have a better standard of living, better access to educational opportunities, and overall better economic prospects. In the case of the Afghans in transit in Istanbul, the master narrative regarding migration is similarly positive, albeit with a strong emphasis that the migration experience is a forced one (due to the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan). Most Afghan migrants in Istanbul also envision reaching Europe as a means for more opportunities and a better life compared to their current situation in Istanbul.

Among the potential migrants in the Gambia, we observed a predominantly positive narrative on Europe, associating 'Europe' with better economic opportunities and high(er) living standards. Similarly, many Afghan participants were ready to go 'anywhere' as long as they leave Turkey. Reaching Europe was the most realistic alternative for most.

EU-FUNDED INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS DEPLOY THREE CENTRAL MESSAGES, NAMELY THAT 'LIFE IN EUROPE IS DIFFICULT FOR AN UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANT'; 'THE MIGRATORY ROUTE IS DANGEROUS', AND THAT 'THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES AT HOME'

In both the Gambia and Turkey, there was a gender dimension in the narratives on migration and Europe, particularly concerning the risk associated with irregular migration. Women, in both groups, were seen to face more risk compared to their male counterparts.

The reception of EU-funded information campaigns

EU-funded information campaigns deploy three central messages, namely that 'life in Europe is difficult for an undocumented migrant'; 'the migratory route is dangerous', and that 'there are opportunities at home' (see more in Trauner et al 2023; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud, 2023).

In the Gambia, we observed that the EU-promoted message on the difficulty of life in Europe was only endorsed by a very small number of participants. Those who agreed with this EU narrative typically had friends or relatives in Europe who shared their experiences and struggles there. However, for most study participants of the Gambia and Afghan migrants in Istanbul, Europe remains a place of prosperity despite the difficulties one may face when living there.

The EU also strongly emphasises the risk during a migratory road with the intention of reducing irregular migration. Gambian participants highlighted that irregular migration to Europe comes with significant risks and dangers, thereby confirming the EU-promoted narrative. Similarly, Afghan migrants in Istanbul are aware of the dangers of the journey, having often experienced them first-hand in attempts to enter Europe with the help of smugglers.

This implies that the largest match between locally dominant and EU-promoted narratives indeed concerns the issue of risks during the migratory journey. There is a strong awareness of the risks and dangers that migrants undergo when traveling to Europe. The Afghans are less receptive than the Gambians to messages highlighting the difficulties and dangers of a migratory route towards Europe, principally because there are other powerful drivers for migration for Afghan migrants. The danger of the journey competes with the danger of being sent back to Afghanistan and the difficulties associated with living in Turkey.

However, even if the message on the risk is endorsed and confirmed, many underline their lack of alternatives as a main reason for still choosing to emigrate to Europe irregularly. Therefore, a higher knowledge of the risks (through information campaigns or other sources) does not necessarily translate into a decision to stay. Many study participants focused in their answers on practical strategies to mitigate or deal with the risks, for instance by relying on religious faith or a careful selection of the smugglers.

In the Gambia, the EU-promoted message that there are opportunities 'at home' is often confirmed by referring to training centres for young Gambians, among others. Some have even benefitted from skills training funded by international donors. However, most Gambians were usually quick to add some qualifiers or reservations. These contestations concern the scope and pervasiveness of opportunities, regional disparities in terms of accessing them and problems such as nepotism and corruption.

The take-away points

The dominant narratives in the Gambia and among Afghan migrants focuses on 'Europe' as a continent of opportunity and 'migration' as a positive life-changing adventure. These narratives are reinforced by 'success' stories from emigrants who made it to Europe. No information source has become as important for young Gambians in terms of making up their mind about migration as social media.

Our research in the Gambia and Istanbul has shown that the EU-funded narratives struggle to exert influence in light of the dominant narratives on migration and Europe. With the exception of the narrative on the dangers of the route, potential migrants in the Gambia and Afghan migrants often rely on sources other than information campaigns to make decisions. Beyond information, material and social reward related to a successful migration play a more important role in the decision-making of potential and actual migrants.

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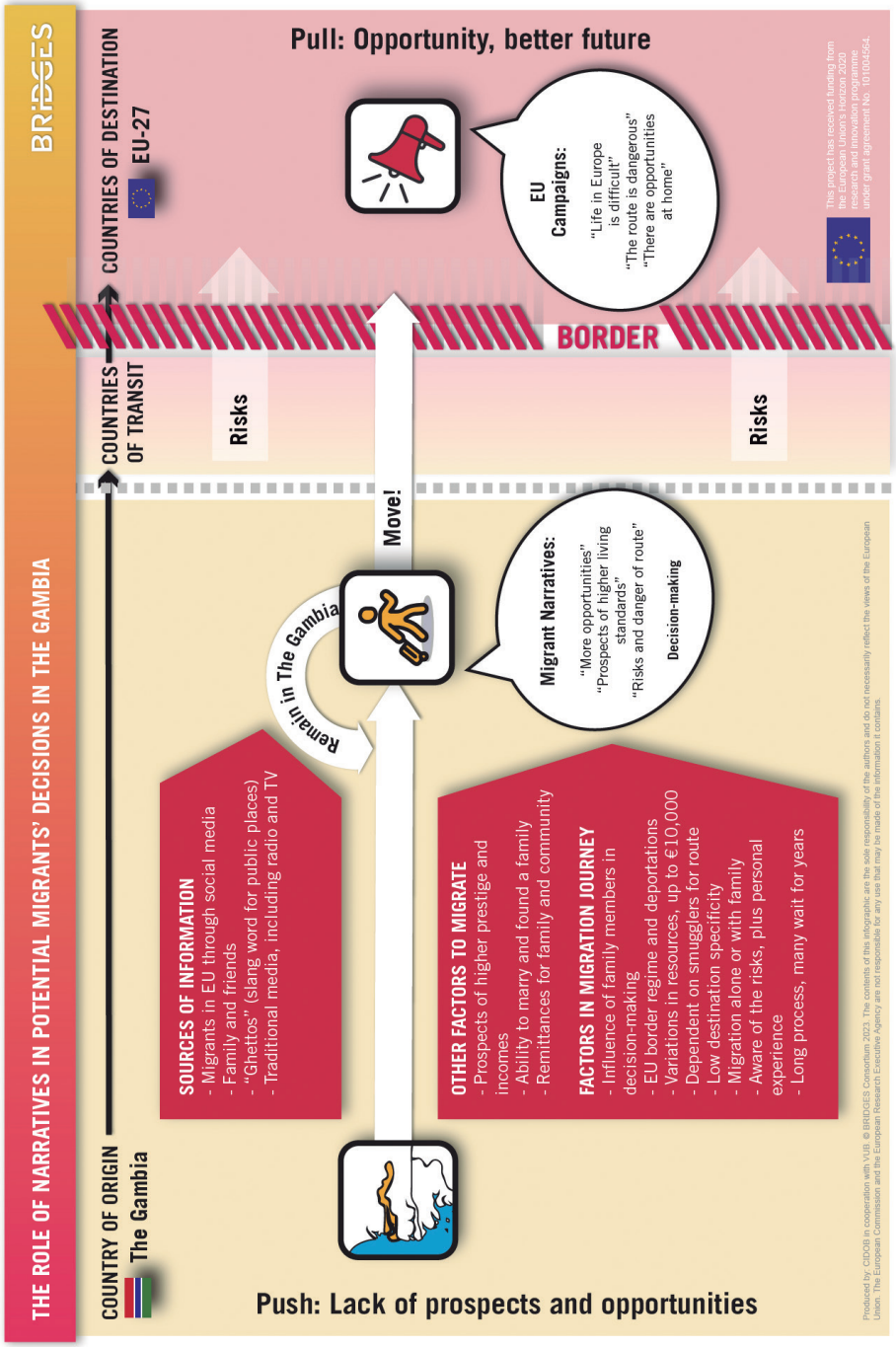
THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES IN POTENTIAL MIGRANTS' DECISIONS IN THE GAMBIA
BRIDGES
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN
The Gambia
COUNTRIES OF TRANSIT
COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION
EU-27
Pull: Opportunity, better future
Push: Lack of prospects and opportunities
Risks
Risks
BORDER
EU Campaigns:
"Life in Europe is difficult"
"The route is dangerous"
"There are opportunities at home"
Move!
Remain in The Gambia
Migrant Narratives:
"More opportunities"
"Prospects of higher living standards"
"Risks and danger of route"
Decision-making
SOURCES OF INFORMATION
- Migrants in EU through social media
- Family and friends
- "Ghettos" (slang word for public places)
- Traditional media, including radio and TV
OTHER FACTORS TO MIGRATE
- Prospects of higher prestige and incomes
- Ability to marry and found a family
- Remittances for family and community
FACTORS IN MIGRATION JOURNEY
- Influence of family members in decision-making
- EU border regime and deportations
- Variations in resources, up to €10,000
- Dependent on smugglers for route
- Low destination specificity
- Migration alone or with family
- Aware of the risks, plus personal experience
- Long process, many wait for years
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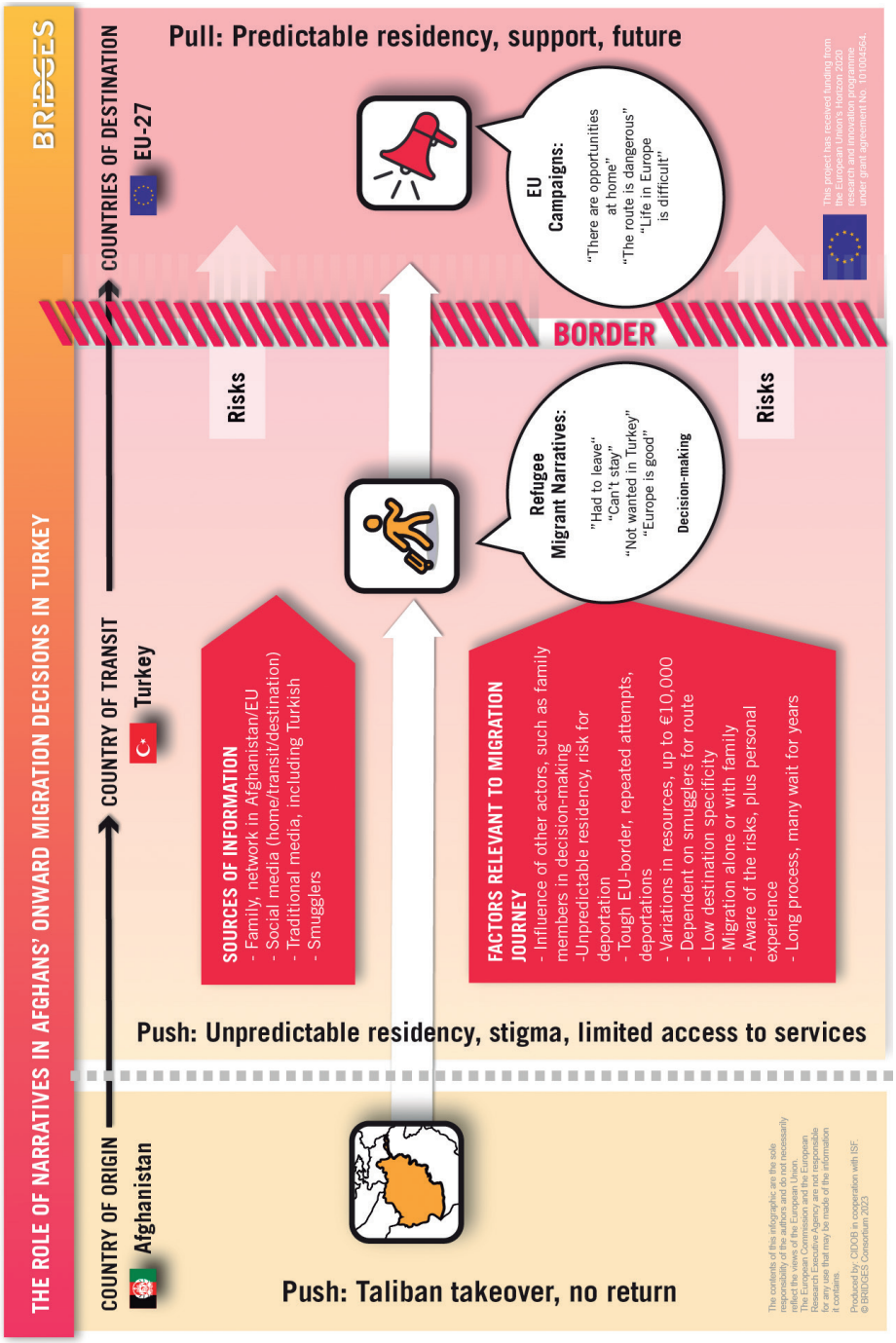
BRIDGES
THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES IN AFGHANS' ONWARD MIGRATION DECISIONS IN TURKEY
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN
Afghanistan
COUNTRY OF TRANSIT
Turkey
COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION
EU-27
Pull: Predictable residency, support, future
Push: Taliban takeover, no return
Push: Unpredictable residency, stigma, limited access to services
Risks
Risks
BORDER
EU Campaigns:
"There are opportunities at home"
"The route is dangerous"
"Life in Europe is difficult"
Refugee Migrant Narratives:
"Had to leave"
"Can't stay"
"Not wanted in Turkey"
"Europe is good"
Decision-making
SOURCES OF INFORMATION
- Family, network in Afghanistan/EU
- Social media (home/transit/destination)
- Traditional media, including Turkish
- Smugglers
FACTORS RELEVANT TO MIGRATION JOURNEY
- Influence of other actors, such as family members in decision-making
-Unpredictable residency, risk for deportation
- Tough EU-border, repeated attempts, deportations
- Variations in resources, up to €10,000
- Dependent on smugglers for route
- Low destination specificity
- Migration alone or with family
- Aware of the risks, plus personal experience
- Long process, many wait for years
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6. How narratives on migration shape and are deployed in political debate and policymaking

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The concept of 'narratives' has gained traction in migration research. However, we still know comparatively little about how narratives on migration influence political debate and policymaking. In Work Package 7 (WP7), we consider how the narratives that emerge in the media are taken up in and influence political debate and policymaking. Of particular interest is how often simplistic, emotive migration narratives circulating in the media and political debate are processed in policymaking spheres. Popular, 'lay' narratives may imply quite polarising, unfeasible, or punitive measures, which are not underpinned by available experience and evidence on migration. Frequently, such narratives are inconsistent with liberal democratic norms, economic considerations, or international commitments. This research elucidates how political actors process such salient narratives on migration and how they shape and inform political debate and policymaking.

In order to understand these dynamics, we draw on research on migration narratives in six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom (Bonelli, Celoria, and Pastore 2023; Gerő et al. 2023; Moncada 2023; Pasetti, Güell, and Garcés-Ramos 2023; Reindorf and Vollmer 2023; Smellie 2023). We compare the analysis of how narratives 'travelled' between the media, political debate, and policymaking in the six countries during two periods of intense debate: first, the 2015 European 'migration crisis', focusing on narratives related to the EU's proposed relocation and quota schemes, and second, narratives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis following Russia's invasion in 2022. Drawing on extensive content analysis of newspaper articles, parliamentary debates, and policy documents, supplemented by interviews

with officials, we trace how narratives are embraced, adapted, overlooked, or explicitly rejected by actors in political and policymaking venues.

Narratives in political debate and policymaking

Narratives in political debate (in the media or parliament) and policymaking are governed by different logics (Boswell and Smellie 2023). Narratives in political debate ('communicative sphere') are oriented towards mobilising the public and voters to galvanise support for political agendas. Within this context, the relationship between the media and politics is two-way (Maneri 2023). Political leaders shape narratives in the media. Conversely, the media frequently adapts political narratives to generate news stories. Thus, politicians keen to maximise their communications will adopt simplistic, accessible, and emotive stories, partly because they have a better chance of being taken up in the media and resonating with the public. Furthermore, media stories can generate demand for a political reaction, requiring politicians to take a position. Where media narratives appear to have strong traction with the public, politicians may embrace or adapt these narratives to signal sympathy with public concerns, support values implicit in the narrative, or demonstrate commitment to addressing the issue.

POLITICIANS KEEN TO MAXIMISE THEIR COMMUNICATIONS WILL ADOPT SIMPLISTIC, ACCESSIBLE, AND EMOTIVE STORIES, PARTLY BECAUSE THEY HAVE A BETTER CHANCE OF BEING TAKEN UP IN THE MEDIA AND RESONATING WITH THE PUBLIC.

Engaging with media narratives becomes trickier when they are potentially out of kilter with what is considered appropriate or responsible political positions. While fringe movements may feel comfortable adopting polarised and divisive migration narratives, mainstream politicians may be more reticent. They may risk losing more 'moderate' votes and undermine their reputation as being 'serious' or evidence-based. The risks become greater when political debate is concerned with operationalising political programmes. This applies to parties in government that need to implement their ideas and opposition parties that want to demonstrate their aptitude for government. Where the narratives they espouse are misaligned with what can feasibly be achieved, they risk being exposed as hypocritical, incompetent, or unable to deliver.

Narratives circulating in policymaking settings ('coordinative sphere') have a different purpose. Coordinative narratives are about ensuring that policies effectively achieve their goals. They must be more or less 'evidence-based' and plausible to the range of specialised and technical actors involved in implementing policy. This suggests more sober, factual and detailed narratives rather than the simple accounts favoured in the media and political debate ('lay' narratives). These 'technocratic' narratives are likely found in the more

detailed policy documents produced by public administrations. Thus, a general expectation is that where more restrictive, sensationalist or nativist narratives dominate the public political debate, there is likely to be greater divergence or 'decoupling' from narratives prevailing in policy venues.

We now consider the findings of how narratives were taken up in political debate and policy-making in the six-country case studies (Smellie and Boswell 2024).

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

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

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

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

Overall, the Ukrainian refugee crisis appears less narrativised and polarised than the 2015 crisis, with little differentiation in narratives along ideological lines. Ukrainians are referred to exclusively as refugees. Women, children, and the elderly feature as the protagonists and 'victims' of the story, whilst men remain in Ukraine to fight, demonstrating a strikingly gendered dimension to the dominant narrative. While some left-leaning media outlets questioned the narrative of the exceptionalism of Ukrainian refugees (often depicted as ethnic Europeans and 'real refugees', compared with 'fake' or economic migrants in 2015), the political debate appeared to largely embrace this narrative, and in the Italian and German case, drove the notion of exceptionalism.

WE DO NOT SEE THE ANTICIPATED 'DECOUPLING' BETWEEN NARRATIVES IN PUBLIC POLITICAL DEBATE AND POLICYMAKING, WHERE DIVISIVE OR POPULIST NARRATIVES ARE NOT REDEEMED IN POLICY SETTINGS. THERE IS EVIDENCE OF THE CONTRARY, WHERE NARRATIVES FOLLOW THROUGH FROM MEDIA AND POLITICAL DEBATE INTO POLICY.

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

How do these narratives in turn influence policymaking?

As expected, in both cases, policy documents have a very different style, and it was not always easy to trace narratives from the 'communicative' through to the 'coordinative' sphere. This is especially the case where the EU relocation scheme did not result in legislation or clear policy change but was simply implemented through technical circulars or operational measures and where, in response to the Ukrainian crisis, the temporary protection directive was activated at the EU level.

Nevertheless, we do not see the anticipated 'decoupling' between narratives in public political debate and policymaking, where divisive or populist narratives are *not* redeemed in policy settings. There is evidence of the contrary, where narratives follow through from media and political debate into policy documents. In the case of the European migration crisis, where we have populist or restrictive governments, they either do not implement clear policies (Hungary), they have sufficient clout to see their policies through without significant 'drift' from their public administration (the UK), or they change course to align with less restrictive public opinion (Spain).

In the case of Ukraine, we observe very few narratives in policy documents, which are either highly technical and operational (UK, France, and Germany), representing the omission of narratives in the coordinative sphere but not 'decoupling' of narratives *per se,* or no circulation of migration narratives in

politics or policy (Hungary and Spain). The exception is the case of Italy, which embraced the simplistic, vivid and dramatic humanitarian narrative from the media and political debate in policy venues.

Moreover, for countries where media and political narratives were generally humanitarian, we can observe a pattern diametrically opposed to the expectations above, namely a note of caution and concern surfacing in policy documents. This is notable in 2015 in the German and Italian cases, which invoked some of the risks and constraints, and in the UK case following the government's U-turn in 2022. Such elements draw on established and historical narratives about risks and 'costs' associated with large-scale and/or uncontrolled immigration.

Key findings

In both cases, there is evidence to suggest that the media set the narrative agenda. Moreover, somewhat counterintuitively, we see a tendency of the media to set a (in most cases) humanitarian tone. This is attributed to the timing of the peak of the 2015 crisis during the parliamentary recess and, in 2022, to a broad consensus that emerged across media and the political arena supporting Ukrainian refugees.

The two cases also illustrate the close interplay between narratives deployed in the media and politics. At the height of public and media salience of immigration in the summer of 2015, we see a proliferation of narratives emerge in the media and political debate, often along ideological fault lines. Under intense media scrutiny, politicians shaped, responded to and strategically deployed media narratives to bolster their political positions and foreground their track record.

In contrast, the consensus on responses to the invasion of Ukraine resulted in fewer narratives. As the provision for refugees was less contested or contentious, it was less politicised. As a result, fewer narratives emerged to mobilise public support, and, in most cases, policymakers focused on the technical and operational details of delivering policy. As one official put it, the consensus was strongly anticipated, so from the offset, the Ukrainian refugee crisis posed an administrative but not communicative challenge.

Finally, we do not see evidence of the type of 'decoupling' anticipated in the literature, where populist and restrictive rhetoric in public political debate is not redeemed in policy practice. In fact, we see elements of the opposite effect where civil servants tempered more humanitarian narratives in political debate or the media with caution and concern regarding large-scale migration. Thus,

we can infer that organisational cultures of migration management influence how governments and their civil servants narrate the issues, even if these narratives are not always surfacing in public political debate.

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HOW DO MIGRATION NARRATIVES SHAPE PUBLIC POLITICAL DEBATE AND POLICYMAKING?

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101004564.

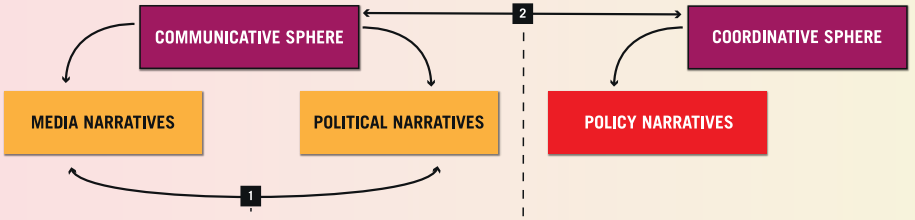
BRIDGES

Narratives in public political debate and policymaking have different purposes and are governed by different logics. But how are migration narratives taken up or responded to in these different arenas? Our research shows that there are two sets of relationships: the first between media narratives and political debate (communicative sphere), the second between the communicative sphere and the coordinative sphere of policymaking.

MEDIA AND POLITICAL NARRATIVES
(in the 'communicative sphere'):
Are utilised by politicians to mobilise and galvanise support from voters for rival political agendas and programmes. They are predominantly 'lay' narratives characterised by simplistic, accessible, and emotive stories.

NARRATIVES IN POLICYMAKING
(in the 'coordinative sphere'):
Are oriented at mobilising engagement and coordinating the activities in delivering policies. They are predominantly 'technocratic' narratives, characterised as comparatively sombre, complex and evidence-based.

The **communicative sphere** of politics is characterised by the competitive mobilisation of public support by political actors and parties through articulating rival political programmes.



The **coordinative sphere** of policymaking is the set of actors and institutions tasked with elaborating and implementing collectively binding decisions and ensuring that policies effectively achieve their goals.

1 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA & POLITICAL NARRATIVES:

- A two-way relationship.
- Political leaders shape media narratives.
- Media takes up and adapts political narratives.
- Politicians use the media as a sounding board and to monitor public attitudes.
- Media reporting pressures politicians to craft a response.
- Where politicians risk losing votes, they may ignore a narrative to reduce its salience or explicitly reject the claims of a competitor.

2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA & POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND POLICYMAKING:

- Not expected to be such a two-way relationship due to the different purpose and role of narratives in the two spheres.
- More technocratic style and content of narratives.
- An expectation of 'decoupling' or a 'gap' between the two discursive spheres.

GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES FOR PROCESSING DOMINANT NARRATIVES:

- **Embrace:** Politicians support or adopt the narratives portrayed in the public political debate.
- **Adapt:** Politicians give qualified support to these narratives whilst adapting key elements or proposing alternative policy solutions.
- **Reject:** Politicians may explicitly criticise, question, or reject narratives.
- **Ignore:** Politicians may decide to overlook or disregard narratives, especially where they are inconvenient.

NARRATIVE IMPACT ON COMMUNICATIVE & COORDINATIVE SPHERES: 2015 MIGRATION CRISIS

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101004564.

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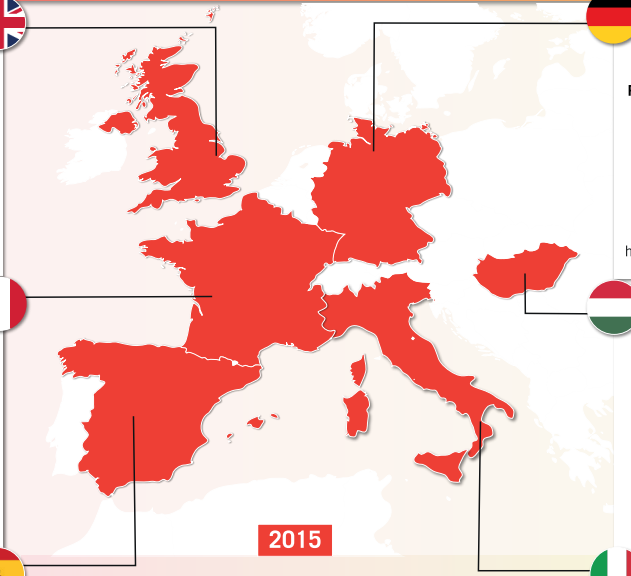
UNITED KINGDOM
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Pro-EU on left, anti-EU on right, lay narratives.
Political narratives: Pro-EU on left, anti-EU on right, lay narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Narratives embraced along ideological lines.
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Operational, with populist elements based on constraints. Technocratic narratives.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Narratives embraced.

FRANCE
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Pro-EU and relocation, humanitarian.
Political narratives: Pro-EU and relocation, patriotic, lay narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Generally embraced. Media narratives shaped the political debate (adaptation).
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Operational, technocratic.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Communicative narratives ignored in policy documents.

SPAIN
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Humanitarian, critique of government, lay narratives.
Political narratives: Humanitarian, anti-relocation, polarising, divisive. Lay & technocratic.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Strategic adaptation of media narratives in political debate (government U-turn on relocation).
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Strategic & operational. Technocratic.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Narratives embraced. Consensus on humanitarian approach buffered policymakers from pressure.



How Narratives on the 2015 Migration Crisis & EU Relocation are Processed in Communicative & Coordinative Spheres:

- Polarised political debate led to a proliferation of narratives, putting governments under pressure to respond (narrative competition).
- Media narratives were adapted and strategically deployed to bolster political positions.
- Media set (humanitarian) narrative agenda during parliamentary summer recess, pressuring governments to adopt 'liberal' approaches.
- Despite differences in style, narratives largely aligned across spheres.
- Some policy narratives tempered lay humanitarian media narratives.

Photo: Mstyslav Chernov, CC-BY-SA-4.0

GERMANY
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Humanitarian master narrative, lay narratives.
Political narratives: Humanitarian & patriotic (national duty), lay & technocratic narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Humanitarian media narratives embraced in political debate.
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Humanitarian, also constraints & risks (master narratives). Technocratic narratives.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Generally embraced. Some policy narratives tempered humanitarian narratives in the communicative sphere.

HUNGARY
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: EU as a puppet of Soros, anti-EU lay narratives.
Political narratives: EU as a puppet of Soros, anti-EU, pan-out/broader. Lay narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Pro-government narratives embraced.
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: n/a.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Outlier. Expectation of complete alignment due to government control.

ITALY
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Pro-EU, responsible lay narratives.
Political narratives: Pro-EU, divisive, polarised lay narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Pro-EU political narratives embraced in media. Strategic adaptation of media narratives by politicians.
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Operational, with some populist elements based on risks. Technocratic narratives.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Broadly embraced. Some policy narratives tempered humanitarian narratives in communicative sphere.

NARRATIVE IMPACT ON COMMUNICATIVE & COORDINATIVE SPHERES: UKRAINIAN CRISIS 2022

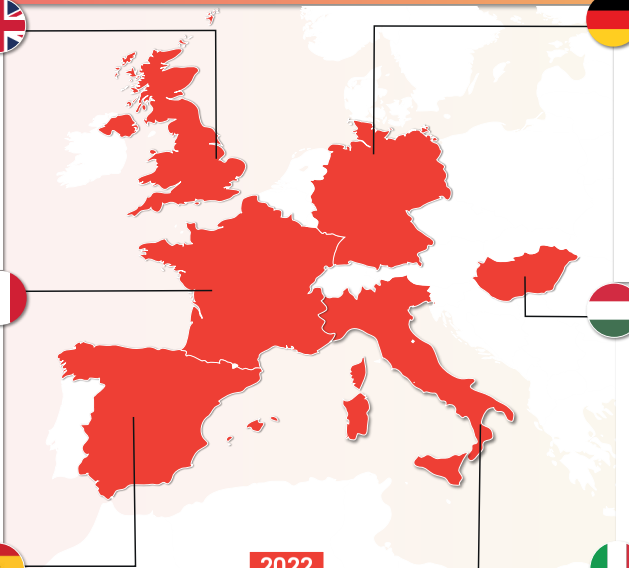
This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101004564.

BRIDGES

UNITED KINGDOM
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Humanitarian, lay narratives.
Political narratives: Humanitarian, lay narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Narratives embraced. Strategic adaptation of media (& master) narrative by politicians.
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Operational & Technocratic.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Partially embraced & ignored (humanitarian consensus buffered policymakers).

FRANCE
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Humanitarian, patriotic lay narratives.
Political narratives: Humanitarian, pro-Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), divisive lay narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Narratives broadly embraced.
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Operational, technocratic narratives.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Communicative narratives ignored in policymaking.

SPAIN
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Humanitarian, pro-Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), welcome culture. Lay narratives.
Political narratives: Broader issue linkage – no migration narrative.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Migration narratives ignored in political debate.
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Limited narrative content. Technocratic.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Narratives ignored (humanitarian consensus buffered policymakers).



2022

How Narratives on the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis are Processed in Communicative & Coordinative Spheres:

- Consensus on Ukraine resulted in fewer narratives, with no real counter-narratives.
- Ukrainians portrayed as 'victims', Russia as the 'villain', governments as 'heroes'.
- Opposing politicians instrumentalised the same narratives to demonstrate moral leadership.
- Crisis was not necessarily perceived as a 'migration issue'.
- Consensus in public debate buffered policymakers from political pressure.

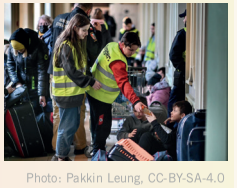


Photo: Pakkin Leung, CC-BY-SA-4.0

GERMANY
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Humanitarian, pro-TPD, responsible lay narratives.
Political narratives: Humanitarian, pro-TPD, patriotic, homogenous lay narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Media narratives embraced in political debate
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Operational, technocratic.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Narrative on Ukrainian 'exceptionalism' embraced. Others ignored (humanitarian consensus buffered policymakers).

HUNGARY
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Humanitarian, patriotic (pro-gov). Lay narratives.
Political narratives: Broader issue linkage – no migration narrative
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Migration narratives ignored in political debate (pro-gov humanitarian consensus).
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: n/a.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Outlier. Expectation of complete alignment due to government control.

ITALY
Communicative sphere
Media narratives: Humanitarian, pro-TPD, responsible. Lay narratives.
Political narratives: Humanitarian, divisive & provocative. Lay narratives.
MEDIA - POLITICAL: Political narratives embraced in the media. Strategic adaptation of humanitarian media narratives by politicians.
Coordinative sphere
Policy narratives: Operational with lay elements. Technocratic & lay narratives.
COMMUNICATIVE - COORDINATIVE SPHERE: Narratives embraced. Government embraced technocratic policy narratives.

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7. Narrative dynamics: Understanding the discourse on migration within EU institutions and its influence on political and policy discussions

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This article refers to Work Package 8 (WP8), which analysed how narratives on migration shape and are deployed in the media, as well as in EU political debate and policymaking, focusing on 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 and the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for those fleeing the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. It is based on Vigneri et al (2023) mapping and evaluation of the dominant narratives in the media, political debate and policymaking, which allowed to better understand alignments and/or divergences across the three domains in the discourses adopted by EU institutions. Specifically, the article aims to address the following questions: How have the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament communicated their proposals on migration issues (political debate) and how have they coordinated on decisions to address them (policymaking)? How have narratives moved from one venue to the other? To what extent populist and emotive migration narratives were taken up by EU actors?

Narratives on the relocation scheme for asylum seekers in 2015

The first case study delves into the proposed relocation and resettlement scheme during the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, examining narratives across media, political discourse, and policymaking at EU level. To this end, starting with an examination of media narratives at Member States' level, it traced the evolution of the communicative (political) and coordinative (policy) debates within European institutions in September 2015.

The media analysis underscored a lively debate surrounding Europe's refugee crisis in 2015 and the proposed EU-wide initiatives, notably the relocation scheme, aimed at resolving it. This debate spawned a multitude of conflicting narratives within national newspapers of different political and ideological stances. These narratives often presented contrasting moral viewpoints and diverging perceptions of responsibility on the issue, advocating for varied policy solutions, either in support of or in opposition to the EU's involvement in managing the crisis.

This array of narratives included one that stressed the necessity for responsibility-sharing among Member States. This slightly dominated EU political discussions on the challenges deriving from internal divisions, aligning with the EU's focus on relocation. Yet, other narratives also held sway, focusing on the moral duty of solidarity – taken up especially by the European Parliament – but also on the need to secure the EU's borders or to externalise the solution, mostly adopted by the European Council. This diversity indicates that the media multifaceted discussions found echoes within EU political debate. This alignment corroborates Boswell and Smellie's (2023) hypothesis that increased political salience on migration leads to diverse narratives, with which political figures feel compelled to engage with, by embracing or adapting them in their communication.

In policymaking, while solidaristic frames become marginal, the narrative that emphasises divisions among Member States gains further prominence, significantly shaping discussions, particularly within the European Commission. However, changes occur in relation to the character roles: frontline Member States are depicted not only as victims, but also as villains, blamed for non-compliance with existing asylum rules, while more emphasis is in general placed on regulatory measures, calling on all Member States to fulfil their obligations. The Externalisation narrative remains pivotal also in this sphere, although with some variations, too: tones become more solidaristic, especially towards origin and third countries, which become the main victims, replacing refugees and asylum seekers. This shift echoes the adaptation of narratives from media and political contexts.

Specifically, such adaptations showcase how narratives flex across spheres, a process termed pervasiveness (Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore, 2022). The prevailing narrative on the divisions among Member States remains consistent in both media and political discourse. However, when entering policymaking, the emphasis on it intensifies, reshaping character roles and highlighting responsibility over solidarity. Meanwhile, still in this sphere, the humanitarian narrative on solidarity diminishes, making way for more pragmatic solutions centring on externalisation. Narrative styles become more technocratic compared to the political discourse. Such adaptive shifts might play a significant role in averting policy outcomes from media and political influence.

Narratives on the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainian refugees in 2022

The second case study focused on the EU debate on the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive in 2022, after the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the subsequent unprecedented influx of asylum seekers towards Europe. What emerged is 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 debates. 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 political debate and policymaking, the European Commission has maintained a unified position, predominantly advocating a narrative of solidarity with an attention to border security. The European Union is consistently presented as having control over the situation, with a recurring narrative centred on solidarity. Divergent narratives, however, surface within the EU 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 EU Parliament.

THE SOLIDARITY NARRATIVE IS UNCONTESTABLY HEGEMON IN THE MEDIA, POLITICAL, AND POLICY SPHERES FOR THE UKRAINE WAR CASE. THE NARRATIVE HAS TRANSITED ACROSS SPHERES WITHOUT SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES AND HAS BEEN EMBRACED BY ALL VOICES ALMOST UNANIMOUSLY.

The solidarity narrative is uncontestably hegemon in the media, political, and policy spheres for the Ukraine war case. 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 on its transformativity, i.e., its capacity to shape EU policymaking (Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore, 2022). 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. In this context, it is hard not to observe a correlation between the dominance of the narrative in the national media, the EU political and policy spheres, and the easiness 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.

THE ELEMENT OF (IN)SECURITY –USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH A FRAMING OF MIGRATION AS A THREAT – IS INCORPORATED IN DIFFERENT NARRATIVES WITHIN BOTH EU POLITICAL AND POLICY DEBATES IN 2015. HOWEVER, SEVEN YEARS LATER, ALTHOUGH A COMPARABLE NARRATIVE EMPHASIZING SECURITY EXISTS, IT DOESN'T EMPLOY THE LANGUAGE OF AN 'INVASION' OR DEPICT REFUGEES AS DIRECT THREATS.

Comparison of dominant narratives

While it is beyond the scope of WP8 to compare dominant narratives in different scenarios, the analysis of the alignment/misalignment of similar narrative components in 2015 and 2022 suggests some interesting insights. First of all, a slight difference between the two events emerges when looking at the movement of narratives from the political to the policy arena. In 2015, the competition among a significant number of diverging narratives – in favour or, to a lesser extent, against EU-wide policy solutions – has produced a nuanced adaptation of narrative components when moving from the media and political to the policy discourse. The reason for this process of adaptation can be identified in the necessity for EU institutions to frame the diverging positions emerging in the political debate into more viable and concrete policy solutions. On the contrary, the solidarity response towards refugees from Ukraine 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.

This general convergence on the solidarity narrative in 2022 has been probably facilitated by the absence of a true counter-narrative. For instance, while in 2015 versions of the narrative on externalisation 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, in 2022 the message of solidarity to Ukraine and refugees from Ukraine 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.

The difference is clear also when it comes to the dominant narrative in 2015, which underlines 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.

Lastly, the adoption of security-inspired tones, especially in lay narratives, constitutes another matter of interest. The element of (in)security – usually associated with a framing of migration as a threat – is incorporated in different narratives within both EU political and policy debates in 2015 (Securing borders; Externalisation). However, seven years later, although a comparable narrative emphasizing security exists, it doesn't employ the language of an 'invasion' or depict refugees as direct threats. In essence, despite aiming for solutions similar to those in 2015 – strengthening border security and advocating for stricter application of asylum granting rules – the equivalent narrative in 2022 doesn't evoke the same sense of menace.

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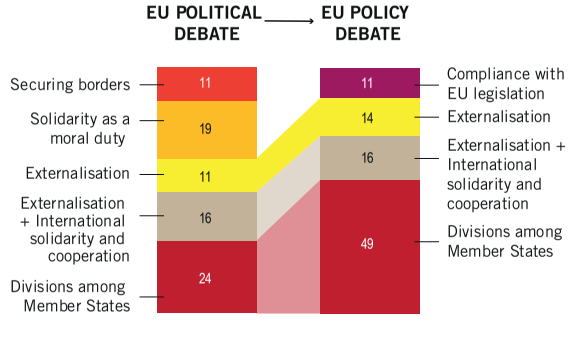
PREVAILING NARRATIVES IN EU POLITICAL AND POLICY DEBATE

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101004564.

The following charts show the prevailing migration narratives in the EU political and policy debates in 2015 (**Case 1**: refugee crisis and EU relocation scheme) and 2022 (**Case 2**: Ukraine war and refugee crisis). The data reveals more divergence in 2015, which results in the non-adoption of a common relocation scheme. On the contrary, narrative consistency in 2022 is connected to the fact that the Temporary Protection Scheme (TPD) was rapidly adopted with a large consensus.

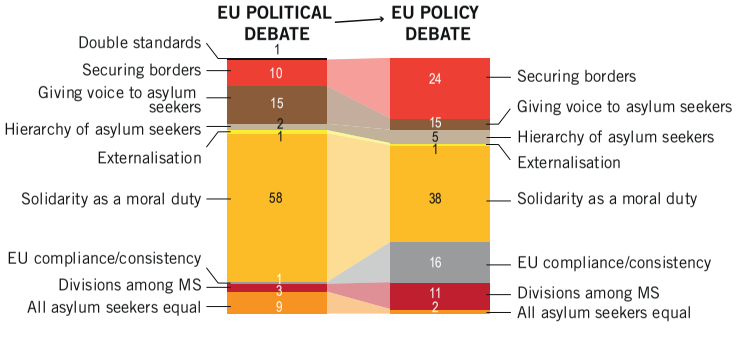
CASE 1: 2015 — **NARRATIVE DIVERGENCE** → **RELOCATION SCHEME**

"Solidarity as a moral duty" (19%) and "Securing borders" (11%) are only relevant narratives in political debate, but disappear in the policy domain. On the contrary, "Divisions among Member States" becomes a key diverging factor in the policy debate (49%).



CASE 2: 2022 — **NARRATIVE CONSISTENCY** → **TEMPORARY PROTECTION DIRECTIVE (TPD)**

The political narratives focused on "Securing Borders" (10%) and "Division among the Member States" gain traction in the policy debate. In the context of the Ukraininan refugee crisis (Case 2), "Solidarity as a moral duty" is also relevant in the policy domain, in contrast with the 2015 refugee crisis (Case 1).



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EU POLITICAL ACTORS AND POLICYMAKERS

Recommendation #1:

MORE EMPIRICAL
EU communication officials and spokespersons should **de-politicise** discourse(s) on asylum and migration and refrain from framing migration as a threat. They should provide **evidence-based** stories on the challenges as well as on the opportunities that migration poses to the EU.

Recommendation #2:

MORE BALANCED
EU officials should encourage more **balanced** narratives, by avoiding the adoption of emotional rhetoric in the media and political debate. Good examples of alternative narratives could focus on long-term and positive effects in labour markets and on human rights compliance

Recommendation #3:

MORE INFORMED
Members of the European Parliament and European Council, as well as Commission officials, should leverage and make full use of EU institutional factors in intra-EU negotiations to **filter** and neutralise the transmission of populist narratives from the political to the policy arena.

Recommendation #4:

MORE POSITIVE
High-level policymakers should promote narratives with migration policy **solutions** linked to broader policy areas with great value for European societies --> make migration narratives not (only) about migration

8. Migration narratives from an intersectional lens: biased representations and their consequences

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Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)

As part of the gender observatory of BRIDGES, this article sheds light on the gender biases in migration narratives from an intersectional lens. To this aim, it reflects on the results of the whole project following the 'life cycle' of a narrative, looking at the gendered and racialised representations of migrants in the production of narratives in different spheres, as well as at the gendered impact of these narratives in the society and in policy-making[1].

Production of migration narratives in the media and societal spheres

Starting with the production of narratives in the media (WP3), results reveal two main patterns. The first one refers to the who – i.e., who is given voice in the news about migration – and the second one refers to the what and the how – i.e., what key narratives about migration emerge in the media and in the civil society, and how migrant women and men are portrayed.

As for the first one, the comparative report by Maneri (2023) concludes that women's voices are considerably less included than men's voices. In particular, the share of women's verbal reactions in the media news analysed ranges from 10% to 50% across case studies[2], with particularly low numbers

1. It must be considered that the gender perspective has not been applied consistently in all case studies of all Work Packages (WPs), since not all case studies in each WP embraced a direct and clear gender dimension, and the research questions were foremost oriented to unravelling the drivers of narrative success in each sphere. However, this article has made an effort to capture main trends from the results of those case studies with a more evident gender dimension.
2. Based on 11 case studies from France, Italy, the UK and Spain (except for one event). Data from Hungary and Germany were not provided.

in Italy and the UK (except in the Windrush scandal[3]) and most cases under 30%. Although there is no data about the origin of people who are quoted, it is clear from the names that the majority are autochthonous. In this regard, female migrants appear double invisibilised, as women and as migrants. While this is also true for male migrants as part of a general underrepresentation of migrants' voices (appearing more as objects than as subjects), the fact that the majority of news about migration focus on irregular entries at the borders and that these are perpetrated by men makes that the prevalent image of the irregular migrant diffused by the media ends up being very masculinised. Yet, if we widen the scope to irregular migration living in Europe with disregard of the channels of entry, we may find out that in some countries like Spain the estimated share of irregular migrant women is actually higher than that of men.

IN THE CASE OF MIGRANT WOMEN, THEY ARE OFTEN DEPICTED AS PASSIVE OBJECTS WITHOUT AGENCY AND AS VICTIMS OF A PATRIARCHAL CULTURE ASSOCIATED WITH THE PERPETUATION OF TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES AND GENDER VIOLENCE.

The second pattern revolves around a gendered and racialised portrayal of migrant women and men in an essentialist way. Following the last example, it is clear how racialised men are affected by the visual and textual representations of 'the threat' posed by the figure of the irregular migrant or even of the economic migrant – versus the 'genuine' asylum seeker. Young male unaccompanied minors are also much affected by these biased representations, who are often associated with crime or sexual harassment against white females (Bourekba et al 2023).

In the case of migrant women, they are often depicted as passive objects without agency and as victims of a patriarchal culture associated with the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and gender violence. This is especially visible in the case of *burkini*[4] analysed in France, where Muslim women tend to be represented as victims of an 'Islamic totalitarianism' without freedom, as villains who threaten the French civilisation and induce terrorist attacks, and/or as heroes when they are defended by communitarian positions who stand for the women's right to wear a veil (Moncada 2023). Be them a victim, a villain or a hero, these gendered representations reinforce essentialist portrayals of Muslim women which embrace expressions of cultural racism.

3. This was one of the case studies analysed in the UK. It was a political scandal that began in 2018 concerning people who were wrongly detained, denied legal rights, and in some cases wrongly deported from the UK. Many had been born British subjects and had arrived in the UK before 1973, particularly from Caribbean countries, as members of the "Windrush generation" (so named after the Empire Windrush, the ship that brought one of the first groups of West Indian migrants to the UK in 1948).
4. A *burkini* is a style of swimsuit for women. The suit covers the whole body except the face, the hands, and the feet, while being light enough for swimming. This type of swimwear was designed with the intention of creating swimwear for Muslims who observe *hijab* in this way.

Yet, it is interesting to observe how the media can also build gendered narratives with EU female citizens. In the case of the criminalisation of the sea rescue operations under the government of Salvini in Italy in 2019, we observe how in the episode of the Sea Watch III captained by the German white woman Carola Rackete, she was portrayed as a hero by more left-leaning newspapers and as a villain by conservative ones. Nonetheless, the interesting fact here is that however she was portrayed, the press exploited the axes of difference of gender, race, nationality, and class to build social boundaries and legitimise or blame her actions (Maneri et al 2023).

When we look at the cases of terrorism, for instance the attacks in Barcelona in August 2017, it is striking to observe that while Muslims are given voice to condemn terrorism, they are otherised when being treated as members of a community which is presented in monolithic terms and almost never as members of the same society (Bourekba et al 2023). These othering processes in intersectional terms (reinforcing the axes of gender, race, religion, or age as it deems more convenient) serve to feed national debates about what it means to be French/Italian/Spanish ('us') versus foreigners ('them'), and interestingly, this can be done from different frames, be them more securitarian or humanitarian. In some instances, these othering processes are created by the media and in others, they are created by other actors (e.g., politicians) and are acritically reproduced by the media. The result is the circulation of biased narratives within the communicative sphere, contributing to reinforce stigma and prejudice against migrants.

The production of narratives also comes from the organised civil society (WP4), which most often tries to challenge the mainstream exclusionary accounts and propose alternative ways to frame migration from a more positive lens (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023). When it comes to the inclusion of the gender perspective, some initiatives stand out in two respects. The first one refers to the adoption of a feminist participatory culture within the organisation, which includes the setting up of a safe climate for women's participation and decision-making, a gender-balance in the external communications of the organisation, and specific training on gender issues for members, among others. Stop Mare Mortum, for example, is an organisation in Spain that has made attempts to comply with such participatory culture (Güell 2023), whereas other initiatives analysed in the project do not mention it (Rheindorf 2023).

The second aspect has to do with the creation and use of gendered narratives which visibilise the oppression suffered by female and LGBTIQ+ migrants in European host societies through their external communication in social media, press releases, public events, demonstrations or performances. This is both in terms of form and content. In relation to the form, it is becoming more and more

common to use the feminine plural (even if this is not normatively accepted) as a political gesture to challenge the gender biases in the language and gain awareness about who is included and excluded. In terms of content, there are several narratives from the civil society that have succeeded in making specific gender aspects of migration visible, such as the need to position an ethics of care at the centre (acknowledging the care work performed mainly by migrant women), intersectional discrimination affecting female and LGBTIQ+ migrants, or the gender violence involved in the migratory trajectory and in the migration and asylum regimes.

Gendered impacts of migration narratives in society and policymaking

MIGRANT WOMEN DO NOT APPEAR VERY MUCH AFFECTED BY THESE CAMPAIGNS, SINCE THE NARRATIVE OF EUROPE AS PROVIDING SAFETY, PREDICTABILITY, AND A FUTURE IS EQUALLY PERVASIVE AMONG FEMALE AND MALE INTERVIEWEES IN THE GAMBIA AND TURKEY.

On the one hand, the social psychology experiment (WP5) concludes that gender is not a key factor for developing intergroup attitudes and prosocial behaviour when individuals are exposed to migrants' testimonial narratives (Pizarro et al 2023). Whereas the testimonial stories around victimhood (migrants as victims) and heroism (migrants as heroes) promote better relations between migrants and autochthonous people than the stories around profiteering (migrants as a threat), this effect does not change depending on the sex of individuals participating in the survey or on the sex of migrant testimonies.

On the other hand, the narratives embedded in EU information campaigns to deter migration (WP6) highlight specific risks for irregular women like suffering from sexual violence in the journey. However, results point out that (potential) migrant women do not appear very much affected by these campaigns, since the narrative of Europe as providing safety, predictability, and a future is equally pervasive among female and male interviewees in the Gambia and Turkey (Brekke et al 2023). In contrast, the decisions of potential female migrants are more widely affected by the stories and information circulating among their family and social networks. Being aware of the potential gendered risks like sexual abuse, rapes, undesired pregnancies and/or abortions, women may adopt different strategies to migrate and reach Europe like taking contraceptives during the journey, forming closer bonds with fellow male migrants to obtain protection or getting married with someone living in Europe and applying for family reunification (Trauner et al 2023). Moreover, they are also advised not to undertake dangerous routes, since suffering from sexual and gender violence could incur in a loss of family honour, a divorce, the rejection of future marriage proposals and the isolation from the community not only in the country of origin, but also in the country of reception.

Finally, the life cycle of narratives also includes the impact of media and political narratives in policymaking (WP7). The case of Ukrainian refugees highlights how their representation as the 'true' refugees who deserve protection (being mainly female with children, and Christian) is often put in contrast with the economic migrants from outside Europe (mostly male with no children, and Muslim). In this regard, the framing of migrant white mothers as victims in the media and political spheres is used to reinforce the otherness with migrant men in gendered and cultural terms. At the same time, Ukrainian men who travel abroad to seek humanitarian protection have been in some instances implicitly or explicitly labelled as 'cowards', since they are expected to stay in Ukraine and fight, following the traditional gender roles (Smellie 2023).

And what implications do these representations have? The depiction of Ukrainian refugees as 'true refugees' has contributed to more tolerance with this group and the adoption of policies that facilitate their entry with measures like the Temporary Protection Directive. The fact that 70% of Ukrainian refugees are women and have benefitted from this Directive has facilitated their integration (e.g., access to employment and housing) over other female refugees and migrants from outside Europe, which shows a pattern of intersectional (indirect) discrimination caused by migration policies.

Summing up, this article has focused on the importance of critically unveiling how we construct gendered and racialised migration narratives and the consequences these narratives may have in the society and in policymaking. Should we not acknowledge the influence of gender relations in the way we tell migration, we run the risk of rendering migrant women and men invisible or in a stereotyped way and even more importantly, of failing to see what potential intersectional effects are produced by biased narratives.

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9. How to co-produce alternative migration narratives?

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One of the BRIDGES' endeavours has been to co-produce alternative migration narratives from different arenas outside – but in connection with – the world of research. In this article, we want to reflect how this can be done from the organised civil society, photojournalism, and the hip hop culture, with some practical examples of what has been done in the project. It is in these spaces, where the voices of migrants are more included, far from the stigmatisation and exclusionary discourses focused on the securitisation of borders and the portrayal of migrants as a threat or a victim. To this aim, this article provides guidelines and insights for new textual and visual narratives that contribute to build more cohesive societies and an enhanced dialogue between academics, stakeholders, policymakers, and the wider public.

Insights from the organised civil society

Civil society organisations are often confronted with the difficulty of 'changing the story' on migration, as the dominant narratives produced by the media and political spheres are pervaded by stereotypes and migrants have few opportunities to express themselves as a political subject. The constant dichotomy between the in-group ('us') and the out-group ('them') maintains power relationships and hides the great heterogeneity that especially dominates within those coming from outside Europe. Against this background, civil society organisations work to change this situation and foster new migration narratives. In Spain, the porCausa foundation has developed a methodology to produce more inclusive narratives with the aim to shape the public debate in a positive way. In particular, for the BRIDGES project, it has produced

a multi-language toolkit with three key rules for other organisations willing to add value in the same direction.

The first rule is that narratives should return to the universal values and commonalities between human beings and promote the shared story and those places where we can think of ourselves as a community. The second rule revolves around the avoidance of categories of migrants in the public discourse. Although the legal distinction between a migrant and a refugee exists and must be acknowledged, it is often used in the public debate to reinforce the boundaries between the 'economic migrant' who is often portrayed as a profiteer or as a threat, and the 'genuine asylum seeker' who deserves all protection and rights. This dichotomic distinction ignores that the causes of (forced) mobility are often multidimensional, where the economic factors may intertwine with political and social ones, even though the asylum laws hardly recognise it. In addition, the use of acronyms that originally come from law, such as MENAS in Spanish to refer to unaccompanied minors, can also be highly stigmatising, whereas others like 'foreigner' or 'expat' are not associated with the stereotype of migrants that predominates in the media. A greater awareness of these language connotations and the recognition of migration as a human right regardless of the motivations for their journey, may contribute to avoid stigmatising concepts when covering news and stories about migration.

THE FIRST RULE IS THAT NARRATIVES SHOULD RETURN TO THE UNIVERSAL VALUES AND COMMONALITIES BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS AND PROMOTE THE SHARED STORY AND THOSE PLACES WHERE WE CAN THINK OF OURSELVES AS A COMMUNITY. THE SECOND RULE REVOLVES AROUND THE AVOIDANCE OF CATEGORIES OF MIGRANTS IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE.

Finally, the third rule consists of avoiding reactive communication by organisations, institutions and the media, especially when this concerns hate speech spread through social media. Platforms like Twitter (or X) have been acknowledged to work as echo chambers of hatred and highly controversial messages, most often associated with the far right and strongly conservative actors. In this regard, it is advised not to react against these messages and rather ignore them. Even if the intention may be to deny or counter fake news or stereotyped narratives, such actions run the risk of magnifying and further spreading the initial negative message. In this regard, inspiring and non-reactive messages should be promoted, as they end up having a stronger favourable impact.

Insights from photojournalism

In the mass media, the visual narratives of migration are predominantly made up of large exoduses of migrants as indistinct groups which tend to accompany texts related to topics such as national security and the protection

of borders. In this context, documentary photography is mainly used as a simplified illustration, which is exploited for its ability to arouse emotions and its tendency to be considered closer to the idea of truth than other forms of communication. Yet, the story of what happens before and after is missing: where these migrants come from, how they live once they arrive in Europe, what their memories and expectations are, or how they interact with the States and societies that welcome them.

Against this background, photography and photojournalism have the potential to challenge existing visual narratives and propose new ones. The itinerant exhibition Out of Frame within the BRIDGES project has been conceived to raise awareness of the role of photography in constructing and shaping public opinion, as well as in contributing to guide political thinking and policy decisions on migration issues. A first analysis of an archive of publications from the major international newspapers revealed that what builds and feeds the collective imagination and the polarization about a topic like migration are not only the images we see in the newspapers, but also those that we do not see. In this regard, rethinking the visual narratives of migration means to start a discussion both on 'what' and 'how' is represented and on the production and editorial dynamics of newsrooms.

After the development of an archive, the works of six photographers (Miia Autio, Felipe Romero Beltrán, Samuel Gratacap, Alessio Mamo, Alisa Martynova, Aubrey Wade) and the collaborative project 'Now you see me Moria' were selected to build the exhibition, which was first displayed in Rome and then in Madrid and Brussels. Through a diverse range of linguistic and visual approaches, all these photographers examine contemporary migration with a common will to raise awareness about migrants' living conditions, presenting them as subjects (rather than objects) that operate in an often complex and adverse context, which may nonetheless be reversed to become positive and integrating. The exhibition also includes a wall installation that depicts a chronology of main events related to migration and how the media portrayed them in different European countries, together with a selection of the most representative news stories on migration in these countries from 2015 to 2022.

In short, these new visual narratives and alternative points of view put the 'humanisation' of the migrant at the centre with individual and non-stereotyped stories and touching upon social and political issues that are often overlooked, such as reception and inclusion. A photography that does not dwell only on the events but that engages the viewer in a process of reflection, relationship, and empathy. Despite the differences in style and realisation, the works contribute to deconstruct the imagery of the mass media and propose new frames of reference with other possible narratives to a wide audience.

Insights from Hip Hop

Hip Hop and its different artistic disciplines (e.g., break dance, rap, graffiti) fosters a culture committed to peace and social justice through the promotion of universal values like peace, love, and unity. This is not only recognised by those who share this culture, but also by global institutions like the United Nations through the approval of the Hip Hop Declaration of Peace in 2001.

Migration has become a popular topic in Hip Hop with an important impact all over the world not just through the lyrics of rap music but also through muralism. We can find inclusive narratives of migration made by artists from all over the world explaining their own experiences as migrants. These are often children of migrants who find difficulties to be recognised as full citizens and denounce structural racism embedded in reception societies. It is the example of the Italian rapper Ghali, who as a son of Tunisian migrants could not become a citizen until he was 18 and did not feel represented by the rap done in Italy despite being a lover. Starting with this feeling, he managed to find his own way to tell his story, using a mix of languages, and become an icon in this genre[5].

THE NARRATIVES PRODUCED FROM THE MARGINS OF THE SOCIETY CONNECT WITH ETHNIC AND MIGRANT COMMUNITIES – ESPECIALLY YOUNG PEOPLE – WHO MOST OFTEN ARE CONCERNED WITH THE SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY IN COUNTRIES THAT HAVE BECOME MORE DIVERSE BUT YET WHERE DISCRIMINATION REMAINS ENTRENCHED.

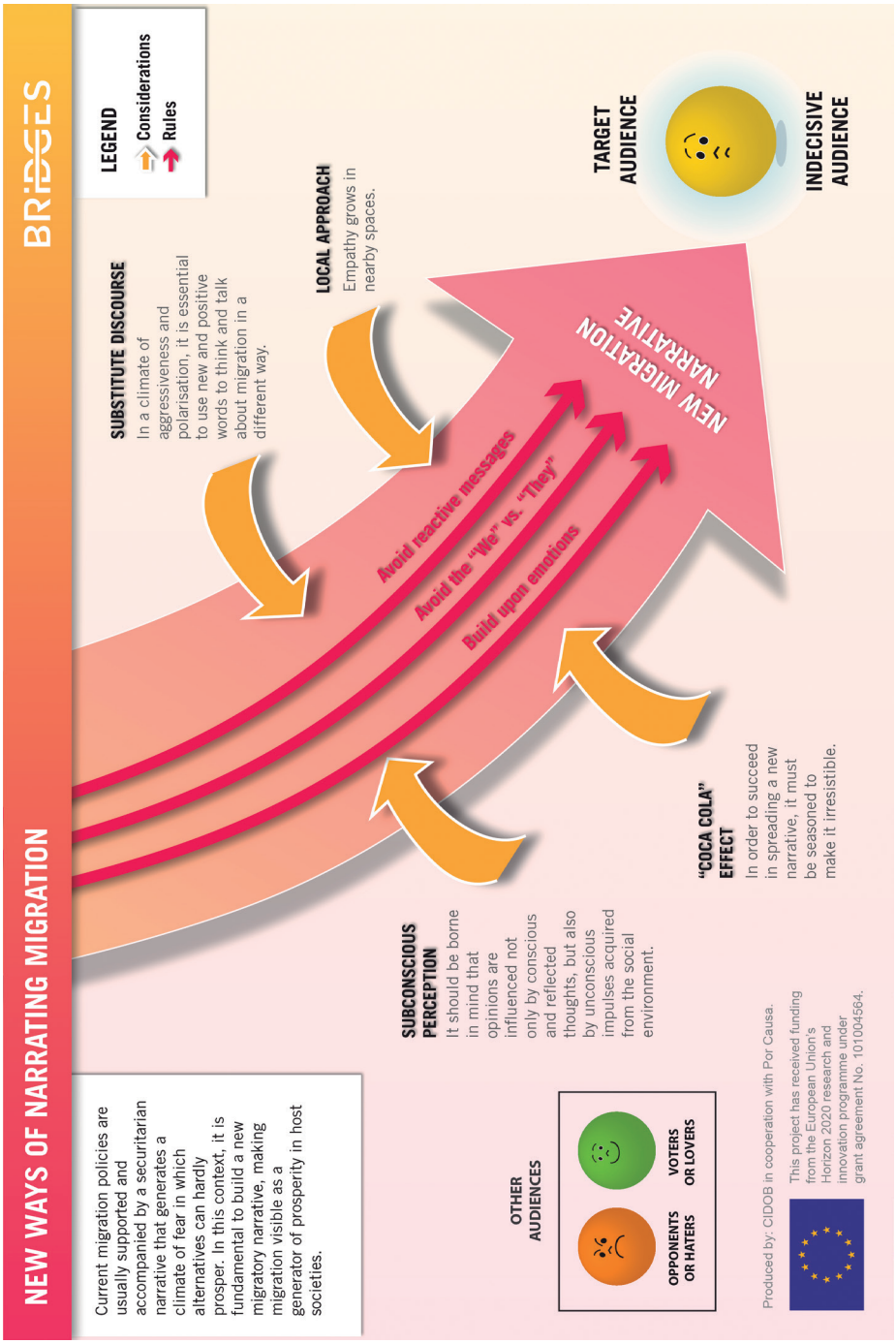
The narratives produced from the margins of the society connect with ethnic and migrant communities – especially young people – who most often are concerned with the search of an identity in countries that have become more diverse but yet where discrimination remains entrenched. At the same time, the narratives about migration are also produced from the Global South, by echoing the experiences of friends or family members in their journey to the Global North or once settled. It is the perspective from the margins and from the lived experience what allows to question and counter exclusionary accounts, by appealing to universal values of humanity. As Armin Langer explains, "modern-day European rappers are challenging outdated European views of citizenship and reshaping public debate on racial and ethnic identity"[6].

5. Source: New York Times Magazine. "Can a Rapper change Italy's mind about migrants?" by Alia Malek. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/magazine/ghali-italy-migrants.html
6. Source: The Conversation. "From its birth 50 years ago, hip-hop has spread throughout Europe and challenged outdated ideals of racial and ethnic identity" by Armin Langer. https://theconversation.com/from-its-birth-50-years-ago-hip-hop-has-spread-throughout-europe-and-challenged-outdated-ideals-of-racial-and-ethnic-identity-202280

The double Hip Hop contest organised within the project has precisely aimed at challenging the main migration narratives and propose new visual and textual stories through rap and muralism. The winners undertook a two-week artistic residency in the multicultural neighbourhood of La Florida, in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat (Barcelona), in which they got to know several initiatives and exchanged experiences with people of the area that nurtured their productions. The results were a song called 'El Extraño' by the Colombian singer Fly So High focused on the experience of a migrant in Spain and a large-format mural by the artist Teo Vázquez with overlapped pictures of three young Hip Hop dancers. Both productions show that participatory processes in artistic residences can be an optimal way to co-produce new narratives about diverse neighbourhoods by dignifying their people.

Concluding remarks

This article has given insights on how the civil society can succeed in promoting alternative migration narratives through different methods and artistic disciplines in the societal sphere and beyond. In a nutshell, from the point of view of organisational and institutional communication, the ignorance of hate speech may be more efficient than trying to counter it. At the same time, fostering the commonalities between human beings regardless of their racial or ethnic origin may be an efficient way to escape from exclusionary frames by also reminding the right of all individuals to migrate regardless of their causes. In a similar vein, we should also focus on all what is left out of the usual frames. From the discipline of photography, taking pictures about individual stories of integration appears as a successful strategy to counter depersonalised pictures of masses of immigrants at the borders. Likewise, the promotion of a participatory culture in arts like Hip Hop can contribute to build a dialogue between different actors and result in more inclusive and respectful narratives about migration.


BRIDGES
NEW WAYS OF NARRATING MIGRATION
Current migration policies are usually supported and accompanied by a securitarian narrative that generates a climate of fear in which alternatives can hardly prosper. In this context, it is fundamental to build a new migratory narrative, making migration visible as a generator of prosperity in host societies.
OTHER AUDIENCES
OPPONENTS OR HATERS
VOTERS OR LOVERS
SUBCONSCIOUS PERCEPTION
It should be borne in mind that opinions are influenced not only by conscious and reflected thoughts, but also by unconscious impulses acquired from the social environment.
SUBSTITUTE DISCOURSE
In a climate of aggressiveness and polarisation, it is essential to use new and positive words to think and talk about migration in a different way.
LOCAL APPROACH
Empathy grows in nearby spaces.
Avoid reactive messages
Avoid the "We" vs. "They"
Build upon emotions
NEW MIGRATION NARRATIVE
"COCA COLA" EFFECT
In order to succeed in spreading a new narrative, it must be seasoned to make it irresistible.
TARGET AUDIENCE
INDECISIVE AUDIENCE
LEGEND
Considerations
Rules
Produced by: CIDOB in cooperation with Por Causa.
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The project aimed 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 adopted an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and was implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

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