

# Migration Narratives in Europe

Through conversations on public social media



A Bakamo Public  Project for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

- 2019 -

# Introduction

---



01



# Public Social Media Conversation on Migration

**Friedrich Ebert Stiftung** commissioned **Bakamo Public** to conduct **social media listening** on the discussion around **migration** in 28 member states of the European Union.

**This research defines the term *migrants*** as "people living and working outside their country of origin."\* Using this definition, the study analyzed posts and comments published within 28 EU member states on public social media from **31 July 2017** until **1 August 2018**.

The goal of the analysis was to identify **Pan-European migration narratives**: thematic topics that appear in all EU member state discussions concerning migration. We aimed to compare the size of these narratives in each country and identify regional similarities.

The research analyzed the influence of **European and domestic politics** on the local migration discourse, and identified **key conversation channels** and overall **tone of discussion** for each country.

\*Source: <https://www.hrw.org/topic/migrants>



# Methodology

We scraped public social media platforms applying the [Talkwalker](#) software, to gather conversations mentioning the keyword “migration”, “migrant”, or particular synonyms of the words.

Talkwalker access posts from online news outlets, forums, blogs, video sharing sites, and leading social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, not including Facebook.

In our 1 year research timeframe (1 August 2017 – 31 July 2018) we have accessed **more than 45 million social media posts from across the European Union**, and analyzed a 10,000+ sample in each country, in original language.

We applied more than 100 native speakers who analyzed local data, and we have also applied the latest AI technology to help us classify large datasets in each country.



*Images presented in this report appeared as attachments to posts on public social media platforms, or are royalty-free photographs accessed through pexels.com.*



# Key Findings | Pan-European Narratives

The size of conversations generated on public social media platforms indicates that migration is a major political issue across all EU member states.

The conversation is dominated by a resoundingly anti-migration stance. **No resonating progressive or migration supporting narratives have been found.**

The 28+ national migration conversations exhibit a unified pan-european narrative framework. People's conversations can be grouped into five main narratives: **security, identity, economy, humanitarianism, and demography.**

The **security and identity narratives' dominance** is larger than the numbers indicate, as they have contested and subverted the other three narratives to align with anti-migration sentiments.





# Key Findings | Local Contexts and Personal Anxieties

In-depth, qualitative analysis of the conversation landscapes revealed that implicit drivers of the conversation behavior are rooted in local issues and emotions. **Implicitly, social media users utilize the migration issue as a vessel to escalate their seemingly unresolved problems.**

## Local Issues

The country-by-country analysis revealed a wealth of domestic, and personally-relevant issues and tensions that provide the migration discussion with unabating popular relevance among social media users in Europe.

## Emotions

The conversation triggers social media users along three discernable existential anxieties: **lack of economic stability**, **fear for personal safety**, and a **void of cultural-communal identity**.





# Key Findings | Coordinated Communication Strategy

## Engineered Conversation

The cross country comparison shows that the anti-migration actors utilize locally-adapted European narratives, and take advantage of disinformation strategically in a cross-EU effort to steer the conversation.

The 28+ local conversations exhibit strong similarities as negative news and conspiratorial disinformation on the migration crisis are disseminated across social media.

## EU Election Campaign

The observed time horizon of the study maps the political marketing groundwork that is likely the political platform of choice in the upcoming European parliamentary elections.





# Study Limitations

**Social listening** methodology does not deliver a “representative” sample of what each individual citizens’ attitude towards the migration topic is. The research only analyzes publicly available conversations, in accordance with the GDPR regulations of the European Union.

Social media content around migration is generated by a fraction of society, but due to the very nature of social media, it has the capacity to shape the perception of the vast passive majorities.

Social media listening is **bias- and hypothesis-free** - with no influence over the analyzed participants.



# Pan-European Narratives

---

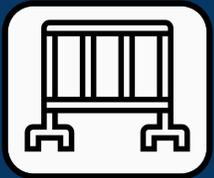


02



# Pan-European Narratives Around Migration

Analysis of public social media conversations around migration revealed five thematic topics that are present in the discourse of all EU member states.



The **security** narrative reflects migration as a vehicle to import terrorism: the discussions cover the perceived threat of crime committed by migrants, and the protective measures a country implements to mitigate the associated risks.



The **identity and customs** narrative reflects the influence of migration on local culture and national identity, the potential consequences of religious differences, and the pros and cons of a multicultural society.



The **humanitarianism** narrative reflects the circumstances of refugees during their journey to Europe, and the treatment they receive after their arrival in the EU.



The **economy** narrative reflects the financial burden of allowing migrants in the country: the impact of migration on the local welfare systems and social services, and the zero-sum game for economic benefits between migrants and locals.



The **demographics** narrative discusses immigration as a solution to the increasing reliance on old age pensions and health services, and immigrants' integration to the local job market to satisfy demand for low-skill workers.

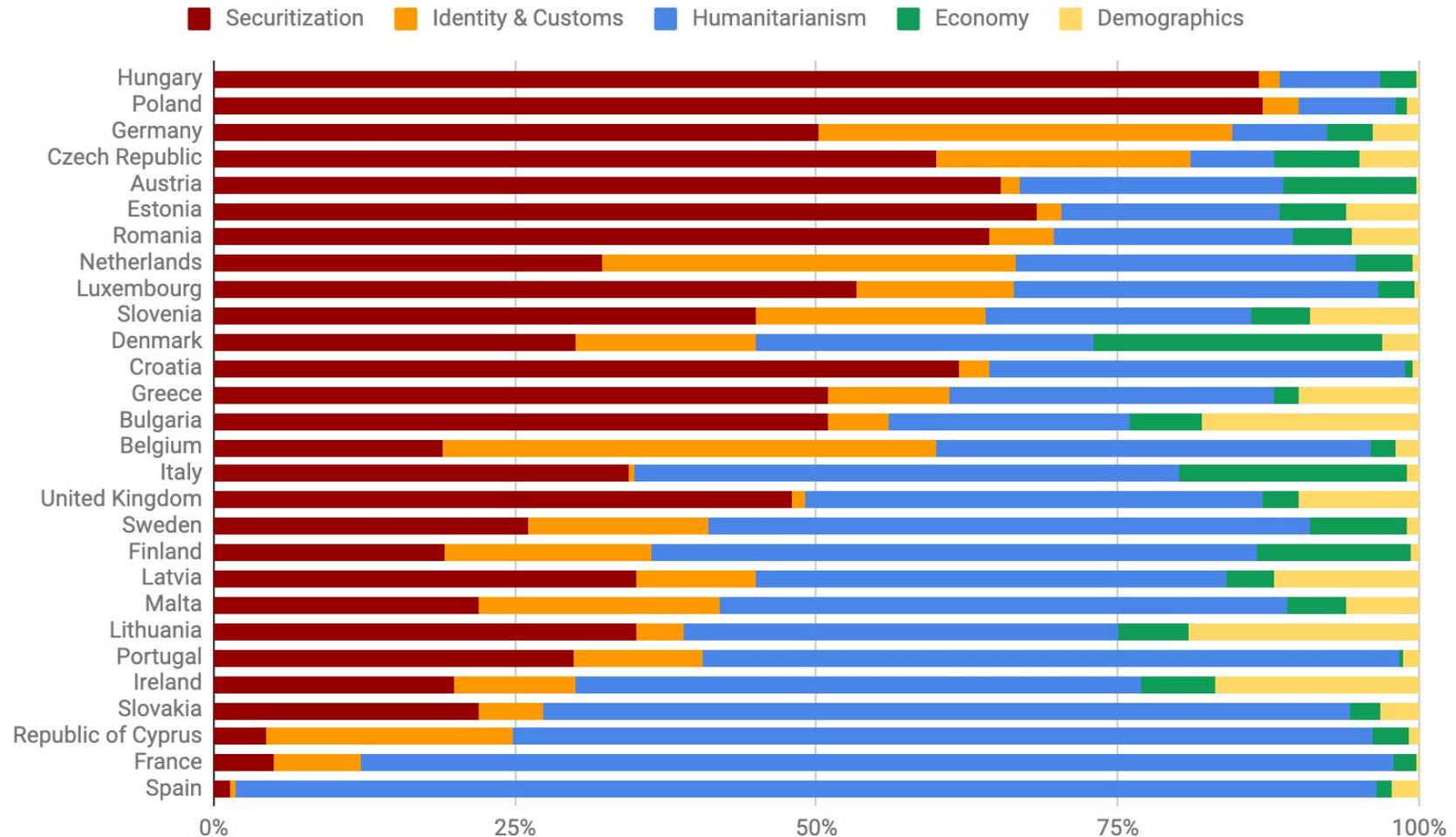


# Five Narratives Cover the Entire Conversation in Europe Around Migration

The analysis shows that **securitization and identitarian discourse**, on the one side, and **humanitarianism** is strong on the other.

As the analysis will show, Humanitarianism cannot be equated with a positive stance towards migration.

Interestingly, southern European countries tend to score higher on humanitarian narratives, while north-eastern member states score higher on security and identity.



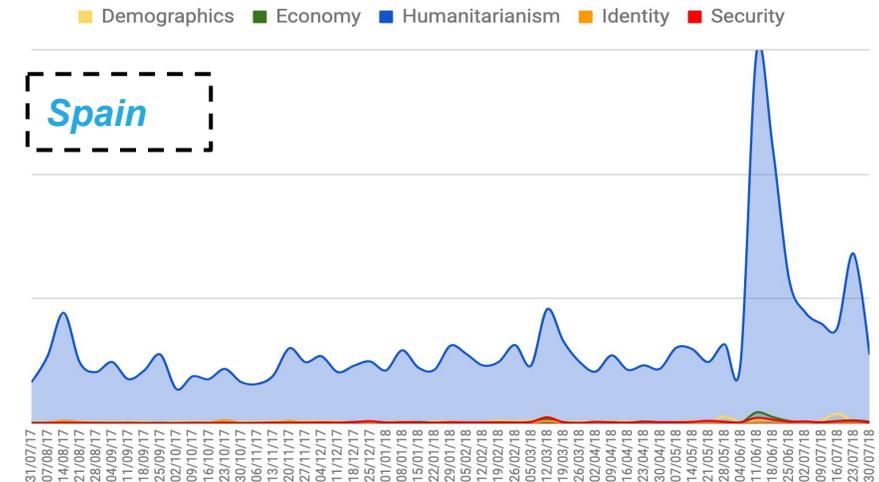
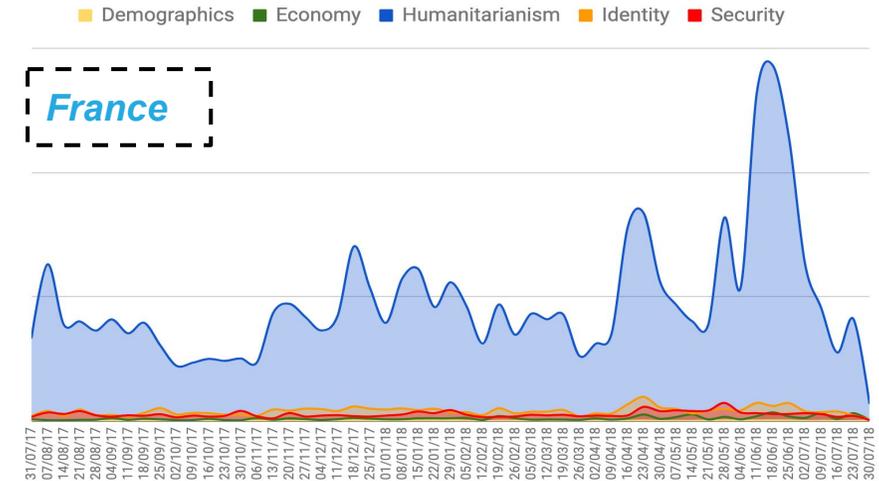


# Dominance of the Humanitarian Narrative Does Not Necessitate Pro-migrant Sentiment

In **France**, **anti-migrant voices** tend to express doubt that migrants coming to the country are in real need of assistance, and voice extreme dissatisfaction with the current government's handling of the situation.

In the meantime, **pro-migrant voices** indicate the opposite: they claim that the current government is not doing enough to assist migrants and that Macron and his allies are guilty of great humanitarian violations in their policies and treatment of migrants.

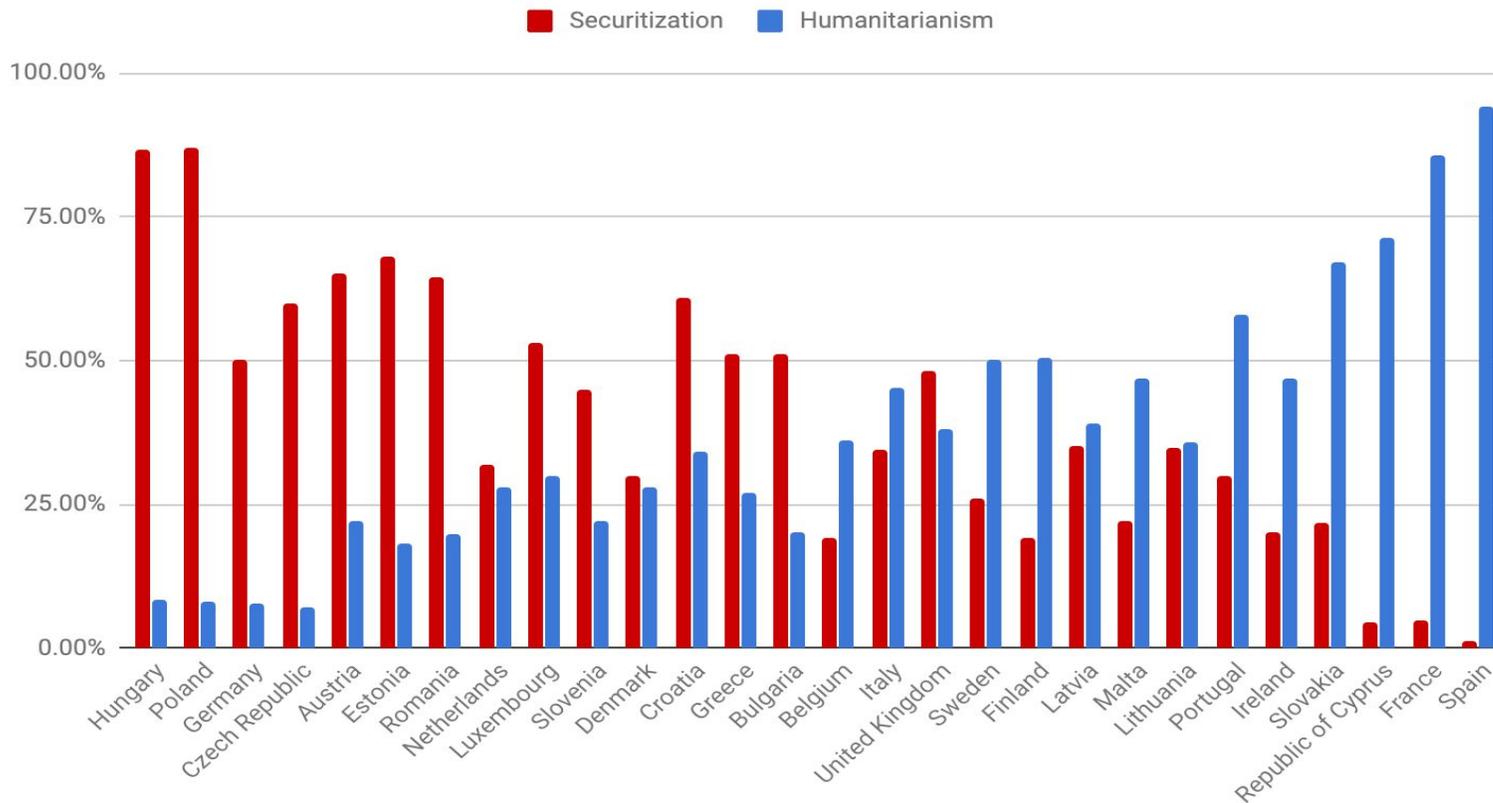
In **Spain**, despite an overwhelming humanitarian sentiment towards migration, catching this wave the **local far-right was able to capitalize on other local issues to achieve a breakthrough** (eg. reacting to Catalan independence, or framing humanitarianism as a hypocritical attitude by left wing politicians who don't deliver prosperity and would prioritize the needs of others over Spaniards).





# A Wave of Securitization Washes Over Humanitarianism

The migration crisis is being leveraged to invoke fear in the public. Even if refugees are not actually present in the country, the **fear is kept alive through daily discourse**. In this landscape, right-wing populists come across as entities that recognize the threat, and provide viable options for protection.



“Securitization in international relations is the process of state actors transforming subjects into matters of "security": an extreme version of politicization that enables extraordinary means to be used in the name of security. **Issues that become securitized do not necessarily represent issues that are essential to the objective survival of a state, but rather represent issues where someone was successful in constructing an issue into an existential problem.**”

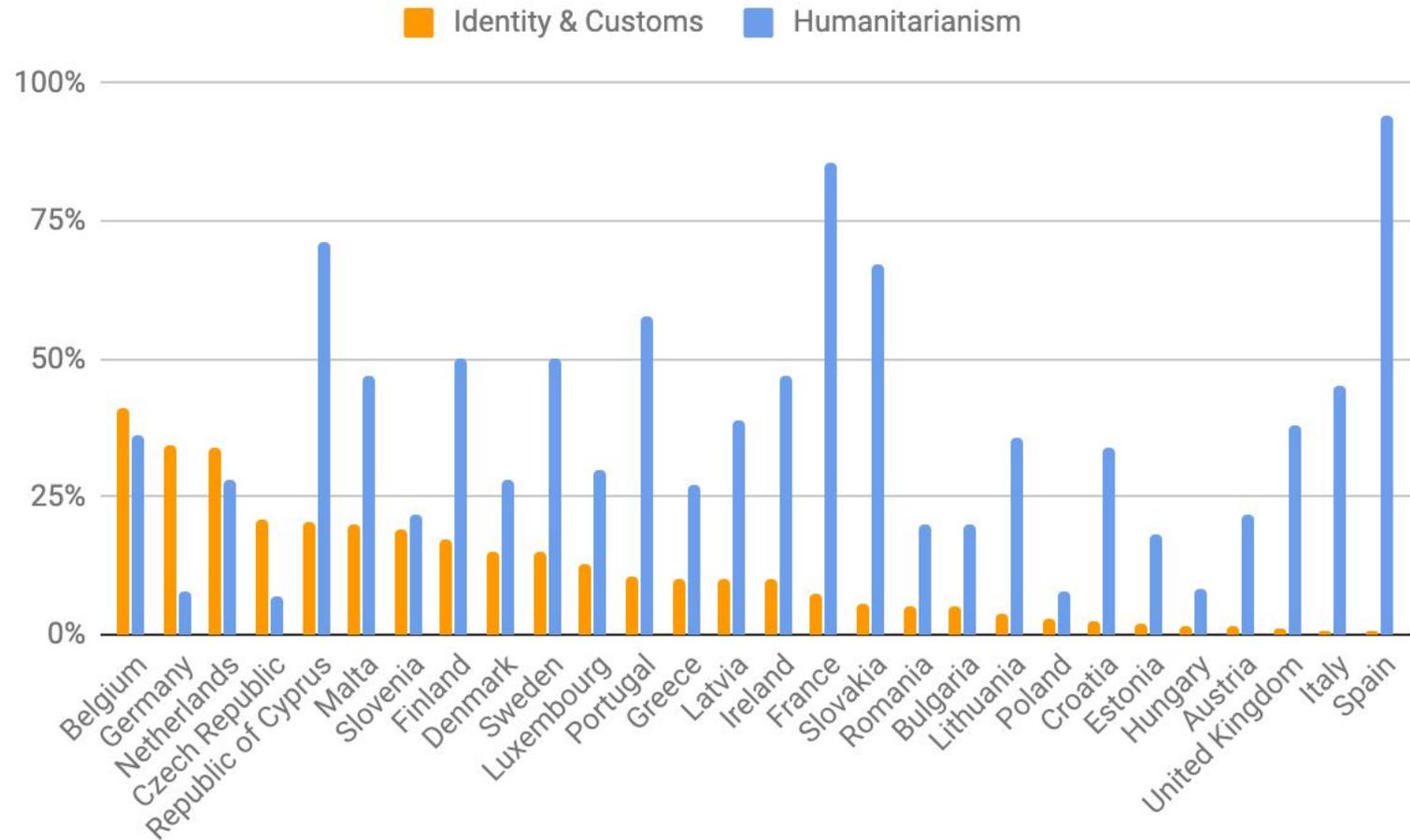
– B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde



# Identitarianism is Subverting Humanitarianism

In addition to securitization, we can see a strong identity-based discourse emerging in **Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands**, arguing that the European identity is incompatible with Islam.

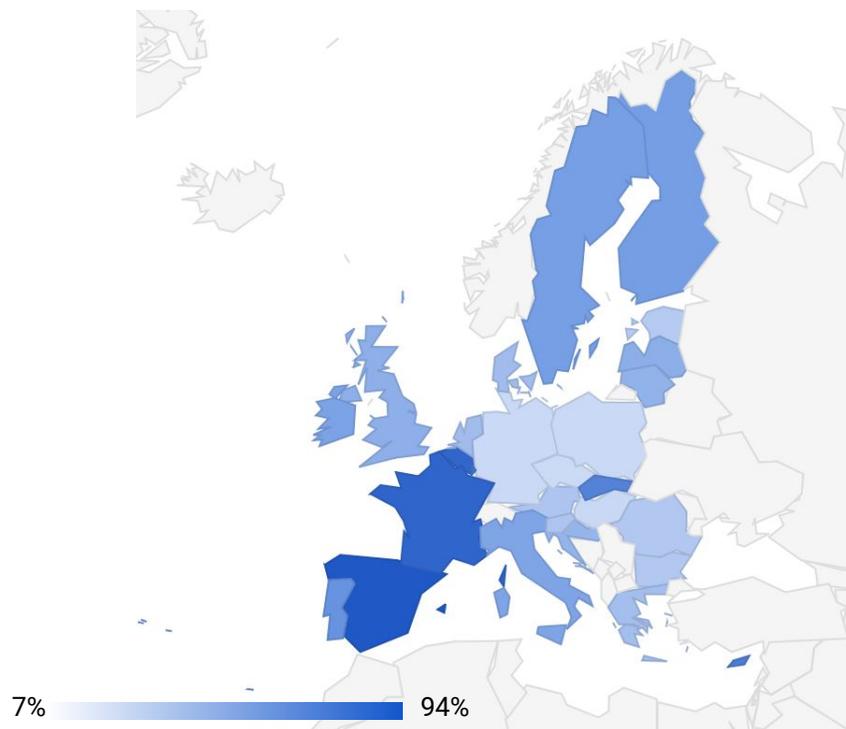
This argument is used for political gain by the right-wing, reframing **humanitarianism as a concealed threat to European identity**.



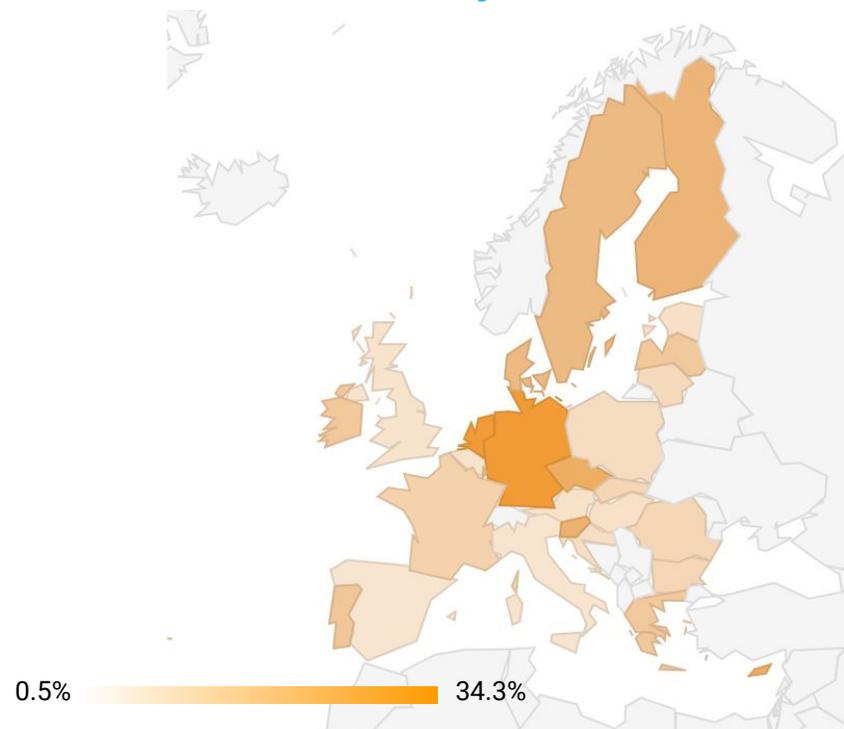
# Mapping the Humanitarian-Identitarian Split

By comparing humanitarianism and identity based narratives, we can find an inverse correlation dividing Europe: **the stronger identitarianism gets, the less chance humanitarianism has to prevail.**

## Size of the humanitarianism discourse



## Size of the identity discourse



# Role of Local Context

---



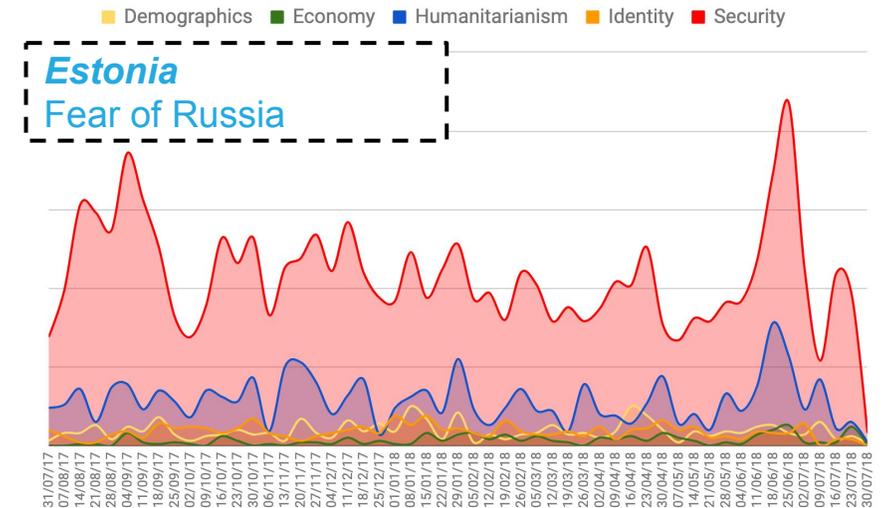
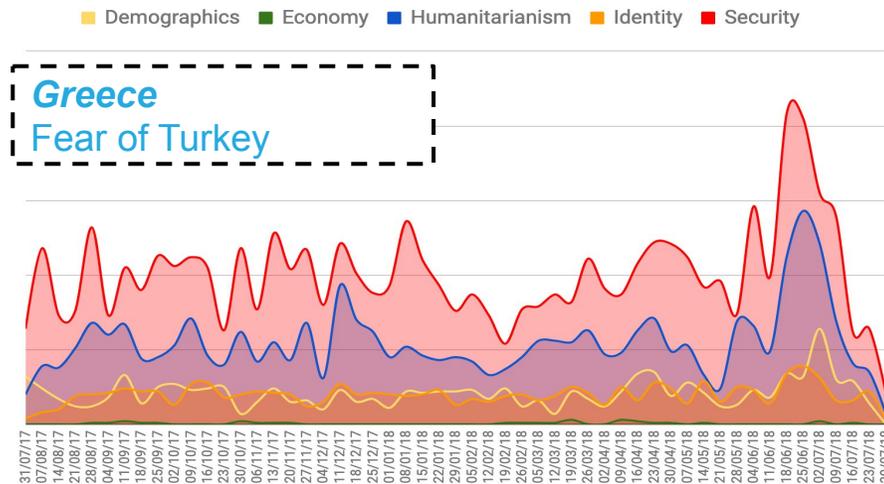
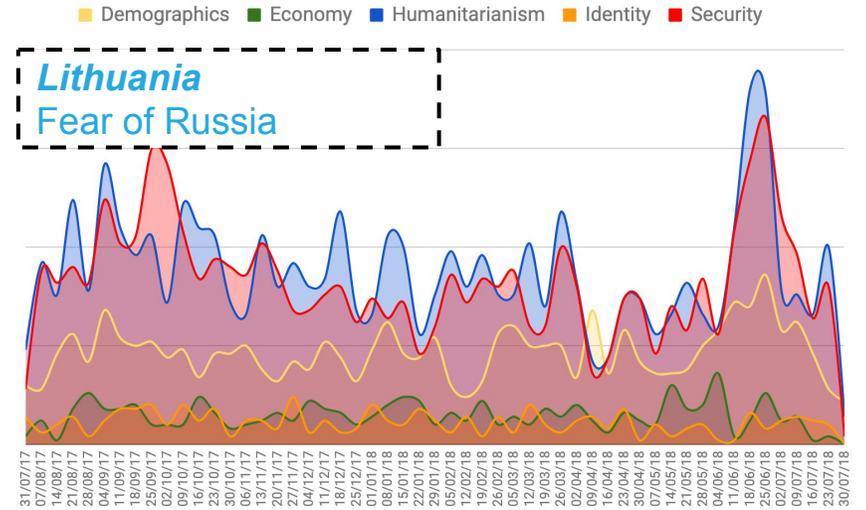
03



# Migration Crisis is an Outlet for Local Geographic Fears

For those member states which exist along the borders of the EU, conversations about the migration crisis tie into a larger, already securitized discourse, focusing on a geopolitically threatening neighbour.

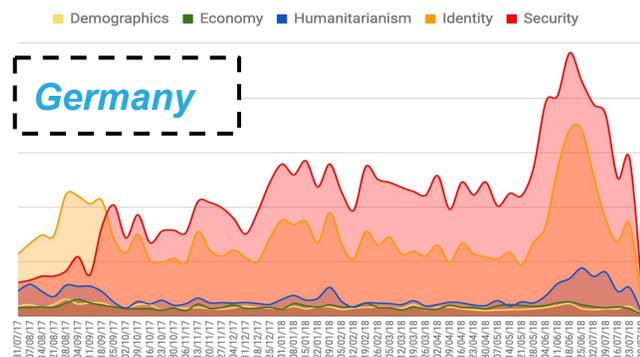
**International events** such as the EU Migration Summit not only serve to amplify the migration conversation, but also **become a vehicle to express anxieties over regional power dynamics.**



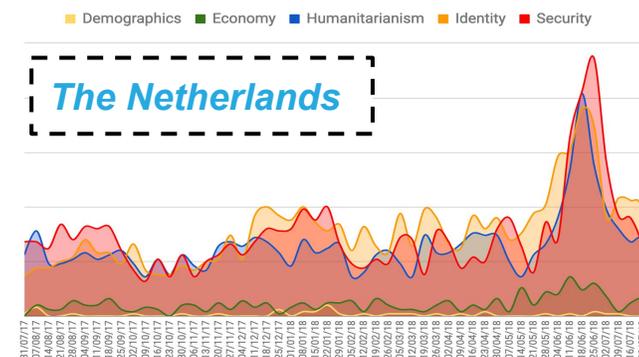
# EU Migration Summit | Local Interpretation of Key Migration-related Events in Europe

Analysis of the conversation timeline in various member states revealed that although key events triggered rapt attention in many countries, the interpretation of such events varied according to the local context:

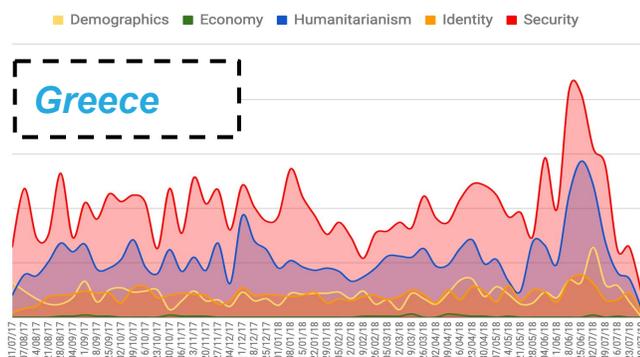
In **Germany**, the Summit directed attention on the internal political debate between CDU & CSU.



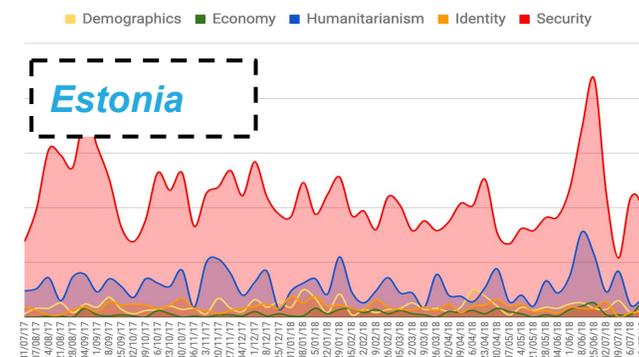
In **the Netherlands**, the EU summit was interpreted as a fight for European identity, between its protectors and destroyers.



As a gatekeeper country of Europe, in **Greece** people welcome the tightening rules around migration.



In **Estonia**, people expect even stricter regulations as they dread migration as Russia's tool to destabilize Europe (and threaten the Baltics)



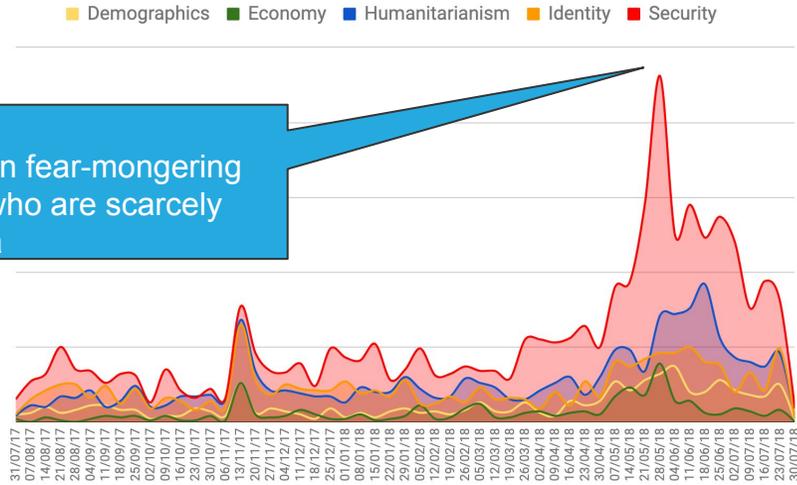


# Local Elections | Politics Curve the Conversation

Election campaigns in the examined time period strongly pushed the narrative which reflected the locally relevant aspect of the migration crisis.

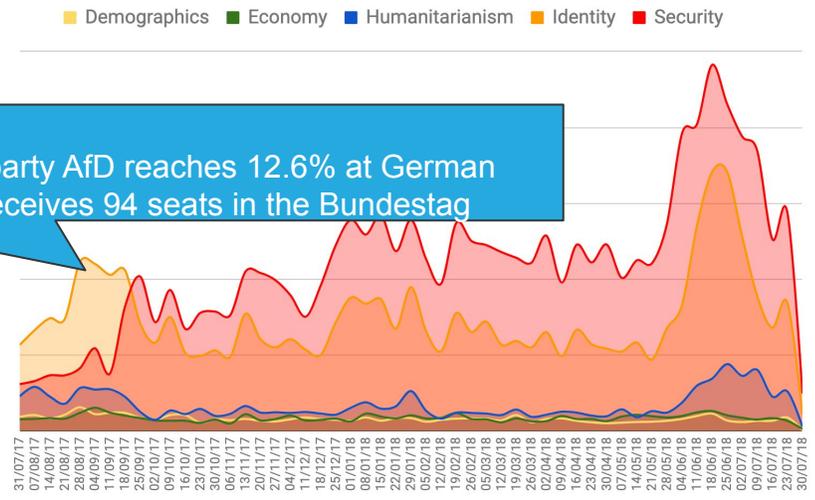
## Slovenia

**SECURITY**  
Campaign based on fear-mongering against migrants, who are scarcely present in Slovenia



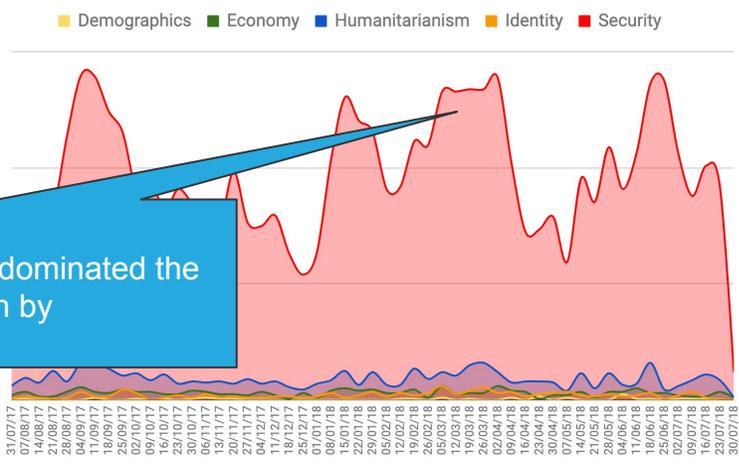
## Germany

**IDENTITY**  
Extreme right-wing party AfD reaches 12.6% at German elections and thus receives 94 seats in the Bundestag



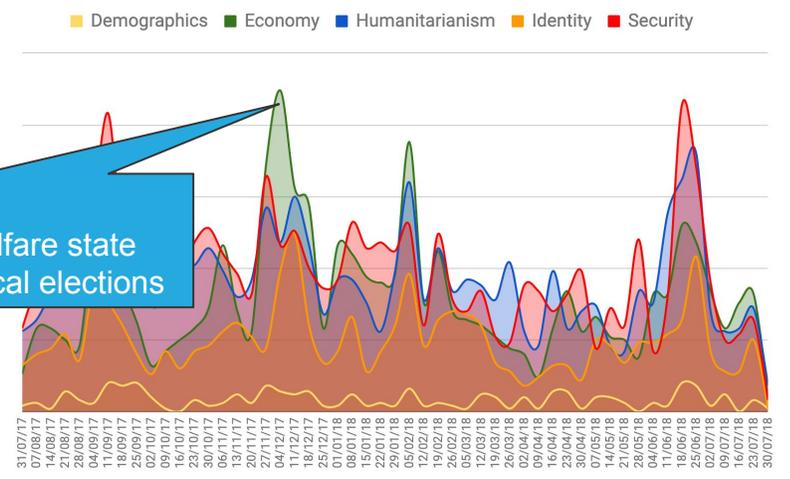
## Hungary

**SECURITY**  
Reigning party Fidesz dominated the migration conversation by securitizing the issue



## Denmark

**ECONOMY**  
Fear of losing the welfare state plays a key role in local elections



# Summary

---



04

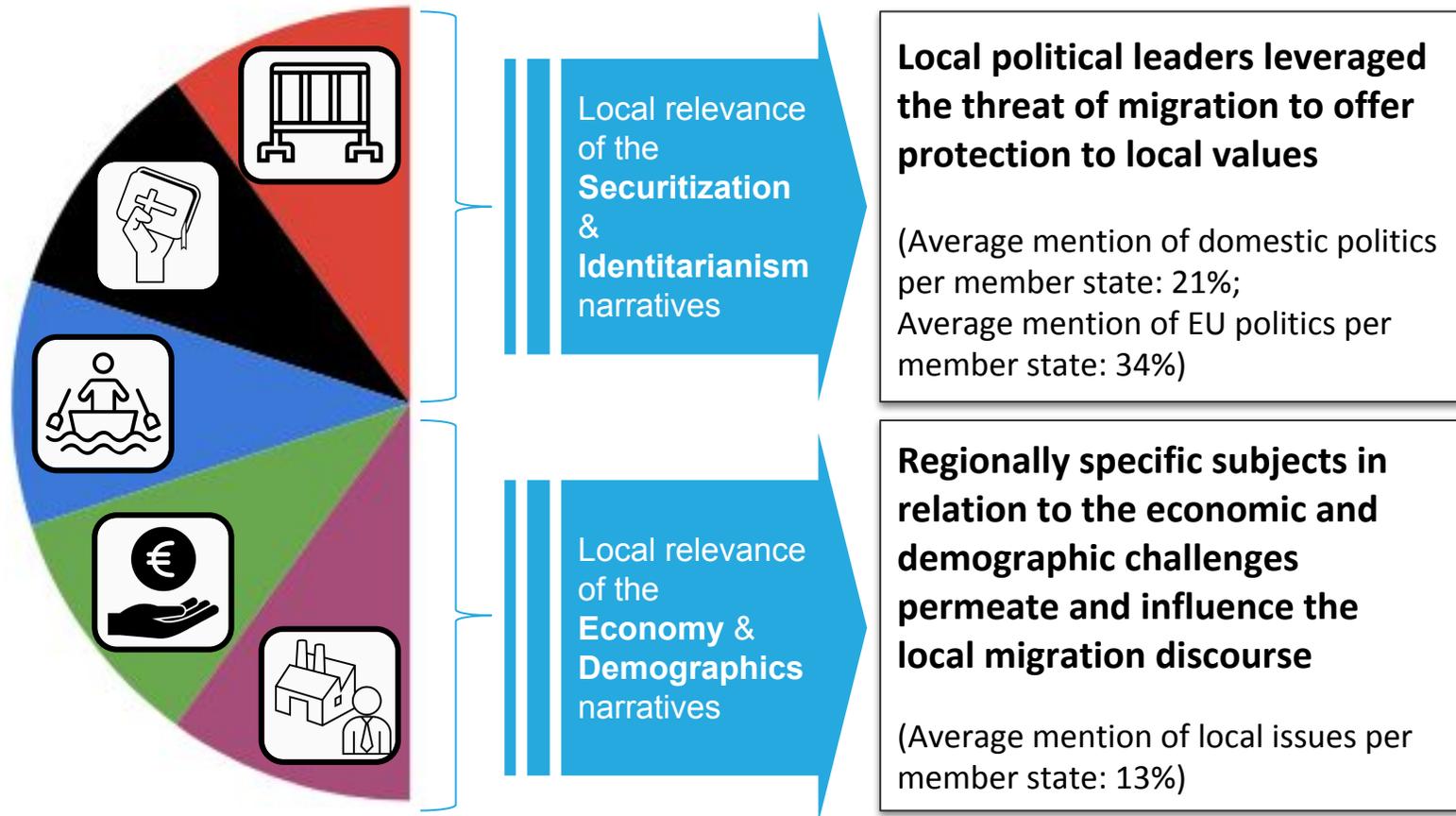


# Local Issues and the Security & Identity Narratives are Key to the Migration Debate

Conversation narratives around migration are interrelated and strongly influenced by issues that are relevant in the given member state:

The local interpretation of **migration's influence on security and identity** is key to understanding the local context around migration.

The **country's economic circumstances** (abundance or lack thereof of financial assets and status of the labour market) also strongly influence the nation's approach to migration.





# Mechanics of the Cross-EU Anti-migration Political Marketing Strategy

## Security and Identity Subsumes Humanitarianism

The migration discourse in every observed country exhibits similar dissemination features, techniques and social media ecosystems.

**The strategy subverts humanitarianism through the security and identity narrative, and utilizes disinformation to maintain outrage and fear.**

## Us vs. Them

Building on the emotional disposition, **anti-migrant actors create an “Us vs. Them” dichotomy**, allowing people to associate their problems with the migration crisis, which anti-migration actors can claim to solve with stopping migration.

## Narratives over Facts

Emotional-laden narrative statements are stronger, more credible and resonant than evidence-based lines of argumentation around the migration issue. **Factual changes and policy decisions have to pierce the narrative bubbles to meaningful impact on social media users.**

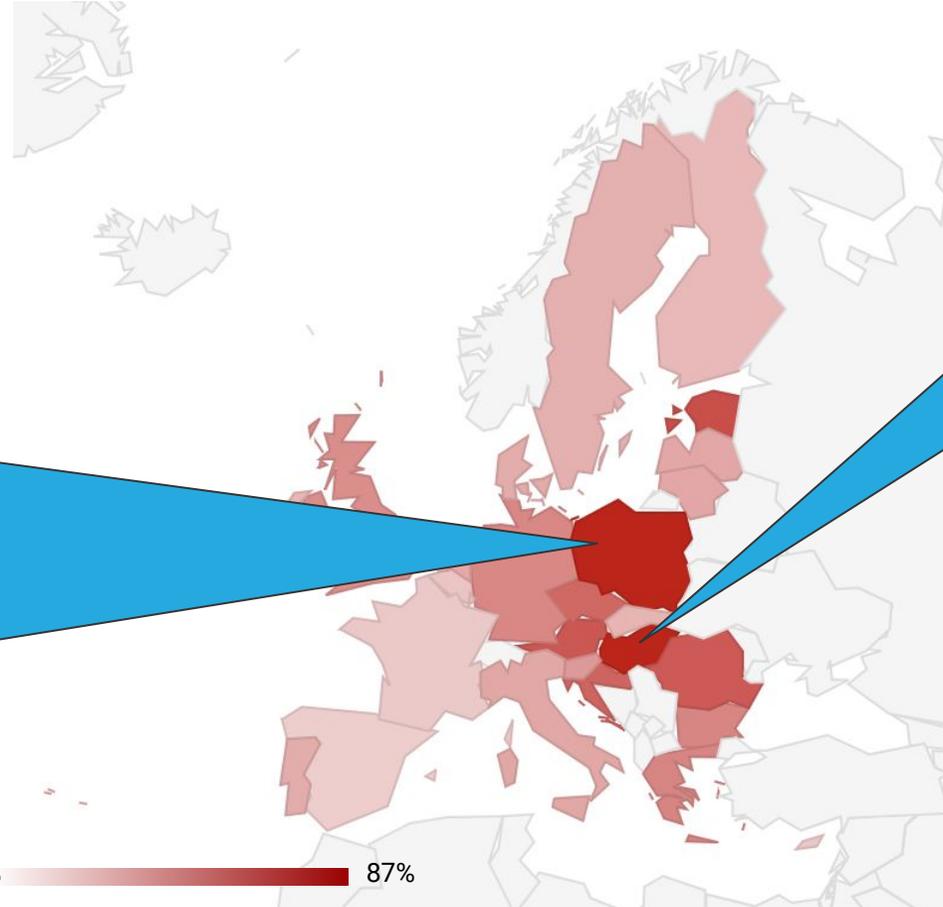
## Distrust Towards Media & Institutions

**Anti-elitism and deployed patterns of disinformation** continue to erode trust into traditional media and public institutions; contributing to a self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust and radicalisation.



# Internal Fear-mongering: Migration Constructed to be an Existential Problem

Poland and Hungary both host a minor number of migrants. However, the migration crisis was co-opted by politicians in both countries, keeping the issue afloat in order to gain political power.



**Poland: Rimini Rape Case**  
Four people with immigrant background raped a Polish woman and beat up her husband in the beach of Rimini, which triggered hate in Poland against migrants

**Hungary: 2018 Parliamentary Elections**  
Election campaign built on one issue only: fear migrants. The governing Fidesz posed as the only entity who's able to protect the country



1.3% 87%



# The Populist Toolkit

Anti-migrant political actors incite anxieties by exaggerating fears of loss. These losses are connected with **problems experienced locally** and are part of the immediate vicinity of the addressed voter groups.



*All images represented in this report appeared as attachments to posts on public social media platforms, and are used here as illustrations of the public online conversation.*

# Recommendations

---



06



# Key Takeaways

## Migration is a mere “vessel”

Public social media comments reflect that the migration crisis is not about migration. People take advantage of the narrative to spotlight and draw attention to their problems.

## Communication attack

Acknowledge and respond to the war-like communication onslaught against democratic institutions and parties by anti-migration opinion groups.

## Pan-EU political discourse has been established

The integrated and franchise-like anti-migrant campaign demonstrates that Europeans are discussing their own problems along narrative frames shared by citizens of other EU member states. This means, that people have a unified EU-level public discourse which can be leveraged by progressive actors as well.

## Humanitarianism has been hollowed out

Humanitarianism as a value has been reshaped by anti-elitist narratives and fails to resonate with people.

## Security and Identity are the dominant frames

The two narrative streaks have managed to either dominate the conversation or subvert other narrative frames, in support of an anti-migration approach.





# Recommendations

## Need for new narratives

To move ahead, progressive actors have to craft a new narrative frame that incorporates and moves beyond security and identity issues.

## Coordinated populist communication

To counter the populist agenda and triumph the new landscape, a single product is not enough. The winning strategy is coordinated and addresses local injustices.



## EU to soothe existential anxieties

The EU and its institutions have to demonstrate how they can be helpful to European citizens in addressing and resolving their three main fears.

## Shift the moral compass

Currently progressive forces are cast to be the enemy of the people. By exposing the true motivation of populists, who use migration to divert from their motifs, progressive forces can shift the discourse.

## Dovetail local and EU issues into a self-confident vision of Europe

Akin to anti-migration actors who have managed to connect local issues with Pan-European narratives, progressive forces must do the same: focus on immediate local issues, while placing them in clear Pan-EU narrative frames.

# Methodology

---



07



# Data Collection

Conversations were systematically collected by the artificial-intelligence based technology platform Talkwalker, which scrapes public social media sites such as forums, blogs, Twitter, Instagram, and content posted on online news sites (articles and comment sections alike). During the time of data collection, due to GDPR regulations Facebook did not provide API access to the public content posted on its platforms.

Data was collected in each country separately, for a one year time period (31 July 2017 – 1 August 2018).

A keyword grid was developed to collect the most far-reaching conversations on the topic, which included terms referring to both 'migration' as a concept and 'migrants' as participants. The keyword grid was first developed in English and then translated to official languages of member states. In each member state, the analysis was carried out in the dominant official language of the country. Conversations were analyzed separately in two dominant languages in Luxembourg (German and French) and Belgium (French and Dutch).

Size of the dataset collected through each country's keyword grid varied by member state. Random sampling was applied to generate a dataset of approximately 10,000 comments in each country, which was then analyzed by human readers and AI-supported technology.



# Use of the Term “Migrant”

The study acknowledges the legal, human rights-related, ethical and other definitions of the term “migrant”, “refugee”, “asylum seeker”, or “immigrant” that form part of the policy debate. Yet, in this study these terms are used interchangeably, reflecting the usage through which they appear in authentic public social media conversations in various EU member states.



# Identification of Pan-European Narratives

Pan-European narratives were identified through qualitative analysis of public social media conversations around migration in six focus countries: Germany, Poland, Italy, Spain, Ireland and Hungary. In the process, local human analysts read a random sample of 1,000 relevant social media posts on migration in each country. Theoretical saturation of the conversation included pinpointing dominant themes. Pan-European narratives emerged through the conceptual grouping of key themes.

Pan-European narratives are topic-based and represent no value judgement. Thus, each narrative may include both pro- and anti-immigrant arguments, depending on the speaker's point of view.

# Description of Pan-European Narratives

## Economy



**Underpinning the economic narrative on immigration is the broad concept of economic sustainability: locals feel that the aggregate effect of migration on national economic growth and local livelihood is unfair and does not come out in their favor.**

Local economic struggles are conflated with discussions citing the **financial burden of hosting migrants**. A particular concern is the allocation of social services and government funds. It is often propagated that a majority of migrants do not deserve support because they are not truly in need.

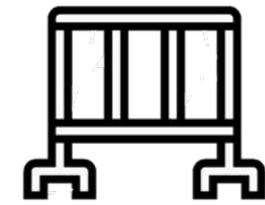
This argument tends to be justified by creating a distinction between **"refugees"** and **"economic" migrants**. While the former are understood to be in real need (and, as such, are deserving of local support and public services), the latter are seen as untrustworthy opportunists looking to improve personal living standards.

### The **Economy** narrative reflects:

- **Zero-sum game** for economic benefits between migrants and locals
- **Financial burden of allowing migrants** in the country
- Impact of migration on the **local welfare systems and social services**
- **Economic migrants** and refugees are juxtaposed

# Description of Pan-European Narratives

## Security



The migration crisis is linked to the perception of an increased threat to local security. In light of violent attacks and crime allegedly committed by migrants, protective measures are promoted to restore a sense of domestic security.

This narrative discusses domestic and international **attacks perpetrated by migrants**. By diverting attention to the potential risk it may pose, migration is believed to be a **vehicle for importing terrorists and criminals**.

Migrants are believed to ruin domestic peace. In particular, **terror attacks, sexual harassment** and other forms of **violence** are discussed as possible ways this security risk could manifest and threaten domestic safety.

Security is not only about the crime, the narrative also reflects counter-measures: **border protection** and **local police** forces are frequent subjects of the discussion.

### The **Security** narrative reflects:

- **Perceived increase of threat due to crime** allegedly committed by migrants
- **Protective measures** implemented by countries to mitigate the risks associated with an influx of migrants

# Description of Pan-European Narratives

## Identity and Customs



**At the heart of this narrative is the fear of losing national identity: the arrival of migrants is perceived to jeopardize social cohesion by threatening to usurp local customs and values.**

Tokens of local culture and identity are perceived to be at risk should a country welcome an influx of migrants with different customs, languages, and values. Specific terrains of national identity such as **gastronomy** and **fashion** are feared to be under threat.

Although the **Pope** expresses a welcoming stance towards migrants, there is a pervasive fear of **local religious customs losing importance** due to an influx of Muslim migrants.

**Multiculturalism** is also discussed—while some believe that it provides value for a society, others claim it is a failed concept.

### The Identity and Customs narrative reflects:

- The influence of **migration on local culture and national identity**
- Potential **consequences of religious differences**
- Pros and cons of a **multicultural society**

# Description of Pan-European Narratives

## Humanitarianism



The humanitarianism narrative considers the concept of moral obligation in the context of migration. While actions such as closing ports to rescue ships may be considered manslaughter, it may also trigger applause.

Key thematic areas for pro-migrant voices include detailed discussions about the **difficult circumstances endured by people fleeing war-zones** and repressive regimes, as well as the specific **names of rescue ships** and member states involved.

Anti-migrant arguments often engage in **selective humanitarianism** whereby a distinction is made between those migrants in "real" need of international aid and "fake" economic migrants who are seen as "false" asylum seekers.

**Blame is often placed on humanitarian NGOs** for the current migration crisis, as they are seen to operate as pseudo taxi services to migrants without regard to international treaties and agreements.

### The Humanitarianism narrative reflects:

- Circumstances of refugees **during their journey to Europe**
- Treatment of migrants **once they arrived in Europe**

# Description of Pan-European Narratives

## Demographics



Migration can be seen as a plausible way to minimize the economic and social consequences of an emerging demographic crisis. In this way, today's migration challenge can be turned into an opportunity.

The successful integration of migrants may result in positive long-term outcomes such as providing relief to local labour shortages and supporting struggling industries.

The potential contribution of successfully integrated migrants may also help alleviate the **pressures of an aging population**.

### The Demographics narrative reflects:

- Immigration as a solution to the increasing reliance on **old age pensions** and health services
- Immigrants' integration to the local job market to **satisfy demand for low-skill workers**



# Categorization of Conversations

The framework of the five Pan-European narratives was applied to analyze the conversation around migration in each member state. Local analysts categorized a random sample of the conversation into each narrative using the Talkwalker platform, simultaneously training [Talkwalker's](#) artificial intelligence algorithm on the the categories' interpretation in the given country. The AI thus became able to group the complete dataset available in each country into the five Pan-European narratives.



# Understanding the Local Context

Pan-European narratives are topic-based categories and refer to the same issues in each country, even if the extent of their presence differs by member state. However, the analysis revealed that the migration crisis is interpreted in each country through very specific local circumstances such as geography, history, politics, or demographic changes. Thus in case of each member state we explored the local issues that wielded crucial influence on the local discourse around migration and the context in which Pan-European narratives are discussed.



# Role of the European and Domestic Political Context

Security of a country depends on its' network of allies, which in the current case refers specifically to the EU. The role of other European countries in the migrant crisis is discussed extensively: for example, certain countries may accuse others of taking less of the migration burden, while the responsibility of the migration crisis is sometimes shifted onto politicians such as Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron.

Similarly, domestic politicians taking stance on the migration issue and their strategies to cope with the threat posed by migration strongly influence the public discourse. Discussions around local parties and politicians are prevalent on public social media platforms throughout all EU countries, and it is clear that a local political party's position on migration strongly effects its popularity and election results.

To measure the influence of European and domestic politics' on the local discourse around migration, we applied qualitative, keyword-based analysis, including key international politicians and fellow EU member states, and local politicians and political parties, respectively.



# Discussion Tone and Conversation Sentiment

Talkwalker's artificial intelligence-based methodology was applied to recognize the tonality of the discourse around migration. Instead of reflecting three groups (positive, negative, and neutral), we applied two categories. Neutral posts were considered to demonstrate 'conversational tone', while comments that were labelled as either positive or negative by the AI were grouped as demonstrating 'passionate tone'. This enabled us to recognize the emotional engagement each narrative triggered, while we applied human analysis to explore the pro- and anti-immigrant sentiment that was present in the discourse around each narrative.

# Questions and Suggestions



Learn more about Bakamo's EU Migration Study and access the individual country reports at <https://www.bakamosocial.com/2018-eu-migration-study>.

If you have any questions or suggestions about this research, contact the Bakamo research team:

**Daniel Fazekas**

Founder & CEO

[dani@bakamosocial.com](mailto:dani@bakamosocial.com)

**Kata Füge**

Project Lead

[kata@bakamosocial.com](mailto:kata@bakamosocial.com)

# Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Issued by:

**Regional Project: “Flight, Migration, Integration in Europe”**



H-1056 Budapest, Fővám tér 2-3, Hungary

Tel.: +36-1-461-60-11

Fax: +36-1-461-60-18

E-Mail: [fesbp@fesbp.hu](mailto:fesbp@fesbp.hu)

<http://www.fes-budapest.org/en/topics/flight-migration-integration-in-europe/>

Responsible: Timo Rinke

*Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.*

*The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works.*