Policy Brief on the impact of narratives on EU policymaking

Luca Barana, Francesco Vigneri and Giulia Daga

December 2023

BRIDGES Policy Briefs 3

Authors

Luca Barana is a Research Fellow at Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). His current research at IAI focuses on EU's migration policies, drivers of migration, the role of migration in EU's external action and Italy's foreign policy, and migration narratives. After graduating in European Studies at the University of Studies of Turin, he has been Junior Visiting Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (London/Turin) and Program Manager at the Centre for African Studies in Turin. He has been Coordinator of the Task Force 10 on Migration of the T20 - Italy 2021. He has recently edited the volume "Moving towards Europe", which analyses migratory drivers and fragmented EU-bound migratory trajectories in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Francesco Vigneri is a researcher in IAI's Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa programme, where he carries out research on the link between media narratives and EU migration policies, in the framework of the H2020 project "BRIDGES - Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives". He is also an adjunct professor at LUMSA University and a research fellow at Sapienza University of Rome. Previously, he worked at European institutions (EEAS, European Commission), as well as at European Union (EUAA) and United Nations (IOM) agencies. He holds a binational Ph.D. in Sociology, obtained in co-tutorship between the LUMSA University in Rome and the Université de Strasbourg in France.

Giulia Daga is a junior Research Fellow in IAI's Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa research programme. In parallel, she has been working as adjunct lecturer at the John Cabot University. She holds a PhD from the School of International Studies of the University of Trento, with a thesis on Oman's foreign policy discourse. During her PhD program, she spent visiting periods at the LSE Middle East Centre and the Sultan Qaboos University. Her research interests include the history and politics of the Persian Gulf, diplomatic and colonial history, maritime strategy, identity and discourse studies, and theories of nonalignment.

Reviewers

Saskia Smellie and Omar N. Cham

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

This policy brief looks at the implications of migration narratives for European policymaking. It focuses on the circulation of narratives in the national media and the EU political and policy debates in two key moments: the proposal for a relocation scheme to redistribute asylum seekers among EU Member States in 2015, and the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for refugees fleeing Ukraine in 2022. After presenting the findings of a research report (D8.1) produced in the framework of the Horizon EU project BRIDGES, this policy brief focuses on translating these findings into policy implications for the EU. The ultimate aim is to draft recommendations for members and officials of European institutions that may contribute to shaping narratives for fairer, comprehensive, and balanced European policy responses to migration and asylum.

Due to the high stakes that migration and asylum entail, institutions, political forces, and the media promote their own narratives to advocate for their preferred policy outcome. Depending on the policy solution that they are pushing forward – usually in favour or against EU-wide actions -, these narratives may identify different causes, heroes, and victims. After taking stock of dominant narratives in both case studies – namely, the one denouncing the divisions among member states in dealing with the 2015 migration and refugee 'crisis' and another in favour of solidarity-measures towards refugees fleeing Ukraine in 2022 – the brief thus argues that policymakers in the EU should (i) de-politicize discourse(s) on asylum and migration; (ii) encourage positive narratives in the media; (iii) make full use of EU institutional factors to filter populist narratives when they move from the political sphere to the policy sphere; (iv) frame narratives promoting policy solutions on migration within broader (geo)political policy areas of great value for European societies.

Introduction

Migration is one of the most divisive issues in the European Union. It poses key challenges to the very nature of the EU and shows some of its greatest flaws. It brings into question the core values of European identity when it questions us about the **solidarity** we must show to vulnerable groups like asylum-seekers and refugees. It interrogates some of the basic components of the European integration project, like the effective functioning of the **Schengen** system of free movement. And lastly, it pits the diverging interests of different Member States against one other, challenging the **governance** of the EU itself.

Due to the high stakes that migration and asylum entail, institutions, political forces, and the media promote their own **narratives** to advocate for their preferred policy output. These may include relocating asylum seekers, cooperating with third countries on migration management, or implementing emergency measures to deal with displacement crises at the European external frontier. Depending on the policy solution that they are pushing forward – usually **in favour or against EU-wide actions** –, these narratives may insist on providing causal explanations by portraying different actors as heroes, victims, and villains.

This policy brief thus aims to contribute to shaping narratives for fair, comprehensive, and balanced European policy responses to migration and asylum, by discussing the policy implications of the circulation of narratives within the media and the EU institutions in two key moments for the Union: the debate around the introduction of **a relocation and resettlement scheme in 2015** and the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for **refugees fleeing Ukraine in 2022**.

It addresses policymakers and communication officials in relevant EU institutions (European Commission, European External Action Service, European Council, Council of the European Union, European Parliament), but also Member States' representatives and civil society stakeholders operating on European integration, political communication, migration, and asylum.

Our findings are based on qualitative research conducted within the context of the 3-year (2021-2024) EU-funded research project —BRIDGES— which is composed of 12 different institutions from all over Europe. The brief draws on insights from the analysis of texts produced by the EU institutions such as speeches and conclusions of the **European Council** and the **Council of the EU**, motions and resolutions of the **European Parliament**, and statements and proposals of the **European Commission**. A media analysis was also performed in selected Member States[1] to scrutinise how public debates on migration unfolded in national newspapers of divergent political stances. Our work is enriched by nine semi-structured qualitative interviews with EU officials in the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament.

To better understand the circulation of narratives within the European institutions, we incorporated in our analysis Schmidt's (2008) conceptualisation of the political and policy debates, as further elaborated in Boswell and Smellie (2023): the former refers to political communication in the public domain (i.e., towards the general public), and the latter to
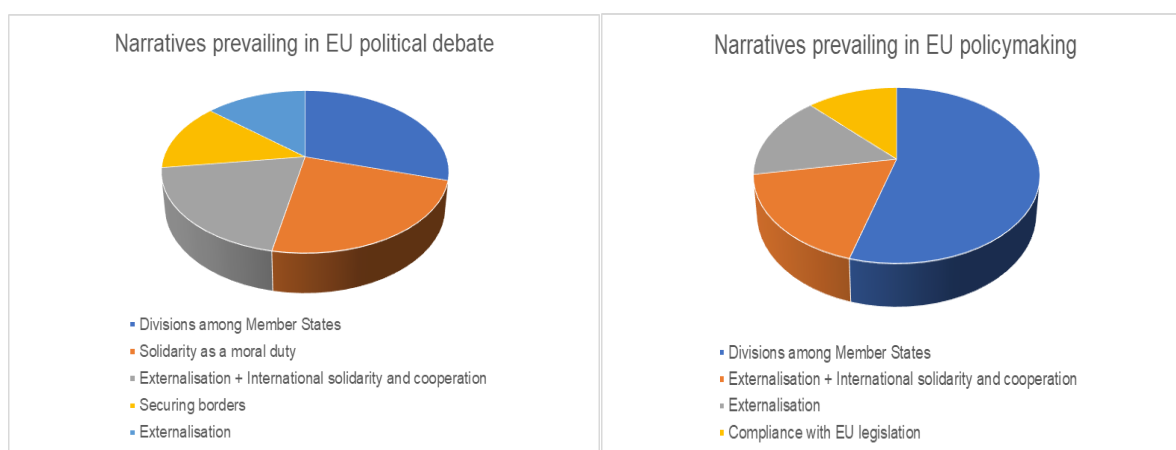
---

[1] The EU Member States included in the media analysis are: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Spain. UK – an EU Member State at the time of the debate on the introduction of the EU Relocation Scheme in 2015 – was also conidered in the analysis.

discourse among policy actors. The elaboration of policy implications and recommendations in this brief also relies on Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore's (2022) work on **Migration Narrative Success (MNS)**, which looks at what types of narratives are most likely to be produced and adopted in and across the media, political, and policy arenas (*pervasiveness*) and how narratives impact the outcomes of policymaking (*transformativity*).

Evidence and analysis

Finding #1 - Dominant narratives on the relocation and resettlement scheme for asylum seekers in 2015: a process of adaptation

FIGURE 1. Narratives prevailing in EU political and policy debates (2015)

Source: Authors' elaboration.

In the political debate, a narrative emphasising the need for responsibility-sharing among EU countries is **embraced**, slightly dominating the discussions on the challenges deriving from divisions among Member States. This aligns with the EU's focus on relocation and the primary challenge of intra-EU disagreements. However, other narratives also hold sway, focusing on the moral duty of solidarity – taken up especially by the **European Parliament** – but also on the need to secure the borders or to externalise the solution, mostly adopted by the **European Council**. This variety **mirrors** the multifaceted debate around the crisis in the media. It shows that increased political salience on migration leads to diverse narratives, with which political figures feel compelled to engage, by **embracing** or **adapting** them in their communication.
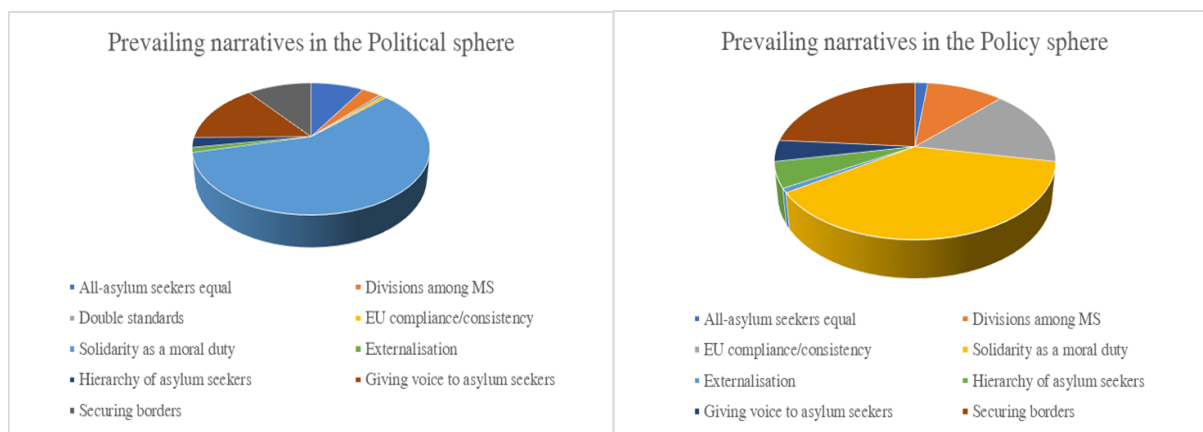
In the policy debate, while solidaristic frames become marginal, the narrative that emphasises divisions among Member States gains further prominence, significantly shaping discussions, particularly within the **European Commission**. However, changes occur in relation to the main characters: frontline 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.

Meanwhile, still in the policy arena, the humanitarian narrative on solidarity diminishes, making way for more pragmatic solutions centring on externalisation, presented here as fair

collaboration with and support to non-EU partners dealing with migrants' displacements within their territories. Narrative **styles** become predominantly *technocratic* compared to the political arena, where lay narratives occasionally emerge in specific circumstances.[2] Such adaptive shifts might play a significant role in averting policy outcomes from media and political influence.

Finding #2 - Dominant narratives on the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive in 2022: narrative consistency prevails

FIGURE 2. Narratives prevailing in EU political and policy debates (2022)

Source: Authors' elaboration.

A prevalent trend of narrative consistency and fluid transition from the media to the EU level, and at the EU level between the political and policy debates emerges. This **cohesiveness** is evident not only in the substantial multipartisan agreement in support of common European solutions, but also in the swift progression of legislative procedures and the subsequent policy outcomes.

In both the political and policy debates, the **European Commission** has maintained a unified position, predominantly advocating a narrative of European solidarity towards refugees but with an underlying attention to border security. Similar cohesiveness is also visible in the discourse of the European Council and the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council. The European Union is consistently presented as having control over the situation and playing the role of the hero, while Russia is unequivocally presented as the villain. The victims are mostly identified as the people fleeing the war in Ukraine, but the importance of the security dimension, especially in the policy debate, has contributed to portraying the Member States, and in particular the frontline countries, also as victims.

Divergent narratives, albeit in a very limited way, surface within the **European Parliament**, primarily within motions for resolutions proposed by parliamentary groups. They include narratives emphasising the EU's double standards, the need to treat all asylum seekers as

---

[2] Lay narratives, which dominate public and political communication, often prioritize simplicity and urgency; they may lack robust evidence and tend to propose straightforward solutions to social issues. In contrast, technocratic narratives, often prevalent in policymaking, tend to uphold higher evidence standards and rely on detailed information. See: Boswell, C., Smellie, S. (2023). Migration narratives in political debate and policymaking. Conceptualising and Operationalising Work Packages 7 and 8. BRIDGES Working Paper 19, Horizon 2020.

equal, or the appropriacy of externalising the reception of refugees. Even if these narratives are expressed by very few outlying voices, their very emergence underscores the role of the Parliament as a platform where narratives originating at the national level find replication, challenge, or at the very least, acknowledgment.

Despite these slight differences, the solidarity narrative is uncontestably hegemon in the media, political, and policy debates. The narrative has circulated across arenas without substantial changes and has been **embraced** by all voices almost unanimously. All other narratives, while expressing nuances in the form of characters and plots, concurred in promoting a European response. Even the most divergent narrative on externalisation was almost completely rejected or still employed under the umbrella of an EU action.

Moreover, both technocratic and lay **styles** have supported the solidarity narrative. The technocratic style has remained predominant both in the political and policy domains, while a lay style was amply present in the political debate. A similar emotional emphasis on the tragedy of the war has been equally employed by left and right-leaning political groups in the European Parliament, and also by the European Commission, especially by the President.

Finding #3 - Impact of migration narratives on EU policymaking: do they work?

The impact of narratives can be twofold. During the 2015 relocation scheme negotiations, adjustments in tones, character roles, and style seemingly allowed policymakers to foster more practical and viable solutions to **avoid the pressure of the media** and political debates.

At the same time, these changes still hint at the potential impact of **less technocratic narratives** on EU policy coordination. Specifically, narratives opposing or downplaying a mandatory relocation scheme, circulating in national media and, to a lesser extent, in EU political discourse, may have influenced the ultimate dismissal of the scheme. Moreover, they likely redirected policy discussions toward regulatory and externalisation-focused measures, sidestepping Member States' deep-rooted divisions on solidarity-based solutions.

Not coincidentally, the heightened emphasis on the external dimension of migration and asylum policies became a pivotal driver of European policy measures from the period under analysis on, prominently marked by the launch of initiatives like the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and the EU-Turkey Statement introduced in the ensuing months.

In the case of the 2022 war in Ukraine, the Temporary Protection Directive was activated within days from the start of the conflict, 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 pervasiveness of the narrative in the national media, the EU political and policy arenas, and the easiness with which the idea of **solidarity** was transformed in policy outputs.

At the same time, the dominance of the solidarity narrative did not exclude the concurring presence of a "soft"[3] **securitisation** narrative, especially in the discourse of policymakers. The two narratives were mutually supportive rather than mutually exclusive. The coexistence, if not straight integration, of narratives both inspired by solidarity and security guaranteed a multipartisan support for the policy proposals which translated into a rapid and consensual approval of the Temporary Protection Directive and subsequent instruments.

Policy implications and recommendations

Policy implication #1: The urgency to de-politicise migration narratives

The tendency to react to migration through emergency-driven and short-term measures, often supported by lay and **populist narratives**, is still a constant trait in EU migration and asylum policies, as the response to the increase in irregular arrivals and asylum requests over 2022-23 is showing again. As a consequence, migration policies are usually concentrated on reducing the number of irregular arrivals through a variety of policy tools. This trend is usually fuelled by the **heavy politicisation of migration**, which is mainly interpreted through a security lens.

Our interviews signal that media and political narratives during the 2015 'refugee crisis' were mostly polarised and negative, also due to the rise of **far-right and populist parties**. The media also tended to reflect these views, pushing to the forefront populist narratives associated with the crisis and against the introduction of a relocation scheme. At the political level, favouring these narratives was conceived as a means of gaining political support.

The analysis of political documents and policy acts produced in 2015 confirms that this politicisation process reached the EU institutions and often entailed the framing of migration as an **existential threat to the EU integration project** itself, further fuelling fears and anxieties around the phenomenon.

However, the passage of narratives into the policy acts of the Commission and the Council does not have to automatically translate into the transmission of politicised narratives to the last stages of the policy-making process. In this phase narratives can assume **less political and more technocratic** traits as well. Looking again at 2015, it is possible to identify a process of **adaptation** of narratives while they moved from the media and the political arena towards the policy debate (see also implication #3). This adaptation happened because the purpose of an institution like the Commission is to pursue more pragmatic solutions in a context where the EU still heavily relies on unanimity. As such, the discourse needs to become less polarised, searching for common ground among Member States and looking at concrete solutions in

---

[3] In the case of the war in Ukraine, the narrative focused on emphasising the need to apply strict criteria for the conferral of the temporary protection, and on strengthening Member States' border control capacities in that sense, rather than evoking images of a threat of invasion.

order to apply the relevant EU legislation and measures put in place in the fields of migration and asylum.

While enhancing the technocratic elements of narratives does not necessarily turn into a milder representation of migration as a threat, incorporating more evidence-based elements in the discourse at early stages could still **help to de-escalate the polarisation** around the migratory phenomenon, showing that the politicisation of migratory narratives is not an inescapable and pre-determined outcome.

Recommendation #1:

EU communication officials and spokespersons should de-politicise discourse(s) on asylum and migration. To this end, they should refrain from framing migration as a threat to the relations between Member States and the integrity of the EU project itself and provide evidence-based stories on the challenges as well as on the opportunities that migratory dynamics pose to the EU.

Policy implication #2: The risks of mainstreaming negative and populist narratives

The heightened politicisation of migratory issues is often based on the adoption of populist narratives promoting a more or less extreme negative view on the phenomenon. This approach was largely adopted in 2015 by far-right parties to **capitalise on public fears**.

Policymakers in the EU are not insulated from the media and political debates – European officials are certainly aware of the impact of these kinds of narratives on both the electorate and elected politicians at the EU and national levels. Political actors and policymakers cannot ignore how these narratives put pressure on them to take action. These stories usually adopt **security-inspired tones,** as migration has often been associated with the idea of (in)security and framed as a threat in different narratives circulating in 2015, for instance, those advocating for stricter border policies or the externalisation of migration management.

At the same time, some **caution** is also requested of the EU institutions, especially when addressing the press. For instance, an official in the European Commission underlines how certain migration-related topics can become highly sensitive due to the wide circulation of such narratives. Consequently, the Commission can be mindful when countering some divisive narratives with positive proposals, due to the risk of pushback from the media, generating adverse public reactions and sounding defensive.

However, refraining from challenging populist narratives for fear of being perceived as out of touch with prevailing sentiments on migration may reinforce a misrepresentation of the phenomenon, potentially fostering discriminatory attitudes (Eberl et al. 2018). While these dynamics have been primarily analysed at the national level (Maneri 2023), the risk may escalate here as this rhetoric's validation originates from EU institutions, widely perceived as advocating for human rights and democracy (Eurobarometer 2023).

Conversely, the 2022 case shows what policy implications can arise from a **limited circulation of populist narratives**. In that circumstance, the more balanced narrative focused on **solidarity towards refugees** from Ukraine was clearly hegemon, as it was embraced through different discourses (media, political, and policy-related). Widely accepted narrative components (refugees as victims, Russia as the villain, the EU as the hero) led to widespread support for common European solutions (the TPD activation).

While the 2022 activation of the TPD constitutes a somewhat outlier case due to the extraordinary circumstances of the Russian aggression against Ukraine (see below implication #4), it suggests that **refraining from circulating populist and negative narratives**, by focusing on positive aspects of the discourse and by operating to mainstream them could be a welcome step forward. Such 'positive' narratives should be evidence-based, calling upon the respect of the rule of law and in line with core EU values (see also implication # 3).

Encouraging the circulation of **more balanced and comprehensive stories** focusing on different aspects of the migratory experience may constitute another move in the right direction. For instance, an alternative narrative on the labour market could be embraced in the EU, highlighting labour shortages in Europe and the positive economic contributions of migrants.

Recommendation #2:

EU officials – in the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission – should encourage more balanced narratives, by avoiding the adoption of emotional rhetoric in the media and political debate, for instance developing in the long-term alternative labour market narratives.

Policy implication #3: Institutional factors and compliance with the EU acquis play a key role in shaping narratives at the policymaking stage

Despite the difficult environment faced by European policymakers when it comes to the circulation of politicised and populist narratives (see policy implications # 1 and 2), EU institutions already possess the tools to counterbalance – at least partially – these risks and promote a **more policy-focused approach**. Interviews with EU officials indicate that, while media and political narratives certainly inform policy discussions, usually they are mentioned in internal conversations taking into consideration their alignment with (or rather, their divergence from) EU rules and Member States interests. EU officials appear to apply a filter to the narratives circulating in the media and political debates after all.

The best ally of EU officials is thus the **EU *Acquis Communautaire***, comprising EU core values, past legislations and institutional factors that constrain the degree to which the Commission or the Council can bend to populist narratives. Media and political narratives can still push a certain item or narrative component on top of the EU agenda, as happened during the extraordinary summit of the European Council in February 2023, when the topic of the maritime frontier of Italy was tackled under political pressure from Italy. However, EU policymakers must then adopt policy responses respecting the EU acquis, which influences

narratives in two ways: favouring the generation of **ad-hoc narratives** and facilitating the **adaptation** of media and political narratives.

The first trend appears quite evident in 2015 with the emergence in the policy domain of a new narrative emphasising **Member States' compliance with EU legislation**. This narrative focuses on the need to implement EU asylum legislation, introducing a more legal and regulatory discourse in policymaking. Policy-making circles, especially the **Commission**, created their own technocratic narrative on that occasion, which was not present in the other arenas, and this innovation supported them in developing more balanced policy measures. A similar trend also emerged in the 2022 policy debate, with the European institutions not only emphasising the legal and regulatory dimension of their action, but also showing the rationality and cost efficiency of the measures proposed in line with already existing instruments.

The second pattern relates to those narratives already present within the media and largely discussed in the **European Parliament** in 2015, either embracing or rejecting EU-wide policy solutions, that were experiencing a **nuanced adaptation** while they moved towards the policy arena. This happened thanks again to the influence of institutional factors, this time linked to the need to smooth the dialogue with actors outside the EU.

The policy discussion in the Commission and the Council introduced for instance a nuanced solidaristic tone in the externalisation narrative, in order to facilitate cooperation with external actors, who were at that point framed more as partners and not as delegates of EU's bidding.

Recommendation #3:

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.

Policy implication #4: Make migration narratives not about migration

Migration remains a divisive issue among Member States and even between EU institutions, as also highlighted by the differences emerging between the Council and the European Parliament during recent discussions on the adoption of the **New Pact on Migration and Asylum**. The apparent intractability of migration and asylum seems to stiff any attempt at producing truly innovative policy outcomes.

The circulation of narratives around the activation of the TPD for refugees fleeing Ukraine seems to suggest a potential path to nuance this deadlock. **The approval of the TPD was widespread** and feelings about it were extremely positive, EU officials told us. The reasons for this convergence on the TPD in 2022 could be explained by several factors, according to our interviewees: Ukrainian nationals and residents were largely seen as victims of aggression and closer to Europe in terms of identity, culture, and geography. Thus, there was widespread media and political solidarity across Member States.

However, it is also possible to single out two additional key factors emerging from our analysis of narratives success. First, the dominance of the narrative on European solidarity in 2022 was not challenged by a true **counter-narrative**. This situation contrasts with the circumstances of

2015, when the competition between narratives was much fiercer at all levels, especially in the media and between political parties.

Secondly, narratives on the displacement of millions of people fleeing Ukraine **were not framed as migration narratives at all**. Language about the welcoming reception and solidarity with refugees from Ukraine used in the media and political debates, as well as the concrete actions taken by the Council and the Commission, were mainly presented as part of the strategic response of the EU against the Russian aggression, alongside other key policy dossiers like energy diversification or military support to Ukraine. An interview with a Member of Parliament confirms that the geopolitical dimension of the war contributed to shaping a sentiment of urgency and necessity that in turn led to the swift adoption of the TPD and subsequent measures.

In this way, by focusing on **broader narrative components** (a war at the European border), narratives still dealing with asylum and displacement have been easily embraced – and led to decisive policy measures – thanks to their apparent disconnections from the highly divisive migration topic. While these implications deriving from our analysis of narratives in 2022 are strictly connected to the specific circumstances of the Russian aggression, they suggest that one way to reduce political clashes around migration narratives could be to frame them within broader discourses and moving away to a certain extent from narrowly defined discussions around irregular arrivals, international protection, and the challenges they pose to European societies.

Recommendation #4:

High-level policymakers, especially in the Council, should promote narratives situating policy solutions on migration within broader geo-political frameworks and interlinking them to other policy areas with great value or high stakes for European societies (e.g., demography, EU's global role, and economic trends in Europe) rather than to sea and land arrivals only.

References

Boswell, Christina and Saskia Smellie. 2023. Migration narratives in political debate and policy-making. Conceptualising and Operationalising Work Packages 7 and 8. *BRIDGES Working Papers* 19. Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10066255.

Eberl, J.M., Meltzer, C.E., Heidenreich, T., Herrero, B., Theorin, N., Lind, F., Berganza, R., Boomgaarden, H.G., Schemer, C., Strömbäck, J. 2018. The European media discourse on immigration and its effects: a literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42:3, 207-223.

Eurobarometer. (2023). EP Autumn 2023 Survey: Six months before the 2024 European Elections (EB 100.1). DG COMM, Public Opinion Monitoring Unit. Retrieved from https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=89910

Garcés-Mascareñas, Blanca, and Ferruccio Pastore. 2022. "Migration narratives success: A conceptual tool for trans-disciplinary integration." *BRIDGES Working Papers* 4. Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7437704

Maneri, Marcello. 2023. "A comparative analysis of migration narratives in traditional and social media". BRIDGES Working Papers 11. Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8192076

Schmidt, V. A. 2008. Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11 (1): 303–26.

Vigneri, Francesco, Giulia Daga, and Luca Barana. 2023. "The impact of narratives on EU policymaking". *BRIDGES Working Papers* 27. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10227329