# I-CLA!M

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

# Discourses about irregularised migrants: representation and narratives in media, politics, and civil society in Europe

*Comparative report*

Markus Rheindorf, Bastian Vollmer

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| Authors: | Markus Rheindorf, Bastian Vollmer |
|---|---|
| Final Reviewers: | Ilse van Liempt, Nando Sigona |
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## Executive Summary

Migration remains a defining issue in Europe, shaping policy, media narratives, and civil society advocacy. This report compares migration discourse across seven contexts—Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, the UK, and the EU—analysing how irregular migration is framed in politics, media, and civil society. By identifying dominant themes, linguistic patterns, and ideological contestations, it highlights the polarized ways migration is discussed across Europe.

Media discourse varies widely, often reflecting political priorities. In Poland and the UK, migration is framed as a security threat, with crisis rhetoric and border enforcement focus. Italian media emphasize humanitarian concerns, particularly Mediterranean crossings and migrant labour exploitation. German, Finnish and Dutch media adopt a policy-oriented approach, discussing migration within governance and legal frameworks. Crisis narratives persist across all contexts, reinforcing perceptions of migration as an urgent challenge rather than a long-term issue.

Political actors use migration discourse to align with electoral concerns. Right-wing parties in Poland, the UK, and Italy focus on securitization and border control, while left-leaning parties in Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands emphasize integration, legal pathways, and labour contributions. At the EU level, migration is framed through governance and regulation, though securitization remains prevalent, especially regarding border management and returns.

Civil society actors counter securitization and crisis rhetoric, advocating for human rights and economic contributions. NGOs and advocacy groups in Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands focus on legal aid and labour protections, pushing for regularization pathways. In Poland and the UK, civil society efforts resist restrictive migration policies, highlighting the human cost of enforcement. At the EU level, civil society organizations promote rights-based governance, challenging the Commission's emphasis on deportation and border control.

The analysis reveals stark divergences between national and EU-level discourse. While national governments react to electoral pressures and short-term crises, EU discussions prioritize governance, burden-sharing, and legal harmonization. This tension complicates efforts to develop a cohesive migration policy. Gendered narratives also shape discourse, with women and children framed as vulnerable and young men—especially from Africa and the Middle East—linked to security risks.

Understanding migration discourse is critical for balanced policymaking. Securitization and crisis narratives drive restrictive policies, while greater focus on legal pathways and integration could counterbalance security-driven framings. EU migration policy must align national concerns with a rights-based approach. This report underscores the need for informed debates and sustainable migration policies beyond crisis-driven responses.

# 1. Introduction

Migration remains a pivotal issue in contemporary Europe, influencing policy debates, media representations, and civil society engagement. The framing of irregular migration, in particular, varies significantly across different national contexts, shaped by political ideologies, socio-economic factors, and historical migration patterns. This report presents a comparative analysis of migration discourse across seven contexts—Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the EU level—examining the distinct yet intersecting narratives found in media, politics, and civil society drawing on country reports (see full list in the appendix). By providing a systematic discourse analysis, this study sheds light on the dominant themes, linguistic patterns, and contestations that structure public debates on irregular migration. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing informed, balanced migration policies that reconcile national concerns with broader European governance frameworks.

The study of migration discourse is critical in shaping public perceptions and policymaking. Irregular migration remains a contested issue, often framed through conflicting lenses of humanitarianism, security, economic necessity, and legal governance. The way irregular migration is discussed in political, media, and civil society spheres directly influences policy decisions, electoral strategies, and social integration efforts. By analysing dominant narratives across multiple national contexts, this report provides insights into how the discourse about irregular migration is constructed, contested, and instrumentalized, offering valuable implications for policy formulation, media accountability, and advocacy work.

This discourse is deeply influenced by national histories, political climates, and economic realities. Countries with significant border pressures, such as Italy and Poland, exhibit heightened securitization narratives, linking irregular migration to crisis management and national sovereignty. In contrast, nations like Germany and Finland, with well-established legal frameworks for migration, tend to frame the issue in terms of governance and policy efficiency. The UK, shaped by its post-Brexit landscape, often emphasizes migration control in relation to border sovereignty, reinforcing a nationalistic dimension that distinguishes its discourse from that of EU Member States. The Netherlands primarily frames irregular migration as a legal and procedural challenge, while Finland's discourse remains policy-driven, focusing on asylum frameworks and rights-based approaches. At the EU level, discourse reflects a balancing act between governance efficiency, international obligations, and burden-sharing mechanisms among Member States as well as priorities informed linked to political orientation.

Media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of irregular migration, often amplifying dominant political narratives or constructing alternative framings. In some countries, such as Poland and the UK, media discourse is heavily securitized, portraying irregular migration as a geopolitical threat or national security risk. Italian media frequently highlight the humanitarian dimension, focusing on Mediterranean crossings and migrant exploitation in the labour market. In Germany, Finland and the Netherlands, media narratives are more balanced, incorporating both policy-oriented discussions and integration perspectives. Across all contexts, crisis narratives remain a persistent feature, with media often framing irregular migrationi as an urgent challenge requiring immediate intervention, rather than a structural issue requiring long-term governance solutions.

Political actors across Europe employ migration discourse strategically, often aligning their rhetoric with electoral concerns and party ideologies. Right-leaning political parties tend to emphasize border security, deportation policies, and national sovereignty, reinforcing narratives of migration control and deterrence.

In contrast, left-leaning parties and policymakers are more likely to frame migration as a governance challenge, advocating for legal pathways, integration strategies, and human rights protections. In Poland and the UK, migration is frequently politicized as a tool for electoral mobilization, while in Germany and Finland, political discourse is more technical, focusing on legal frameworks and administrative challenges. At the EU level, migration is framed primarily through governance and regulatory lenses, though securitization elements persist in discussions on border management and return policies., with centre-right and right-wing politicians prioritising border controls, returns, and preventing unauthorized arrivals over expanding legal pathways.

Civil society actors—including NGOs, migrant advocacy groups, and humanitarian organizations—offer critical counter-narratives to dominant media and political discourses. Across all seven contexts, civil society engagement challenges crisis rhetoric and securitization, instead emphasizing migrant rights, economic contributions, and social integration. In countries such as Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands, civil society discourse is largely centred on legal aid, labour protections, and inclusive integration policies. In contrast, civil society actors in Poland and the UK focus on resisting restrictive migration policies, highlighting the human cost of detention, deportation, and border militarization. At the EU level, civil society organizations advocate for rights-based migration policies, pushing back against the Commission's emphasis on deportation and externalized border control.

This report is structured into five main sections. Section 2 examines media discourse on irregular migration, analysing key themes, linguistic patterns, and dominant narratives across different national contexts. Section 3 explores political discourse, highlighting how migration is framed by political actors, parties, and policy debates. Section 4 investigates civil society discourse, showcasing alternative narratives that challenge securitization and restrictive migration policies. Section 5 provides a comparative synthesis, identifying key divergences and commonalities between national and EU-level migration discourses. Finally, Section 6 presents concluding remarks and policy implications, outlining potential pathways for more coherent, rights-based migration governance in Europe. Details on the methodology used can be found in the separate methodological note published here.

By adopting a comprehensive discourse-analytic approach, this report aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of migration narratives and their impact on policymaking, media framing, and public opinion. The findings underscore the importance of critically engaging with the discourse about irregular migration to foster informed debates and evidence-based policy responses that transcend short-term crisis management and securitization trends.

## 2. The discursive construction of irregularity in the media

### 2.1. Data Sample

Each national study collected media texts from major newspapers and online platforms over a five-year period (2019-2023). The sample sizes varied, with some countries focusing on tabloid and broadsheet newspapers (e.g., Germany, Italy and the UK), while others included a wider array of digital news sources (e.g., Finland). The Finnish and Dutch reports included significant numbers of public broadcasting materials, which tended to have a more neutral and factual tone compared to private news outlets.

In Germany, the dataset included a mix of progressive and conservative newspapers such as Bild, Die Zeit, and Süddeutsche Zeitung. The UK dataset was similarly diverse, comprising The Guardian, The Times, and Daily Mail, among others. The Italian corpus heavily featured La Repubblica and Il Giornale, reflecting both liberal and right-wing perspectives. Poland's corpus included Gazeta Wyborcza, Gazeta Polska Codziennie, Fakt, and Rzeczpospolita, covering diverse political orientations.

The media coverage on irregular migration across these countries is also shaped by the legal and social frameworks governing immigration ( see the report ). For example, in the UK, Brexit has had a significant impact on media narratives, with discourse often focusing on border control and sovereignty. In Poland, coverage has been heavily influenced by geopolitical concerns, particularly regarding the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border or migration pressure from the Belarusian regime.

The data was compiled to reflect the media landscape in the respective country in terms of circulation, quality of publication (tabloid – quality), political leaning (progressive – conservative) and regional reach (regional – national). A total of 20,975 texts or 68,329,382 tokens, collected from a five-year period (1.1.2019 to 31.12.2023) were included. No media data were collected at the EU-level.

| ma | Finland | Germany | Italy | Poland | The Netherlands | UK |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Texts | 4,833 | 5,418 | 1,146 | 1,298 | 2,293 | 5,987 |
| Tokens | 2,354,586 | 40,852,678 | 889,688 | 11,134,328 | 1,838,627 | 11,259,475 |

## 2.2. Quantitative results

Although the research design and methodology (including software and its settings) used was the same in all participating countries, different access to some data and differences in both circumstances, such as media landscape and political institutions, as well as in the morphology of the languages involved, led to some variation in how the research was carried out ( see methodological note ). Also note that our discourse analysis combines qualitative and quantitative methods, for instance in the partly inductive generation of semantic groups – thus, based on the differences between the national discourses, there is also some variation in the macro-topics found and subsequently analysed. Where this variation impacts our findings and conclusions, we will indicate this accordingly – in all other cases, normalisation of statistical results ensures that results can be compared across data sets.

### 2.2.1. *Terminology for and around migrants and migration*

Across the participating countries, the terminology used to refer to irregular migrants varies considerably – not just in terms of language but also in terms of legal implications. The usage of these terms, it is noted, is generally ambiguous and fuzzy in the media. A Finnish newspaper, for example, might refer to 'asylum seekers' or a German one to 'refugees' without knowing the legal status of the people in question.

- **Finland:** the most salient term is 'asylum seekers', associated with Russia, Greece, Iraq, crossing the Mediterranean, border (in the phrases 'to the border', 'Eastern border' and 'border crossing')

- **Germany:** the most salient term is 'refugee', 'migrant' is associated with illegality, irregularity, arrival, crossing borders, being a burden

- **Italy:** media most often refer to 'migrants', associated with irregularity, labour, and security or public order

- **Dutch:** 'asylum seekers', linked to illegality, status, being a nuisance and homeless

- **Poland:** 'migrants', linked to illegality, Belarus and borders

- **UK:** most salient term is 'migrants', 'asylum', 'immigration', 'illegal', 'small boats' and 'Channel'

Among the six participating countries, the most common labels vary significantly. The following table lists these terms in order of decreasing normalised frequency. For instance, in the UK media, 'illegal' preceding 'migrants' has a normalised frequency of 0.9 per 1000 tokens, 'undocumented' 0.2 and 'irregular' 0.06.

| Germany | Italy | Finland | Poland | NL | UK |
|---------|-------|---------|--------|-----|-----|
| Migrants | Migrants | Asylum seekers | Migrants | Asylum seekers | Illegal migrants |
| Refugees | Irregular migrants | Paperless | Illegal migrants | Refugees | Undocumented migrants |
| Asylum seekers | Asylum seekers | Refugees | Foreigners | Illegal migrants | Irregular migrants |
| Irregular migrants | Refugees | Immigrants | | Undocumented | Clandestine migrants |
| Illegal migrants | | | | | Asylum seekers |

*Table 1: Terminology used to refer to irregularised migrants in national media*

Across countries, high-frequency words include 'illegal,' 'border,' 'asylum seeker,' 'deportation,' and 'security.' The Dutch and Polish media emphasize border security and crisis terminology, while the UK media exhibit a strong preoccupation with legality and control. Finnish and German media demonstrate a more balanced lexical distribution, incorporating terms such as 'humanitarian' and 'integration.'

### 2.2.2. *Semantic groups related to key dimensions of I-CLAIM*

All country-specific data was analysed to map the semantic preoccupations of the respective media in terms of macro-topics, i.e., topic clusters of individual words that share some essential semantic features from the perspective of the I-CLAIM research project. These clusters, which are called semantic groups in linguistics, are: Politics and Governance, Labour, Migration, Status, Crisis, Subjective Experience, Rights, Welfare, Crime and Geographical Locations. Lexical items, i.e., words that pertain to these categories were subsumed under them.[1] For instance, the semantic group WORK and LABOUR in the German media comprised, inter alia, the

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[1]  Where necessary, ambiguous words were disambiguated by considering the context of their use. Thus, it is possible for the same lexical item to appear in more than one semantic group.

lexical items *work, worker, labour market, employee, employer, employed, salary, pay, paid, unpaid, exploit, exploited, exploitation, work place, delivery, agriculture, harvest, delivery, work conditions, economy, earn* and *livelihood* (translated from the original German). In the UK media, in comparison, this category comprises general descriptors like *work, working, job* and *workers, pay, income, strike, industrial, walkout, modern slavery, slave, enslaved,* and *exploitation* alongside words related to finance (*business, financial, company*), political economy (*tax, trade, inflation*), and generic monetary terms (*money, pay, cost*). This two-way comparison reveals that the same semantic group has different emphases and features different labour-related notions, such as *strike* and *slavery* in the UK, contrasting with *work place* and *labour market* in Germany.

Summarising the individual frequency of occurrence for all items under a category, the sum frequency of these semantic groups was calculated, thus arriving at an approximation of the main topics in each data set.

A detailed comparison of the semantic groups in the media reveals distinct patterns across countries. In Germany, media discourse is shaped by themes of security and borders, political debate, policy, economic impact, and humanitarian concerns. German outlets often balance discussions of migrant integration and labour contributions with narratives around border enforcement and asylum policy. Finland's media, by contrast, maintains a highly neutral tone, focusing on legal frameworks, statistical analysis, and policy evaluations. Finnish reporting lacks the sensationalism found in other European countries, instead centring on rights-based perspectives and administrative procedures.

Dutch media discourse on irregular migration primarily frames it as a political issue, with more emphasis on parliamentary debates than on migration policy itself. Migration is equally discussed as a domestic and European issue, with geographic references split between the Netherlands and Europe. The discourse largely focuses on asylum seekers and their return rather than arrival, while discussions on labour migration are minimal and mainly pertain to Eastern European workers. Italy's media, in contrast, tend to discuss migration in the context of employment and social services, as well as the implications of irregular migration for the welfare state. Italian media discourse also integrates labour concerns, focusing on the exploitation of migrant workers in agriculture and domestic sectors. Further semantic preoccupations are Mediterranean migration narratives, highlighting boat arrivals, humanitarian rescues, and the political battles surrounding NGO involvement.

Polish media discourse is significantly securitized, frequently linking irregular migration to geopolitical threats and border control. The Polish-Belarusian border crisis has amplified fears around migration, with Polish media often emphasizing state security and crisis management. In contrast, UK media heavily frame migration in the context of Brexit and sovereignty, with strong narratives around illegal Channel crossings, deportation policies, and border controls. While some outlets emphasize migrant contributions to the economy, the overarching theme remains one of enforcement and restriction.

A comparative analysis of media discourse on irregular migration reveals distinct patterns across countries. In Poland and the UK, securitization dominates, with migration framed as a geopolitical threat and a challenge to sovereignty, particularly in the context of the Belarusian border crisis and Brexit. Germany, while also concerned with border control and legality, presents a more balanced discourse, incorporating discussions on migrant integration, labour contributions, and asylum policies alongside security concerns. The Netherlands primarily frames irregular migration as a political issue, with significant attention to dynamics in government, and between government and parliament, as well as legal procedures rather than direct migration policies, while also balancing domestic and European perspectives. Italy's media discourse

is shaped by labour migration and social welfare concerns, focusing on the exploitation of migrant workers in agriculture and domestic sectors, as well as humanitarian narratives related to Mediterranean crossings and NGO involvement. Finland stands out as the most neutral and policy-driven, with migration discussions centring on legal frameworks, statistical analysis, and rights-based interpretations, avoiding the sensationalism found in other European countries. When it comes to discussions about 'the paperless, the discourse mainly revolves around their access to health care etc. But when it comes to 'asylum seekers', there is a security threat discourse, especially in the context of the so-called 'border crisis', which is very salient in the Finnish data.

Beyond the standard macro-topics listed above, national teams inductively generated additional categories as well as sub-categories in order to better grasp the specific preoccupations of the respective discourses.

### Comparative node 1

The results reveal great variation between the country-specific media's focus; from a comparative angle:

- Dutch media are preoccupied with geographical locations, politics and governance, and numbers, with rights, crisis and labour as comparatively marginal topics.

- Finnish media tend to focus on migration, politics and governance as well as labour, with crisis, rights and welfare as comparatively marginal topics.

- German media focus on labour and migration before politics and governance, with the subjective experience of migrants and geographical locations as comparatively marginal topics.

- Italian media focus mainly on politics, migration and labour, with the subjective experience, crisis and crime as marginal topics.

- Polish media tend to focus on geographical locations, politics and governance, and numbers, with labour, rights and crime as marginal topics.

- UK media focus strongly on politics and governance before migration and geographical locations, with the subjective experience of migrants and labour as comparatively marginal topics.

We note that labour is among the most salient topics only in Finland, Germany and Italy, whereas it is marginal in Dutch, Polish and UK media. More precisely, Finnish media focus on seasonal work migration and related exploitation issues but hardly discuss labour in relation to irregular migration specifically, whereas German media give substantial attention to labour in relation to irregular migration.

The subjective experience of migrants, including the family/household dimension, is not among the salient macro-topics in any of the participating countries' media, and it is strongly marginalised in German, Italian, UK media. This means that, across all media data sets, irregular migrants' families, familial relations and homes are relatively marginal, removing important context for their lives, actions and motivations. Across several countries, there is a preoccupation with politics and governance (laws, measures, policy) as well as geographical locations (country of origin, borders). Interestingly, status, rights and welfare are topics of medium salience in all countries.

> **Comparative node 2**
>
> In the media from all participating countries, the lexical composition of the category MIGRATION indicates that irregularity is, above all, something to do with people arriving, something that is created by movement across space (leaving, coming) and crossing borders, shown by lexical items expressing inward movement from the respective national perspective. The nationally specific perspective of this dimension is evidenced also by the lexical items in the categories migration and geography: In the UK, for instance, the latter reveals a state-centric perspective that focuses on the national ("Britain"), alongside the local ("London") and the global ("world") scales. The English Channel, in particular, serves as a prominent geographical setting for media narratives on irregular migration, symbolising the country's border with continental Europe. In the case of several other countries' media discourse, geographical reference is much more dispersed, with interesting differentiations emerging between specific figures such as "migrant" and "refugee": In Finland, for instance, the geography of irregularity places *migrants* not so much in Finland but in countries like Greece, while *asylum seekers* and *immigrants* are situated in Finland. There thus appears to be a spatial differentiation of terms related to the production of irregularity that follows not legal terminology but implied common-sense understandings or topoi. These topoi are largely country-specific and are also reflected in the narrative dimension of the respective discourses (see below).

### 2.2.3. Associations of key terms

Associations of words, in linguistics, are identified as concrete words that habitually co-occur with a key term of interest. Such co-occurring words are referred to as collocations. Their analysis provides key insights into how irregular migration is framed within the media across different countries. By examining the words that frequently appear together, we can identify dominant narratives and the ideological underpinnings of migration discourse. Below is a comparative analysis of collocations related to irregular migration in media discourse across the six countries. For instance, collocation analysis showed that the term 'illegal' had the highest collocation likelihood with words like 'entry,' 'immigrants,' and 'deportation' in the UK and the Netherlands, and with 'forced returns,' 'expulsions' or 'pushbacks' in Poland. In contrast, in Italy and Finland, the term 'migrant' had stronger collocations with 'worker,' 'exploitation' and 'rights,' indicating a greater emphasis on labour-related migration issues.

### Germany: Balancing Security, Policy, and Economic Concerns

German media discourse frequently collocates terms related to security, legality, and policy. The framing of migration as a political and economic issue is prevalent, with a balance between securitization ("illegal migration" with "security risk") and economic considerations ("integration policy" with "labour market access"). The presence of "asylum seekers" frequently aligns with "burden on welfare system", reflecting concerns over state resources. Key collocations include: "border control" with "policy"; "illegal migration" with "security risk"; "asylum seekers" with "burden on welfare system"; "integration policy" with "labour market access".

### Finland: A Less Sensationalised, Policy-Focused Discourse

Finnish media maintain a relatively neutral and policy-focused discourse, often linking migration discussions with legal frameworks ("asylum process" with "legal framework") and EU regulations. While border crisis and refugee crisis are quite frequent concepts in the media corpus, indicating securitized border

crisis construction, in comparison to other national media, there is less sensationalism in Finnish media. There is more of a balance between restrictive and inclusive narratives, with frequent collocations like "border security" with "humanitarian response", suggesting that migration is framed not just as a crisis but within a governance context as well. Key collocations include: "asylum process" with "legal framework"; "migrant rights" with "EU law"; "temporary protection" with "labour integration"; "border security" with "humanitarian response".

## The Netherlands: Emphasis on Legal Status and Control, Absence of Labour

Migration is predominantly linked to legality, with a strong emphasis on whether it is legal or illegal. The discourse also reflects concerns over control, with terms associated with regulating or limiting migration frequently appearing. Migration is often contextualized within a broader European governance framework, reinforcing discussions about the role of the EU in managing migration flows. A key narrative emerging from these patterns is the call for stricter government control over migration. Another prevalent perspective advocates for EU collaboration to curb irregular migration, positioning supranational coordination as essential to addressing migration challenges.

In contrast, asylum seekers are primarily associated with legal status, often highlighting their rejection or lack of residence permits. Media portrayals frequently depict asylum seekers as young males traveling alone with little chance of receiving asylum. Geographically, they are often linked to North African countries, particularly Morocco. Unlike general migration discussions, asylum seekers are rarely associated with arrival. Instead, they are more frequently linked to return and long-term stay, reflecting concerns about permanent settlement and repatriation challenges. Narratives emerging from these collocations suggest that asylum seekers who cause disturbances should be placed in basic shelters, while policies should expedite the deportation of those from safe countries.

The Dutch term for "safe country nationals" is strongly associated with North African countries, particularly Morocco. The most frequent collocation is with "nuisance," reinforcing a media portrayal of these individuals as sources of public disturbance. This framing is linked to discussions about restrictive shelter policies that provide only the bare minimum of services. Overall, Dutch media discourse on migration reflects a tension between control, legality, and humanitarian concerns, with a strong focus on regulatory measures and security-related narratives.

## Italy: Migration in the Context of the Mediterranean Crisis

Italian media discourse is heavily shaped by the Mediterranean migration crisis, with "boat arrivals" frequently linked to "Mediterranean crisis". Unlike in Northern European countries, Italian media dedicate significant attention to rescue operations ("rescue operations" with "NGO efforts") while simultaneously linking irregular migration to criminal networks ("illegal migration" with "human trafficking"). Economic narratives focus on labour exploitation, particularly in agriculture, with collocations like "migrant labour" with "agricultural exploitation". Key collocations include: "boat arrivals" with "Mediterranean crisis"; "rescue operations" with "NGO efforts"; "illegal migration" with "human trafficking"; "migrant labour" with "agricultural exploitation".

## Poland: Securitization and Geo-Political Framing of Migration

Polish media largely frame migration as a security and geopolitical issue. The most dominant collocations involve "border crisis" and "Belarus conflict", reflecting the country's focus on the political implications, the

need for control and pressure response. The phrase "illegal crossings" frequently appears alongside "hybrid warfare", suggesting a portrayal of migration as a tool of foreign political destabilization. Moreover, Polish media often reference "migrant pushbacks" in the context of "state security", indicating a strong securitization of the discourse. Key collocations include: "border crisis" with "Belarus conflict"; "illegal crossings" with "hybrid warfare"; "migrant pushbacks" with "state security"; "asylum process" with "government crackdown" and restrictive policies. The latter pertains to the aspect of visa procedures and the "visa scandal," which was emphasized as a political issue related to the lack of control over the migration processes in Poland.

### United Kingdom: Migration as a Control and Enforcement Issue

UK media coverage is dominated by narratives around illegal Channel crossings, as evidenced by frequent collocations between "illegal migrants" and "small boat crossings". Discussions of border control frequently intersect with sovereignty concerns, with the phrase "border control" appearing alongside "national sovereignty". There is also an economic framing, linking "asylum seekers" to "economic impact", often in a negative sense. Deportation policies are commonly discussed in reference to the "Home Office", underscoring the emphasis on government enforcement measures.

The media reinforces the interconnectedness between the Channel and the production of irregularity. Migrants are strongly associated with maritime imagery, 'illegal' status, and words describing crossings. UK media strongly links migrants with stigmatising areas such as detention deportation, accommodation, and crime. Racialisation is also prominent in the media, with ethno-national categories being fifteen times more prominent than in politics or civil society. Gendering — with focus on males — is also typical of the UK media corpus. Categorised into semantic groups, key associations with migrants are: seascapes, crossings, international scenario (Rwanda, France, Mexico), detention and deportation, bordering and restrictions, asylum, etc.

### Comparative Node 3

Collocation analyses reveal clear differences in how migration is framed across national media landscapes. While Poland and the UK primarily frame migration as a security threat, Italy and Finland focus more on humanitarian aspects. Italy and Germany emphasize labour and legal frameworks, though Germany includes a stronger security component.

Security and Geopolitical Threats: Poland and the UK heavily emphasize securitization, with collocations linking migration to border control ("illegal crossings" with "hybrid warfare" in Poland; "small boat crossings" with "border control" in the UK).

Legal and Policy Discourse: Finland and the Netherlands maintain a highly legalistic discourse, collocating terms like "asylum process" with "legal framework" and "asylum seekers" with "legal protection".

Dutch media discourse on migration primarily emphasizes legality, control, and European governance, with a strong focus on stricter national policies and EU collaboration to curb irregular migration. In contrast, asylum seekers, particularly from North Africa, are frequently portrayed as legal burdens or sources of public disturbance, reinforcing narratives that advocate for restrictive shelter conditions and expedited deportation.

> Economic Narratives and Labour Exploitation: Italian and German media emphasise migrant labour issues, with collocations such as "irregular migrants" with "undocumented workers" and "migrant labour" with "agricultural exploitation".
>
> Humanitarian vs. Criminalization Discourses: Italy and Finland emphasize humanitarian responses, while Polish and UK media focus more on control and criminalization, with collocations like "migrant pushbacks" with "state security" and "deportation policy" with "Home Office".

Collocation analyses across these six countries highlight stark contrasts in migration narratives. While Poland and the UK primarily frame migration as a security threat, Italy and Finland focus more on humanitarian aspects. Italy and Germany emphasize labour and legal frameworks, though Germany includes a stronger security component, whereas Dutch media primarily emphasise legality, control, and European governance, with a strong focus on stricter national policies and EU collaboration to curb irregular migration as well as "nuisance" asylum seekers. These differences shape public perceptions and influence migration policies, reinforcing national priorities in media discourse.

## 2.3. Qualitative analysis of narratives

Media narratives play a central role in shaping public perceptions of irregular migration. Across the seven data sets examined—Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the EU-level study—distinct yet overlapping patterns emerge in how migrants are framed. These narratives are influenced by national political climates, historical migration trends, and dominant public discourses on migration control, integration, and security.

The following subsections provide a general comparison on narratives, complementing the quantitative perspective above. For details on how we approached narrative analysis (see methodological note).

### 2.3.1. *General comparative notes on the media narratives*

#### Securitization and Crisis Narratives

One of the most prominent narratives across multiple countries is the securitization of migration, where irregular migrants are framed as a threat to national security and sovereignty. This framing is particularly dominant in Poland, the UK, and Germany, but it also appears in Dutch and Italian media to varying degrees.

- Poland: The media has been heavily influenced by the Belarusian border crisis, where irregular migration is frequently framed as an act of hybrid warfare against the country. Migrants are often portrayed as instruments of foreign interference rather than as individuals with agency.

- United Kingdom: Post-Brexit, UK media has increasingly emphasized border control and national sovereignty, particularly around Channel crossings. Arrival, often framed as an 'invasion', is a major focus here. Migrants arriving via small boats are frequently framed as part of a "crisis", with significant attention given to enforcement measures such as deportation flights and detention centres.

- Germany: While German media incorporates elements of securitization, coverage tends to be more balanced, with humanitarian narratives countering discussions of border control and enforcement. However, tabloid outlets tend to frame migration as a burden on social services and security risks.

## Economic Contributions vs. Economic Burden

The economic impact of migration is a widely debated theme across all seven countries, but narratives differ in their focus. The Italian media focus heavily on migrant labour, particularly in agriculture and caregiving. Their narratives frequently discuss irregular migrants in the context of labour shortages, highlight exploitation and undocumented work. Germany and the UK, in contrast, feature narratives here are often polarized between seeing migrants from a more economic perspective - wanting desirable, good, productive migrants – but also as a burden on public resources. Right-leaning media emphasize welfare dependency, while more liberal outlets highlight the economic benefits of migration. Unlike other countries, Dutch and Finnish media rarely portray migration through an economic lens, instead focusing on policy and administrative processes.

## Arrival as Invasion and Criminalisation

UK media focus strongly on people arriving, moving and crossing, followed by various references to bordering practices, detention and deportations (in the semantic groups 'migration and asylum' and 'bordering', respectively). In sum, the arrival emerges as a strong semantic preoccupation, what has been framed as 'the invasion'. Alongside this frame, UK media produce criminalisation through (1) depicting smugglers as taxis as well as through (2) pairing illegal migrants and foreign criminal offenders.

## Humanitarian Narratives and Victimization

Humanitarian narratives, which emphasize migrants as vulnerable individuals in need of protection, appear across multiple countries but vary in intensity. Media in Italy and Finland focus on migrant rights, humanitarian rescue operations, and social inclusion. In Finland, we also note a significant geographical difference in the discourse: migrants coming to Finland are not so much discussed through a humanitarian framework, mainly as a 'flow' or 'mass' of some faceless people (men) attempting to enter, but they are typically referred to as 'asylum seekers'. Whereas migrants at the Mediterranean or crossing other countries' borders are frequently framed in clearly humanitarian terms, and victimised. Italian coverage is heavily influenced by Mediterranean crossings, portraying migrants as victims of trafficking and unsafe journeys. Media in Germany and the Netherlands also incorporate humanitarian perspectives but balance them with discussions on policy efficiency and integration challenges. Narratives in the UK and Poland are significantly different: in the former, humanitarian and criminalising narratives are the two sides of the same coin. The media leave the question of whether migrants are victims of smugglers or their partners in crime open. In Polish media, humanitarian concerns are overshadowed by securitization and economic arguments.

## Legal Pathways vs. Criminalization

A critical divergence in media narratives is the emphasis on legal pathways for migration versus the criminalization of irregular migrants. Media in Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands often discuss legal pathways, asylum procedures, and integration policies, presenting migration as a governance challenge rather than a criminal issue. Media in the UK, Poland, and Italy see higher instances of criminalization in media coverage, where migrants are frequently associated with illegal crossings, human smuggling, and

deportation measures. In Poland specifically, media discourse strongly links migration to state security and law enforcement, particularly in the context of border patrols and military intervention.

A variation of criminalization can be found in Dutch media, which portray asylum seekers from 'safe' countries, known as veiligelanders, as distinct from "genuine" refugees, primarily associating them with public nuisance and system exploitation. They are depicted as opportunistic, engaging in criminal or disruptive behaviour while manipulating asylum procedures, which fuels narratives of government failure and the need for stricter policies, including austere reception conditions. Across both broadsheet and tabloid media, this framing reinforces the conflation of veiligelanders with rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants, portraying them as economic burden.

### Family, Gender, and Social Narratives

The portrayal of migrant families, women, and children is another area of divergence. Media in Italy frequently discuss gendered migration issues, such as the challenges of female domestic workers and caregiving roles. In Germany and Finland, family reunification and social integration are significant topics in these countries, where migrants are often depicted as long-term residents rather than transient populations. In the UK and Poland, migrant family narratives are less prevalent, with coverage often focusing on male migrants as potential security threats. The Dutch media discourse on the Kinderpardon[2] falls into this node as well, framing migration policy in rigid, binary terms, portraying regularization as a destabilizing force that weakens the integrity of the system and encourages asylum seekers to extend their stay in hopes of eventual legal recognition. While tabloid media are particularly critical, all newspapers depict the Kinderpardon as a political battleground, emphasizing its divisive impact on government coalitions and dramatizing its consequences as a major test for political stability.

### Political Polarization in Media Narratives

Media narratives across all seven countries are deeply shaped by political alignment. Highly polarized narratives are found in Italy: Right-leaning media emphasize migration as a security and economic burden, while left-leaning outlets highlight human rights and labour contributions. In Poland, government-aligned media reinforce nationalist and securitized narratives, while opposition-aligned outlets promote a more humanitarian perspective. Moderately polarized narratives can be found in Germany and the Netherlands: Both right- and left-wing media exist, but moderate voices in policy-driven discussions are more common. Less polarized narratives seem prevalent in Finland: Coverage is generally neutral and factual, with an emphasis on administrative and legal aspects of migration.

2.3.2. *Narratives about migrants*

Significantly, **narratives about migrants** show little similarities between countries. In German media, for instance, none of the proto-narratives centred on migrants involve the German state or government as an additional actor/character, whereas in Polish media 2 out of 3 narratives do. Two overlaps are that every country has at least one common narrative in which the country of origin of migrants features prominently and one in which the respective country features as the destination of movement, travel etc. In the Finnish context, narratives about migrants often revolve around illegal border crossings, being pushed back illegally

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[2]  The so-called Kinderpardon was a regularisation program in the Netherlands in 2013, where children who were in the Netherlands for more than 5 years could apply for a regularisation.

or being weaponised/ instrumentalised by hostile states. In Italian media, most proto-narratives about migrants are highly gendered and involve labour, exploitation or crime. Dutch media do not feature salient narratives using the term 'migrant' without specification of age or status. UK media, similarly, feature narratives about 'migrant workers' as key workers during the pandemic, alongside more general salient narratives about migrants as arriving or crossing the Channel.

Qualitative analysis revealed distinct narrative frames. In Italy, media portrayals were highly gendered, with women depicted in caregiving roles and men associated with agricultural labour. The UK and Germany focused on crisis narratives, linking irregular migration to broader concerns about governance and economic impact. Finnish media approach migration on as, on the one hand, about asylum seeking, with a hint of threat, and about labour issues such as exploitation of migrant workers, on the other hand. In contrast, Polish media frequently connected it to national security concerns.

### 2.3.3. *Narratives about refugees and asylum seekers*

Narratives about refugees and asylum seekers – in some cases, one of the two terms is predominant – show some similarity across countries. For one, countries of origin are often specified for this actor, with Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syria as the most salient countries. Such narratives also tend to differentiate between reasons, causes or goals of refugees, especially while they are moving/crossing borders: war, crisis, poverty. Correspondingly, the evaluation attached to these narratives can vary with the cause. For instance, in Polish media the narrative 'In Poland, war refugees from Ukraine will receive assistance.' was salient. It should also be noted that narratives about refugees and asylum seekers in Poland are politicized, racialized, and ethnicized, emphasizing a division between those who 'deserve' refugee status (having access to procedures and state support) and those who do not. For example, help was justified particularly for mothers with children fleeing the war in Ukraine or migrants in need of hospitalization at the Polish-Belarusian border. In contrast, male migrants from Asian or African countries were associated with threats and 'aggressiveness', sometimes constructed in a passive way, such as portraying them as coming despite being unwanted and as a potential threat.

In Germany, Poland, Finland and the Netherlands, the respective state or government also features prominently as a secondary actor, as either providing help/shelter/support or stopping/detaining refugees or asylum seekers. Other cross-country similarities are the many narratives that in various ways tell of arrival, crossing or moving across space; the narratives that tell of an increase/growing number/influx of refugees. More specifically, German and Dutch media also feature prominent narratives about (young, male) refugees – or people labelled as such – as causing problems, nuisance, and therefore needing to be expelled or deported.

### 2.3.4. *Narratives about migration*

Significantly, proto-narratives about migration as an abstract entity or process differ strongly from narratives about migrants in most countries' media. In Germany, Poland and The Netherlands, there are salient narratives around migration as increasing, representing a threat or challenge to society/the welfare state/culture or respective way of life, or even 'damaging Europe' as a whole. In German media, there is an opposing narrative as well, casting migration as helping the economy and maintaining the wealth of Germans. In Poland, the effect (of migrant labour) on the national economy is seen rather positively. In some of these narratives, blame for an open-door policy is assigned to the government or the EU as well, combined with a call for the government or EU to 'get a grip on migration', i.e., crack down on 'illegal migration'. In

German media, we also find a salient narrative about migration being creased/triggered or intensified by crises such as war or climate change.

### 2.3.5.  *Narratives about labour*

Across many of the participating countries, media narratives about labour or work in the context of irregular migration overlap in several ways. First, there are salient narratives about migrants finding work only in specific sectors because there is a shortage of workers, because they are un- or underqualified for other work, and because they are vulnerable. Their vulnerability appears in many such narratives in connection with risk/exploitation/being exploited by local businesses, who are evaluated as criminal and subject to fines. Such narratives are particularly salient in German, Polish, Italian media, where we also find narratives about the respective state's/government's failure/obligation to safeguard migrants in irregular or illegal working conditions and guarantee their (labour or human) rights. In German media, we also note a salient narrative about how work for migrants is necessary for/helps/facilitates integration and should therefore be regularised. In Polish media, such migrant workers are prominently described as Ukrainian, whereas in other national context other ethnic or national attributions are more common in this particular context. In UK media, labour is truly a marginal topic; that said, undocumented and illegal migrants in employment are mainly narrated in terms of (1) economic contribution and working conditions (in the Guardian and in terms of (2) raids, arrests, and penalties for employers by tabloids. Neither Dutch nor Finnish media feature salient narratives on labour when discussing irregular migration.

### 2.3.6.  *Miscellaneous narratives*

Beyond narratives centred on the above core concepts, each country team also pursued other structures that emerged as salient in their respective media data. In German media, narratives around the concept of 'family' were one such finding: such narratives are very common but also diverse, including narratives about large refugee families being a burden (negatively evaluating current family reunion law and its alleged abuse), narratives about the difficulties of family life for irregularised migrants in Germany, and migrants depending on/withdrawing into their families, which are sometimes evaluated as sexist/patriarchal and fundamentally different from German families.

In the Polish media, a salient cluster of narratives was found to revolve around the border/borders. Here, the role of the Border Guard in sending people (back) to Belarus is highlighted, while groups of migrants are trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian border illegally, and officers stopping volunteers who help refugees at the border.

In the Finnish media, Ukrainians are a very prominent refugee actor in narratives about fleeing/flight and receiving protection, being taken in by local families, and settling in Finland permanently. Another term used to refer, more or less vaguely, to irregular migrants is as 'the paperless' – such narratives emphasise that they are vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking, and as having access to basic health care as of 2023 (at a cost for municipalities for organising this).

In the Dutch context, we find salient narratives around 'veiligelanders' - a relatively new word used to refer to people, usually asylum seekers, coming from so-called 'safe countries', usually North African countries. These are described as causing nuisance, concluding that their shelter therefore should be austere (limiting benefits or support).

In the Italian media, there are very specific salient narratives about irregular migrant male farm workers from Africa as irregularly employed and exploited by illegal gang-masters, living in disgusting conditions, being desperate, and being beaten up when protesting these conditions, but also narratives about the police intervening against such crimes. In addition, we find narratives about Italian families struggling to find home-based care workers (who are often irregular migrants).

## 2.4. Conclusions regarding media

The analysis of media narratives across the countries studied reveals substantial differences in how irregular migration is framed. While some nations prioritize security-based narratives (Poland, UK), others focus on social issues and legal pathways/regularisation (Netherlands, Finland). Humanitarian discourses are strongest in Italy and Germany, while criminalization narratives are more visible in Poland and the UK. In the UK, the Channel and arrival are most salient as topics, followed by victimisation and economic contribution; positive representation is generally projected towards irregular or documented migrants outside the UK, e.g. the US. Political polarization is a significant factor influencing media representations, with right-leaning outlets often reinforcing securitization and economic burden frames, while left-leaning media highlight humanitarian and labour-based arguments.

Terminology around irregularity is used inconsistently, especially in the media, without adhering to legal terms. Representation of irregularised migrants is therefore characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty and bias. Such bias pervades media and is linked to gender, origin and religion. Labour, and access to labour markets, is constructed very differently in the media of specific countries, in some it is not associated with irregularised migrants (NE, FI), in others very strongly (DE, IT). In media, work and crime in connection with migrants tends to be gendered as male, victimhood and vulnerability as female. Personalised narratives used differently by tabloid/quality media, linked to different morals (emotion vs geopolitics).

## 3. The discursive construction of irregularity in politics

## 3.1. Data sample

The political discourse on irregular migration varies significantly across the seven data sets studied—Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and an EU-level study. The data samples used in analysing political narratives were drawn from parliamentary debates, government reports, policy papers, political party manifestos, ministerial speeches, and official press releases between 2019 and 2023. Each dataset reflects the dominant political concerns and priorities related to migration in that context.

In Germany, the dataset comprises 5,143 political texts amounting to 8,700,230 words, including Bundestag parliamentary debates, party manifestos from CDU/CSU, SPD, the Greens, FDP, and AfD, as well as government migration policies from the Interior Ministry. Additionally, ministerial speeches on migration policy were included, providing insight into the balance between integration policies and deportation enforcement.

Finland contributed a dataset of 2,134 texts totalling 3,495,100 words, drawn from Eduskunta parliamentary debates, official migration strategy papers, party positions from the Centre Party, Finns Party, Social Democrats, Greens, also The Left Alliance and the National Coalition, as well as policy documents of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. This data set focuses on Finland's migration management system and its alignment with EU regulations, access to services and rights, as well as labour-related issues, among other things.

The dataset for the Netherlands includes 478 political documents with 13,705,213 tokens, consisting of parliamentary records from the Tweede Kamer, government migration policy white papers, and party programmes of all parties participating in the two elections in the period of study. It also incorporates speeches from key politicians discussing migration, particularly in relation to asylum policies and migration policy, as well as the written communication between government and parliament.

In Italy, 4,217 political documents comprising 6,945,900 tokens were collected. This dataset includes Senate and Chamber of Deputies debates, party manifestos from Lega Nord, Brothers of Italy, Five Star Movement, and the Democratic Party, as well as ministerial statements and executive orders related to border security and migration policy. The dataset also contains key discussions on migration management and law enforcement.

For Poland, the dataset consists of 3,289 texts totalling 5,122,500 words, including Sejm and Senate parliamentary debates, which included statements from the National Defence Committee, the Border Guard, the Ministry of Interior and Administration, official government migration and border security reports, party manifestos from Law and Justice (PiS), Civic Platform, the Left and the right-wing Konfederacja, as well as local/regional strategies on migration governance. These documents highlight Poland's approach to migration through securitization and national border control measures. This corpus includes the perspective of rationalizing migration policy in terms of labour migration as a solution to address labour force shortages. This perspective was aligned with the narrative about measures to restrict irregular migration.

The United Kingdom dataset includes 218 political texts with 2,490,453 tokens, sourced from House of Commons and House of Lords parliamentary proceedings, party policy documents from, inter alia, Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Reform UK, Home Office migration enforcement reports, and ministerial speeches on asylum and border control. The dataset provides extensive insight into post-Brexit migration policies and enforcement measures.

At the EU level, 4,678 official documents amounting to 7,812,300 tokens were analysed, including European Commission policy papers and directives, speeches from the President of the Commission, the former Vice President on Promoting the European Way of Life and the former EU Commissioners for Migration and Home Affairs, European Parliament debates on asylum and border control, and reports from Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office. These documents reflect EU-wide efforts to manage irregular migration through legislation, external border control agreements, and asylum regulations.

This structured dataset provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding how political discourse on irregularised migration is shaped by national and supranational concerns, revealing both commonalities and divergences in policy discussions across Europe.

| | Finland | Germany | Italy | Poland | The Netherlands | UK | EU |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Texts | 2,134 | 5,143 | 4,217 | 3,289 | 478 | 218 | 1,945 |
| Tokens | 3,495,100 | 8,700,230 | 6,945,900 | 5,122,500 | 13,705,213 | 2,490,453 | 1,658,969 |

## 3.2. Quantitative analysis

This section presents a comparative analysis of the quantitative results drawn from political discourse on irregular migration in Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and at level of the European Union. The analysis focuses on high-frequency words, semantic groups, and collocations, providing insights into the dominant themes and linguistic structures shaping migration discourse.

### 3.2.1. *High-frequency words*

The most frequently occurring words in political texts across the seven datasets reveal the core topics emphasised in political discussions on irregular migration. While there is overlap in key terms, national contexts significantly influence the prominence of specific words.

Security and border-related words such as border, security, illegal, and deportation dominate discourse in Poland, the UK, and Germany, reflecting a heightened focus on migration control and enforcement. Meanwhile, discussions in Italy show a greater emphasis on labour market dynamics, with frequently occurring words like work, employer, and integration demonstrating an economic perspective on migration.

Italy and Poland's discourse frequently contains crisis-related words, such as boat, rescue, crisis, and Belarus, signalling a framing of migration as an emergency. In contrast, politics in the Netherlands, Finland and at the EU level feature a higher prevalence of legal and policy-oriented terms, such as regulation, Schengen, and asylum law, indicating a technical and administrative focus on migration. All six countries also feature high-frequency words related to the EU and Europe, EU politics and policies. Some, such as the Netherlands and Germany, also focus on municipalities or cities as places.

Migration-related High-Frequency Words by context

| Germany | Italy | Finland | Poland | NL | UK | EU-level: Commission | EU-level: Parliament |
|---------|-------|---------|--------|-----|-----|---------------------|---------------------|
| Migrants | Migrant | Immigration | Illegal | Migration | Asylum | EU | We |
| Asylum | Boat | Legal | Border | Asylum | Immigration | Member States | European |
| border | Rescue | System | Belarus | Municipality | Legal | European | People |
| security | NGO | Border | Foreigners | People | Trafficking | Our | President |
| Integration | Border | Application | Crisis | Europe | Migration | Migration | Union |
| Economy | Security | Refugee | Defence | Policy | Detention | Commission | They |
| Refugee | Crisis | Integration | Pushbacks | Government | Illegal | Support | Europe |
| Law | Asylum | Labour | Security | Illegal | refugee | New | Need |
| Policy | Human rights | Residence | Policy | | Removal | People | Rights |
| Deportation | Work | Human rights | state | | Boats | Union | Migration |
| | | | | | Rwanda | Asylum | Countries |
| | | | | | Channel | Need | Border |

### 3.2.2. Semantic groups

Beyond individual words, the analysis of semantic groups provides insight into how migration-related themes are constructed in political discourse. The analysis of semantic groups across political discourse on irregular migration reveals significant differences in how migration is framed. These differences reflect varying national priorities, political climates, and historical contexts. This section presents a detailed comparison of the most prominent semantic groups found in the discourse of each country, highlighting commonalities and divergences.

### Security and Border Control

Security and border control dominate migration discourse in several countries, particularly in Poland, the UK, and Germany. Poland emphasizes migration as a national security threat, often linking it to hybrid warfare, border crises, and illegal crossings. The Belarus-Poland border situation has amplified narratives centred on state defence, pushback policies, and military interventions.

The United Kingdom focuses on sovereignty and control, framing irregular migration as a failure of border enforcement, particularly regarding Channel crossings and deportation measures. Words linked to 'asylum' appear six times more often than words linked to 'migrants'. Similarly, analysis of semantic preoccupations highlights how in the "migration and mobility" domain migration is framed mainly as asylum and administrative procedures, and to a lesser extent as arrivals, crossings and borders. Significant emphasis is placed on asylum seekers and legal routes, with the word 'legal' appearing more frequently than 'illegal'. References to specific policies such as the Rwanda deportation plan appear frequently – indeed, Rwanda appears less frequently than British/Britain but more frequently than Channel. This likely indicated how the debate over Rwanda overshadows the Channel – although the two things are connected, as Rwanda is seen as deterrence to border crossings.

Germany also engages in security-related discussions, though with a stronger legal framework emphasis, addressing issues such as deportation laws, border cooperation within the EU, and enforcement of asylum regulations.

In contrast, Finland and the Netherlands mention security concerns less frequently, focusing more on administrative and policy-driven discussions about border management rather than outright securitization.

### Humanitarian Concerns and Rights-Based Discourse

Countries such as Italy, Finland, and Germany include humanitarian perspectives within migration discourse, frequently discussing refugee protections, asylum rights, and rescue operations. Italy presents migration as a humanitarian challenge, particularly in the context of Mediterranean boat arrivals and NGO rescue operations. The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in saving migrants at sea features prominently in political debates.

Finland focuses on migrant welfare and human rights, often linking migration discourse to international treaties, protection obligations, and ethical considerations. Germany balances humanitarian and policy-based narratives, with discussions on integration policies, family reunification, and social protection for asylum seekers. In contrast, Poland and the UK employ humanitarian language in their political discourse less prominently – the UK does, for example, in the depiction of women and the risks of Channel crossing. In comparison to other data sets, however, security- and control-related lexis is more prominent.

Dutch politics stands out by giving significant focus to subjectivities, encompassing terms that denote age, gender, and victimhood, such as victim or vulnerable. It also includes words reflecting subjective experiences, like life, health, and happiness, alongside family-related terms, including children, parents, and nuclear families. This semantic group is marginal in other political discourses, e.g., German politics.

## Economic and Labour Migration

The economic impact of migration is a central theme in Italy, Finland, and Germany, where discussions focus on labour shortages, workforce integration, and economic contributions of migrants. Italian politics frames migration as an economic necessity, discussing issues such as work permits, labour shortages in specific industries, and employer needs. Finland adopts a similar approach, particularly focusing on skilled labour migration and economic integration strategies. Germany debates both the benefits and challenges of labour migration, particularly in relation to social services, taxation, and workforce sustainability.

Germany and Italy furthermore focus on the exploitation of migrant labour, discussing undocumented work, wage theft, and poor working conditions, particularly in agriculture and domestic labour sectors. In UK politics, the discourse about the figure of the migrant worker is not only salient but reveals a key oppositional construction: the figure of the illegal migrant precisely emerges as a counter-image to the skilled, desirable migrant worker.

Labour migration in Poland is primarily presented through the lens of legal regulations on employment and labour shortages. In the Polish context, migration is often discussed in relation to employers and workers, with Ukrainians emerging as a particularly prominent migrant group in the corpus. Seasonal work is frequently associated with legal migration, reflecting the country-specific discourse on labour-related migration. Interestingly, irregularities in employment were not visible in the analysed corpus.

## Legal and Policy Frameworks

Migration discourse in all countries and at the EU level is heavily shaped by policy and/or legal considerations, with frequent references to asylum law, Schengen regulations, and EU migration directives. The EU-level discourse is structured around policy harmonization, burden-sharing agreements, and legal frameworks governing asylum and border control. German politics frequently discusses policy efficiency, visa regulations, and administrative challenges in processing asylum claims. Finnish politics focuses on legal clarity and rule-based migration management, often citing international agreements on refugee protections. In contrast, politics in Poland and the UK frame legal discussions in terms of restrictions, such as tightening asylum laws, deportation enforcement, and reducing migration pathways. In Poland, this was also a response to EU migration policy – for example, a strong stance against the EU relocation mechanism.

## Crisis and Emergency Narratives

Migration as a crisis is a dominant theme in Italy, Poland, and the UK, with political discourse frequently invoking emergency rhetoric. Italy refers to migrant waves, boat landings, and overwhelmed reception centres, portraying migration as a continuous crisis requiring urgent policy intervention. Political discourse in Poland describes migration in terms of a border emergency, often linking it to foreign influence and state security threats. Politics in the UK focuses on overburdened asylum systems, with references to backlogs, unmanageable inflows, and crisis situations; there is also a notable moralising discourse about migrants in UK politics, as well as a strong association between 'immigration' and crime, contributing to the construction

of migration as a crisis (while 'crisis' itself is seldom used). In contrast, Finland and the Netherlands frame migration as a long-term governance issue, rarely resorting to emergency-based language.

### Sovereignty and National Identity

Migration as a challenge to national identity appears prominently in Poland, the UK, and Italy, where discourse frequently references cultural preservation, national sovereignty, and demographic concerns.

Political discourse in Poland reinforces divisions between 'us' and 'them, often positioning migrants as incompatible with Polish traditions and values. This sustains the discourse of "otherness" and the distinction between "cultural proximity vs. cultural/racial distance," particularly when comparing migration from Ukraine to migration from non-European countries. The UK frequently connects migration discussions to post-Brexit sovereignty, focusing on controlling migration independently from international legal standards: Debates over immigration legislation aimed at reducing asylum rights through via association to criminalised 'illegal migrants' and frame the European Court of Human Rights as legal constraints for implementing more restrictive regulations. Moreover, post-Brexit sovereignty can be linked to the slogan of "taking back control", while in reality exiting the EU did not mean exiting Human Rights standards. Italy has nationalist elements in migration debates, particularly regarding Italian identity and perceived threats from non-European migration. Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands rarely frame migration in cultural or identity-based terms, instead emphasizing policy efficiency and humanitarian obligations.

In summary, the comparative analysis of semantic groups reveals distinct national approaches to irregular migration. Politics in Poland and the UK are primarily concerned with security and sovereignty, while Italy focuses on humanitarian challenges and crisis narratives. Politics in Netherlands, Finland, and Germany emphasize legal, economic, and administrative migration management, whereas EU-level discussions are centred on regulatory frameworks and burden-sharing policies. This divergence in semantic group emphasis reflects broader ideological and policy differences, shaping public discourse and political decision-making on migration across Europe.

### 3.2.3. *Collocations*

Collocation analysis in political discourse on irregular migration across Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and at the European Union level reveals significant differences in how migration is framed within national political contexts. The linguistic patterns that emerge demonstrate varying national priorities, policy emphases, and the ways in which irregular migration is linked to security, economy, legal frameworks, and humanitarian concerns.

In Germany, collocations frequently centre around structured governance and integration policies. The term "asylum policy" is frequently associated with "EU regulations" and "refugee protection," highlighting Germany's engagement with European migration policies and its legal obligations under international agreements. Additionally, "migrant integration" appears frequently alongside terms such as "labour market access" and "educational programs," suggesting a significant focus on long-term social incorporation rather than crisis management. However, security concerns are also present, with "border enforcement" regularly linked to "internal security measures," reflecting the ongoing debate about balancing openness with national safety.

In Finland, collocations emphasize legal precision and administrative structures in migration governance. "Immigration law" appears frequently in conjunction with "humanitarian protection" and "asylum application," highlighting the country's commitment to legal frameworks and due process. Similarly, "asylum application" is often collocated with "appeals process" and "residence permit," underscoring Finland's procedural approach to migration matters. Compared to other countries, Finland's discourse lacks strong associations with security and enforcement, instead maintaining a neutral, policy-driven tone that focuses on governance efficiency.

The political discourse on migration in the Netherlands strongly emphasizes control and regulation, with migration frequently associated with the need for tighter oversight. The most common collocations reflect concerns over irregular migration, which is framed not in legal terms but as uncontrolled movement requiring intervention. A related theme is secondary migration within the EU, reinforcing the idea that Member States must collaborate to counter movement between countries. The discourse also reflects a clear preference for deportation over regularization, with terms related to rejected asylum seekers and their return occurring far more frequently than those related to legalization. The political framing of asylum seekers often links them to crime and public disturbance rather than protection and human rights, particularly when referring to migrants from so-called safe countries.

The portrayal of shelter policies in political discourse reflects two contrasting narratives. One supports austere, restrictive shelters for asylum seekers from safe countries and Dublin claimants, arguing that their behaviour undermines public support for migration policies. This perspective frames migration management as a means to protect public order, reinforcing the idea that some groups should be placed in minimal-amenity accommodations. On the other hand, there is also a discourse surrounding humane and small-scale shelter models, particularly for displaced Ukrainians, who are often framed as deserving of dignified reception. Political discussions on migration policy also include references to privately hosted shelter, a form of support exclusive to Ukrainians. Additionally, discussions on the Kinderpardon (child pardon) highlight a polarized debate, where calls for leniency and compassion for children rooted in Dutch society are countered by arguments for stricter policies to prevent long-term stays. This debate exemplifies the broader tension within Dutch migration politics—balancing humanitarian considerations with restrictive policies aimed at limiting migration and maintaining state control.

Italian politics presents a different trend, with collocations strongly linked to labour migration and economic impact. "Labour migration" frequently appears with "economic contribution" and "worker permit," illustrating a pragmatic discourse that frames migration in terms of workforce needs and productivity. Additionally, "citizenship policy" is collocated with "naturalization process" and "integration efforts," pointing to the structured pathways available for migrants to obtain legal status. Although security-related terms such as "border control" and "illegal employment" are present, they are less dominant than in other countries, reflecting a more balanced discourse between regulatory concerns and economic benefits. In Italian politics, collocations are also shaped by the Mediterranean migration crisis and emergency response measures. "Boat rescue" is a highly frequent collocation, appearing alongside "humanitarian operations" and "NGO involvement," reflecting the prominence of sea arrivals and international rescue efforts in Italian political discussions. Similarly, "migrant crisis" is closely linked to "border security," illustrating the tension between humanitarian obligations and concerns over sovereignty. Furthermore, "asylum backlog" appears frequently with "bureaucratic delays," highlighting inefficiencies in the processing of asylum applications that have fuelled political debates over migration management.

Poland's collocations are dominated by security and geopolitical concerns, particularly in the context of the Belarusian border crisis. "Illegal crossings" often appear in conjunction with "state defence" and "military reinforcement," illustrating the highly securitized framing of migration in Polish political discourse. "Belarus border" is another frequent collocation, appearing alongside "hybrid warfare" and "national sovereignty," demonstrating how migration is closely linked to geopolitical strategies rather than humanitarian considerations. Additionally, forced expulsions/forced returns frequently co-occur with "law enforcement," reflecting the government's stringent approach to managing irregular migration.

The United Kingdom presents a similar securitized discourse, particularly in relation to Channel crossings. "Illegal Channel crossings" frequently appear with and "border control," emphasizing the UK government's enforcement measures. The term "Rwanda deportation" is also highly prevalent, collocated with "asylum seeker backlog" and "legal challenges," revealing the controversial nature of the government's approach to offshoring asylum claims. In UK political discourse, migrants are strongly associated with status, moral assessment, arrivals, seascapes and quantities; immigration, in contrast, is linked to criminality, law enforcement, legislation and rules, immigration status, and after this detention and deportation. Asylum, the more specific term, is linked to 'fixing' the broken asylum system, administrative process of claiming asylum and its assessment.

From the perspective of collocational analysis, the European Commission's discourse on migration is predominantly focused on borders and migration control, with significant emphasis on governance instruments and structures. The most prominent collocations with migration-related terms fall under the Borders and Migration category, with 'irregular' migration being the most frequently associated term, highlighting a preoccupation with unauthorized movement rather than broader migration dynamics. Governance-related terms like 'policy' and 'legislation' are also prominent, reflecting the Commission's legal and policy-driven approach to migration. However, rights-related discourse is largely confined to asylum and refugee-related issues, with little focus on broader fundamental rights. Additionally, migration is frequently linked to policing and crime, with terms like 'smuggling' and 'instrumentalisation' reinforcing a securitized and defensive perspective on mobility. The framing of irregular migration is even more control-oriented, focusing primarily on border crossings, prevention, and enforcement rather than integration or residence. In contrast, discussions around refugees incorporate a more humanitarian perspective, with collocations related to geographical origins, aid, and social support. Employment-related terms, while prominent, tend to be treated as a separate policy domain, with little direct connection to migration. In terms of gender dynamics, the Commission's discourse emphasizes women as victims and children as vulnerable subjects, whereas men's experiences remain largely unspoken, indirectly associating them with security and control concerns.

In contrast, the European Parliament's migration discourse is heavily focused on governance, illegality, and border control, with a strong emphasis on policy and legislation, particularly regarding the EU's Migration Pact. The term 'illegal' is the most strongly associated with migration, reflecting a dominant framing of migration as a security and law enforcement issue, whereas 'irregular' is used far less frequently. Discussions around border control, entry, and legal status are also prevalent, reinforcing securitization narratives. Refugees, in contrast, are framed more within humanitarian and rights-based discourses, with a focus on specific nationalities such as Ukrainians and Syrians, and issues of asylum and welfare. Employment-related discussions remain largely separate from migration, indicating little overlap between migration policies and labour market concerns. Gendered differences are evident in the discourse: women are framed as victims,

often linked to exploitation and gender-based violence, while men—especially young men—are less frequently mentioned except in security-related contexts. Children are the most frequently discussed demographic, with a focus on protection, rights, and welfare. These patterns reveal a European Parliament discourse that oscillates between securitization, humanitarian concerns, and policy-driven governance, with significant political and ideological divides shaping how migration is framed.

Overall, collocation analysis highlights significant divergences in political migration discourse across the seven contexts. While Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands frame migration through structured governance and economic contributions, Italy, Poland, and the UK adopt highly securitized narratives centered on border control and enforcement. At the EU level, discourse remains policy-driven but is deeply entangled with securitization. The European Commission's rhetoric is dominated by concerns over irregular migration, border management, and enforcement, linking migration to policing and crime while largely limiting rights-based discussions to asylum and refugee issues. Meanwhile, the European Parliament's discourse is highly politicized, with a strong emphasis on governance, illegality, and border security, frequently using 'illegal' rather than 'irregular' to frame migration as a law enforcement matter. While refugees are discussed in more human rights terms, employment-related migration is treated as a separate economic issue, with little integration into migration debates. Gendered framings further reveal how women and children are positioned as vulnerable subjects, whereas young men—especially from African and Middle Eastern backgrounds—are implicitly linked to security concerns. These linguistic patterns underscore the varied political priorities shaping migration debates across Europe, reflecting both national interests and broader supranational governance challenges, where securitization remains a key—albeit nuanced—feature of EU-level discourse.

### 3.3.  Qualitative analysis

Political discourse on irregular migration across the seven analysed data sets reveals distinct yet intersecting narratives shaped by national political priorities, historical migration patterns, and ideological divisions. The qualitative analysis of political texts, including parliamentary debates, party manifestos, ministerial statements, and policy documents, uncovers the rhetorical strategies, thematic framings, and contestations that define migration-related discourse.

In Germany, migration is framed as a policy and governance issue rather than a crisis. Political debates often emphasize the country's responsibility under the European asylum system and the need for structured legal pathways to migration. The dominant narratives distinguish between "deserving refugees" and "economic migrants," with left-leaning parties such as the Greens and the SPD advocating for humanitarian protection and social integration, while the CDU/CSU focuses on regulation, border security, and labour market controls. The right-wing AfD has introduced a securitized narrative that portrays irregular migration as a cultural and economic threat, frequently invoking fears of "parallel societies" and "overburdened welfare systems."

Finland's political discourse appears relatively depoliticized compared to other European countries, with migration framed more often an administrative and legal issue than a deeply polarized topic. This is not to deny the polarisation of migration discourse in Finland as such, especially with the rise of populist Finns Party. From a comparative angle, governmental discussions focus more on maintaining an efficient asylum process and balancing humanitarian obligations with economic needs. The Centre Party and the National Coalition Party emphasize orderly migration and labour-market-driven policies, while the Finns Party promotes stricter border controls, citing concerns about "preserving Finnish cultural identity" and "protecting

social services." (While most right-wing parties do use quite reasonable argumentation — even when attempting to restrict migration — the Finns party sometimes use very defamatory language. They often approach the issue in an openly racist manner, e.g. talk of 'invasive alien species' or 'bearded children pretending to be asylum seekers'.) The Social Democrats, The Left Alliance and the Greens counter these arguments by highlighting Finland's international obligations and the need for inclusive integration policies. It should also be noted that the data, like that of all other countries, spans 2019-2023, and that the discussion in Finnish politics has since taken on a harsher tone.

In the Netherlands, political discourse oscillates between pragmatism and restriction. The Kinderpardon debate in highlights deep ideological divisions regarding the regularization of long-term irregular migrant children. Left-wing politicians argue for its continuation, emphasizing children's rights and stability, while the government frames it as a policy that fuels false hope and encourages prolonged irregular stays. Right-wing politicians reject regularization altogether, asserting that rejected asylum seekers had clear legal outcomes and should have left, portraying regularization as a reward for disregarding the law. This debate reflects broader tensions between humanitarian concerns and restrictive migration policies, with opponents of the Kinderpardon emphasizing legal clarity and deterrence while advocates stress children's welfare and moral responsibility.

The LVV shelter program for irregular migrants similarly reflects ideological divides between national and local governance. Critics, particularly from right-wing and liberal parties, argue that the program contradicts national migration policy by offering shelter to those who should leave, thus weakening deterrence and potentially attracting more irregular migrants. Municipalities and NGOs involved in the LVV are depicted as overly lenient, prioritizing humanitarian concerns over state enforcement, with some politicians suggesting stricter control over local compliance with national policies. The government frames NGOs as well-intentioned but counterproductive, highlighting concerns that their support for irregular migrants undermines return procedures. Ultimately, the debate over the LVV mirrors broader migration discussions, balancing deterrence-focused national policies against local-level humanitarian interventions.

Italy's political discourse is dominated by securitization and humanitarian contestations. Right-wing parties, particularly Lega and Brothers of Italy, frame migration as an "invasion" facilitated by NGOs that "collaborate" with smugglers to bring migrants across the Mediterranean. The Salvini-era discourse reinforced a dichotomy between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" migrants, pushing policies such as port closures and stricter asylum regulations. On the other hand, left-wing actors, including the Democratic Party and various civil society organizations, challenge this narrative by emphasizing Italy's humanitarian obligations and the rights of migrants. They frequently counter right-wing securitization narratives with stories of migrant contributions to society, arguing that restrictive policies exacerbate underground labour exploitation.

Poland's political discourse is overwhelmingly securitized, particularly since the 2021 Belarus border crisis. The ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party portrays migration as a tool of "hybrid warfare" used by hostile foreign actors to destabilize national security. Government statements frequently associate irregular migration with criminality, smuggling, and terrorism, reinforcing a state of emergency narrative. Opposition parties, particularly Civic Platform and The Left, attempt to introduce humanitarian considerations, but these perspectives struggle to gain political traction against the dominant national security framework. The Polish government has also used anti-EU rhetoric to justify its pushback policies, arguing that Brussels' migration quotas threaten Poland's sovereignty and security.

The United Kingdom's political discourse on migration, while displaying some differentiation along party lines, is not as deeply polarized as in other countries. Every political party – government and opposition – recognise potential contribution of certain migrants to UK economy and society. However, the discourse is polarised alongside the skilled migrant worker and the illegal migrant divide, not alongside political lines – Labour vs Conservative.

At the European Union level, migration discourse revolves around burden-sharing, regulation, and externalization policies. The European Commission promotes migration as a governance challenge requiring collective responsibility among Member States. However, tensions arise between southern border countries, such as Italy and Greece, which demand greater solidarity, and eastern states like Poland and Hungary, which resist EU-mandated relocation quotas. The discourse often presents migration as a "test of European unity," with frequent references to humanitarian obligations, security concerns, and geopolitical considerations. Frontex and the Dublin Regulation are key reference points in EU migration debates, with ongoing contestations over border management and the legal responsibilities of transit versus destination countries.

There is, however, also a notable connection between discourses on the deservingness of migrants and their gender, coming from right-wing Members of the European Parliament. Women and children are framed as 'deserving victims', while men (particularly from Africa and the Middle East) are framed as security risks. contrasts Ukrainian refugees (who are mostly women and children) as deserving of protection with male refugees from African and Arab countries, who are framed as an "illegal invasion" and a security threat. Such gendered biases and a hierarchical view of migrant "deservingness" indicate that men, unless explicitly identified otherwise, are assumed to be potential security threats rather than individuals in need of protection. This kind of discourse explicitly associates young male migrants with crime and violence, reinforcing the notion that male refugees are security threats, while prioritising narratives of women and children's vulnerability.

Overall, the qualitative analysis of political discourse on migration across the 7 datasets reveals distinct national narratives shaped by political ideology, historical context, and external pressures. While Germany and the Netherlands frame migration as a policy issue, Finland and the EU level emphasise legal and administrative efficiency. Italy and Poland adopt securitized narratives, with migration portrayed as a threat to national sovereignty and stability. The UK's political discourse is polarized alongside the skilled migrant worker and the illegal migrant divide, not alongside political lines; the politics goes beyond the maritime siege (present in the media) and arguably more sophisticated – there are, indeed, strong arguments about the economy and the social cohesion, and moral dimension of fairness. These differences highlight the complexity of migration governance and the challenges of reconciling security, economic, humanitarian, and legal considerations in policy-making.

### 3.4. Conclusions regarding political discourse

The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative results reveals significant differences in how political discourse on irregular migration is structured. These differences reflect national priorities, political ideologies, economic needs, and historical migration patterns. Despite this variation, common trends emerge in securitization, economic arguments, humanitarian concerns, and legal-administrative approaches.

The quantitative analysis of political discourse on irregular migration across six European contexts and the EU level highlights significant national differences in thematic focus. Countries like Poland, the UK, and Germany emphasize security and border control, with high-frequency words related to enforcement,

sovereignty, and illegal migration dominating their discussions. Italy and Poland, in particular, frame migration as a crisis, frequently using terms like "boat," "rescue," and "crisis" to describe migration as an emergency requiring urgent intervention. In contrast, Finland, the Netherlands, and the EU level focus on legal and administrative perspectives, using terms like "regulation," "Schengen," and "asylum law" to reflect a governance-driven approach to migration. Despite these variations, all countries reference EU migration policies, though with differing attitudes toward burden-sharing and regulatory control.

The semantic grouping analysis further reveals how different national priorities shape political migration discourse. Security and border control dominate discussions in Poland, the UK, and Germany, with Poland framing migration as a geopolitical security threat, the UK emphasizing border sovereignty post-Brexit, and Germany focusing on asylum enforcement within EU legal frameworks. Humanitarian narratives are more prevalent in Italy, Finland, and Germany, where migration is often linked to refugee rights, protection obligations, and integration policies. The Netherlands stands out for its focus on subjectivities, frequently discussing migration in terms of age, gender, and family-related concerns. Meanwhile, economic and labour migration themes are most prominent in Italy and Germany, where debates focus on workforce shortages, migrant contributions, and labour exploitation.

The EU-level discourse differs significantly from national narratives by emphasizing policy coordination, legal governance, and burden-sharing among Member States rather than security threats or sovereignty concerns. While individual countries frame migration as a crisis or a national security challenge, EU discussions frequently reference harmonization efforts, Frontex operations, and external migration agreements. Unlike Poland and the UK, which resist external regulatory influence, EU discourse presents migration as a collective responsibility, balancing security with human rights commitments. These comparative findings underscore the fragmented nature of migration politics in Europe, where securitization dominates in some contexts, while governance, economic concerns, and humanitarian principles shape others.

One of the most pronounced themes across political discourse in all countries is the tension between securitization and humanitarian narratives. Countries such as Poland, the United Kingdom, and Italy predominantly frame migration as a security threat, emphasizing border control, enforcement, and deterrence policies. Quantitative analysis shows that words like "border," "illegal," and "security" occur at high frequencies in these countries, reinforcing narratives that portray migration as a crisis. Poland's discourse, for instance, frequently associates migration with geopolitical threats, particularly in the context of the Belarus border crisis, where migration is framed as an instrument of "hybrid warfare." However, in such comparisons, one must note that each discourse is country-specific and holds countless nuances: As a case in point, the key to the UK politics discourse is the use of positive imagery (skilled workers, legal migrants and routes) to construct the opposite negative image of 'the illegal migrant'. This is clear, for example, in the use of queue-jumping metaphors whereby illegal migrants disadvantage legal ones, and in the depiction of illegal migrants as harming social cohesion, undeservedly receiving taxpayer money etc. It is not so much about literal borders as about a moral dimension and distinctions – bordering and removals are the solution offered, but the whole narrative has its rhetoric centre within the British island, not in the Channel.

By contrast, countries such as Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands exhibit a more policy-oriented and pragmatic approach. Migration is discussed primarily in administrative and legal terms, emphasizing governance challenges rather than existential threats. Quantitative findings in these countries show a high frequency of terms like "integration," "labour," and "legal framework." Germany's migration debate is framed

around the balance between legal pathways, economic contributions, and social cohesion, while Finland's discourse largely treats migration as a matter of procedural efficiency.

Economic arguments about migration are central in countries such as Italy and Germany but also present in other countries, where they take different forms. Germany politics primarily discuss migration in terms of labour market needs and workforce integration, while Italy and the UK engage in more polarized discussions about migrants as either economic contributors or the unfair receiving of taxpayer money through welfare. In Italy, labour exploitation narratives are common, reflecting concerns about the precarious working conditions of migrants in agriculture and domestic labour. Meanwhile, in the UK, migration is frequently framed as a "strain" on public services, a narrative that supports restrictive migration policies. In Poland, economic discussions are largely secondary to security concerns, though migration is sometimes positioned as a challenge to national resources.

Humanitarian arguments appear in different forms across the countries. Italy and Germany have strong humanitarian narratives, particularly in relation to asylum seekers and the role of NGOs in rescue operations. The Italian debate often revolves around Mediterranean migration, where NGOs and international bodies clash with government policies over port closures and restrictions on humanitarian missions. Germany's political discourse incorporates humanitarian concerns but is tempered by integration-focused discussions, distinguishing between "deserving" and "undeserving" migrants based on their ability to contribute to society. In contrast, Poland and the UK largely dismiss humanitarian perspectives, with Poland emphasizing national defence and the UK focusing on deterrence policies. Finland and the Netherlands engage with humanitarian arguments in a more technical manner, framing migration within the broader discussion of legal protections and administrative processes rather than emotional appeals.

Legal-administrative discourse is strongest in Finland, the Netherlands, and the EU-level discussions, where migration is treated as a governance issue rather than an ideological battleground. In these contexts, policy efficiency, asylum processing, and legal pathways take precedence over emotionally charged rhetoric. In contrast, in Italy and Poland, migration law is a contentious subject, often wielded as a political tool by different factions. The EU discourse is distinct in that it focuses on burden-sharing, border regulation, and policy harmonization among Member States. However, tensions between southern European countries like Italy, which demands greater solidarity, and eastern European countries like Poland, which resist migration quotas, continue to shape debates at the European level.

In conclusion, while political discourse on irregular migration varies significantly across European contexts, common tensions emerge between securitization, economic pragmatism, humanitarian considerations, and legal-administrative approaches. Countries such as Poland and the UK prioritize security and deterrence, framing migration as a threat to sovereignty and national stability, while Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands adopt a more policy-driven approach, emphasizing governance and economic integration. Italy straddles multiple narratives, balancing humanitarian concerns with crisis framing and labour market discussions, whereas Poland largely sidelines economic and humanitarian arguments in favour of securitization. Social burdens or nuisances are key to political discourse in Germany, Finland and the Netherlands. At the EU level, migration discourse revolves around policy harmonization, burden-sharing, and legal frameworks, yet tensions between national interests and collective governance remain unresolved. These divergences reflect broader ideological and political cleavages, shaping both national policies and European migration governance, highlighting the ongoing challenge of aligning security imperatives, economic realities, and humanitarian commitments.

## 4. The discursive construction of irregularity in civil society

### 4.1. Data sample

The civil society domain in migration discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, influencing policy, and providing direct support to migrants. Across the seven reports synthesised here, the data sample from civil society organizations varies in size, scope, and thematic focus.

In Germany, the dataset comprises 199 texts with a total of 579,676 words. These texts originate from a diverse range of organizations, including humanitarian NGOs, religious charities, labour unions, and policy advocacy groups. The documents largely focus on integration policies, legal aid for migrants, and critiques of border enforcement measures.

Finland's dataset contains 305 texts with a total of 268,012 words. The civil society materials from Finland mainly consist of reports from human rights organizations, research institutes, and labour unions advocating for migrant worker rights, social inclusion policies, and protections against labour exploitation.

The Netherlands presents a comprehensive dataset, including 503 texts totalling 824,271 tokens. Civil society engagement in the Dutch context is reflected in texts from various national and local civil society organisations. This includes (news)letters, website articles, yearly reports (jaarverslag), and other written texts. Some grassroots organisations have English as their primary language for communication, while others use Dutch.

Italy's civil society dataset is the largest among the national samples, comprising 262 texts with a total of 9,547,833 words. The extensive collection of materials reflects the country's complex relationship with migration, particularly regarding labour exploitation, migrant worker rights, and humanitarian assistance. Many of these documents come from faith-based organizations, labour unions, and NGOs engaged in direct service provision and advocacy.

Poland's sample consists of 125 texts containing 579,676 words. The dataset includes reports from NGOs, migrant support groups, legal aid and humanitarian organizations, as well as grassroots advocacy campaigns addressing restrictive migration policies, state pushback practices, and migrant vulnerabilities along Poland's borders.

The United Kingdom's civil society corpus contains 611 texts, amounting to 2,793,436 tokens. These materials reflect a highly active civil society sector that engages in migrant advocacy, legal assistance, policy lobbying, and public awareness campaigns regarding asylum seekers, refugee rights, and detention policies.

At the EU level, the dataset includes 278 texts with a total word count of 214.753. These documents originate from international NGOs, European networks of migrant organizations, and position papers submitted to EU institutions regarding migration governance, asylum procedures, and human rights concerns across the European Union.

| | Finland | Germany | Italy | Poland | The Netherlands | UK | EU |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Texts | 305 | 199 | 262 | 125 | 503 | 611 | 278 |
| Tokens | 268,012 | 579,676 | 9,547,833 | 579,676 | 824,271 | 2,793,436 | 214.753 |

## 4.2. Quantitative analysis

### 4.2.1. *High-frequency words*

Across the civil society datasets, certain words consistently appear at high frequencies, reflecting dominant concerns and priorities among NGOs, advocacy groups, and grassroots organizations. Common high-frequency words include "human rights," "dignity," "legal assistance," "vulnerability," and "integration." However, notable variations exist between countries:

Germany and Finland emphasize "integration" and "social inclusion" significantly more than securitization terms. Italy shows a marked focus on "labour exploitation" and "migrant workers," highlighting concerns about undocumented labour conditions. The UK and Poland have a strong presence of words related to "deportations" or "forced returns," "border policy," and "hostile environment," as well as "rights" – reflecting policy-oriented advocacy and pushback against restrictive measures. At the EU level, terms like "asylum policy," "legal framework," and "solidarity" dominate the discourse, highlighting institutional engagement at a broader governance level.

### People, Human Rights and Dignity

The most stable high-frequency terms across all seven datasets are "human rights" and "dignity." These terms appear consistently in Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, and EU-level discourse, reflecting a broad humanitarian perspective that frames migration as an issue of fundamental rights. In Italy, however, while "human rights" is still present, it is more frequently associated with labour conditions and exploitation rather than legal protection. In Poland human rights highly associated with legal protection and humanitarian response. In contrast, the UK dataset associates "human rights" with European, committee, convention, bill, parliament, organisation, international, protection and violation, showing references to European Convention of Human Rights, which was blocking the deportations to Rwanda.

The Dutch civil society discourse on irregular migrants focuses particularly strong on people-centred terms, with frequent references to individual migrant stories, national debates, and shelter policies. Unlike political and media discourse, civil society actors predominantly use humanizing terms such as undocumented and asylum seeker, while avoiding terms like illegal migrant, reinforcing a rights-based and humanitarian framing of migration.

### Inclusion vs. Exclusion

A clear distinction emerges between countries prioritizing "integration" versus those emphasizing "exclusion" in their high-frequency words. Inclusion-related terms appear with high regularity in Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands, reflecting civil society efforts to facilitate long-term settlement and social cohesion. Conversely, in Poland and the UK, terms related to "exclusion"—such as "border policy," "pushbacks," and "hostile environment"—appear with greater frequency, indicating a more adversarial discourse around migration governance.

### Deportation and Legal Assistance

The UK and Polish datasets contain a significantly higher frequency of "deportation" and "pushbacks"/"forced returns", respectively, compared to other countries, reflecting civil society resistance to forced removals and restrictive border policies. In Germany and Finland, the focus shifts towards "legal assistance" and "residency rights," with frequent mentions of asylum applications and legal aid programs. Italy's dataset also references

"deportation" but in the context of labour exploitation rather than enforcement policies, linking it to undocumented workers' precarious status.

### Labour Exploitation vs. Worker Protections

Italy and Germany show the highest frequency of words related to "labour exploitation," particularly "undocumented labour," "agriculture," and "precarious employment." In contrast and Italy include frequent references to "worker protections," "fair wages," and "labour rights," demonstrating a civil society push toward employment security and anti-discrimination efforts. The UK dataset contains both narratives, reflecting a highly polarized civil society discourse that contrasts exploitation concerns with policy discussions on migrant work restrictions.

### Asylum and Solidarity in EU-Level Discourse

The EU-level dataset contains some of the most distinct high-frequency words, with "asylum policy," "solidarity," and "legal framework" appearing at a much higher rate than in national datasets. These terms highlight a broader focus on institutional governance and cross-border cooperation rather than the immediate concerns of national civil society actors. While "solidarity" appears occasionally in Finnish and Dutch civil society texts, it is largely absent in UK and Polish discourse, where adversarial migration policies dominate.

In summary, high-frequency word analysis reveals significant national differences in civil society discourse. Germany, Finland, and Italy emphasize "inclusion" and "integration", "legal assistance," and "worker protections." In contrast, Poland and the UK focus more on "deportation," "border enforcement," and "exclusionary policies." Italy focuses on "labour exploitation," while EU-level discourse remains more institutional, centring on "asylum policy" and "solidarity." These linguistic variations illustrate the different priorities and challenges faced by civil society organizations across Europe, shaped by each country's political landscape and migration policies.

### 4.2.2. *Semantic groups*

The semantic group analysis reveals stark contrasts in civil society discourse on irregular migration. Despite frequent universalist appeals and framing, Civil society organizations (CSOs) engage with migration from different perspectives, influenced by national policy environments, labour market dynamics, and humanitarian concerns. While Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands focus on integration and legal rights, Italy prioritizes labour concerns and worker protections. The UK show strong engagement with securitization and deportation resistance, Poland with rights and protections, whereas Italy and the EU-level dataset maintain a strong humanitarian framing. These differences illustrate how national policy environments shape the language and themes of civil society actors, ultimately influencing the broader migration discourse in each country.

### Human Rights and Legal Protections

One of the most dominant semantic groups across all seven datasets revolves around human rights and legal protections. Terms such as "human dignity," "asylum rights," "legal aid," and "protection mechanisms" appear frequently, particularly in the Netherlands, Finland, and Germany. These countries have a strong legalistic approach to migration advocacy, emphasizing procedural fairness, access to asylum, and rights-based frameworks. In contrast, civil society discourse in Poland also uses human rights-related terminology but

often in the context of challenging restrictive policies rather than advocating for expanded rights frameworks.

### Family, Social Inclusion and Integration

The Dutch civil society discourse on irregular migration emphasizes individual experiences more than political or media narratives, with frequent references to family, age, emotions, and personal circumstances as part of a broader effort to humanize irregular migrants. A significant focus is placed on welfare concerns, particularly health, housing, and social support, reflecting the role of civil society organizations in providing essential services. Unlike political and media discourse, civil society discussions treat irregular migration primarily as a national and local issue, with far less emphasis on politics or government, instead focusing on policy implementation rather than political debate. Notably, irregular migrants are rarely framed as workers or labour force members, with work-related terms primarily referring to the efforts of civil society organizations rather than migrant employment.

Germany and Finland exhibit a strong focus on integration and social inclusion, where CSOs frequently discuss terms related to "community support," "language training," and "employment access." These findings suggest a well-developed discourse around long-term settlement rather than short-term crisis responses. The Netherlands similarly shows a high presence of integration-related terminology, although often tied to conditionalities, such as participation in civic programs.

### Labour and Economic Contributions

Germany and Italy stand out with a semantic grouping that heavily emphasizes labour conditions and economic contributions. Terms such as "undocumented workers," "labour exploitation," "workplace rights," and "precarious employment" dominate their datasets. These countries have extensive migrant labour sectors, particularly in agriculture and domestic work, which likely explains the prominence of these themes. The UK civil society data also shows a strong presence of labour-related terminology, with a particularly high frequency of conditions, workforce and workplace, as well as a focus on employers-related terms and sex work, highlighting vulnerabilities and abuse in the context of prevention.

### Detention, Deportation, and Border Policies

The UK and Poland display an unusually high frequency of words related to deportation and border enforcement. Semantic clusters in these datasets include terms such as "detention centres," "deportation flights," "border security," and "pushback policies." Civil society actors in these countries often focus their advocacy efforts on resisting deportation orders and critiquing state-led border enforcement tactics. Polish civil society emphasizes the issue of child detention as a violation of children's rights and child welfare (dobro dziecka in Polish). Additionally, forced removals, pushbacks, and detention are often framed in relation to the individual experiences of migrants, highlighting the harms and hardships they endure. This is reflected in the frequent references to subjective experiences such as health, death, hunger and to specific vulnerable groups like pregnant women. Interestingly, this perspective aligns with the broader CSO framework, which promotes the idea that a 'safe border is a border where no one dies.' In contrast, Finland and Germany's CSOs are less focused on securitization issues and more engaged with integration-oriented discussions.

### Humanitarian Framing and Crisis Responses

Italy and the EU-level dataset show a strong humanitarian discourse, with frequent use of words like "emergency aid," "rescue operations," and "solidarity." Italian CSOs focus significantly on Mediterranean migration, as the country remains a key entry point for irregular migration via sea routes. Similarly, EU-level discourse often situates migration within a humanitarian framework, reinforcing solidarity-based rhetoric but with a strong policy-oriented vocabulary.

### Criminalization and Policy Resistance

In Poland and the UK, there is a strong emphasis on state-imposed criminalization of migration – in Poland, CSO use terms "illegal pushbacks" as forms of opposition to the role of control institutions. Terms such as "illegalized migrants," "criminalization," and "policing of migration" appear with notable frequency. This suggests a higher engagement of CSOs in counter-narratives that challenge dominant state discourses. The UK civil society corpus frames negative descriptors as manufactured (and other similar terms), thus critically engaging with the dominant portrayal in media. Civil society in the Netherlands and Finland include fewer references to criminalization, with CSOs focusing more on systemic improvements rather than direct resistance to state actions.

### Discrepancies Between National and Transnational Discourse

The EU-level dataset differs significantly from national datasets, as its semantic groups are more policy-driven, with frequent references to "regulatory frameworks," "harmonization," and "EU migration governance." This contrasts with national-level discussions, which are often more immediate and grounded in direct service provision or advocacy.

### 4.2.3. *Collocations*

Collocation patterns in civil society discourse reveal distinct national priorities and advocacy strategies. Countries with strong labour migration histories, such as Germany or – if we include internal migration – Italy, show a greater focus on worker exploitation and legal protections, while civil society in countries like the UK emphasizes engagement with the administrative process and, to a lesser degree, restrictive border policies. Finland, the Netherlands and Germany display a more policy-driven and systemic approach, with collocations reflecting structured integration efforts and legal frameworks. At the EU level, discussions are more abstract, focusing on broader themes of policy alignment and international cooperation. These findings highlight the diverse ways in which civil society organizations shape migration discourse, influenced by both national policies and regional governance structures.

### Human Rights and Associated Terms

Across all seven datasets, "human rights" is a highly frequent term, but its collocations differ significantly by country. Germany and the Netherlands commonly pair "human rights" with "protection," "dignity," and "legal aid," highlighting an emphasis on migrant support services and advocacy for fair treatment. In the UK and Poland, the term is more frequently linked with "violations," "detention," and "deportation policies," indicating a discourse that centres on contesting restrictive state policies. Finland and the EU-level texts associate "human rights" with "asylum procedures" and "international obligations," reflecting a policy-oriented discourse on rights frameworks.

## Legal Aid and Justice

Italian civil society discourse exhibits strong collocations between "legal aid" and "exploitation," "undocumented," and "migrant workers," reflecting concerns about labour conditions and access to legal representation. In the UK and Germany, "justice" frequently co-occurs with "deportation appeals," "asylum cases," and "immigration tribunals," indicating a strong focus on legal resistance to state-imposed removals. Finland and the Netherlands associate "justice" with "equal treatment" and "social rights," highlighting broader inclusionary concerns. In Poland, legal aid and justice primarily refer to access to asylum procedures and humanitarian protection. Organizations emphasize unlawful practices such as the denial of the right to apply for asylum, pushbacks to Belarus, and detention, including the detention of children and women. From the perspective of justice and aid, Polish civil society also highlight the role of human rights activists, volunteers, and lawyers who provide support at the Polish-Belarusian border, as well as the criminalization of humanitarian assistance by the Polish government.

## Integration and Inclusion

Germany and Finland show frequent collocations between "integration, "inclusion", "rights" and "access to" and "education," "language support," and "social housing," underscoring their focus on systemic inclusion efforts. The EU-level dataset link "integration" with "policy frameworks" and "labour market access," demonstrating a more institutional approach to the topic. Poland and the UK, by contrast, have weaker associations between "integration" and positive terms, with collocations often reflecting political resistance, such as "failed integration" or "policy failures." It should be noted that, for Poland, civil society was the only corpus where the term 'integration' appeared, which reflects that organizations have the broadest perspective on migration and highlight integration as an important aspect; however, given that integration efforts are limited by the authorities, "policy failure" is an accurate collocation.

## Exploitation and Labour Rights

Italy and Germany have a high frequency of collocations between "exploitation" and "agriculture," "domestic work," and "seasonal labour," reflecting economic migration concerns. Germany and Poland associate "exploitation" with "legal gaps" and "unregulated work," emphasizing advocacy for policy reform. Finland exhibits a focus on "exploitation" linked to "modern slavery," "trafficking," and "undocumented employment," suggesting a rights-based approach to the issue.

## Deportation and Border Control

The UK and Poland strongly link "deportation" to "detention centres," "forced removals," and "government policies," reflecting confrontational civil society narratives against state migration control. Italy and the Netherlands associate "deportation" more with "legal pathways" and "asylum decisions," indicating efforts to navigate restrictive policies rather than outright contestation. Germany and Finland display weaker collocations with "deportation," with discourse focusing more on long-term settlement rather than removals.

## Solidarity, Shelter and Community

Italy and Finland have high collocation frequencies between "solidarity" and "grassroots movements," "volunteers," and "mutual aid." Germany and the Netherlands associate "solidarity" with "EU cooperation," "policy coordination," and "refugee networks." The UK and Poland show less emphasis on "solidarity," with weaker co-occurrence patterns compared to other nations. In Dutch civil society, there is a strong discourse

on shelter, linked to guidance and structured support, particularly within the LVV program, which combines housing with pathways toward a long-term resolution for irregular migrants. Shelter is often discussed in relation to its organization, government involvement, and municipal policies, highlighting its structured nature rather than an emergency response. Additionally, the LVV program is frequently framed as a pilot project, with considerable attention given to its evaluation and national implementation. Notably, the discourse does not heavily associate the LVV with the people who rely on it, suggesting a focus on policy mechanisms rather than the lived experiences of migrants. In contrast, discussions on homelessness among irregular migrants emphasize the passive nature of becoming homeless, with many references to individuals "ending up on the street" rather than actively choosing or being forced into homelessness. This framing is significant given the conditional nature of shelter, where non-compliance with return procedures can result in migrants losing their access to housing.

### Family and Children

In several data sets, collocation analyses reveal women, family and children as a particular focus of civil society discourse. In Dutch civil society, for example, children are discussed in relation to family and age-related concerns, with strong associations between children, women, and the Kinderpardon regularization debate. Many organizations actively advocate for the continuation of this policy or provide shelter to families who were rejected under the program. In contrast, work-related discussions are virtually absent. In the rare occasion that they are present, it is about domestic work, but this is mainly because the migrant domestic workers union is included in the sample. Informal work is referenced more often than formal employment, with a notable focus on wages and job loss, while discussions of working conditions remain relatively infrequent. This suggests that while economic survival is a concern, labour rights and protections are not central to Dutch civil society discussions on irregular migration.

## 4.3. Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis of civil society discourse on irregular migration across Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the EU level reveals distinct yet overlapping narratives. Civil society organizations, including NGOs, advocacy groups, and labour unions, contribute significantly to shaping migration debates by providing alternative perspectives to political and media discourses. This section compares the key narratives that emerge from the qualitative findings in each country's civil society reports.

### 4.3.1. *General comparison and thematic clusters*

### Humanitarian Narratives and Rights-Based Discourse

A dominant theme across all seven contexts is the emphasis on humanitarian principles and migrant rights. However, the framing varies: Germany and Finland highlight dignity and social inclusion, emphasizing the long-term integration of irregular migrants. Civil society organizations advocate for inclusive policies, stressing narratives of belonging and equal opportunities. The Netherlands maintains a balance between legal advocacy and social responsibility, often framing migrants as individuals in need of protection within a structured and rule-based system. Italy and Poland, where migration crises have been more pronounced, frame migrants as victims of structural exploitation and institutional neglect, with a strong focus on the failures of state policies. The EU-level discourse frequently discusses systemic injustice, portraying migration governance as fundamentally flawed and in need of reform. UK-based groups criticize the "hostile

environment" policies and accuse the state / the government of producing exploitation; EU-level civil society organizations promote solidarity and shared responsibility.

### Labour and Economic Narratives

A recurring theme in Italy and Germany is the labour exploitation of irregular migrants, particularly in low-wage sectors. Civil society organizations in these countries highlight the duality of migrants as both necessary contributors to the economy and vulnerable workers subjected to severe precarity. Italy has a strong focus on the agricultural sector and domestic labour, describing migrants as being trapped in cycles of exploitation due to informal work conditions. Germany, while acknowledging exploitation, also frames labour migration through the lens of economic necessity, arguing for structured pathways to employment and better labour protections. Germany and Finland present a regulated perspective, where the focus is on integrating migrants into legal labour frameworks rather than highlighting exploitation. In UK civil society, the economic contribution arguments of civil society organisations is quite strong and deployed with regard to the future (regularisation for undocumented means that will contribute) and the present (they already run the economy, the country depends on their essential labour).

### Criminalization and Securitization Counter-Narratives

In countries where state-led migration policies are highly securitized, civil society organizations provide counter-narratives that challenge the portrayal of irregular migrants as security threats. Poland and the UK counteract the dominant political discourse of border control and deterrence, arguing that securitization dehumanizes migrants and fuels xenophobic rhetoric. Italy and Germany emphasize the human cost of restrictive policies, particularly concerning migrant deaths in transit and detention conditions. Germany and Finland, while not as securitized, still engage in counter-narratives by critiquing administrative obstacles to regularization rather than direct criminalization. EU-level discourse pushes back against nationalist anti-migration rhetoric, advocating for collective responsibility and burden-sharing among Member States.

### Family, Gender, and Vulnerability Narratives

The gendered and family-based experiences of migration appear across multiple national reports, though with varying degrees of emphasis. The Netherlands and Finland focus on family reunification and social integration, portraying migrant families as units seeking stability and inclusion. Italy and Poland highlight gendered labour exploitation, particularly in domestic and caregiving roles where female migrants are disproportionately affected. Germany adopts a mixed narrative that both acknowledges migrant agency and highlights vulnerability in legal limbo, especially concerning unaccompanied minors. UK-based civil society often discusses migration through the lens of forced displacement and asylum-seeking women, particularly in the context of detention policies. In general, UK civil society narratives are particularly gendered — presenting negative portrayal of men as social construct and emphasising they experience of discrimination, and women as victims of violence and abuse. Asylum and forced migration appear as distinctive themes but are not central.

For the Polish case, the civil society corpus holds the most diverse perspective on social categories of irregularised migrant. For example, there is a focus on how the approach of the government and society to women and children in the context of war refugees from Ukraine differs, and on threats and violence against people on the move. Their narratives make children and, to a minor degree, women and families particularly noticeable, referring to different, sometimes intersectional, vulnerabilities. The narratives of civil society

organisations were more sensitive to, and reflective about, the significance of the terms they used, e.g., differentiating between migrants and refugees. They endeavoured to produce and promote counter-narratives, e.g., framing as illegal certain practices of the Polish state or showing how Ukrainian forced migrants are privileged in contrast to other forced migrants.

### Migration Policy and Legal Reform Narratives

Across all seven contexts, civil society organizations advocate for policy reform, but their framing differs. The UK and Poland focus on challenging restrictive government measures, including deportation and detention policies. Germany and Finland emphasize constructive legal solutions to regularize undocumented migrants rather than directly opposing government policies. Italian and German NGOs engage in direct advocacy for legislative changes, particularly concerning work permits and asylum processes. EU-level discourse frames migration policy as a collective European issue, stressing the need for harmonized and rights-based legal frameworks.

In conclusion, the narratives within the civil society domain highlight key divergences in how irregular migration is framed. While all countries incorporate humanitarian principles, their narratives reflect national migration policies and socio-political climates. Italy focuses on labour and exploitation, while Germany and Finland emphasize integration and legal regularization. The UK and Poland both feature strong counter-narratives to securitization, while EU-level discourse prioritizes structural reform and collective responsibility. Civil society in Poland specifically emphasizes the humanitarian perspective and the obligations of the government to adhere to international and national law regarding access to asylum procedures and restrictions on the detention of children.

This comparative analysis underscores the role of civil society in shaping migration discourse by providing alternative perspectives to political and media narratives, advocating for rights-based approaches, and pushing for policy reform.

### 4.3.2. *Alternative Narratives*

Across all seven reports, a stark contrast emerges between the narratives found in civil society discourse and those dominant in media and political arenas. While civil society actors generally advocate for human rights, social inclusion, and structural reforms, media narratives often focus on securitization, crisis framing, and economic burden. Political discourse, in turn, frequently reinforces restrictive migration policies, emphasizing border control and national security concerns.

### The Securitization of Migration in Media and Political Narratives vs. Humanitarian Advocacy in Civil Society

A central point of divergence is the securitization of migration in media and political discourse versus the humanitarian and rights-based framing found in civil society. In countries like Poland and the UK, political narratives emphasize irregular migration as a "threat" to national security, portraying migrants as risks to public safety and economic stability. Media coverage in these countries often aligns with these political perspectives, framing migration as a crisis that requires urgent government intervention through restrictive policies.

In contrast, civil society organizations in these same countries counteract these narratives by highlighting humanitarian concerns, legal rights, and personal migrant stories. Polish NGOs, for example, document human rights violations at the Belarus border, while UK-based advocacy groups push back against hostile immigration policies. Civil society organisations also develop two lines of arguments, one centred on

economic contribution, the other on humanitarian and human rights approaches – both problematic in their own way. In Germany and Finland, where media narratives are somewhat more balanced, civil society still plays a crucial role in ensuring that discussions of migration incorporate social integration and labour rights.

## Economic Narratives: Burden vs. Contribution

Another major divergence lies in the economic framing of migration. Media and political narratives in the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany frequently depict irregular migrants as a burden on social welfare systems. This discourse, while varying in intensity, often underscores concerns about public spending, job competition, and housing shortages. Political rhetoric in Italy, for instance, often associates migration with unemployment and strain on national resources.

However, civil society narratives in these same countries emphasize migrants' economic contributions rather than their costs. Advocacy organizations in Germany and Italy highlight the indispensable role of migrant workers in agriculture, caregiving, and essential services. In Germany, civil society discussions frequently stress the need for migrant labour to sustain economic growth and offset demographic decline. Rather than depicting migration as an economic liability, these narratives present migrants as integral to national and regional economies. In some ways like their German counterparts, UK civil society organisations take a strong position regarding the economic contribution of migrants, arguably more insistently in terms of the 'essential' nature of migrant labour.

## Integration vs. Othering: A Narrative Divide

A recurring contrast across all reports is the way migration is framed in relation to societal belonging. Political and media discourses in countries like the UK and Poland often emphasize the "otherness" of migrants, arguably reinforcing the idea that irregular migration disrupts national identity and social cohesion. Terms like "illegal migrants," "invasion," and "cultural clash" appear frequently in right-leaning media narratives and political speeches in these contexts. However, UK civil society also features a strong racialising discourse, mobilised not to construe image of threatening other, but for reporting discrimination.

In contrast, civil society actors in all seven countries focus on integration, dignity, and rights-based inclusion. In Finland and the Netherlands, NGOs work towards promoting cultural exchange and migrant participation in civic life. In Germany, labour unions and advocacy groups stress access to education, fair employment, and long-term residency as key integration strategies. This contrast in narrative framing—where media and political narratives "other" migrants while civil society emphasizes inclusion—remains consistent across national contexts.

## Legal Frameworks: Criminalization vs. Regularization

One of the most significant divergences between civil society discourse and media/political narratives is in how legal status is framed. Media and political rhetoric in Italy, Poland, and the UK frequently associates irregular migration with criminality. Political debates often frame undocumented migrants as "lawbreakers," reinforcing the necessity of detention, deportation, and border militarization. Specifically in the UK, criminalisation of illegal migrants goes hand in hand with the association between asylum seekers and illegal migrants – it serves to criminalise asylum seekers, and weaken the right to asylum.

Civil society organizations, however, frame migration as a legal and human rights issue. In Italy, NGOs advocate for regularization policies, arguing that legal status should be accessible through work permits and

residency programs. In Germany and Finland, civil society actors push for clearer pathways to citizenship and oppose detention-based immigration policies. This fundamental difference in framing—criminalization versus regularization—marks one of the deepest contrasts in migration discourse across all seven reports.

A good case in point is Dutch civil society discourse on the Kinderpardon, which differs significantly from political and media narratives by centring on personal stories and the lived experiences of children and families affected by the policy. Unlike the abstract, procedural discussions in other corpora, civil society organizations humanize the issue, using individual cases to critique the policy's shortcomings and its failure to fully prioritize the best interests of the child. The discourse highlights a duality, celebrating the policy's successes while emphasizing its partial justice, as many children remain excluded. Two key themes emerge: het belang van het kind (best interest of the child), where the policy is seen as prioritizing state interests over children's welfare, and the menselijke maat (human dimension), which critiques the policy as unjust, inhumane, and disconnected from the realities of irregular migration. Additionally, some texts link the Kinderpardon-deal to the abolition of discretionary powers for the State Secretary, arguing that removing this "humanitarian valve" has left vulnerable migrants without any recourse when all other policy options fail. By grounding their arguments in real-life examples, civil society organizations not only challenge the policy on moral and practical grounds but also advocate for reforms that restore a sense of justice and humanity to the asylum system.

### The Role of Public Perception and Counter-Narratives

Civil society actors play a crucial role in countering dominant narratives produced by media and political elites. While media outlets shape public perception by amplifying crisis narratives and political debates focus on electoral concerns, NGOs and advocacy groups work to shift public sentiment toward empathy, legal reform, and human rights-based policy. In the Netherlands and Germany, civil society-led campaigns have successfully influenced policy changes regarding asylum rights and refugee support. In the UK, civil society actors have challenged restrictive migration laws by engaging in public awareness campaigns and legal challenges. Meanwhile, in Poland, despite strong securitization narratives, civil society remains one of the few voices advocating for humanitarian aid at border zones.

Across all seven datasets, civil society narratives stand in stark contrast to those produced by media and political actors. While political and media discourse tends to emphasize securitization, economic burden, and national identity concerns, civil society remains focused on humanitarian advocacy, economic contributions, and legal rights. The criminalization of migrants in political rhetoric and media coverage is countered by civil society efforts advocating for regularization and integration. Despite national variations, these broad trends are present in all seven reports, underscoring the consistent role of civil society as a counterbalance to more restrictive and securitized migration narratives. Civil society actors not only challenge dominant discourses but also provide alternative framings that influence migration policies, public opinion, and legal reform efforts.

### 4.4. Conclusions regarding civil society discourse

The analysis of civil society discourse across the data sets reveals substantial differences from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, i.e., regarding how irregular migration is represented and narrativised.

The quantitative analysis of high-frequency words in civil society discourse reveals significant national variations in focus and priorities. In Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands, terms related to integration,

legal assistance, and worker protections are common, reflecting an emphasis on rights-based advocacy and systemic inclusion. In contrast, Poland and the UK have a stronger presence of deportation, border enforcement, and exclusionary policies, indicating a more confrontational stance toward state migration control. Italy focuses on labour exploitation, particularly in agriculture and undocumented work, while EU-level discourse is more institutional, dominated by terms like asylum policy and solidarity. These variations demonstrate how national migration policies and socio-political environments shape civil society advocacy, with some countries prioritizing legal and humanitarian concerns while others focus on resisting restrictive border policies.

The semantic and collocation analyses further highlight these differences in civil society discourse. Germany and Finland frequently discuss integration in connection with education, language support, and social inclusion, while Italy and Poland emphasize labour rights and exploitation. The UK and Poland show high associations between deportation, detention, and border security, reflecting advocacy efforts against restrictive migration measures. Meanwhile, Italy and EU-level discourse maintain a strong humanitarian framing, frequently referencing solidarity, rescue operations, and emergency aid. In Dutch civil society, shelter and support services, particularly the LVV program, dominate discussions, with little direct reference to the migrants affected. Additionally, family and children emerge as key themes, particularly in relation to women and the Kinderpardon debate. Discussions around work and labour rights are almost absent, mostly confined to domestic work and informal employment, indicating that economic concerns, while present, do not play a central role in civil society discourse on irregular migration.

The qualitative analysis of civil society discourse on irregular migration across seven European countries and the EU level reveals a consistent counter-narrative to dominant political and media framings. Civil society organizations—including NGOs, advocacy groups, and labour unions—play a crucial role in advocating for humanitarian principles, legal reform, and migrant inclusion, offering alternative perspectives grounded in rights-based discourse.

While national contexts vary, several key themes emerge:

Humanitarian and rights-based narratives are central across all countries, though differently framed. Germany and Finland focus on integration and social inclusion, while Italy and Poland emphasize structural exploitation and state neglect. The UK and Poland showcase particularly strong critiques of securitized state approaches, while the EU-level discourse stresses systemic reform and shared responsibility.

Labour and economic themes highlight migrants as both essential workers and vulnerable to exploitation, particularly in Italy, Germany, and the UK. Civil society promotes regularization and labour protections, positioning migrants as contributors rather than burdens.

Counter-narratives to criminalisation and securitisation challenge state-led portrayals of migration as a threat. Civil society actors in the UK, Poland, and Italy especially critique detention policies, militarized borders, and xenophobic rhetoric, promoting instead narratives centred on dignity, legality, and empathy.

Family, gender, and vulnerability appear in all contexts, with special attention to women, children, and unaccompanied minors. The Netherlands and Finland focus on family unity and inclusion, while Italy and Poland address gendered exploitation. The Dutch debate on the Kinderpardon exemplifies civil society's emphasis on individual stories and moral justice.

Legal reform advocacy is widespread, with calls for regularization, clearer legal pathways, and opposition to detention. Civil society contrasts sharply with political rhetoric that often equates irregular migration with criminality.

Across all cases, civil society stands out as a critical voice pushing back against securitization, economic burden framings, and exclusionary narratives. These organizations influence migration debates by foregrounding human stories, promoting inclusive policies, and advocating for structural reform, thereby reshaping public perception and pressuring governments toward more humane and rights-respecting approaches.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The comparative analysis of migration discourse across political, media, and civil society domains highlights significant divergences in framing, priorities, and narratives. While political and media discourse frequently emphasize securitization, control, and national sovereignty, civil society provides an alternative perspective, advocating for humanitarian approaches, legal protections, and social inclusion. This divergence is evident across all national contexts examined, with political actors often reinforcing restrictive migration policies and media narratives amplifying crisis rhetoric. In contrast, civil society actors counter these narratives by humanizing irregular migrants and emphasizing rights-based solutions, integration, and economic contributions.

One of the most pronounced contrasts lies in the framing of migration as either a security threat or a human rights issue. In countries such as Poland and the UK, migration is frequently discussed in terms of border security, deterrence measures, and criminalization. Media and political discourse in these contexts reinforce narratives of national sovereignty and border control, often portraying migrants as threats to public order and economic stability. Conversely, civil society actors challenge these dominant discourses by advocating for regularization, legal pathways to residency, and protection from state-led enforcement measures. The Netherlands and Finland, for example, showcase a policy-oriented approach that emphasizes structured governance and migrant integration over crisis narratives.

Another key theme emerging from the analysis is the role of labour and economic considerations in migration discourse. While media and political narratives often overlook or downplay the economic contributions of migrants, civil society actors highlight their role in filling labour shortages, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, domestic work, and caregiving. In Italy and Germany, for instance, labour exploitation and precarious working conditions feature prominently in civil society discourse, framing irregular migration as a labour rights issue rather than merely an enforcement concern. This discrepancy underscores the ways in which political and media discourse tend to prioritize restrictive policies over discussions on economic inclusion and workforce integration.

The case of the Kinderpardon in the Netherlands further exemplifies the divergence in migration discourse between different societal actors. While political and media discussions frame the policy in terms of procedural concerns and potential loopholes in migration enforcement, civil society narratives focus on the lived experiences of affected children and families. By centring personal stories and moral arguments, civil society actors seek to reshape public debates around migration policy, advocating for reforms that prioritize the best interests of children and restore discretionary powers for humanitarian considerations. This reflects a broader pattern in which civil society challenges the impersonal and restrictive nature of political discourse by foregrounding the human dimensions of migration.

Migration governance at the European level differs significantly from national debates, as it is shaped by legal frameworks, burden-sharing mechanisms, and policy harmonization efforts. EU-level discourse tends to emphasize procedural efficiency and collective responsibility among Member States, but tensions remain between national sovereignty concerns and regional cooperation. While some countries resist externally imposed migration regulations, others push for greater solidarity and responsibility-sharing. This divergence in priorities complicates efforts to create a cohesive European migration policy, particularly in the face of ongoing humanitarian crises and shifting political landscapes.

Moreover, the contrast between securitization and humanitarianism remains a persistent theme in migration discourse. Countries that emphasize national security concerns tend to implement strict border controls and deterrence policies, while those prioritizing humanitarian perspectives advocate for expanded asylum protections and legal pathways to residency. These differing approaches contribute to inconsistencies in migration governance, where migrants' experiences vary significantly depending on the country in which they seek protection or employment.

Media representation of migration further shapes public perception and policy responses. Sensationalized coverage of migration crises often reinforces fears of mass influxes and security threats, thereby legitimizing restrictive policies. By contrast, media outlets that prioritize human-interest stories and nuanced reporting contribute to a more balanced discourse, fostering empathy and understanding of migrants' lived experiences. This dynamic underscores the role of media in either exacerbating or mitigating polarization in migration debates.

## Alternative Narratives in Civil Society

One of the most significant findings of this study is the role of civil society actors in countering dominant media and political narratives on migration. Across all seven contexts, civil society organizations advocate for rights-based migration policies, humanitarian protections, and social inclusion measures, offering a stark contrast to the securitization and crisis-oriented narratives prevalent in media and politics.

Civil society discourse in Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands is particularly focused on inclusion/integration, legal protections, and labour rights. These narratives emphasize the contributions of migrants to society and challenge exclusionary policies that restrict access to employment, education, healthcare and residence permits. In Italy, civil society organizations highlight labour exploitation, precarious working conditions, and the urgent need for protections against abuse in the informal labour market. In the UK and Poland, civil society discourse is often oppositional, critiquing government policies that prioritize deportation or pushbacks, forced detention and deterrence over humanitarian considerations. In Poland, specifically, civil society organizations primarily highlight violations of human rights and the right to international protection during the Polish-Belarusian crisis.

Notably, civil society discourse at the EU level, to a certain extent, aligns more closely with EU institutional discourse than with national-level political debates. European NGOs and transnational advocacy networks focus on legal frameworks, burden-sharing, and collective responsibility, mirroring the language of EU policymakers. Nonetheless, EU-level civil society strongly opposes the EUs focus on deportation and security, arguing for a rights-based migration policy. It challenges the militarization of migration and pushes for social justice and inclusion rather than restrictive border policies. This alignment suggests that civil society actors play a crucial role in bridging the gap between national-level crisis-driven narratives and EU-level policy debates, promoting a more structured and rights-based approach to migration governance.

Civil society organizations play a crucial role in bridging the gap between migrants and host societies by advocating for policies that align with human rights principles. These organizations provide essential services, legal support, and advocacy efforts that challenge restrictive policies and promote social cohesion. Their work underscores the importance of grassroots activism in shaping migration discourse and influencing policymaking at both national and international levels.

Economic considerations remain an underexplored yet critical aspect of migration discourse. While migrants contribute significantly to labour markets, discussions surrounding their economic impact often focus on perceived burdens rather than benefits. Addressing this imbalance requires a more comprehensive approach that recognizes migrants' contributions to economic growth, innovation, and workforce sustainability. Policies that facilitate labour market integration and skills recognition can enhance the economic potential of migration while addressing host country concerns.

The fragmentation of migration discourse across political, media, and civil society domains presents challenges for policymakers seeking to develop coherent and effective migration policies. Divergent narratives and competing priorities hinder the formation of comprehensive solutions that balance security, economic interests, and human rights considerations. Greater collaboration between stakeholders is necessary to bridge these gaps and create policies that reflect both humanitarian obligations and national interests.

Looking ahead, fostering an inclusive and balanced migration discourse is essential for addressing contemporary migration challenges. This requires efforts to counter misinformation, promote evidence-based policymaking, and engage diverse voices in public debates. Ensuring that migration policies are informed by a broad range of perspectives can lead to more sustainable and equitable solutions that benefit both migrants and host communities.

Furthermore, continued research into migration discourse can provide valuable insights into shifting trends and emerging challenges. By examining the intersections of political, media, and civil society narratives, scholars and policymakers can better understand the evolving dynamics of migration governance. This knowledge can inform strategies that promote integration, social cohesion, and human rights protections within migration policies.

Ultimately, the comparative findings underscore the fragmented nature of migration discourse across Europe, shaped by national histories, policy priorities, and ideological divisions. While political and media narratives frequently construct migration as a problem to be managed or controlled, civil society offers a counterbalance, advocating for more inclusive, rights-based approaches. This tension between securitization and humanitarianism, between exclusion and integration, continues to shape the political and public debates on migration. Moving forward, fostering a more balanced discourse that incorporates diverse perspectives will be critical in shaping fair and sustainable migration policies across Europe.

In conclusion, the complex landscape of migration discourse requires ongoing engagement from policymakers, researchers, civil society, and the media. Addressing migration challenges in a holistic manner necessitates nuanced discussions that move beyond polarized debates and acknowledge the multifaceted nature of migration. By fostering collaboration and dialogue, stakeholders can work toward solutions that uphold human rights, promote economic stability, and ensure social inclusion for migrants across Europe.

## I-CLAIM Consortium

Utrecht University

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Ca' Foscari University of Venice
Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Katholische Hochschule Mainz
Catholic University of Applied Sciences

CEPS

THE JOINT COUNCIL for THE WELFARE OF IMMIGRANTS

actionaid
REALIZZA IL CAMBIAMENTO

Centrala

ASSOCIATION FOR LEGAL INTERVENTION

CONFEDERATION SYNDICAT EUROPEÆN TRADE UNION

ENAR

Deaconess Foundation

KATHOLISCHES FORUM LEBEN IN DER LEGALITÄT

FAIRWORK

## Contact info

**iclaim@uu.nl**

**For press inquiries:**
I-CLAIM Communications Manager
**miriam.mir@ceps.eu**

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