



Features chapters on the
Future of Migration and
Identity and Belonging
Dilemmas

MIGRATION & MEDIA

*STORIES CROSS BORDERS,
VOICES TRAVERSE SCREENS*

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Introduction

Migration is one of the defining forces of the twentyfirst century, shaping societies, identities, and the ways we communicate across borders. Yet the stories of migration – its frictions, its solidarities, its everyday negotiation, are never simply told. They are mediated: through news coverage, digital platforms, artistic practices, and the narratives communities craft for themselves. *Migration & Media: Stories Cross Borders, Voices Traverse Screens* emerges from this intersection, bringing together scholars, students, and practitioners who explored how mobility and mediation coproduce one another in contemporary Europe.

This publication is the result of research and educational activities conducted within the framework of The MigrationMedia(tor): Empowering Migrant Voices project. It is an international initiative funded by the European Union under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. Implemented between 2023 and 2025, the project addresses the complex interplay between migration, media, and public discourse in contemporary Europe. Its overarching aim is to strengthen democratic culture and social cohesion by improving the quality of information and public debate surrounding migration.

The project responds to the growing influence of both traditional and digital media in shaping societal attitudes toward migrants and migration processes. Public perceptions are increasingly formed within highly mediated environments, where misinformation, stereotyping, and polarizing narratives can undermine social trust and democratic values. Against this backdrop, MigrationMedia(tor) seeks to develop evidencebased insights into media representations of migration and to promote critical media literacy among young people, migrants, and the wider public.

The initiative is coordinated by the Jagiellonian University (Poland) in cooperation with partners from Poland and Croatia, including the Museum of Emigration in Gdynia, PRO HUMANUM Association, and the Center for Cultural Dialogue in Zagreb. This consortium brings together academic expertise, civil society engagement, and cultural institutions, enabling a multidimensional approach to the study of migration narratives and their societal implications.

The project's activities encompass empirical research, educational interventions, and publicfacing initiatives. These include comparative analyses of media portrayals of migration, international academic conference, summer school and workshops for emerging scholars and practitioners, and creative storytelling programmes designed to amplify migrant voices. Through these activities, MigrationMedia(tor) aims to foster more nuanced, accurate, and humancentered representations of migration, while equipping individuals with the skills necessary to critically evaluate media content.

By integrating research, education, and public engagement, the project contributes to the CERV programme's broader mission of promoting equality, human rights, and inclusive democratic participation. MigrationMedia(tor) ultimately seeks to enhance societal resilience to disinformation, support intercultural dialogue, and strengthen the visibility and agency of migrant communities within European public spheres.

This volume grows out mostly of the MigrationMedia(tor) Summer School, an intensive international program designed to experiment with new ways of studying and representing

migration. The contributors to this publication are participants of the summer school. Throughout the program, they worked across disciplines, including media studies, anthropology, sociology, digital humanities, and the arts, to explore how migration is framed, contested, and experienced through media.

The 10day summer school, held in September 2025 across four locations: Gdynia, Warsaw, Kraków, and Zagreb, offered participants a uniquely dynamic and multilayered learning experience. Organizing the programme in several cities allowed the group to engage with diverse institutional settings, cultural environments, and local perspectives on migration. Each location contributed distinct academic, historical, cultural and social contexts, enriching discussions and enabling participants to observe how migration is framed and addressed in different urban spaces. This mobility not only strengthened the comparative dimension of the programme but also fostered a sense of transnational collaboration, encouraging participants to reflect on migration as a phenomenon shaped simultaneously by local specificities and broader European dynamics.

It brought together twenty participants representing sixteen countries: Norway, Ireland, Croatia, the Netherlands, Kosovo, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Spain, France, Austria, Italy, Greece, Germany, and Poland, creating a uniquely international learning environment. The group consisted of young adults aged 20–30, drawn from a wide range of academic and professional backgrounds, including students conducting research on migration as well as individuals engaged in nongovernmental organizations working in the fields of migrant support and intercultural dialogue. This diversity significantly enriched the programme: the multiplicity of national perspectives, disciplinary approaches, and practical experiences fostered dynamic discussions, encouraged critical reflection on migration-related issues, and facilitated peer learning across cultural and professional boundaries. As a result, the summer school functioned not only as a training initiative but also as a platform for building transnational networks and strengthening intercultural competencies among emerging scholars and practitioners.

At its core, MigrationMedia(tor) Summer School was built on the belief that learning about migration requires more than reading texts or collecting data. It requires dialogue with communities, critical reflection on one's own position, and hands-on engagement with the tools that shape public understanding. The summer school therefore functioned as both a research laboratory and a pedagogical experiment: one that invited participants to rethink what it means to study migration in a mediasaturated world.

The chapters in this book reflect the diversity of perspectives that emerged from this shared experience. Some examine the politics of representation in journalism and social media; others explore creative methodologies, from participatory storytelling to digital mapping. Together, they offer a multifaceted view of migration as a mediated phenomenon, shaped by technologies, institutions, and human encounters.

This volume brings together a diverse set of scholarly perspectives on migration, media, identity, and the evolving sociopolitical landscapes that shape human mobility. The book is structured into four thematic chapters, each addressing a distinct yet interconnected dimension of contemporary migration debates.

The first chapter examines how media ecosystems construct, circulate, and weaponize narratives about migrants and migration. Petra Svobodová opens the section with a critical discourse analysis of pre-election communication by the SPD and allied parties, revealing how

social media rhetoric surrounding Ukrainian asylum seekers in 2025 shaped public sentiment. Juliana Fekiacova expands the discussion to the Visegrad region, exploring how cognitive biases and susceptibility to disinformation influence the image of migrants and undermine analytical thinking and resilience in Central Europe. Lazar Petrović investigates how populist governments in Serbia contribute to the creation of negative media narratives about migrants and migration processes. Sandra Bielak interrogates the dual media framing of migrants as threats or victims, arguing for more empowering and humanizing storytelling. Finally, Angelos Gkouskos analyzes racist speech and xenophobic tropes in Greek mass media, highlighting the persistence of exclusionary discourses across national contexts. Together, these contributions illuminate the media's profound power in shaping migration imaginaries and political attitudes.

The second chapter turns toward the future, addressing emerging trends, structural pressures, and policy dilemmas that will define migration in the coming decades. Łukasz Wysocki provides an overview of the United Kingdom's migration trajectory, considering demographic, economic, and political factors. Lennart Junge examines the tension between EU legal obligations and national practices, focusing on Latvia's pushback operations at the Belarusian border and the implications for human rights under Article 19 TFEU. Emmanuel Learnmore Gumbo explores climate-induced displacement and the limitations of current protection frameworks, advocating for rights-based and narrative-centered approaches. Premton Asllani analyzes migrant labor in Germany and Italy, situating it within Europe's broader demographic challenges. Kateryna Fadieieva concludes the chapter by mapping the opportunities and risks that arise at the intersection of development, climate change, global conflict, and labor market transformations. Collectively, these essays offer a forward-looking assessment of the forces reshaping global mobility.

Another chapter delves into questions of identity, belonging, and the lived experiences of migrants navigating new cultural landscapes within contemporary and historical migration contexts. While grounded in diverse geographical settings and methodological approaches, the contributions share a common concern with how individuals and communities negotiate their sense of self amid displacement, mobility, and shifting sociopolitical landscapes. Together, they illuminate the ways in which personal narratives, cultural practices, and collective memories shape the experience of belonging, and how these processes are mediated by broader structures of power, representation, and historical contingency. Iskra Yankova's article examines integration as a communicative process, foregrounding the transformative potential of first-person narratives. Through an analysis of the Migrants Got Talent project, she demonstrates how creative self-expression can serve as a tool for social empowerment, enabling migrants to challenge dominant stereotypes and assert agency within the public sphere. DragoşAlexandru Ioniță extends this focus on narrative by investigating the role of personal testimonies in shaping migration discourse. His contribution highlights how individual accounts, often marginalized in mainstream debates, offer critical insights into the lived realities of migration and possess the capacity to humanize and reframe public understanding.

The theme of identity negotiation is further developed in Vesa Maxhuni's study of Kosovo-Albanian women in Austria. Through a nuanced exploration of gender and ethnicity within diasporic settings, Maxhuni reveals the dialectical processes through which migrant women construct and reconstruct their identities in response to both cultural continuity and the pressures of adaptation. Adriana Radovanović's chapter broadens the analytical lens by interrogating the cultural and political dimensions of belonging in the Western Balkans. Her

examination of competing claims to “home” underscores the contested nature of ethnic identity in a region marked by historical fragmentation and ongoing mobility. Finally, Marko Vulević turns to the forced migration from Montenegro during the 1990s, offering a critical account of state responses and the politics of memory. His analysis demonstrates how institutional narratives and collective remembrance shape not only the interpretation of past displacement but also contemporary understandings of national identity and social cohesion.

Taken together, the contributions in this chapter reveal identity and belonging as dynamic, relational, and deeply contextual processes. By foregrounding voices and experiences that are often overlooked, the authors collectively challenge simplified narratives of migration and invite a more nuanced engagement with the complexities of living between places, cultures, and histories.

The final chapter broadens the analytical lens by presenting diverse methodological and cultural perspectives on migration, emphasizing how narratives, creative expression, and digital practices shape our understanding of mobility. Yaffah van Schie opens the section through a literary lens, tracing migrant voices in postWorld War II Dutch literature. Her contribution reveals how migrant authors have articulated belonging, displacement, and identity in a national literary landscape that has evolved alongside shifting migration patterns. Nahel Sedira turns to Marseille, a historically layered port city, to analyze migrant-authored literature as a form of “migratory polyphony.” His chapter uncovers how personal accounts and narrative textures capture the city’s dynamic interplay of cultures, memories, and mobilities. The chapter concludes with an investigation into digital activism and rights-based communication by Johanne Prøis Fearnley. The final contribution examines the experiences of seven content creators who work to counter fear-based narratives and center migrant rights in online spaces. Their practices demonstrate how digital storytelling can challenge misinformation, foster solidarity, and amplify marginalized perspectives. Together, the chapters in this section underscore the importance of plural viewpoints in migration studies, showing how literature, interdisciplinary research, and digital media each contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of human mobility.

The chapters in this volume offer a multifaceted exploration of migration as a social, political, cultural, and communicative phenomenon. By bringing media analysis, future oriented research, identity studies, and literary perspectives into dialogue, the book underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding human mobility. It invites readers to consider not only how migration is represented and regulated, but also how migrants themselves narrate their experiences, claim space, and shape the societies they enter.

Migration & Media: Stories Cross Borders, Voices Traverse Screens is thus not only a record of a summer school but also an invitation to approach migration with curiosity, methodological openness, and a commitment to amplifying the stories that too often remain unheard.

Migration has always been part of the human story, yet the ways we talk about it, represent it, and understand it has never been more contested than today. As editors, we began this project with a shared conviction: that the narratives surrounding migration matter just as much as the policies that regulate it. Stories shape perceptions. Perceptions shape politics. And politics shape lives.

This book emerged from conversations across disciplines, institutions, and countries. Conversations that revealed how urgently we need nuanced, research based perspectives on

migration and media. We wanted to create a space where scholars, students, activists and those less directly engaged with migration studies could examine not only the forces that drive people to move, but also the discourses that follow them across borders and screens.

The chapters gathered here reflect that ambition. They explore how media construct migrants and migration; how future migration flows will be shaped by climate change, demographic shifts, and political decisions; how individuals negotiate identity and belonging in new cultural landscapes; and how literature and digital storytelling offer alternative ways of understanding mobility. Each contribution adds a layer to a broader mosaic, showing migration as a complex, multifaceted, and deeply human phenomenon.

We are grateful to the authors for their commitment, insight, and generosity throughout this process. Their work demonstrates the power of interdisciplinary dialogue and the importance of centering migrant voices in academic and public debates. We also thank the European Commission and our partners: the Museum of Emigration in Gdynia, PRO HUMANUM Association, and the Center for Cultural Dialogue in Zagreb who supported this project, and the readers who will carry these conversations forward.

Our hope is that this volume not only informs but also inspires, encouraging critical reflection, empathy, and a deeper appreciation of the stories that cross borders every day.

Katarzyna Górka & Joanna Kulpińska

Editors

CHAPTER I

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHARING THE NARRATIVES ABOUT MIGRATION

Media ecosystems, representation and weaponized narratives

Petra Svobodová

Critical discourse analysis of the pre-election discourse of the SPD and allied parties on social media regarding Ukrainian asylum seekers in 2025

IN A GIST

Far-right parties in Czechia use emotive language, exaggeration, and "us vs. them" framing on Facebook to portray Ukrainian refugees as threats – mirroring broader European patterns of anti-immigration populist rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines how the Czech far-right movement Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and its allies use social media communication to influence public perceptions of Ukrainian refugees during the 2025 parliamentary election campaign. The analysis focuses on posts published on Facebook, including three visual materials directly related to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.

The newly formed partnership of four right-wing parties is among the most prominent actors in anti-immigration politics in the Czech Republic. In their public statements, they often focus on migrants and asylum seekers, including Ukrainians. Their communication follows broader European trends of right-wing populism, which emphasize nationalism, the protection of domestic interests, and the division of society.

The partnership uses emotive language, metaphors, and exaggeration to create a clear distinction between “us” (Czech citizens) and “them” (foreigners). Czechs are portrayed as victims of government policies that allegedly favor refugees, while Ukrainians are depicted as a threat to social stability, national identity, and access to public services, education, and employment.

The study aims to answer several key research questions:

1. How do the SPD and its allies use discourse on social media to create “us” and “them” identities in relation to Ukrainian refugees?
2. To what extent does this partnership's discourse coincide with broader European patterns of anti-refugee and anti-immigration rhetoric?
3. What are the possible consequences of this discourse for the Czech public's attitudes toward Ukrainians?
4. Does this partnership distinguish between migrants and refugees in its discourse, and what can be inferred from this distinction (or lack thereof) about its ideological framework?

The research situates this discourse within the election period from January to September 2025, when political parties intensify their communication and attempt to mobilize voters using polarizing and often fear-inducing messages. In addition to the discourse analysis itself, the study also utilizes available data from Czech research agencies on public attitudes toward Ukrainians and on the voter base of the SPD and its allies. Their strongest support comes from voters aged 40–59 with lower or secondary education without a school-leaving certificate.

RISE OF FAR-RIGHT POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MIGRATION DISCOURSE IN CZECHIA

At the start of the 2010s, migration was not a major issue for most political parties. The exception was the Dawn of Direct Democracy movement (Úsvit), which first used migration strongly in political discussions during the 2013 elections (Krotký, 2019). Critics said that Dawn was a party that "systematically worked" to turn problems like unemployment and crime into hatred against certain groups (Čaněk, 2013).

The leader of today's far-right nationalist SPD was part of Dawn until 2015, when he was expelled after disagreements over money. That same year, he founded the SPD (Škraňková, 2025). From the start, SPD has been nationalist, focusing on sovereignty and referendums, including a vote on leaving the EU. It sees migration as a serious threat, rejects multicultural ideas, and says that foreigners can only live in the country if they adapt to Czech values (iDNES.cz, 2025).

When SPD was forming, Europe was facing a migration crisis. Even though the Czech Republic was not a main destination for refugees from the Middle East and Africa, the issue was heavily covered in the media and linked to domestic politics. Most Czechs saw migrants negatively, with nearly 90% viewing refugees as a threat (Krotký, 2019). SPD became the main party promoting anti-immigration messages, which increased polarization in society and influenced other parties' views (Krotký, 2019).

In the 2017 elections, SPD won 22 seats, showing it had become a major party that actively focuses on migration issues. The party often brings xenophobic or racist behavior and false information into public debates (Škraňková, 2025), and it has faced multiple accusations of incitement to hatred in the past (ČTK, 2025), (Štěpánek & Hněvkovská, 2025), (Svorník, 2025).

At the same time, the situation for Ukrainian migrants was changing. Before 2014, Ukrainians were mainly seen as economic workers who could easily integrate and helped the Czech economy. After Russia annexed Crimea, their numbers grew from 110,000 to over 130,000 between 2016 and 2018, and they also made up a significant part of asylum seekers. Politically and in the media, Ukrainians were not seen as a threat (O'Brien, 2024).

A big change came after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. In just a few months, the Czech Republic accepted over 390,000 Ukrainian refugees, making it the EU country with the most Ukrainian asylum seekers per capita. At that time, politicians and media mostly presented Ukrainians positively, as Slavic brothers with Christian roots who could integrate. However, this solidarity was not universal: Ukrainian Roma, in particular, were seen very critically and called "unadaptable migrants" by some, including the SPD (O'Brien, 2024).

Throughout 2022, the overall discussion was still mostly empathetic, although people started to feel refugee and war fatigue. From 2023 onwards, the debate grew stronger, especially after media reports of violent incidents involving some Ukrainians. SPD began to question their refugee status, calling them economic migrants and demanding that they return to Ukraine.

Still, the negative rhetoric against Ukrainians never became as intense as the anti-Islamic discourse during the 2015 migration crisis (O'Brien, 2024).

The SPD was entering the 2025 elections stronger because of its cooperation with the Svobodní Party, Trikolora, and the PRO movement. It had support just under 14% and a stable position as the main party for protest votes (STEM, 2025). These parties chose to work together on the same issues with the strongest player, the SPD, which allowed them to avoid the 11% threshold required

for coalitions of more than three parties or movements (Chromý & Doležal, 2025).

Migration remains one of the main issues for two of the parties in particular, the SPD and PRO. These positions have not weakened over time. On the contrary, in the run-up to the elections, these parties have been the most vocal in the Czech political scene about migration and the arrival of Ukrainians. They present it as a threat to the country's security, economy, and culture. In their messages, they often accuse Ukrainians and Ukraine of corruption, crime, poor integration, and abusing social benefits. This kind of rhetoric has become a central part of their election campaigns. It will be examined in more detail through a critical discourse analysis of their Facebook posts below.

DATA

This study focuses exclusively on official posts by selected Czech political parties on social media concerning Ukrainian refugees. Posts about other groups of migrants for example, from the Middle East or Africa were deliberately excluded in order to maintain thematic and analytical accuracy.

The data set consists of text posts published on the official Facebook pages of the analyzed parties. Facebook was chosen because, according to available research, it is the main communication channel for these entities. This is where the majority of their supporters are concentrated and where they achieve the highest level of interaction and support (Rožánek, 2025).

The analyzed posts were published during the pre-election campaign period. A total of 5–10 posts per party were selected to capture key patterns in their anti-migration discourse.

For each party, posts focusing on Ukrainian refugees were analyzed, supplemented by three selected visual materials related to Ukraine or Ukrainians. These visual materials were chosen because they were shared simultaneously across the cooperating parties during the campaign. They illustrate different types of blaming and discursive tactics directed at Ukrainians. The selection aimed to ensure variation across categories, allowing readers to see the range of approaches through which these actors attempt to weaken public support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.

In the current elections, the SPD movement is running in a partnership with several smaller parties that would probably not exceed the five percent threshold required to enter the Chamber of Deputies on their own. These smaller entities, which individually appeal to approximately 2–3% of voters, share similar ideological and value positions with the SPD.

METHODOLOGY

The research uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on Norman Fairclough's three-level model ((Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). This approach allows discourse to be examined on three interconnected levels: (1) at the text level, where linguistic structure, vocabulary, and rhetorical devices are analyzed; (2) at the level of discursive practice, which focuses on the creation, dissemination, and reception of texts; and (3) at the level of social practice, where discourse is placed in a broader social, political, and ideological context (Janks, 1997) (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

At the level of social practice, the analysis focuses in particular on the links between the newly formed SPD-led partnership and right-wing populist discourse and movements in Europe. It also takes into account the political context of the pre-election period and, last but not least, the

attitudes of the Czech public towards Ukrainian refugees, which are exploited and framed by political actors to strengthen their electoral support.

OVERVIEW OF SELECTED FACEBOOK POSTS

This section presents the main Facebook posts published by the selected political parties that were included in the analysis. Additional posts and related content used for analysis are listed in the first reference section.

The posts were first grouped into categories, such as portraying Ukrainians as violent, as a threat, as taking jobs and money from Czech citizens, or as “stealing” education opportunities and other resources. The examples included here were selected to demonstrate the full variety of these discursive strategies. One particularly long post by Tomio Okamura was included because he often published extended posts that combine many elements of anti- Ukrainian discourse at once. Presenting these longer examples allows readers to see the full range of strategies in a few selected posts.

Examples of posts by Tomio Okamura – SPD:

“Crime among immigrants in the Czech Republic is on the rise, including among Ukrainians. At the same time, due to the pro-immigration policy of Fiala’s government and Interior Minister Rakušan from STAN, the number of innocent Czech victims is also increasing. We can see where the behavior of immigrants is heading in Germany. There, Arab and Muslim immigrants commit about ten times more violent crimes than German citizens. According to statistics, there are 79 knife attacks in Germany every day. And we know that immigrants from Germany or Ukraine can move freely between European countries thanks to Schengen. So, in our opinion, Czech citizens should be protected. And foreigners should never be allowed to enter our country again after serving their sentences.

The SPD also disagrees with Ukraine’s accession to the EU and NATO for several reasons. We do not want our country and other EU and NATO member states to be drawn into a conflict with Russia. As is well known, Ukraine is rife with corruption and widespread crime, and we do not want these practices to spread further to our country. And war-torn Ukraine would be entitled to financial aid after joining, which we would also have to pay for. We reject all of this!

We will only grant these permits to Ukrainian citizens who can prove that they are working in a legal, insured job that cannot currently be filled by a Czech citizen. We will terminate the residence permits of all other Ukrainians in the Czech Republic, as well as their social benefits. For us, Czech citizens and their legitimate interests come first.

There are already too many of them here, and coexisting with them often causes problems for Czech citizens. We do not agree that they should receive services free of charge that Czech citizens are entitled to. We do not agree that they should drain our money through benefits. And as I mentioned, crime committed by Ukrainians in our country is also on the rise. Unfortunately, Fiala’s government gives preference to Ukrainians over Czech citizens. We disagree with them receiving services free of charge that Czech citizens are entitled to. We disagree with them draining our money through benefits.

For example, disabled immigrants from Ukraine automatically receive a care allowance from our money at the level of dependency grade 2! So a Czech disabled person in the first degree receives 880 crowns a month, but a Ukrainian starts at five thousand! And now the new Minister

of Labor, Marian Jurečka (SPOLU), wants to push through a measure allowing Ukrainian women to receive parental benefits. Meanwhile, Fiala's government has robbed Czech families of their money. Back in February 2024, Jurečka was already talking about Ukrainians receiving Czech social benefits. So Fiala's government is taking from Czech families, but wants to give to Ukrainian ones? That's crazy. For the SPD, Czech citizens and Czech families come first!" (Tomio Okamura, 2025a)

"Crime committed by Ukrainians in the Czech Republic is rising sharply due to the pro-immigration policies of Fiala's government and Interior Minister Rakušan. For example, yesterday in Pilsen, shortly before half past two in the morning, a municipal police patrol was dispatched to another report of a disturbance of the peace. An intoxicated 18-year-old Ukrainian man made a well-known Hitler-style gesture with his left hand during the check and began giving the officers the Nazi salute with his right hand. What does he think he's doing here?

If the SPD is in government after the elections, we will push through a "one and done" law so that all foreigners who commit a crime or offense in the Czech Republic will automatically have their residence permits revoked. At the same time, we will review all residence permits for Ukrainians in the Czech Republic so that only those who work in insured jobs for which there are demonstrably no Czech citizens available will remain. We will terminate the residence permits of all others and stop paying benefits to all foreigners." (Tomio Okamura, 2025b)

"What I said earlier still applies. The SPD is pushing for Ukrainian "refugees" to return home. There are already too many Ukrainians here. At present, they are essentially just economic migrants." (Tomio Okamura, 2025c)

Examples of posts by Trikolora:

"We are now making the same mistake with Ukrainians that the Germans made with Turks and Syrians, the French with Algerians, and the Belgians with Moroccans. Nothing good has ever come of such mixing." (Petr Štěpánek, 2025)

"Yes, there are, of course, people who engage in social tourism and abuse our system, but there are also people who have been involved in corrupt practices directly in Ukraine." (Zuzana Majerová, 2025)

Examples of posts by PRO:

"This case is further proof that our proposed legislative amendment, supported not only by us in PRO but also by all our partners in SPD, Trikolora, and Svobodní, which would introduce automatic deportation for foreigners who commit intentional crimes on our territory, must be adopted as soon as possible after the September elections.

A foreigner who does not appreciate the fact that we have allowed him to live and work (or, very often, receive benefits) in the Czech Republic must be expelled from our country without further ado." (Jindřich Rajch, 2025)

Examples of posts by Svobodní:

"The abuse of social benefits by Ukrainians is an issue that concerns people, at least those we met on the streets, and we definitely want to address it immediately after the elections. Their contribution to the economy could be much higher if we stopped their benefits, subsidies, and other privileges in time." (Libor Vondráček, 2025)

The text level

The texts and images use certain words and expressions to portray Ukrainians as a threat and the government as the culprit. For context, the current government, led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala, is a center-right coalition that has generally supported Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine since the start of the war. It is often targeted by far-right parties as demonstrated below.

Evaluative words such as "rapidly growing," "widespread crime," and "unadaptable foreigners" create the impression that the situation is getting worse. Expressions such as "mafia" or "drunk Ukrainian" exaggerate individual cases and link the arrival of migrants with crime or extremism. General labels such as "Ukrainians" or "foreigners" blur the differences between people and give the impression that everyone is to blame.

Words such as "so-called refugees" or slogans such as "Czechs first" are repeated and reinforce certain opinions. Sentences often pit groups against each other "Czechs vs. Ukrainians" and use expressions that make the proposed solutions seem obvious, not political ("they should be deported"). References to the past, such as "the mistake of the Germans with the Turks", reinforce fears of a diverse society.

Emotional expressions such as "this is crazy" or "I can't understand it" draw readers into feelings of anger and distrust towards the state. Scare tactics, moralizing ("once and for all!"), and irony ("alleged refugees," "surprise, surprise") are also used to question the legitimacy of migrants and their requests for protection.

The principle of division is also common. Czechs are portrayed as decent and disadvantaged, Ukrainians as dangerous and privileged. The government is portrayed as favoring foreigners ("Fiala's government favors Ukrainians"), creating an impression of betrayal and an "internal enemy."

The texts often use numbers and statistics for example, "79 knife attacks a day" or "Czechs have 880 crowns, Ukrainians 5,000" without explaining the context. Such figures appear credible, but are intended to evoke a sense of injustice and overload. Examples from schools ("Ukrainian children are overtaking Czech children") reinforce the impression that Czechs are suffering at the expense of refugees.

Individual cases, such as "Ukrainian threw a bottle of flammable liquid" or "18-year-old Ukrainian gave a Nazi salute", are presented as proof that "all Ukrainians are the same." The texts also link local issues (schools, benefits) to broader stories about corruption in Ukraine or "social tourism", thereby reinforcing the negative image.

There are also references to authorities politicians, surveys, or the media ("Novinky") to lend weight to the claims. Statements by political opponents are sometimes twisted to make them look like insults ("Ukrainians behave more politely than Czechs"), reinforcing the "us versus them" divide. Sarcastic remarks such as "Fiala is the protector of Ukrainians" combine irony with the feeling that the elites have betrayed their own nation.

SPD visual materials play a major role in this debate. The first image shows a woman with a Ukrainian flag and the caption "51% of Czech citizens perceive Ukrainian 'refugees' as a threat." The SPD is using public opinion polls to confirm that fear of Ukrainians is justified. The quotation marks around the word "refugees" suggest doubt about whether they are really refugees, thereby undermining their credibility. The whole campaign material relies on emotions specifically fear and presents the majority opinion as proof of the truth. At the bottom, the slogan "We advocate for the return of Ukrainian 'refugees' home" clearly expresses the SPD's political stance. This text links the "problem" with a simple solution and reinforces the impression that

there is an easy and quick way out of the situation.



Image 1 (Tomio Okamura, 2025g)

The second image shows Prime Minister Petra Fiala with the Ukrainian flag on his face and the caption "Fiala's government favors Ukrainians...". This visual creates a sense of division between "us" (Czechs) and "them" (Ukrainians). Fiala and his government are portrayed as weak and dishonest, caring more about foreigners than their own citizens. The word "prioritizes" carries a sense of condemnation and suggests that the government is acting unfairly. At the bottom is another slogan: "We advocate the deportation of criminal foreigners and a review of the residence status of Ukrainians." This text translates criticism of the government into a specific policy proposal. The image combines strong emotions with a seemingly logical solution, reinforcing the sense of threat and promoting resistance to immigration.



Image 2 (Tomio Okamura, 2025h)

The third image depicts a car accident with the caption "Ukrainian who crashed into a house...". In this way, one negative act by one person is generalized to all Ukrainians. The language used refers to Ukrainians as "unadaptable foreigners", reinforcing the idea that they are a problem. The text creates the impression that Ukrainians often break the law and that the state is unable to respond. According to the SPD, the government does not deport such people. At the bottom, the familiar slogan "We advocate the deportation of unadaptable foreigners" appears again, linking a specific case to the SPD's political program. This turns a single incident into general evidence that the entire group is dangerous. At the same time, a simple "solution" is offered, deportation.

This approach reinforces the division between Czechs and Ukrainians and supports the idea that Ukrainians do not belong in Czech society.



Image 3 (Tomio Okamura, 2025j)

The level of discursive practice

The second part of the analysis focuses on how the texts are created, who creates them, and how they affect the audience. Texts about crime and benefits for Ukrainians in Czechia are mainly created by representatives of the far right, primarily Tomio Okamura and the SPD movement. Their goal is not only to gain voter support, but also to undermine confidence in the government and state institutions, which are portrayed as incompetent and "too pro- Ukrainian." In this way, the SPD deepens divisions in society and strengthens resistance to the acceptance and support of refugees.

The texts combine various discourses that is, ways of talking about certain topics.

- The security discourse uses words such as "attacks," "threats," and "crime," associating Ukrainians with danger.
- Economic discourse emphasizes that Ukrainians are "taking benefits" or "depleting resources."
- National discourse creates the impression of rivalry between "Czechs" and "Ukrainians."
- The political discourse of the opposition is reflected in statements such as "Fiala's government is failing" or "it gives more to foreigners than to its own people."

These levels combine into one powerful narrative that links economic dissatisfaction, national identity, and political criticism. The result is a text that is emotionally charged and evokes a sense of injustice and threat.

Intertextuality, i.e., references to other texts and sources, also plays an important role. The SPD uses statistics, media quotes (e.g., Novinky), or references to authorities to make the texts appear credible. At the same time, it relies on well-known phrases from the public sphere for example, "Germany is a warning," "Ukrainians have priority," or "Czechs are paying for it." These are not new ideas, but rather repetitions and modifications of existing fears, which helps the texts appear "objective," even though they are often distorted.

The texts are mainly spread on social networks, especially Facebook, through paid campaigns and sharing between users. The target group is people who do not trust the government, feel disadvantaged, or are dissatisfied with the economy. These are often older or less educated

voters, but the SPD is also trying to reach undecided voters between the SPD and ANO. Social media enables rapid dissemination and reinforces information bubbles that deepen divisions in society.

The reaction of readers is also important. These texts usually confirm their existing opinions for example, that the state cares more about foreigners than its own citizens. The meaning of the texts therefore arises not only from what they say, but also from the personal experiences and feelings of the audience. This further reinforces the negative image of Ukrainians and strengthens the division of society into "us" and "them."

The vocabulary is often emotional and moralizing for example, "anti-national government," "they stole our rights," "Ukrainians control the republic." These phrases are meant to provoke anger and a sense of urgency to act. It is often emphasized that Ukrainians "take jobs," "take advantage of our benefits," or "live off the budget to which they do not contribute." In this way, the SPD legitimizes its proposals to restrict residence and benefits as a "reasonable defense of Czech interests."

The visual part of the campaign reinforces these ideas:

- The first image uses numbers and statistics to appear credible and reinforce the sense of crisis.
- The second image links Ukrainians with the government and creates the impression that the government is protecting foreigners instead of Czechs.
- The third image criminalizes an individual and transfers his actions to the entire group.

All visuals have a common goal to simplify complex issues, evoke emotions, and offer a simple "solution": deportation, benefit cuts, or "return home."

Overall, the SPD's discourse creates an image of Ukrainians as dangerous foreigners and the government as weak and treacherous. In doing so, the SPD mobilizes fear, anger, and a sense of injustice, thereby strengthening its own position and reinforcing the division between "Czech citizens" and "the others."

The level of social practice

SPD posts on social media, including images and videos, do not arise on their own. They respond to the situation in society and politics. The SPD exploits moods that already exist among people mainly fears of war in Ukraine and the arrival of more than half a million Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic. These fears mainly concern the economy (inflation, pressure on the social system, healthcare, housing) and security.

The SPD thus uses similar strategies to other right-wing populist parties in Europe for example, the AfD in Germany, the Rassemblement National in France, Fidesz in Hungary, and PiS in Poland. In all these countries, migration is presented as a threat to national identity, security, and the economy (Halikopoulou & Vlandas, 2022).

From a cultural perspective, this rhetoric has a normalizing effect it gradually makes rejection of Ukrainians a common and acceptable attitude. This weakens solidarity in society and reinforces the feeling that Czech identity is threatened by the presence of foreigners. The SPD thus exploits people's fears and dissatisfaction and transforms them into political support.

On social media, the party plays on emotions, using strong slogans and striking images. It offers simple solutions (such as deportation or residence reviews) instead of complex systemic

measures. This reinforces the division between "us" (the Czech people) and "them" (the government, foreigners, elites). The SPD's social media allows it to speak directly to voters, without censorship or control. In the Czech Republic, there is currently no effective oversight of such statements that attack certain groups of people.

According to a survey by the Public Opinion Research Center from the fall of 2024 (Kyselá, 2025), Czechs' interest in the situation of Ukrainian refugees is declining only about 29% of people are interested. The majority (64%) support only a temporary stay for Ukrainians with a return home, and 23% would not accept them at all. More than half of those surveyed (56%) consider the presence of Ukrainian refugees to be a problem for the whole country (Kyselá, 2025).

Differences in attitudes are linked to education and social situation. People with secondary education without a high school diploma, those who rate their standard of living as poor, and those dissatisfied with politics tend to be more skeptical. It is these people who often vote for the SPD or parties close to it.

The SPD thus exploits issues that already resonate with people, but amplifies them. It does not just raise concerns, it offers direct but repressive solutions, thereby increasing frustration and its own support. The relationship between the SPD and the public is thus two-way: the party responds to people's moods, but at the same time reinforces and consolidates them with its statements.

This approach is in line with a broader trend in Europe, where populist and nationalist parties use the issues of migration and identity to mobilize voters. The SPD thus ranks among the European far-right parties that build on fear, anger, and simple solutions.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the pre-election communication of the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) movement and affiliated right-wing parties on Facebook shows a clear pattern of populist discourse. In this discourse, Ukrainian refugees are often portrayed as a threat to Czech society and culture.

The SPD uses emotive language, exaggeration, metaphors, and divisions into groups of "us" (Czechs) and "them" (foreigners, the government). It attributes to Czech citizens the role of victims of government policy, which, according to the SPD, allegedly favors foreigners. Ukrainians, on the other hand, are portrayed as people who are unjustly drawing on state support. The SPD's posts repeatedly use strategies of generalization, exaggeration, and creating the impression that individual cases prove a broader problem. Textual and visual elements together support demands for stricter measures such as deportation, restrictions on social benefits, or residence permit checks. These proposals are presented as a defense of "ordinary Czechia." Such rhetoric, based on fear and moralizing, reinforces nationalist attitudes and undermines trust in migrants and political elites.

The findings show that the SPD's discourse corresponds to broader European trends among right-wing populist parties, which link migration to threats to national identity and sovereignty. In the Czech context, however, the SPD focuses primarily on Ukrainian refugees. After the Russian invasion in 2022, they were initially welcomed with empathy, but the SPD gradually began to label them as "economic migrants" or "unadaptable foreigners."

This shift reflects a change in the mood of part of Czech society, which is becoming increasingly distrustful of refugees. The SPD not only exploits these attitudes, but also actively reinforces them, thereby contributing to their spread and normalization. The discourse thus reflects existing social tensions and functions as a tool of political mobilization.

Lastly, the study shows that the SPD and its partners use communication in a targeted way. They seek to evoke strong emotions, deepen social divisions, and turn people's fears and frustrations into political support. In doing so, they create a polarized image of society that weakens solidarity with refugees and reinforces nationalist and anti-immigration attitudes in Czech political culture.

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Juliána Fekiačová

Framing the Susceptibility Window: Disinformation and the Image of the Migrant in the Visegrád Four. Cognitive Biases, Analytical Thinking and Resilience in Central Europe

IN A GIST

Migration is a prime target for disinformation in Central Europe. Cognitive biases open a "susceptibility window," while analytical thinking and media literacy help close it – though polarization can bypass even critical thinkers.

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this study, the concept of a 'susceptibility window' is used to describe the degree of individual or collective vulnerability to accepting disinformation. It is argued that the window may be broadened by cognitive biases (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Seiger et al. (2025, p.57), and polarization which lowers the positive effect of analytical thinking on disinformation resilience. Conversely, analytical reasoning and media literacy narrow the window. Disinformation actors strategically leverage salient issues such as migration where the 'window' is already opened and attempt to broaden it further through framing, polarization and/or selective truths.

The initial part of the article assesses migration as a subject of disinformation in V4 through the lens of cognitive biases such as loss aversion and framing effects (Vilagi & Babos, 2025, p.452), aiming to understand the vulnerability of individual readers. For instance, Butcher and Neidhardt (2020, p.7) identified that disinformation agents specifically seek to exploit readers' fears and concerns "framing migration as a threat to health, wealth, and identity", directly exploiting the susceptibility window fostered through aforementioned cognitive mechanisms. As noted by Orsini et al. (2022, p.156) it is the securitization of migration directly contributing towards discrimination of racialized groups of migrants with "structural racism occurring within most European societies". While migrants being presented as a threat to society is not a recent phenomenon in the history of industrialized Europe (Lucassen, 2005), there is a need to factor in the contemporary environment of algorithm based emotionally charged online platforms which broadens the susceptibility window by amplifying division.

The information setting of social media combined with an increased degree of uncertainty facilitate an opportunity for agents of disinformation to disrupt social order by reinforcing distrust and hostility towards outside groups (Humprecht et al., 2023, pp.1343). Szakács and Bognár (2021, p.8) align with this view in that the employment of politics of fear and 'othering' of immigrants indeed contribute to the erosion of social cohesion. Therefore, to account for how individual biases scale into collective polarization, part 2 employs a concept of Polarizing Moral Panics introduced by Zielińska & Pasamonik (2022), who examined the reaction to the increased migrant movement to Europe, mainly refugees coming from the Middle East and North African countries between 2015–2016.

The final part further focuses on factors contributing to societal resilience to disinformation, analyzing the cases of Visegrád Four. For this purpose, findings from regression cross-national analysis by Humprecht et al. (2023) and the content analysis by CEDMO (Stasiuk-Krajewska & Cuker, 2025) were utilized. Humprecht et al., (2023, pp.1354) outline “populist party support, alternative media use, and the use of and activity on social media” as the main factors contributing to lowered resilience. Drawing on cognitive biases and structural racism, the final part critically evaluates countermeasures against migration-related disinformation, with particular attention to approaches that prioritize ‘success stories’. Pre-existing cognitive biases shape how people evaluate even accurate information, disinformation subsequently leverages the susceptibility window by employment of specific legitimization and rhetorical structures within low-trust, polarized information settings to penetrate further.

Effective countermeasures must therefore account for cognitive processes and systemic reforms. The paper thus reframes “fighting disinformation” as a multi-level task rather than a messaging problem. Using the analysis of Butcher and Neidhardt (2020) a more complex strategic approach to ‘re-narrate’ the story of migration through the message, medium and audience is brought forward.

PRE-EXISTING COGNITIVE BIASES – HOW DO PEOPLE PERCEIVE MIGRATION?

Before analyzing migration in the context of disinformation campaigns, a clear definition of the latter is necessary. Despite issues to prove “intentionality”, disinformation has been conceptualized as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.” (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2020, p.4). Humprecht et al. (2023, p.1343) provides a similar yet more straightforward understanding – “false or inaccurate information that is intended to deceive”, having a strategic manipulative potential.

Today’s fast-evolving media environment however challenges these definitions. As highlighted by European Commission et al. (2025, p.49) “Even truthful information can be used to mislead, through selective emphasis or out-of-context reporting – tactics often seen in migration-related stories.”. To account for this definitional gap, this paper also considers communication strategies – such as ‘information gaslighting’ which is “a strategy designed to flood the information space with a mix of accurate and misleading content, creating uncertainty” – that are intentionally designed to “undermine the public’s ability to distinguish truth from lies, leading to ‘cognitive overload’ or ‘cognitive exhaustion’ (European Commission et al. 2025, p.49), hence triggering heuristic thinking. Accordingly, strategies that deliberately broaden the public’s susceptibility window to false or inaccurate information aiming to cause public harm or for profit are considered disinformation tactics.

Authors (Humprecht et al., 2023, p.1343) describe the effects of disinformation as both mobilizing and demobilizing, aiming to either delegitimize political opponents or cultivate support for ‘alternative’ perspectives and solutions. It “often aims at disrupting the established political order by arousing distrust and cynicism, it is meant to incite hostility and cultivate divisions between social groups”. Migration due to its salience (European Commission et al., 2025, p.19) is a key subject frequently utilized in disinformation campaigns perpetuating longstanding narratives (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2020, p.6; Neidhardt, 2025, p.9; Szakács & Bognár, 2021, p.6).

Recipients are subjected to strong (recurring) affective and cognitive appeal – migration is framed as a threat to issues of “deep symbolic meaning – such as religion and identity – or sensitive topics like jobs and security” (Neidhardt, 2025, p.9). This strategic manipulative potential of migration-related (dis)information can be better understood through psychological theories. Prospect theory explains how individuals evaluate potential outcomes in uncertain situations, assuming that values associated with end results are individual rather than uniform, which helps bring “rationality” into seemingly irrational choices (Vilagi and Babos, 2025, p.451). ‘Uncertain’ situations in this sense refer to salient issues that are “new, severe or if they touch on core values that the public holds dear” involving risk and/or uncertainty (European Commission et al. 2025, p.19). More critically, these processes of decision-making and judgments formation may be influenced by cognitive biases – such as loss aversion and framing effects.

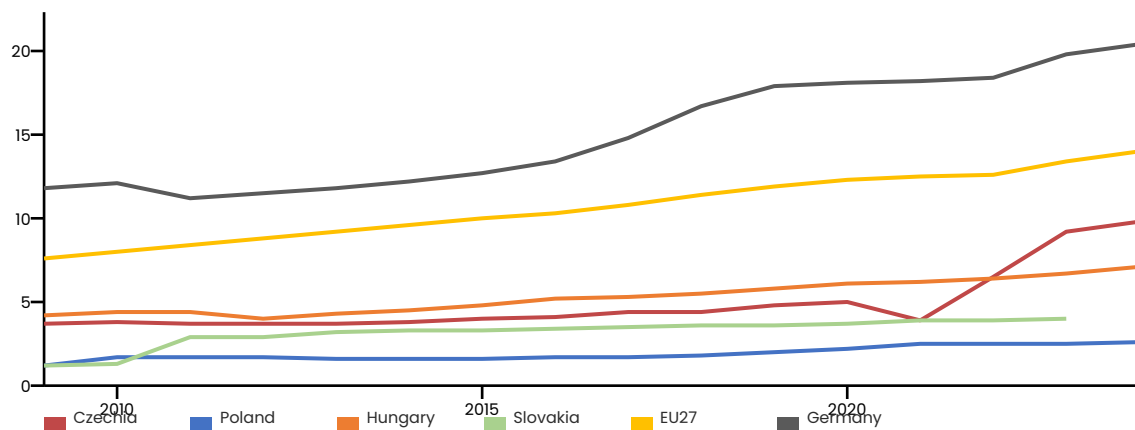
The loss aversion bias assumes that “the psychological impact of losses is far greater than that of gains, even if the value of the losses and gains is exactly the same” (Vilagi and Babos, 2025, p.452). Referring to prospect theory, the loss in this sense may be potential or perceived rather than objective, especially considering the symbolic nature of the issues targeted by disinformation about migration (identity and religion), where outcomes are intangible. The framing effect becomes particularly relevant with increased degree of uncertainty – the lack of direct personal experiences presumes increased reliance on “mediated experiences through influencers’ viewpoints” and, more importantly, political cues (Vilagi and Babos, 2025, p.453).

On the other hand, utility and rational choice theory assume rational judgments and decisions based on a stable set of uniform preferences and hierarchy known to each individual – maximizing utility through rational weighing of costs and benefits. This section explores how identified cognitive mechanisms may manifest in judgment formation through migration-related disinformation campaigns targeted at Visegrád countries.

Between 2009 and 2024 V4 countries consistently ranked at or near the bottom of EU, having one of (or) the lowest shares of foreign-born individuals (Figure 1) (Eurostat, 2025a; Eurostat, 2011, p.24). This is especially true for Slovakia and Poland which placed continuously within the bottom five throughout the entire period. Moreover, ageing populations and low fertility rates continue to be observed across all 4 nations (similar trend in much of the EU), with Poland being one of 7 EU members where fertility rate fell below 1.30, while simultaneously having (together with Slovakia) the biggest increase in share of the population aged 65 years in the last 10 years (Eurostat, 2025b; Eurostat, 2025c).^[1]

Poland’s Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) has found “Poland would need to attract almost two million immigrant workers over the next decade” to maintain its current working-age population to retirees ratio (Tilles, 2023). From a rational choice theory perspective, one could expect citizens of V4 countries to value the benefits of migration – such as mitigation of costs of ageing demographics and labour shortages (European Labour Authority, 2025, pp. 8, 44) – relative to the potential social costs, including concerns over identity, religion or security.

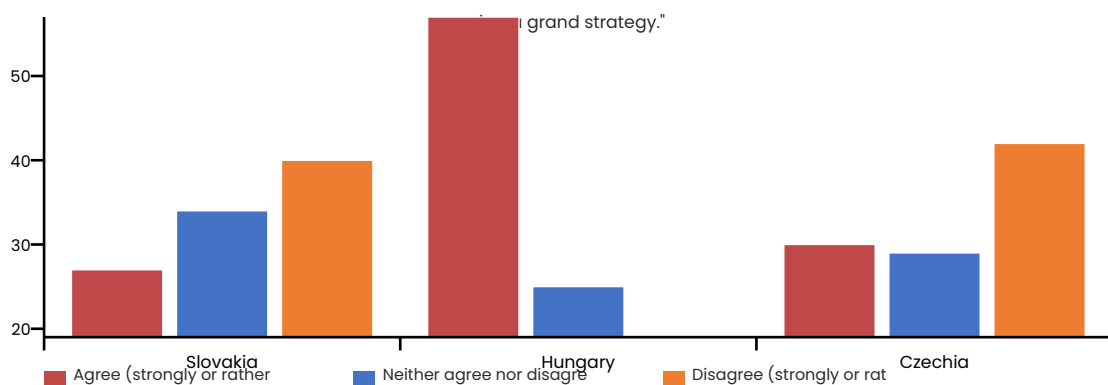
Figure 1: Share of foreign-born persons in the resident population (2009–2024)(%)



Sources: Eurostat, 2025a; Eurostat, 2011, p.24.

In other words, given the low fertility rates and low migrant stocks, utility theory would suggest immigration is a net benefit in this case. Aligned with the Vilagi's and Babos' (2025, p.452) assessment of the Slovak case, applied to whole V4, "concerns over EU-induced challenges in immigration and cultural identity (...) might [therefore] appear of limited relevance". However, European Digital Media Observatory (CEDMO, 2024) in their representative cross-national survey found the opposite – 30% of Czechs, 57% of Hungarians, and 27% of Slovaks endorse the conspiracy that "The native population in Europe is being replaced by immigrant population following a grand strategy" (Figure 2). This disinformation was embraced by the PM of Hungary – Viktor Orbán, and PM of Slovakia – Robert Fico, suggesting a framing effect. Polish society is similarly divided (Figure 3). As Zielińska & Pasamonik (2022, p.1551) demonstrate, migration became a polarizing issue after being placed at the core of the 2015 general election campaign, when the "mass exodus of refugees from the Middle East and North African countries in 2015 led to an unprecedented increase in migrant movement in the postwar history of Europe". This gap between rational expectation and actual attitudes suggests that cognitive biases, rather than utility calculations, may be driving perceptions.

Figure 2: "The native population in Europe is being replaced by immigrant population following a grand strategy."



Source: CEDMO, 2024.

A contrasting perspective – classical reasoning – however shifts the focus away from cognitive biases to a different cognitive mechanism – (the absence of) analytical thinking. According to

some scholars, a stronger predictor of susceptibility to disinformation is people's inability to think analytically rather than because of their values or pre-existing biases (European Commission et al., 2025, p.57).

"Studies accordingly indicate that individuals who score higher on tests of analytical thinking are better at distinguishing truth from falsehood, even when the information aligns with their existing beliefs." (European Commission et al., 2025, p.57)

This paper suggests an interplay of classical reasoning, and cognitive mechanisms. Cognitive biases alone don't determine an individual's decision-making but rather help us understand why salient issues – such as migration – have higher potential for the susceptibility window within which disinformation campaigns operate. Conversely, analytical thinking helps to shrink this window. Individuals with lower analytical thinking skills may rely more on heuristic thinking and hence form judgments based on cognitive and affective biases when evaluating outcomes, whereas individuals with higher analytical abilities and critical thinking can account for these mechanisms (Torreggiani, 2025, p.47). However, analytical thinking does not eliminate cognitive and affective biases or the susceptibility window in their entirety, it provides tools to recognize and (partially) counter them. Disinformation that induces partisan-identity reinforcement has the potential to bypass ones' analytical skills and increase its capacity to exploit the susceptibility window, especially through the high-paced environment of social media.

Analytical thinking abilities are therefore a strong predictor of resilience to disinformation, but cognitive biases and intuitive processes help us understand why disinformation can still bypass critical thinking (European Commission et al., 2025, p.58). This tension between the heuristic and analytical (classical) perspectives will be further examined in part 2. Lastly, to account for other possible predictors of disinformation vulnerability, Torreggiani (2025) critically notes that factors such as anti-elitism, institutional trust, and social norms are often not considered in the literature, whereas cognitive drivers are prioritized. However, his findings suggest that these latter three variables remain inconclusive predictors once cognitive mechanisms are controlled for (Torreggiani, 2025). Country-specific factors for V4 will be further examined in part 3.

This study primarily assesses prospect theory, framing effect and loss aversion to examine pre-existing cognitive biases and their impact on judgment formation when migration-related information is encountered. These are, however, part of a broader set of cognitive and affective mechanisms that scholars have linked to disinformation vulnerability, not an exhaustive list. Vilagi and Babos (2025, p.452) for instance further highlight the affective theory, which posits that "instinctual reactions, rather than rational calculations of benefits" may influence people's attitudes. European Commission et al. (2025, pp. 57–58) bring forward motivated reasoning, confirmation bias, affective polarisation, and cognitive exhaustion that reinforce the same vulnerability logic. Accounting for these pre-existing biases in understanding the factors that broaden the susceptibility window to disinformation in the V4 (e.g. Figure 2) helps clarify why certain countermeasures, such as success stories, may be insufficient and will therefore be critically examined in Part 3.

VULNERABILITY TO MIGRATION-RELATED DISINFORMATION AND THE SUSCEPTIBILITY WINDOW

In the context of resilience and the two competing perspectives dominating the literature, susceptibility to disinformation is a multilayered issue. Classical reasoning prompts the question of whether analytical and critical thinking skills are sufficient and, more critically, have the ability

to evolve and adapt fast enough to ‘overcome’ cognitive biases enhanced by the digital media environments’ design. By contrast, heuristic explanations that emphasise cognitive biases, may suggest ‘structural openness’ to exploitation, hence limiting the effectiveness of disinformation countermeasures. This section therefore examines the factors that influence societal resilience to disinformation, with a focus on the Visegrád Four countries.

Humprecht et al. (2023, p.1344) operationalized resilience as the “unwillingness to share, like, and comment on disinformation”. In a cross-national regression analysis, Humprecht et al. (2023, p.1354) demonstrate that “populist party support, alternative media use, and the use of and activity on social media” are consistent generalizable predictors of individuals’ resilience to disinformation across countries. Authors (Humprecht et al., 2023, p.1354) further found that other factors related to specific political and media environments analyzed (Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, the U.K. and the U.S.) play a significant role. Therefore, to account for structural differences of the V4 countries, part 3 complements Humprecht et al. (2023) generalizable findings with the content analysis by CEDMO (Stasiuk-Krajewska & Cuker, 2025).

Polarization, populism, and cognitive mechanisms

Figure 3. Competing visions of the social order: moral values present in anti- and pro-refugee narratives - Poland.

Anti-refugee narrative (nationalist)	Pro-refugee narrative (humanitarian)
National/exclusive community - Poland as an exclusive community – a community of origin, faith and culture (ethnic nation) - Ethnic homogeneity perceived as a value - Patriotic duty to defend one's homeland (from the invasion of barbarians, from terrorists) - Clash of civilizations and defense of the national, cultural and religious community (Poland, a bulwark of Christianity) - Protection of Poland's economic interest - Protection of Polish women - Sovereignty of homeland – freedom from the European Union's diktat Moral particularism - Responsibility for the closest, the safety of the closest (rational national egoism) - Family and homeland have priority over strangers; mercy on refugees can impoverish us - Patriotic duty to protect the homeland from the threat of refugee inflow	Civic/inclusive society idea - Poland as an inclusive community (civic nation) - Multiculturalism seen as a resource - Respect for the Other - Polish migrants have always been welcomed in exile - immigrants are in Poland's economic interest - EU membership obliges Moral universalism - Human solidarity and unselfish altruism - Christian mercy, solidarity with those in need, moral duty to help the weaker and poorer - Compassion and moral responsibility for others regardless of their origin.

Source: Pasamonik, B., (2017)

Figure 3. Competing visions of the social order: moral values present in anti- and pro-refugee narratives — Poland.
Source: Pasamonik, B., (2017)

Humprecht et al. (2023, p.1344) argues that the unwillingness to disseminate potentially harmful information on the collective level represents ‘the capacity of groups of people bound together in communities or nations to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges’. This aligns with their findings in which they outline “the extent of societal polarization and the amount of support for populism in a society” as one of the most robust predictors of vulnerability to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2023, p.1354). Interestingly, Torreggiani (2025) finds anti-elitism (understood as a sub-dimension of populism (Torreggiani, 2025, p.51) alone to be inconclusive once cognitive style (especially analytical thinking) is controlled for.

This suggests that the link between populism and disinformation susceptibility may be mediated by cognitive processing instead – populist electorates while endorsing anti-elitist views, may also rely less on analytical reasoning, thus broadening their susceptibility window. Further research is required to confirm whether differences in cognitive style (analytical thinking and

cognitive biases) systematically account for this effect. This part primarily focuses on the polarizing and divisive effects of migration-related narratives (which are often amplified by populist politicians), and are recurring concepts in the literature (Humprecht et al., 2023; Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, European Commission et al., 2025). It is argued that identity-based polarization of society lowers analytical thinking and therefore broadens the susceptibility window.^[2]

European Commission et al. (2025, p.18) identify three dominant narratives that appear in the media. The 'pro-migration' flow characterized by "solidarity, humanitarianism and/or economic gain"; the 'pragmatic' flow characterized by crisis and regulation, and/or migration as a joint problem for both migrants and the host societies; and the 'anti-migration' flow characterized by "migration portrayed as threat (economic, physical, cultural)" – all are problem focused (European Commission et al., 2025, p.16). Emergence of these divisions can be better understood through the concept of 'Polarizing Moral Panics' (PMPs) developed by Zielińska & Pasamonik (2022). Previously, classic moral panics "reaffirmed the normative contours of society and thus strengthened social cohesion." by reminding a society of what is right and what is wrong (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, p.1543). By contrast, PMPs account for the contemporary diversified information settings and audiences – especially digital media environments – and thus highlight a completely different outcome, in which social morality consensus is disturbed rather than reinforced (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, p.1547).

Authors (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, p.1548) posit that PMPs usually start with "a media-amplified social reaction to an apparent threat to the social order". A part of society whose values may be threatened (moral panic Activators) reacts, hence igniting a moral panic engine (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, p.1548). The subsequent reaction of a different part of the public (Opponents), is to take a counter position to that of Activators, and present contrasting narratives and attitudes to the issue (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, p.1548). As the process of PMPs develops further, the two moral communities consolidate, each represented by "different moral entrepreneurs and experts" (Figure 3) (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, p.1548). Crucially, Zielińska & Pasamonik (2022, p.1548) note that PMPs not only diagnose existing moral cleavages, but also reinforce them, as both 'tribes' deploy PMP mechanisms to strengthen their arguments and identities.

Such mutually reinforcing process of identity consolidation brings an important insight to the previously discussed tension between classical reasoning (analytical thinking) and cognitive biases in their roles as determinants of disinformation susceptibility. Scholars agree that fostering divisions through the culture of fear is one of the most prominent characteristics of neoliberal western societies (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, p.1547). Even individuals who score higher on tests of analytical thinking may lean back on cognitive biases when polarization induces partisan-identity formation. As Barron, Becker & Huck (2025, p.15) demonstrate, factual beliefs often align with pre-existing values through processes of motivated reasoning, along the lines of political identity. This bias takes place on both sides of the political spectrum – when values are made salient, individuals shift their beliefs to align them with the average party beliefs overriding analytical processing (Barron, Becker & Huck, 2025, p.15).

This aligns with the concept of 'Cultural-Identity-Protective Risk Perception' – a marriage of the cultural theory of risk and identity-protective cognition put forward by Kahan et al. (2007). Cultural theory of risk asserts that cultural worldviews dictate risk perception of individuals, who selectively credit or dismiss claims of perceived societal danger based on whether the potential

hazard conforms to or threatens their preferred form of social organization. They (Kahan et al., 2007) operationalize the Grid-Group Typology that outlines four such cultural orientations – hierarchist, egalitarian, individualist, and communitarian. Whereas identity-protective cognition emphasizes group membership, to which individual well-being is bound, as the primary determinant in how “people process information about nearly all categories of stimuli in the social world” (Kahan et al., 2007, p.6). Authors (Kahan et al., 2007, p.6) maintain that people are more likely to adopt and conversely reject information depending on its origin from either inside the group or outsiders regardless of its accuracy. Moreover, experimental studies show that even those using systematic, deliberate reasoning to a high degree are nevertheless often motivated by an “unself-conscious desire” to affirm group beliefs (Kahan et al., 2007, pp. 6–7).

Subsequently, the notion that susceptibility to “alternative facts” or disinformation is confined to right-wing populism is challenged (Barron, Becker & Huck, 2025, p.15). Rather polarization itself seems to decrease (or cancel out) analytical reasoning and broaden the susceptibility window. Instead of inaccurate or false information, selective, but accurate truths may be deployed by agents of disinformation designed to bypass one's analytical reasoning, aiming to reinforce tribal divisions between the two communities to further broaden their susceptibility window rather than “spread a false claim” (to which individual with analytical reasoning may be more immune). Zielińska & Pasamonik (2022, p.1549) assert that the winner of such culture wars (if there is any) “gains a temporary feeling of superiority over their moral vision of society”. Accordingly, measures to counter disinformation should not be limited to correcting false claims but should also address systemic polarization and media-induced PMPs, which constitutes a significant vulnerability factor.

Strengthening resilience

As a salient divisive topic, migration requires a multi-layered approach that goes beyond it being a mere “messaging issue”. Cognitive mechanisms – such as heuristic thinking, subsequently cognitive biases, level of analytical thinking and motivated reasoning – seem to be the most robust determinants for disinformation resilience once factored in (Torreggiani, 2025). This is an important finding when accounting for factors that broaden the susceptibility window (e.g., populism, disinformation), as often these are not isolated issues, but rather symptoms of one's cognitive style. The goal is not to change peoples' values, but to preemptively give them appropriate tools to narrow their susceptibility window, particularly, through enhancement of their analytical thinking. Additionally, true insecurities need to be addressed so the artificial link (scapegoating) to migration might be broken (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2020, p.28). These include the broad social changes in Western countries induced by the neo-liberal capitalist culture, “resulting in the growing instability of employment, changes in work patterns (flexible hours) and part-time jobs, the declining power of trade unions and diminishing social welfare” (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022, p.1547).

This paper argued that polarization through PMPs decreases analytical thinking by inducing partisan-identity formation that is mutually reinforced by both ‘tribes’, drawing on Zielińska & Pasamonik (2022) and Barron, Becker & Huck (2025). This creates an environment in which individuals' analytical reasoning may be overridden, reliance on cognitive biases and heuristics increases, and the susceptibility window broadens (Barron, Becker & Huck, 2025). The goal of this article is not to argue against strong stances on issues that one finds important to ‘prevent polarization’. It advocates for equipping citizens with higher analytical and critical thinking skills by providing tools to recognize arguments that are identity weapons designed to polarize, rather

than value-based or evidence-based reasoning.

In other words, teaching people how to defend values without fuelling the “us vs. them” polarization (no mirror-image tribalism). This may for example mean recognizing and avoiding narratives that demonize the other moral community (which only broadens the susceptibility window of both), identifying it as a threat to the whole society. Humprecht et al. (2023, p.1344) highlights that the unwillingness to disseminate potentially harmful information on the collective level represents ‘the capacity of groups of people bound together in communities or nations to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges’. “Harmful information” in this sense is therefore not only disinformation, but also information that unnecessarily fuels divisions (including the left vs. right divisions). Kahan et al. (2007, p.35) assess that it would be a profound mistake to assume that “simple ascertainment and dissemination of empirical truth will lead to public enlightenment on various societal and personal risks”. They argue that identity-protective cognition induces people to filter out information depending on its conformity to their established cultural orientations. Similar logic could be applied to strategies of success stories.

Acknowledging the individual values assigned to outcomes – such as conservation & self-enhancement for people who perceive migration as a threat; and self-transcendence or openness to change reflecting humanitarian and economic-benefit narratives – is also crucial (European Commission et al., 2025, p.16). This reflects why solutions revolving solely around “success stories” (e.g. GLOBSEC, 2024, p.9) while well-intentioned are misplaced as they don’t sufficiently account for cognitive biases and divisive effect of PMPs (Figure 3). Success stories might land with one moral community, but rather than changing perception of the other, it might broaden the division further (Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022). Kahan et al. (2007, p.36) put forward experimental work that has shown that “individuals who are either personally affirmed or exposed to group-affirming stimuli thereafter display less bias when processing information that is contrary to beliefs dominantly held by their peers”. Crucially, a concept of belief echoes introduced by Thorson (2016) provides another essential insight in that “exposure to negative political information [mis- or dis-information] continues to shape attitudes even after the information has been effectively discredited”. Instead, a more complex strategic approach to ‘re-narrate’ the story of migration through the message, medium and audience is advised (see the analysis of Butcher and Neidhardt, 2020).

Humprecht et al. (2023, p.1354) findings imply that combating disinformation should involve broader structural measures tailored to each country. In the context of Poland, Czechia and Slovakia, CEDMO (Stasiuk-Krajewska, Cuker, & Džamporová, 2025, p.14) found that contrary to the expectation, increased emotionality of the message decreases its effectiveness as recipients are more likely to engage analytically and detect the manipulative intention. Neutral and impersonal messages are the most persuasive since they closely resemble professional news items (Stasiuk-Krajewska, Cuker, & Džamporová, 2025, p.14). Results show that Polish society recognizes the content as manipulation to a higher degree than Czech and Slovak society (Stasiuk-Krajewska, Cuker, & Džamporová, 2025, p.14).

The content analysis (Stasiuk-Krajewska, & Cuker, 2025) further highlights three strategies that increase appeal of disinformation – framing, rhetoric, and legitimization. Framing portrays migrants as threats to security, health, or cultural identity, trying to exploit the susceptibility window by appealing to cognitive biases such as loss aversion. Rhetorical devices such as exaggeration, simplification, or emotional appeal reinforce these frames, resonating with audiences whose susceptibility window was already broadened by the uncertainty. Finally,

drawing on van Leeuwen's theory of legitimation, disinformation often anchors its claims in selective truths. These country-specific findings align with the aforementioned aims of disinformation agents to target cognitive processing of recipients, leverage systemic insecurities and broaden the susceptibility window of its targets.^[3]

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary environment of algorithm-driven emotionally charged online platforms that reinforce echo-chambers, disinformation is recognized not as a mere collection of falsehoods, but rather as a manipulative tool deployed to achieve predefined political, monetary, or other strategic goals with both mobilizing and de-mobilizing effects (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2020; European Commission et al. 2025; Humprecht et al., 2023). It functions through intentional exploitation of the 'susceptibility window', both on individual and collective levels, in effort to bypass one's analytical thinking by activating various subconscious cognitive biases. The concept of 'susceptibility window' does not presuppose one's lack of rationality, instead it is argued that agents of disinformation leverage cognitive exhaustion and 'Cultural-Identity-Protective Risk Perception' to force a retreat from deliberate analysis into tribal heuristics and motivated systematic reasoning (Kahan et al., 2007; Zielińska & Pasamonik, 2022). Therefore, even individuals who score higher on tests of analytical thinking may lean back on cognitive biases when polarization induces partisan-identity formation.

Migration due to its salience is a key subject frequently utilized in disinformation campaigns perpetuating longstanding narratives (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2020, p.6; Neidhardt, 2025, p.9; Szakács & Bognár, 2021, p.6). Common themes include framing migrants as a threat to security, health, or cultural identity (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2020; Stasiuk-Krajewska, & Cuker, 2025). The paper analyzed the concept of susceptibility window to migration-related disinformation in the context of V4 countries. Between 2009 and 2024 they have consistently ranked at or near the bottom of EU, having the lowest shares of foreign-born individuals (Eurostat, 2025a; Eurostat, 2011, p.24). Moreover ageing populations and low fertility rates continue to be observed across all 4 nations (Eurostat, 2025b; Eurostat, 2025c). Utility and rational choice theories presuppose decision making and judgment formation based on rational weighing of costs and benefits, implying that fears over 'migration induced threats to culture, identity and safety' should be of limited influence. Yet European Digital Media Observatory (CEDMO, 2024) in their representative cross-national survey found the opposite – 30% of Czechs, 57% of Hungarians, and 27% of Slovaks endorse the conspiracy that "The native population in Europe is being replaced by immigrant population following a grand strategy". The lack of direct personal experiences in these cases demonstrate increased reliance on "mediated experiences through influencers' viewpoints" and political cues (Vilagi and Babos, 2025, p.453).

As a salient divisive topic, migration requires a multi-layered approach that goes beyond it being a mere 'messaging issue'. Kahan et al. (2007, p.35) assess that it would be a profound mistake to assume that "simple ascertainment and dissemination of empirical truth will lead to public enlightenment on various societal and personal risks". Efforts to counter migration-related disinformation in the context of a high-paced media environment should therefore aim to put forward strategies that defend values without fuelling the "us vs. them" polarization and fundamentally account for cognitive biases and Cultural-Identity-Protective Risk Perception. For instance, Kahan et al. (2007, p.36) emphasizes that experimental work has shown that "individuals who are either personally affirmed or exposed to group-affirming stimuli thereafter

display less bias when processing information that is contrary to beliefs dominantly held by their peers”.

Finally, Humprecht et al. (2023, p.1344) outline among others “the amount of support for populism in a society” as one of the most robust predictors of vulnerability to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2023, p.1354). However, Torreggiani (2025) finds anti-elitism alone to be inconclusive once cognitive style is controlled for. Further research is required to confirm whether differences in cognitive style systematically account for the correlation between populism and susceptibility to disinformation.

NOTES

1. Based on the author's own calculations using Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2025; Fekiačová, 2025).
2. Note: Poland, Slovakia, Sweden and Liechtenstein did not include refugees from Ukraine in the temporary protection scheme. Source: Eurostat, 2025a; Eurostat, 2011, p.24.
3. For a full comparative overview of studies on migration framing in the media and the polarisation of migration narratives see Table 1 in European Commission et al. (2025, p.18).
4. See Stasiuk-Krajewska, K. & Cuker, I.R. (2025) for comprehensive data across CZ, SK & PL.

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Lazar Petrović

The Influence of Populist Governments in Serbia on the Creation of Negative Media Narratives About Migrants And Migration Processes

IN A GIST

Populist governments in Serbia have systematically cultivated negative media narratives about migrants, instrumentalizing migration for domestic political gain while aligning with broader illiberal tendencies in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Migration represents one of the most important social, political, and security issues of the modern era. Due to its geographic location on the so-called Balkan migration route, Serbia has for years been one of the key transit points for migrants and refugees trying to reach European Union countries. This specific situation has led to migration issues becoming a central topic of political debates, media narratives, and public opinion in Serbia.

The subject of this paper is the analysis of the ways in which populist politics in Serbia, with the significant role of the media, shapes negative narratives about migrants and migration processes. Special focus will be placed on the consequences of such narratives – the rise of xenophobia, the social exclusion of migrants, and the creation of policies that primarily view migration as a security issue rather than a potential for development.

The aim of the paper is to provide insight into the connection between political rhetoric, media reporting, and public discourse on migrants in Serbia. Based on the analysis of existing sources, the paper seeks to show how negative narratives influence citizens' perceptions and the shaping of state policies, but also to propose possible guidelines for creating a more inclusive and balanced approach to migration.

The methodological framework of this paper is based on the analysis of secondary sources. Reports from international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and Amnesty International (AI) have been used, providing data and analyses on the situation of migrants and their rights in Serbia. In addition, the paper uses publications from domestic non-governmental organizations dealing with human rights and migration, as well as relevant academic and expert works.

Special emphasis is placed on the analysis of media reports and public appearances by political leaders in Serbia, as well as the role of social media in spreading anti-migrant attitudes. Through the combination of these sources, the aim is to provide a comprehensive picture of the connection between politics, media, and public opinion in the formation of negative narratives about migrants.

MIGRATIONS IN SERBIA – CONTEXT

Serbia is located on one of the most important migration routes in Europe, known as the "Balkan route." Due to its geopolitical position, between the Middle East, Asia, and the European Union, it

has since 2015 become a significant transit country for thousands of migrants and refugees attempting to reach Western Europe. The majority of migrants come from war-torn or unstable countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran, as well as from certain African nations. Serbia is not the final destination for most migrants, but primarily a territory they pass through in an attempt to enter EU countries, particularly Hungary and Croatia (IOM, 2021).

During the 2015 migrant crisis, more than 800,000 people passed through Serbia, placing the country at the center of European and global attention (UNHCR, 2016). Although the number of migrants has decreased since the closing of borders and the introduction of restrictive European Union policies, Serbia has remained a key transit country. In recent years, the number of migrants staying on Serbian territory has ranged from several thousand to several tens of thousands annually, depending on the intensity of conflicts and changes at EU borders. According to the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, an average of 3,000 to 6,000 migrants reside monthly in reception and asylum centers, while many remain outside these facilities, relying on informal support or attempting illegal border crossings.

Migration flows in Serbia changed significantly after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, when the number of refugees passing through the region increased. Although the majority still consists of migrants from Asia and Africa, there is also a smaller number of people fleeing the conflict in Ukraine, which further complicates the situation and influences public perception of migration (Amnesty International, 2022).

All these circumstances have contributed to making migration one of the central social and political issues in Serbia. The country faces the challenge of balancing between the international obligations it has undertaken in the field of human rights and migration, the demands of the European Union within the process of European integration, and the pressure of the domestic public, which often perceives migrants as a threat to security and social stability. This context creates fertile ground for the spread of populist and negative narratives about migrants, which will be examined in more detail in the following sections of the paper.

POPULISM AND MIGRATION POLICY

Populism has become the dominant political pattern in contemporary Serbia, and one of the key elements of populist rhetoric is the use of migration issues to gain political support and mobilize public opinion. Populist leaders in Serbia often portray migration as a serious security and social threat, emphasizing dangers such as crime, violence, and cultural endangerment allegedly brought by the presence of migrants. This creates an image of migrants as the “other” and “undesirable,” allowing politicians to present themselves as protectors of the people and national security (Stojić, 2020).

In practice, Serbia’s migration policy oscillates between formal respect for international obligations and populist rhetoric aimed at the domestic political scene. On one hand, Serbia is a signatory to numerous international human rights agreements and, in cooperation with the European Union, develops migration management strategies. On the other hand, political leaders often use anti-migrant messages to calm citizens’ fears and gain political support. In public appearances, migrants are frequently associated with violent incidents, terrorism, or threats to local communities, even though research shows that such narratives are mostly unfounded (Amnesty International, 2022).

The influence of populist politics on the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards migrants is very pronounced. Public opinion research shows that a significant part of the population views migrants with distrust, and many perceive them as a threat to economic stability and social security (IOM, 2021). These attitudes are not spontaneously formed but are the result of years of media and political discourse dominated by a negative image of migrants. Populist leaders use this atmosphere of fear to justify restrictive policies and avoid responsibility for creating more inclusive solutions.

In this way, populism in Serbia not only shapes state policy towards migrants but also spreads a social context in which migrants become a symbol of problems and threats. Instead of recognizing migration as part of global processes that can bring economic and cultural benefits, populist rhetoric reduces it to a security challenge. This further complicates migrant integration and slows Serbia's progress toward European standards in human rights and migration policies.

MEDIA NARRATIVES ABOUT MIGRANTS

The media in Serbia play a key role in shaping the perception of migrants and migration processes. Traditional media, such as television, daily newspapers, and widely read portals, often portray migrants through sensationalist headlines and reports that emphasize incidents and conflicts. Migrants are frequently depicted as potential perpetrators of crime, violence, or as an economic burden on society. This creates an atmosphere of fear and distrust, which suits political elites inclined toward populist rhetoric (Bodrožić, 2020). In media content, especially tabloids, terms like "migration crisis" or "migration threat" are often used, further amplifying the negative tone and suggesting that the presence of migrants in Serbia poses a source of insecurity for citizens.

On the other hand, a smaller number of media outlets and independent portals strive to provide a more balanced picture, highlighting humanitarian aspects of migration and portraying the real-life stories of migrants. However, such content is often overshadowed in the public sphere by the more aggressive rhetoric of tabloids and media close to the authorities. Thus, the media portrayal of migrants in Serbia is predominantly negative, which strongly influences the formation of public opinion and the shaping of political attitudes.

Social networks represent an even more significant space for spreading negative narratives about migrants. They enable rapid and wide distribution of information, but also misinformation, often leading to the spread of inaccurate or completely fabricated stories about migrants. On platforms like Facebook and Twitter, numerous posts depict migrants as violent, aggressive, or as a direct threat to the local population. Such content often spreads through groups and pages with nationalist and anti-migrant views, and their virality increases feelings of fear and insecurity among citizens (HRW, 2021).

A particular problem on social networks is the lack of control over content, which allows the spread of hate speech and discriminatory messages. In the digital space, migrants are often portrayed through stereotypes, and such narratives further polarize the public sphere and hinder rational discussion about migration policies. Additionally, social media serve as a channel for spreading conspiracy theories that claim migration is not a result of wars and poverty but part of alleged "secret plans" for demographic change in Europe.

The combination of negative messages from traditional media and misinformation from social networks creates a strong framework through which Serbian citizens view migrants. This

framework rarely leaves room for understanding migration as a complex social process, instead reducing it to a security and political problem. This further entrenches a climate of distrust and rejection of migrants, making it more difficult to implement inclusive policies and integrate foreigners into society.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE NARRATIVES

Negative narratives about migrants in Serbia have far-reaching consequences, both for social relations and for the shaping of state policies. One of the most noticeable consequences is the rise of xenophobia and intolerance towards migrants. Citizens influenced by sensationalist media and populist political rhetoric increasingly perceive migrants as a security and cultural threat. Such attitudes result in the social exclusion of migrants, who face discrimination, verbal attacks, and even physical incidents in everyday life (Amnesty International, 2022). In some local communities, especially those near migrant centers, protests against the presence of migrants have been recorded, demonstrating how deeply negative narratives have become part of social reality.

Xenophobia and social exclusion further complicate the integration of migrants into Serbian society. Although most migrants view Serbia only as a transit country, some stay longer or express the intention to seek asylum. However, the hostile environment reduces their chances for inclusion and access to education, employment, and social services. This creates a vicious circle in which migrants remain isolated, and their marginalization is used as an argument for new anti-migrant policies.

Negative narratives also strongly influence public opinion. Research shows that the majority of Serbian citizens see migrants as a potential threat, while only a small portion view them as people in need of help and protection (IOM, 2021). This perception is not based on objective data but is the result of years of media and political shaping of public discourse. When citizens believe migration is solely a threat, they support restrictive measures and policies aligned with the populist agenda.

The impact of negative narratives is also evident in the creation and implementation of policies. Although Serbia formally respects international human rights conventions and cooperates with the European Union on migration issues, domestic policy often balances between international obligations and citizens' expectations. Under pressure from public opinion, authorities resort to measures aimed at "calming" the local population rather than providing long-term and sustainable solutions. Thus, negative narratives shape migration policy so that it becomes reactive and restrictive instead of proactive and inclusive.

All of the above shows that the consequences of negative narratives go beyond mere media reporting and become a factor that deeply affects social cohesion and political decision-making in Serbia.

RESPONSE OF INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC ACTORS

International and domestic organizations have attempted to respond to the negative narratives about migrants in Serbia, aiming to mitigate the consequences of populist rhetoric and media sensationalism. Their role is multifaceted – ranging from humanitarian aid and human rights protection to public education and advocacy for more inclusive policies.

International organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and Amnesty International (AI) regularly publish reports on the situation of migrants in Serbia, with a particular focus on the respect for human rights. IOM is a significant partner in implementing state programs and providing logistical and material support for the accommodation and integration of migrants. HRW and AI focus on highlighting cases of rights violations, especially concerning violence at the borders, inhumane living conditions, or discrimination. Their reports serve as a basis for international pressure on Serbian authorities to ensure a more humane and responsible approach to migration (HRW, 2021; AI, 2022).

In addition to international organizations, domestic non-governmental organizations and associations play an important role. Organizations such as the Belgrade Center for Human Rights, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, and others actively work on providing legal assistance to migrants, educating local communities, and combating hate speech. Their activities are aimed not only at protecting migrants but also at building a more tolerant social environment. However, their work often faces resistance from authorities and media, who portray them as "foreign agents" or "advocates of migrant interests," which further limits their influence on public discourse.

The European Union also plays a key role in shaping Serbia's migration policy. As a candidate country for membership, Serbia is obligated to align its legislation and practices with European standards in asylum and migration. The EU funds numerous projects aimed at improving accommodation capacities, strengthening the capacities of state institutions, and promoting human rights. Nevertheless, in public discourse, the presence of the EU is often portrayed as the imposition of foreign policies, which populist leaders exploit to strengthen the anti-migrant narrative.

The response from international and domestic actors shows that there is an ongoing struggle between populist discourses and human rights advocates. Although their efforts contribute to better protection of migrants and strengthening institutional capacities, negative media narratives remain dominant in Serbian society, limiting the scope of their impact.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the impact of populist governments in Serbia on the formation of negative media narratives about migrants and migration processes shows that contemporary political discourse and media reporting play a key role in shaping public opinion and migration policy. Populist rhetoric, based on security-dramatic interpretations of migration, contributes to the normalization of fear, xenophobia, and social exclusion of migrants, creating a favorable ground for the adoption of restrictive and reactive policies. The media, especially tabloids and social networks, often serve as carriers of these narratives, further influencing the perception of migrants as threats rather than as vulnerable groups in need of protection. Such discourses have far-reaching consequences on migrant integration, social cohesion, and Serbia's international image, as well as on the state's capacity to develop sustainable and inclusive solutions in line with European standards. Despite efforts by international and domestic actors to mitigate the effects of negative narratives, their influence remains limited due to the strong influence of populism in the public and media space. In this regard, future efforts must be directed towards strengthening citizens' media literacy, encouraging responsible journalism, and creating institutional mechanisms that will enable migration policy based on facts, solidarity, and respect for human rights.

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Sandra Bielik

Constructing Migration through Media: Threat, Victimhood, and the Need for More Empowering Narratives

IN A GIST

Media persistently frame migrants as either threats or passive victims. This paper argues for more empowering and humanizing forms of storytelling that restore agency to migrant subjects in public discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Migration continues to be at the center of political and social discourse in contemporary Europe (Berry et al., 2016; Szylo-Kwas, 2023). Whether driven by armed conflict, political oppression, economic hardship, or environmental change, the movement of people across borders has triggered intense political debate, public anxiety, and widespread media coverage (Berry et al., 2016; Serafis et al., 2023; Szylo-Kwas, 2023). How migration is represented in the media matters profoundly, not only because of its influence on public opinion and policymaking, but also because of its implications for the well-being and dignity of migrants themselves. In mainstream media, migration is most commonly portrayed through two dominant narratives, that of “victimhood” and that of “threat”, each shaping how audiences perceive and respond to people on the move (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). To understand why these representations are so powerful, two interrelated communication theories, “agenda-setting” and “framing”, offer useful explanatory frameworks.

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) emphasizes that the media, while not always successful in telling people “what to think”, is effective in directing people “what to think about”. By selecting certain issues, giving them greater visibility and prominence, media coverage shapes the salience of topics in the public sphere. Migration, when consistently presented as a political or social “problem”, acquires a heightened significance on the public agenda, often overshadowing other dimensions of migrants’ lives and experiences.

Framing theory (Entman, 1993) goes one step further by highlighting how issues are presented in the media. “Frames”, as Entman (1993) argues, are communicative devices that involve the selection and salience of certain aspects of reality to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. When migration is framed as a threat, it directs attention to national security, cultural identity, or economic burden, while when framed through the lens of victimization, it highlights migrants’ suffering, loss, and dependence on Western aid (Berry et al., 2016; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). Both frames, though seemingly different, limit the interpretive space by constraining how audiences are invited to understand migration and what responses are seen as legitimate (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Entman, 1993).

Taken together, agenda-setting and framing demonstrate how the dominance of threat and victimization narratives in mainstream media is not accidental but systemic. These narratives not only set the terms of public debate but also reproduce deep-seated asymmetries of power between European publics and migrant communities. As a result, the complexity of migration as

a human experience is reduced to simplified moral binaries (Berry et al., 2016; Entman, 1993; Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Expanding on this, Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017), in their analysis of the 2015 refugee “crisis”, construct a typology of visual frames which they term “regimes of visibility.” They identify five distinct visual logics that organize how refugees are seen and what forms of public responsibility are mobilized. The victimhood narrative is produced through two key regimes. “Visibility as biological life” depicts a dehumanized “mass of unfortunates” reduced to their bodily needs, which legitimizes a response of monitorial action – a detached, “checking up” on events that creates awareness but invites no critical reflection. “Visibility as empathy” uses individualized images of suffering, like the iconic photo of Alan Kurdi, to evoke sentimental pity. The legitimate response here is charitable giving, a form of compassion that remains “fleeting and unstable”. The threat narrative is enacted through “visibility as threat”, which uses images of “aggressive young men” to legitimize state security and exclusionary measures, mobilizing fear and a responsibility of “proactive protection” against a perceived danger. Beyond this binary, Chouliaraki and Stolic identify two other regimes that, while seemingly more positive, still maintain a focus on the host society. “Visibility as hospitality” portrays pro-refugee protests, mobilizing political activism and trans-national solidarity. However, in doing so, it centers the agency of Western citizens while the refugees themselves remain largely voiceless. Finally, “visibility as self-reflexivity” includes celebrity humanitarianism or social media graphics that focus on the observer’s feelings. This encourages self-reflection, but simultaneously turns the refugee into “the vehicle for a conversation that takes place exclusively by ‘us’ and about ‘us’ (Westerners)”.

Chouliaraki and Stolic’s central critique is that all five regimes ultimately fail to humanize migrants. By presenting them as powerless bodies, dangerous outsiders, or props for Western conscience, they deny them what the authors call “narratability” – the ability to articulate their own life histories, aspirations, and political voices.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES

In this section, a closer look will be taken at the mainstream European media trends that rely heavily on two dominant and mutually reinforcing frames when portraying migration: the “threat” frame and the “victimhood” frame.

The threat narrative constructs refugees and migrants as outsiders who endanger social, economic, or cultural stability. This framing is especially apparent in the language of “crisis” and “invasion,” which depicts the arrival of migrants as a sudden, overwhelming force at Europe’s borders. For example, coverage of the 2015–2016 arrivals often centered on images of large crowds crossing borders or boarding boats, which functioned to massify migrants into an indistinguishable group, invoking fear and legitimizing heightened securitization and militarization (Berry et al., 2016; Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; McLoughlin, 2023; Serafis et al., 2023). Such portrayals reproduce a binary of “us versus them” in which European publics appear as threatened subjects in need of protection, while refugees are portrayed as potentially dangerous “others” (Horsti, 2013, as cited in McLoughlin, 2023). The attribution of agency in these representations is often negative. When migrants are depicted as active, they are not shown as political actors or community members, but as criminalized figures, potential terrorists, or opportunists wanting to exploit Western resources (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017).

The victimhood frame, by contrast, depicts refugees as helpless, dependent, and voiceless bodies in need of rescue. Visual representations are central here. Photographs of overcrowded dinghies, massive refugee camps or children in distress dominate in this portrayal of migration. The image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who drowned on the Turkish coast in September 2015, epitomizes this mode of representation. His lifeless body became an icon of innocence and vulnerability, stirring a wave of sympathy but also crystallizing the process by which refugee lives are rendered visible only through spectacles of suffering (Marchevska & Defrin, 2023; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). In the same way, close-up photographs of crying mothers or hungry children that circulate the media, reduce individuals to their biological existence, stripped of political voice and history and reliant on Western humanitarianism for survival, and thereby reproduce paternalistic relations of power.

Both frames, threat and victimhood, are problematic not only because they dominate coverage, but also because they often overlap, producing contradictory representations in which refugees oscillate between being feared as dangerous outsiders and pitied as powerless sufferers, but are rarely represented as full human beings with agency, aspirations, or political subjectivities (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). This ambivalence is compounded by pervasive moral hierarchies that distinguish between “deserving” and “undeserving” refugees. As McLoughlin (2023) notes, media discourse often casts suspicion on those who do not conform to stereotypical markers of vulnerability, for example, the “smartphone-using refugee” whose possession of technology is taken as evidence of illegitimacy, or the Muslim male refugee who is more likely to be portrayed as a potential criminal than as a victim. At the same time, certain groups, such as women, children, or, more recently, Ukrainian refugees, are more easily framed as “deserving” since their vulnerability aligns with familiar cultural scripts of innocence, proximity, and whiteness (Marchevska & Defrin, 2023). These racialized and gendered hierarchies shape not only media coverage but also public and policy responses, determining who is welcome and who is excluded (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

As McLoughlin (2023) emphasizes, refugees are rarely engaged as interlocutors in media or policy debates. Instead, they are spoken about by journalists, NGO representatives, and Western experts who claim interpretive authority over their experiences. When migrant voices do appear, they are usually used to convey emotions – gratitude, pity, or hope – rather than complex opinions or political claims. Quotations are frequently edited or extracted from their original context to support the narrative objectives of humanitarian campaigns or news outlets. Many refugees, aware that public statements may affect their asylum processes, engage in strategic self-censorship, avoiding criticism of host governments or NGOs. These practices reinforce a persistent silencing of refugees, who are hyper-visible as images yet largely inaudible as narrators of their own lives. The absence of refugee voices allows the dominant frames of threat and victimhood to persist unchallenged, as stories about migration continue to be told “about” rather than “with” those most affected. As a result, humanitarian portrayals, though seemingly more positive than threat discourses, remain fragile, politicized, and easily displaced by securitarian logics. The selective application of victimhood to some groups and threat to others underscores the malleability of migration narratives and the fact that, rather than reflecting reality, the meaning of migration is actively constructed through processes such as agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and framing (Entman, 1993). Ultimately, the twin logics of threat and victimhood flatten migration into an ethical binary, denying migrants voice and agency and closing off more nuanced understandings of human mobility. As Chouliaraki and

Stolic (2017) argue, such representations lead to failure of media responsibility. They mobilize pity or fear but do not recognize migrants as protagonists of their own stories. In doing so, they reproduce colonial and racialized imaginaries of the Global South as dependent or dangerous and sustain asymmetrical power relations between European publics and migrant communities.

Alternative Narratives

Given this context, there is an urgent need for alternative, more empowering narratives of migration that move beyond portraying migrants as mere “problems” to be managed or saved. Such a shift requires moving from what Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) term “formal responsibility” to “substantial responsibility”. Formal responsibility is a self-focused framework, centering on “the responsibility I have for my own acts” and prompting European publics to ask: “what should we do?”. This approach inevitably positions migrants as passive objects who are acted upon, whether through charity, pity, or securitization. In contrast, substantial responsibility is other-focused, defined as the “responsibility for the condition of the other”. This framework fundamentally changes the central question from the host society’s response to the migrant’s own humanity and lived reality: “who is this person?” The core of substantial responsibility lies in granting migrants “narratability”, the “ability to articulate their own life histories, trajectories and aspirations as irreducibly human endeavours”. This means treating their lives as “worthy story-telling material” and portraying them in the media not as voiceless victims or threats, but as “creative and knowledgeable actors,” “citizens with views,” and “professionals with ideas and aspirations”. By foregrounding the humanity and agency of migrants themselves, the media could help cultivate more just imaginaries where refugees are seen not as outsiders to be acted upon, but as equals acting with us “in a common world” (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017).

While mainstream European media continues to rely on the dual tropes of threat and victimhood, these are not the only possible ways of representing migration. A range of alternative practices, emerging from grassroots initiatives, participatory theatre and cultural institutions, attempt to reframe migration in more empowering and humanizing ways. These practices emphasize agency, resilience, and creativity, thereby resisting paternalistic humanitarianism and securitarian fear. The following case studies – ReFOCUS Media Labs in Lesbos and Theater Company of Sanctuary “PSYCHEdelight” illustrate two very different approaches that seek to disrupt dominant frames and expand the cultural imagination of migration.

ReFOCUS MEDIA LABS: COMMUNITY-BASED STORYTELLING AND NARRATIVE RESISTANCE

ReFOCUS Media Labs, founded in 2018 on the Greek island of Lesbos, one of the so-called migration “hotspots”, is an example of an effort to challenge dominant media portrayals of refugees through community-based participatory practices. Established in response to an existing gap in mainstream journalism concerning the representation and participation of refugees, the initiative trains asylum seekers and migrants in skills such as photography, video production, and editing, providing them with the tools to tell their own stories (McLoughlin, 2023). The guiding principle of ReFOCUS is that those who experience displacement should not, as McLoughlin (2023) notes is often the case, remain the objects of media narratives, but instead become co-producers of the stories that concern them.

A central feature of ReFOCUS is its role in producing “citizen journalists” who can intervene in global media discourses. Graduates of the program have contributed to coverage of major events such as the 2020 fire at Moria Camp, and their work was featured by the BBC (McLoughlin,

2023). Moreover, they have produced a film “Nothing About Us Without Us” which calls for the media to improve their engagement with and understanding of groups they present. In this sense, the project directly allows migrants to take ownership of their own story, reclaim agency and fight being seen as a voiceless homogenous mass, by foregrounding individual perspectives and lived experiences. In doing so, they also contest the binary framings of refugees as either threats or victims, offering instead narratives of agency, resilience, and everyday life. By positioning refugees not as passive recipients of humanitarian aid or securitarian control, but as active storytellers, ReFOCUS redistributes narrative power and challenges structures of racism and colonialism still prevalent in Europe (McLoughlin, 2023). It also cultivates skills and professional networks that can empower participants beyond the camp setting, thereby linking media representation with material opportunities (McLoughlin, 2023).

While being a promising initiative, it is important to keep in mind the systemic challenges that initiatives like ReFOCUS face within the wider media ecosystem. The work must constantly navigate the risk of reproducing dominant narratives, such as the trope of “giving voice to the voiceless,” which falsely implies refugees are inherently powerless, forgetting that silence often results from structural oppression (McLoughlin, 2023; Malkki, 1996). Similarly, even participatory projects risk being filtered through external media gatekeepers who continue to privilege “expert” voices, reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge and representation (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). Beyond these representational risks, challenges such as dependence on established media platforms for visibility and the precarious living conditions faced by participants, can constrain long-term engagement and limit the capacity to transform mainstream narratives (Godin & Doná, 2016; Eade, 2007). Furthermore, as McLoughlin (2023) notes, the lack of systematic evaluation and the reliance on secondary data reflect a broader gap in research on how such initiatives impact participants’ lived experiences. Nevertheless, ReFOCUS demonstrates the potential of participatory media to resist reductive portrayals and to open spaces where migrants assert authorship over their own stories.

PSYCHEdelight: REIMAGINING REFUGEE NARRATIVES THROUGH PARTICIPATORY THEATRE

A different approach is presented by the UK-based initiative Theatre Company of Sanctuary PSYCHEdelight. Founded in 2011 by a French director Sophie Besse, the company describes itself as “celebrating diversity and promoting social inclusion by bringing marginalised communities and local people together through creative workshops and productions” (Besse 2022, as cited in Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

PSYCHEdelight’s work emerged against the political backdrop of the “hostile environment” policy introduced by Theresa May in 2012. The policy’s stated aim was to make the everyday lives of undocumented migrants so difficult that they would choose to leave the country voluntarily (Marchevska & Defrin, 2023). In practice, it institutionalised what the human rights organisation Liberty called “state-sanctioned discrimination,” obliging ordinary citizens and public servants to act as “border guards”. Landlords, employers, NHS staff, and other private and public sector workers were required to check a person’s immigration status before providing employment, housing, healthcare, or other forms of support (Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

Against this exclusionary discourse, PSYCHEdelight’s participatory theatre offers an artistic counterpoint. Their first major success, “Borderline” (2017), grew out of workshops with refugees in the Calais “Jungle” camp. Co-written and co-performed by people who had lived there, the play took the form of a comedy rather than a tragedy. It turned life in the Jungle into a series of

absurd sketches (such as a fashion show and a scene featuring a “health-and-safety” officer absurdly regulating refugee movements) pieced together with a sense of humour and camaraderie. PSYCHEdelight viewed laughter as an “antidote to stress, trauma, exclusion and isolation ... an empowering and magic tool to transform pity into admiration” (Besse 2022, as cited in Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

Building on this experience, the company later developed “Mohand and Peter”, a comedy for two performers, co-created and performed by a Sudanese refugee Mohand Hasb Alrsol Badr and a British actor Peter Pearson. The play reverses the expected narrative. Rather than depicting the refugee’s perilous journey to Europe, Mohand takes Peter to Sudan, inviting the audience to experience the beauty and complexity of his homeland. Through physical theatre, multilingual dialogue, and laughter, the work redefines what a “refugee story” can look like, foregrounding friendship, nostalgia, and humour instead of suffering (Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

Marchevska and Defrin (2023) highlight how such participatory and co-creative methods resist singular views of migration narratives by shifting representation from “looking at” to “looking with” (Thompson 2009, as cited in Marchevska & Defrin, 2023). Rather than pitying refugees, audiences are invited into moments of shared joy and recognition. During performances, particularly at venues such as the Southwark Playhouse, Sudanese diaspora audiences responded with laughter and song, revealing how the play created emotional bridges across cultures.

Nevertheless, as Marchevska and Defrin (2023) note, participatory projects of this kind face significant structural limitations. Many remain “scattered, one-off projects that are infrequently evaluated and replicated,” often dependent on short-term funding and confined to cultural spaces where audiences are already sympathetic. In this way, the broader arts sector continues to reproduce “parallel systems” that mirror political segregation by separating “migrant art” from mainstream programming. This division contributes to two major risks: folklorisation and tokenism. Folklorisation occurs when institutions “emphasise the distance between ‘migrant art’ or ‘ethnic art’ and mainstream culture, presenting such work as exotic or culturally specific, and thereby reinforcing otherness rather than inclusion. Tokenism, on the other hand, arises when institutions engage with migrant artists not for the intrinsic value of their work but to signal their own social virtues. As Marchevska and Defrin (2023) observe, the short-term nature of many projects can lead participants to feel “like they have been used to boost an institution’s reputation as socially conscious.” This superficial engagement gives the appearance of diversity without bringing lasting structural change or equitable representation. To better understand and address these challenges, participatory research involving artists, audiences, and community members is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of such initiatives and to ensure that they foster genuine empowerment rather than symbolic inclusion.

Despite these constraints, PSYCHEdelight’s long-term, collaborative practice exemplifies an ethical alternative to hierarchical and paternalistic forms of representation. Both “Borderline” and “Mohand and Peter” involve refugees as active co-authors rather than subjects of humanitarian storytelling, ensuring that consent, visibility, and humour are central to self-representation. Their work contests the dehumanising logic behind the idea of the “hostile environment” by reclaiming creativity and belonging and offering a vision of cultural participation grounded in solidarity, co-creation, and shared laughter amidst the hostility (Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of dominant and alternative narratives of migration reveals that European media representations continue to oscillate between two simplistic categories: refugees as either threats to societal stability or victims of humanitarian catastrophe. These dual framings, as explained through the lenses of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and framing theory (Entman, 1993), not only determine which aspects of migration enter public consciousness, but also shape how audiences understand and emotionally respond to them. The result is a narrow moral binary that sustains asymmetrical power relations, positioning European publics as protectors or saviours and migrants as dependent or dangerous “others”. Even humanitarian portrayals, though seemingly benevolent, often reproduce paternalistic hierarchies that deny refugees voice, agency, and “narratability” (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; McLoughlin, 2023; Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

Against this backdrop, initiatives such as ReFOCUS Media Labs and Theatre of Sanctuary PSYCHEdelight demonstrate the transformative potential of participatory media and arts practices to reclaim narrative agency (McLoughlin, 2023; Marchevska & Defrin, 2023). Both examples illustrate what Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) call a move from “formal” to “substantial responsibility”, a shift from speaking “about” refugees to creating spaces for them to speak “with” and “for themselves”. By equipping migrants with tools of storytelling and co-creation, these initiatives challenge dominant frames, foreground lived experience, and foster encounters rooted in recognition rather than pity or fear (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; McLoughlin, 2023).

Nevertheless, structural and institutional constraints continue to limit the reach and sustainability of such alternative practices. The risks of tokenism, folklorisation, and dependency on short-term funding underscore the persistence of systemic inequalities that shape cultural production and visibility (Marchevska & Defrin, 2023; Godin & Doná, 2016; Eade, 2007). For genuine transformation to occur, participatory approaches must be accompanied by broader institutional reforms that embed refugee voices within the mainstream media and cultural sectors, not as exceptions, but as integral contributors to the European public sphere (McLoughlin, 2023; Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

Ultimately, reimagining migration narratives requires more than diversifying representation. It demands a fundamental ethical shift toward recognizing migrants as co-authors of shared realities (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). When migrants are portrayed not as symbols of crisis or compassion but as full human beings – creative, knowledgeable, and politically engaged – the media can begin to dismantle colonial and racial hierarchies that underpin current discourse (Berry et al., 2016; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Serafis et al., 2023). In doing so, it can foster a more inclusive and truthful understanding of migration – one that acknowledges complexity, celebrates agency, and affirms our interconnectedness within a shared world (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; McLoughlin, 2023; Marchevska & Defrin, 2023).

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Angelos Gkouskos

Racist Speech and Xenophobia in Greek Mass Media

IN A GIST

Racist speech and xenophobic tropes persist across Greek mass media, reflecting systemic exclusionary discourses that reinforce discrimination against migrants and asylum seekers.

INTRODUCTION

Mass Media (MM) in Greece constitute a central channel for information dissemination and a key factor in shaping the political agenda and public opinion. Their role extends beyond the neutral reporting of events; through their choice of topics, linguistic framing, and repetition of certain narratives, they can reinforce existing stereotypes and contribute to the reproduction of social prejudices. In this sense, MM function not only as transmitters of information but also as ideological actors influencing perceptions of minority and migrant groups (Hiliadou, 2021).

In the Greek context, racism and xenophobia are complex social phenomena, defined and analyzed in various ways across the literature. Racism is broadly understood as a social practice characterized by unfavorable treatment of individuals on the basis of racial, cultural, or socio-economic differences (Gazakis, Syrris & Takis, 2014). Xenophobia, while related, denotes an irrational fear or hostility toward those perceived as "foreign" to the dominant national identity. Both concepts, although distinct, are interconnected and tend to intensify in periods of societal instability (Lialiouti, Georgiadou, Galariotis & Kafe, 2017).

The economic crisis that struck Greece after 2009 significantly altered the social and political landscape. The prolonged recession weakened state welfare structures, eroded trust in institutions, and created fertile ground for scapegoating vulnerable groups, particularly migrants and refugees. In this climate, far-right narratives gained visibility, most notably through the rise of Golden Dawn, whose rhetoric combined extreme nationalism with overt racism and xenophobia. The crisis thus not only exacerbated economic inequality but also legitimized exclusionary political discourse in the public sphere (Papadogianni, 2013).

The present study examines the interplay between media discourse, socio-economic conditions, and political extremism in Greece, with a focus on how Mass Media have contributed to the dissemination of racist and xenophobic narratives. It further explores the extent to which the Greek and European legal frameworks—despite providing formal protections against discrimination—are sufficient to address the deep-seated cultural and political mechanisms that sustain these phenomena (Gazakis et al., 2014; Lialiouti et al., 2017). By situating the discussion within both the theoretical definitions and the specific socio-political realities of Greece, this research aims to highlight the central role of media in shaping public attitudes toward diversity and difference.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on bibliographic research and theoretical analysis. The data used in this paper were collected from secondary sources

including academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles, relevant to mass media, racism, xenophobia and the socio-political context of Greece. The selection of sources was guided by criteria such as scientific credibility, relevance to the research topic and contribution to understanding the relationship between media discourse and the construction of social attitudes toward migrants and refugees. Particular emphasis was placed on literature addressing media representation, political extremism and the impact of the economic crisis and refugee flows on public discourse in Greece. The data analyzed in this study were examined through a qualitative interpretive framework, focusing on the identification of recurring themes, patterns and theoretical arguments related to media framing, stereotyping and ideological construction. This approach allowed for the synthesis and critical examination of existing knowledge in order to explore how mass media contribute to the reproduction and normalization of racist and xenophobic narratives within the Greek socio-political context.

DISCUSSION

The concept of Mass Media (MM) has been the subject of extensive theoretical discussion across disciplines, reflecting its centrality in modern social life. Mass media should be understood not simply as tools for disseminating information but as a fundamental part of culture itself. Media function as social institutions that produce and circulate meanings, shaping how individuals and groups perceive reality. This view highlights that media do not passively reflect society but actively construct it through their selection of topics, framing of events, and repetition of specific narratives (Altheide (1995). Similarly, Bryant and Miron argue that the study of mass communication must focus on how media effects are generated through processes such as agenda-setting, framing, and priming. By determining what issues are publicly discussed and how they are presented, the media influence social norms, political attitudes, and perceptions of entire groups (Bryant & Miron, 2004).

The definition of mass media refers to institutionalized systems of communication designed to reach large audiences simultaneously through channels such as television, radio, newspapers, and digital platforms. These systems, they note, have a dual role: they both inform and socialize, transmitting dominant values and cultural codes that shape public understanding of issues like migration, security, and national identity. As such, mass media are not neutral spaces of information exchange but active participants in the formation of collective consciousness. Their capacity to create symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them” gives them enormous power in shaping social cohesion or division (Viswanath, Ramanadhan & Kontos, 2007).

In the Greek context, this role of the media becomes particularly visible in the portrayal of migrants and refugees, especially during times of political or economic uncertainty. Since the early 1990s, when large numbers of migrants from Albania, Eastern Europe, and later Asia and Africa arrived in Greece, public discourse has been heavily mediated through negative or alarmist coverage. The report *Minorities and Media in Greece* found that Greek television and newspapers often associate migrants with criminality, unemployment, and social disorder. Headlines such as “Albanian gangs terrorize Athens” or “Illegal migrants flood the islands” became common during the 1990s and 2000s, reinforcing public fears and legitimizing xenophobic attitudes. Rather than offering balanced coverage, these representations tended to reduce migrants to statistical data or anonymous crowds, depriving them of individuality and voice (Georgiou, 2002).

During the 2009 economic crisis, such portrayals intensified. Migrants were often framed as competitors for scarce jobs and welfare benefits, while their presence was presented as a burden on an already weakened state. This discourse provided fertile ground for far-right political narratives, most notably that of Golden Dawn, which utilized the same rhetoric of “national purification” and “defense of the Greek people.” Mainstream media often covered Golden Dawn’s activities with sensationalism, sometimes uncritically reproducing their slogans or focusing on the “problem of immigration” without contextual analysis (Panera, 2021). Such coverage contributed to normalizing extremist views and embedding them into everyday political discussion.

The 2015–2016 refugee crisis further revealed how linguistic and visual strategies shape perceptions. Greek and European news outlets frequently used the term “illegal immigrants” instead of “refugees” or “asylum seekers,” framing migration as a law-and-order issue rather than a humanitarian one. Visual imagery—overcrowded boats, border clashes, and desperate faces—often accompanied these stories, creating an atmosphere of moral panic. While some alternative and digital outlets attempted to humanize refugees by sharing personal narratives, these remained marginal compared to mainstream portrayals. The repetition of dehumanizing language and imagery not only influenced public opinion but also policy decisions, contributing to stricter border controls and increased tolerance toward exclusionary practices (Panera, 2021; Doria Repository, 2020).

In recent years, despite growing awareness and the emergence of fact-checking initiatives, the Greek media landscape continues to struggle with balanced representation. Migrants are still disproportionately featured in stories about crime or public health risks, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic when certain newspapers linked migrant communities to virus outbreaks without evidence (Panera, 2021). These discourses reinforce pre-existing stereotypes, perpetuate social divisions, and obstruct integration. Media culture shapes emotional and moral responses to events, determining who is perceived as deserving of empathy and who is excluded from it. Therefore, understanding the media’s power in constructing meaning is essential for addressing the deeper cultural mechanisms that sustain racism and xenophobia in Greek society (Altheide, 1995).

Racism and xenophobia, though distinct, are closely interconnected both theoretically and in practice. Conceptualizing racism is not a straightforward process, as the literature includes multiple definitions and categorizations corresponding to different domains of action. In general terms, racism can be defined as a form of social practice characterized by the unfavorable treatment of individuals based on differing racial, educational, social, or economic characteristics. Through such treatment, racism promotes a worldview that contradicts the fundamental principle of respect for human dignity. Within the Greek constitutional framework, Article 5(1) safeguards every individual’s right to the free development of their personality, as well as the absolute protection of life and liberty without discrimination on grounds of gender, class, or socioeconomic status, rendering racism incompatible with the fundamental values of the state (Gazakis, Syrri, & Takis, 2014).

Xenophobia, on the other hand, literally translates to “fear of the foreigner” and encompasses irrational fear, intense intolerance, and disproportionate hatred toward vulnerable social groups. According to the International Labour Organization and the International Organization for Migration, xenophobia includes attitudes, behaviors, and prejudices that reject and often demean individuals based on the perception that they belong to “foreign” or “external” elements

in relation to social cohesion, national identity, or cultural homogeneity. The underlying assumption is that different origins constitute sufficient grounds for differentiated or hostile treatment, even when not based on actual threats (Lialiouti et al., 2017).

In the Greek socio-political context, the two concepts intertwine sharply, especially during times of crisis. The decade-long economic recession following 2009 led to institutional degradation, the contraction of the welfare state, and the deterioration of living standards for the middle and lower classes. In this climate of insecurity, outdated perceptions of the “foreigner” re-emerged, with migrants often portrayed as responsible for social and economic hardships (Papadogianni, 2013). This situation culminated in 2012 with the parliamentary entry of Golden Dawn, an extreme-right neo-Nazi party that exploited economic and social insecurity to gain political power. The organization, which had existed since the 1980s as a fringe political movement, seized the opportunity of the crisis to present itself as an “anti-systemic force” while promoting an extreme nationalist, racist, and xenophobic agenda. In the June 2012 elections, Golden Dawn received 6.92% of the vote, entering the Greek Parliament for the first time and gaining institutional legitimacy (Papadogianni, 2013).

Its rhetoric was based on constructing a clear dichotomy: on one side, the “authentic Greek nation,” and on the other, the “invaders” — primarily migrants and refugees — who allegedly threatened national identity and social security. Violence was presented as “necessary” to defend the nation, while “assault squads” were organized to attack migrants and political opponents. Golden Dawn’s discourse was not limited to racial references but also included attacks on minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and political figures of opposing ideologies. This period saw an intensified “us” versus “them” division, portraying those representing diversity — whether in race, religion, origin, or sexual orientation — as threats to the nation and social cohesion (Iliadou, 2021).

The role of the Mass Media was crucial in shaping and reinforcing these perceptions. Media outlets — television, press, radio, and online platforms — did not merely serve as neutral transmitters of news but as ideological actors and constructors of reality. Topic selection, presentation style, and language use often contributed to the consolidation of stereotypes and prejudices. Particularly notable was the frequent use of the term “illegal immigrant” instead of “refugee” or “asylum seeker.” This linguistic choice reinforced the association of migrants with illegality, undermining public compassion and empathy while framing their presence as a threat to public order and safety (Iliadou, 2021).

Hate speech in the media can manifest not only through content but also through the framing and frequency of specific narratives. The repeated portrayal of migrants as responsible for the economic crisis, as criminals, or as public health threats created an environment of moral panic. In times of political and economic instability, such narratives are more readily accepted by the public as they align with pre-existing feelings of insecurity and fear. Unequal representation remains another critical issue. Migrants’ own voices are rarely heard in mainstream media, depriving them of the opportunity to share personal experiences and challenge negative narratives. Although the Internet theoretically offers more opportunities for self-representation, it often exacerbates the problem through the rapid dissemination of false or distorted information that reproduces stereotypes and reinforces racist discourse. Social media algorithms intensify this phenomenon, creating “echo chambers” in which users are exposed only to content that confirms their pre-existing views (Iliadou, 2021). In response to these challenges, Greek and European legal frameworks establish measures for protection against racism and

discrimination. At the national level, in addition to constitutional guarantees, Law 927/1979, as amended, provides criminal penalties for inciting violence or hatred based on race, religion, national, or ethnic origin. At the European level, Directive 2000/43/EC on implementing the principle of equal treatment irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, and Directive 2000/78/EC on equal treatment in employment and occupation, constitute binding instruments for member states. Moreover, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination impose international obligations adopted by Greece. However, the existence of legal frameworks is insufficient without active enforcement and societal acceptance of the principles of equality and tolerance (Gazakis, Syrri, and Takis (2014) and Lialiouti et al. (2017).

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that racism and xenophobia in Greece are multidimensional phenomena deeply intertwined with economic insecurity, political polarization, and media discourse. The 2009 financial crisis and the rise of Golden Dawn marked turning points that institutionalized hate speech and legitimized exclusionary ideologies in public life. Mass media, rather than acting as neutral intermediaries, played a decisive role in shaping these dynamics through selective reporting, emotionally charged language, and the repetition of stereotypes that associated migrants with illegality, criminality, and public disorder.

In recent years, although digital platforms and fact-checking initiatives have emerged, the persistence of sensationalist and dehumanizing narratives—particularly during the 2015 refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic—shows that media-induced moral panic remains a powerful driver of xenophobic sentiment. The European and Greek legal frameworks provide essential tools for combating hate speech and discrimination, yet legal measures alone are insufficient without continuous education, media accountability, and the promotion of intercultural understanding.

Ultimately, addressing racism and xenophobia in Greece requires a dual approach: strengthening institutional mechanisms of equality and fostering a media culture grounded in ethical journalism, empathy, and inclusivity. Only through this synthesis of legal, social, and communicative reform can Greek society move toward a more democratic and cohesive public sphere.

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CHAPTER II

FUTURE OF MIGRATIONS

Emerging trends, structural pressures, and policy dilemmas

Łukasz Wysocki

The future of migration in the UK

IN A GIST

The UK's migration trajectory is shaped by post-Brexit policy shifts, demographic pressures, and economic necessity – creating a tension between political rhetoric and labor market realities.

INTRODUCTION

Migration caused by global conflicts has shaped the social, economic and political landscape of the United Kingdom for many decades. Although the country has long attracted migrants due to its English language, high level of economic development and extensive diaspora networks, the nature of the influx has changed significantly. Contemporary waves of migration are increasingly the result of forced departure from the country of origin in the face of war, persecution and political repression, rather than a voluntary economic decision. This type of migration is particularly challenging for the host country, as it usually occurs suddenly, on a large scale and without prior logistical planning.

In recent years, the United Kingdom has faced exceptional migratory pressure. Data from the Office for National Statistics show that in the year ending June 2023, net migration stood at 672,000, down from a record 745,000 in 2022, but still significantly above pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels (ONS 2023). This phenomenon was partly the result of military operations in various regions of the world, which led to the launch of special visa and resettlement programmes, including for citizens of Ukraine, Afghanistan (OECD 2024). The number of asylum applications in 2023 reached 84,000, confirming the continuing pressure on the international protection system (UK in... 2024).

Conflict-induced migration is particularly difficult to predict and manage. People fleeing war cannot plan their route or arrival date, and the host country must respond in crisis mode. The effectiveness of this response depends not only on administrative efficiency and the availability of resources, but also on the political and social climate in the host country. Although the United Kingdom has formally left the EU asylum and migration mechanisms following Brexit, it remains an important destination for refugees and persons in need of international protection. This is due both to London's historical role on the international stage and to the strong ties of diasporas from different parts of the world.

SCALE AND DYNAMICS OF THE PHENOMENON (1990–2025)

Migration to the United Kingdom caused by armed conflicts is a phenomenon that has intensified over the last three decades, but its origins can be traced back to the 1990s. The collapse of Yugoslavia and the Balkan wars brought the first mass waves of refugees since World War II, which also reached the British Isles (Refugee Council 2020). Although the scale of the inflows at that time was much smaller than today, they were an important reference point for subsequent administrative and social measures.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have played an increasingly important role in shaping British migration policy. The invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, and then the civil war in Syria, which has been ongoing since 2011, triggered successive waves of migration that reached the United Kingdom through various channels – both through resettlement programmes and through individual asylum applications (Migration Observatory 2023). However, the largest increase in the number of refugees has been recorded in recent years, when the war in Syria and the Afghan crisis were joined by Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

Data from the British Office for National Statistics (ONS) confirm that net migration has reached record levels in recent years. In 2022, there was a net inflow of 745,000 people, a significant proportion of whom were migrants arriving through humanitarian channels or asylum seekers fleeing war. In the year ending June 2023, the figure was 672,000, which represented a decline but still remained well above the averages for the first two decades of the 21st century. In 2024, net migration fell to around 431,000 people, mainly as a result of visa restrictions for certain categories of arrivals, but humanitarian and asylum channels remained at a high level (ONS 2023).

A particularly visible element of the contemporary picture of conflict-driven migration to the United Kingdom has been the phenomenon of so-called small boats, i.e. small vessels crossing the English Channel. Although the first cases were recorded as early as 2018, it was only in the following years that the numbers began to rise sharply (Home Office 2023). In 2022, more than 45,000 people arrived via the Channel, and in 2024, estimates put the number at around 37,000. Year-on-year declines were visible in quarterly data, but the phenomenon remains at a high level and remains one of the main challenges for the government in terms of border control.

The number of asylum applications has also increased significantly. In 2024, 84,200 applications were submitted for a total of over 108,000 people, which was a record in British statistics in terms of the number of people covered by the applications. The largest groups came from countries affected by war or serious humanitarian crises, with citizens of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Sudan dominating, and after 2022 also Ukraine.

Changes in the dynamics of conflict-related migration are strongly linked to global political events. The United Kingdom has responded to these events by launching special resettlement programmes, such as the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme for Syrians, the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy for collaborators of the British armed forces in Afghanistan, and Homes for Ukraine and the Ukraine Family Scheme for people fleeing the Russian invasion. Although these programmes differ in structure, they had a common goal: to provide a safe and legal entry route for people who might otherwise seek refuge through irregular channels (Home Office 2023; UK Parliament 2023).

The dynamics of conflict-related migration to the UK between 1990 and 2025 show a clear upward trend, with the scale of the influx becoming unprecedented in recent years. This, in turn, forces the host country not only to take immediate crisis measures, but also to engage in long-term planning in the areas of housing, integration and adaptation of the asylum system to handle large waves of refugees.

THE CASE OF SYRIA: EXPERIENCES AND CONCLUSIONS

The civil war in Syria, which has been ongoing since 2011, was one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the 21st century and served as an important reference point for British migration policy towards refugees. The conflict, characterised by brutal fighting, mass internal displacement and numerous human rights violations, has forced more than half of Syria's population to flee their homes. According to UNHCR data, over 6.8 million Syrians found themselves outside the country, mainly in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. For some of them, Europe, including the United Kingdom, also became a destination (UNHCR 2023).

In response to this crisis, the United Kingdom launched the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) in 2014, which aimed to resettle particularly vulnerable people – women and children, victims of sexual violence, people in need of urgent medical assistance and families deprived of their livelihoods. The programme was based on close cooperation with the UNHCR, which identified candidates in refugee camps in the Middle East (Crawley & Skleparis 2018). Unlike those who arrived in the United Kingdom independently and applied for asylum, VPRS participants were provided with organised transport, accommodation and access to basic services from the moment of their arrival.

Between 2014 and 2020, over 20,000 Syrians were resettled in the United Kingdom under the VPRS. Although this number was relatively small compared to global needs, the programme gained recognition for its well-planned logistics and relatively effective integration of participants. An important element of its success was close cooperation with local authorities, which were able to plan for the arrival of refugees in advance, as well as the availability of funds for English language courses, support in finding employment and assistance with cultural adaptation (Digidiki & Bhabha 2017).

However, the experience with the VPRS also revealed the limitations of the British resettlement model. The programme was costly, required the involvement of a large number of administrative staff and had a pre-determined admission limit, which meant that many Syrians who met the protection criteria were unable to benefit from it. Furthermore, the 2015 migration crisis, when hundreds of thousands of refugees attempted to enter Europe through informal routes, showed that resettlement mechanisms, while necessary, cannot replace a broader system of international protection.

It is also worth noting that the UK's response to the war in Syria was partly influenced by public opinion. Initially, public support for accepting refugees was moderate, but dramatic images from camps and tragic events, such as the death of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi in 2015, led to a temporary increase in empathy and pressure on the government to increase the number of people accepted (Long 2015). Nevertheless, the UK maintained its policy of limited resettlement, arguing that it was better to focus on helping refugees in the conflict region, which, according to the government, would allow more people to be supported at a lower unit cost (Holmes & Castaneda 2016).

The Syria case study showed that resettlement programmes can be effective if properly planned and funded, but they will not solve the problem of mass migration caused by conflict. The experiences of 2014–2020 became an important reference point in designing further actions – both in response to the Afghan crisis in 2021 and the war in Ukraine since 2022 (Portes 2024).

AFGHANISTAN 2021: EVACUATIONS AND SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

The situation in Afghanistan in 2021 has become one of the greatest challenges for British migration policy in recent years. The rapid advance of the Taliban across the country, culminating in the capture of Kabul in August 2021, led to the dramatic evacuation of thousands of Afghan citizens who had cooperated with coalition forces and international organisations. For the UK, this was not only a matter of moral obligation to its allies, but also a logistical and political challenge on an unprecedented scale (House of Commons Library 2021).

In response, the British government launched two key programmes. The first was the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), aimed at Afghan citizens who had worked directly with the British armed forces or the embassy in Kabul (Ministry of Defence UK 2022). This programme included translators, technical staff, drivers and people involved in UK-funded development projects. The priority of ARAP was rapid evacuation in situations of immediate danger to life. During Operation Pitting – the largest evacuation mission in the history of the British armed forces – more than 15,000 people were transported to the UK in just two weeks.

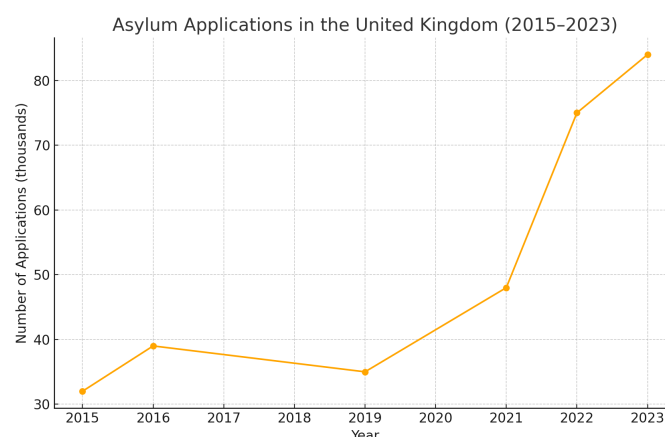
The second mechanism was the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), which was long-term in nature. It envisaged the admission of up to 20,000 people over several years, with particular emphasis on women, children, human rights activists and members of ethnic or religious minorities. Some of the ACRS beneficiaries were evacuated directly in 2021, while others arrived in the UK in the following months through humanitarian corridors organised in cooperation with Afghanistan's neighbouring countries (UK Home Office 2023).

Both programmes differed from traditional asylum procedures primarily in that they provided legal entry, the right to work upon arrival, and immediate access to social benefits and public services. Those accepted under the ARAP and ACRS also received support in finding accommodation and, in many cases, were housed in government-funded hotels until they found permanent accommodation. However, this last element proved problematic – due to the limited availability of council flats, many families spent more than a year in hotels, which had a negative impact on the integration process (Refugee Council 2023; Public Accounts Committee 2024).

As in the case of Syria, the UK's response to the Afghan crisis was partly shaped by public pressure. Media coverage focused on the fate of interpreters and military collaborators, which generated widespread public support for their evacuation. However, over time, the narrative began to change as the costs of accommodation and integration became the subject of political controversy. According to Home Office data, in 2023, several thousand Afghans were still staying in government-funded hotels, generating hundreds of millions of pounds in expenditure per year.

The Afghan experience revealed both the strengths and weaknesses of the British system for responding to migration crises. On the one hand, it proved that the state is capable of carrying out a rapid and effective evacuation in conditions of extreme danger. On the other hand, it showed that the lack of adequate housing infrastructure and a coherent integration strategy can seriously hamper the long-term settlement of refugees and their adaptation to life in a new country (Portes 2024). The lessons learned from Afghanistan were applied just a few months later, when the United Kingdom faced another crisis – the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Figure 1. Asylum Applications in the UK (2015–2023).



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS), Home Office. (2024). Immigration Statistics, Year Ending June 2023.

UKRAINE 2022: RESPONSE TO THE MASS INFLUX OF REFUGEES

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, was a turning point for European migration policy, including that of the United Kingdom. The scale of forced migration was unprecedented in post-war European history – in just a few months, more than seven million people crossed the Ukrainian border, seeking refuge mainly in neighbouring countries, but also in Western Europe (Dempster & Smith 2022). Although the United Kingdom did not participate in the EU's temporary protection mechanism, it decided to introduce its own support programmes, which differed significantly in scale and structure from previous responses to migration crises.

The government in London launched two main mechanisms for accepting refugees from Ukraine. The first was the Ukraine Family Scheme, which allowed British citizens and permanent residents to bring their closest relatives, including spouses, children, parents and siblings, to the United Kingdom. The second programme was the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, under which any UK resident could offer accommodation to Ukrainian citizens for a minimum of six months. In return, hosts received financial support of £350 per month, and local authorities received additional funds for integration services (UK Government 2023).

By the end of 2023, over 170,000 Ukrainian citizens had arrived in the United Kingdom under both programmes (Refugee Council 2023). The vast majority took advantage of the sponsorship programme, which was a new solution in British migration policy, based on the direct involvement of the public in the process of accepting refugees. This model made it possible to quickly increase the number of available accommodation places, but at the same time created new challenges, including the risk of abuse, a lack of clear procedures in the event of conflicts between guests and hosts, and problems with securing long-term housing after the expiry of sponsorship agreements.

Unlike traditional asylum procedures, the programmes for Ukrainians provided immediate right to work, access to social benefits and public services. This enabled many people to find employment quickly, which not only facilitated integration but also reduced the financial burden on the state budget. According to estimates by the Office for National Statistics, the employment rate among refugees from Ukraine in their first year in the UK was higher than in most previous waves of conflict-induced migration (ONS 2023).

The public reaction to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine was initially very positive. The media focused on solidarity and assistance, and the number of applications to the sponsorship programme exceeded the government's expectations. However, as time passed and housing problems and inflation grew, some members of the public began to express concerns about the long-term financial and organisational implications. Nevertheless, opinion polls conducted by YouGov in 2023 indicated that the majority of the public still supported continuing to help refugees from Ukraine.

The Ukrainian case revealed the potential of alternative models for receiving refugees that can act quickly and engage broad groups of citizens. However, it also showed that such solutions require careful planning in terms of the sustainability of accommodation, coordination between the government and local authorities, and ensuring continuity of integration after the initial period of stay. The lessons learned from this experience will be crucial in designing future programmes to respond to sudden migration crises, especially in situations where large numbers of people arrive in a country in a short period of time (UK in... 2023).

ILLEGAL ROUTES AND THE PHENOMENON OF 'SMALL BOATS'

One of the most visible and controversial elements of contemporary migration to the United Kingdom, including that caused by armed conflicts, has been the phenomenon of small boats crossing the English Channel, referred to in the media as 'small boats'. Although illegal entries into the country have been taking place for a long time, until 2018 the number of people using this dangerous route was relatively small. It was only in the following years, with tighter controls at ports and airports, as well as an increase in the number of people fleeing war-torn areas, that this phenomenon began to grow exponentially.

Home Office statistics show that in 2018, approximately 300 people arrived in the UK in this way. In 2019, this number rose to over 1,800, and in 2020 it exceeded 8,000. In 2021, it reached 28,000, setting a record in 2022 with over 45,000 people. Although the number of crossings fell to around 37,000 in 2023, the phenomenon remains a serious operational and political challenge (Migration Observatory 2024). Analyses indicate that this decline may have been the result of both weather conditions and increased cooperation with the French authorities, but it does not represent a permanent reversal of the trend.

The nationality structure of people arriving in small boats shows a clear link to global conflicts. The majority of those crossing are citizens of Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Sudan and Eritrea – countries affected by war, repression or serious humanitarian crises. For many of them, there is no realistic possibility of obtaining a visa through formal channels, forcing them to use the services of smuggling networks. The route across the English Channel is extremely risky due to ship traffic, strong sea currents and unpredictable weather conditions. Every year, there are reports of drownings, and dramatic images of Coast Guard rescue operations regularly appear in the media (House of Commons Library 2023).

The political response to small boats has been decisive and often harsh in tone. The government, arguing the need to 'stop the activities of smuggling gangs', has introduced a number of controversial legislative measures (Sumption 2024). The most controversial of these is the plan to relocate people who have arrived illegally in Rwanda in order to process their asylum applications. Although this idea faced numerous legal challenges and criticism from human rights organizations, it was upheld in the form of the Safety of Rwanda Act of 2024. According to

the government, this was intended to act as a deterrent, but research by the Migration Observatory indicates that there is no clear evidence that such a policy is effective in reducing the number of crossings.

The public debate surrounding small boats has become the arena for a broader dispute over the shape of British migration policy. Some members of the public view those arriving by this route as victims of war and persecution who should have the right to safe and legal access to asylum procedures. Others point out that as long as it is possible to reach the UK through illegal channels, this phenomenon will encourage risky journeys and fuel the activities of smugglers. The government therefore faces a dilemma of how to reconcile its humanitarian obligations under international law with political pressure and the expectations of part of the electorate regarding border control (Anderson & Hughes 2023).

The small boat phenomenon is in fact the result of a gap between the real needs of refugees and the available legal migration routes. For people fleeing conflict zones such as Afghanistan or Syria, the inability to apply for asylum outside the UK means that the only option to start the procedure is to physically reach the British Isles – even if this requires a risky crossing (UNHCR UK 2024). Solving this problem would require a comprehensive reform of the asylum system, including the development of safe humanitarian corridors and effective cooperation with international partners.

CHALLENGES FACING THE ASYLUM SYSTEM IN THE FACE OF CONFLICT-RELATED MIGRATION

The British asylum system has been struggling with growing pressure for years, but in the last decade, the influx of refugees from areas of armed conflict has highlighted its greatest weaknesses. These challenges include both organisational and procedural issues, as well as long-term social, economic and political consequences.

One of the most pressing problems is the length of proceedings (Yeo 2022). In 2023, the average time taken to process an asylum application was around 449 days, a significant increase compared to the early 2010s, when many applications were decided within a few months. Such long waits have serious consequences, both for the applicants themselves, who remain in a state of uncertainty, and for the state administration, whose costs of maintaining those waiting increase with each passing month. In practice, many people spend years in centres or temporary accommodation before receiving a decision, and in the event of a rejection, the appeal process further prolongs the process (Home Office UK 2024).

The second key challenge is inadequate housing infrastructure. The growing number of people seeking international protection, including those arriving under humanitarian programmes, has overwhelmed local accommodation systems. According to Home Office data, in 2023, thousands of refugees – both from Afghanistan and Ukraine – were living in hotels, generating costs of millions of pounds per week. The lack of adequate social housing and insufficient cooperation between central and local government make finding permanent accommodation one of the most difficult aspects of integration.

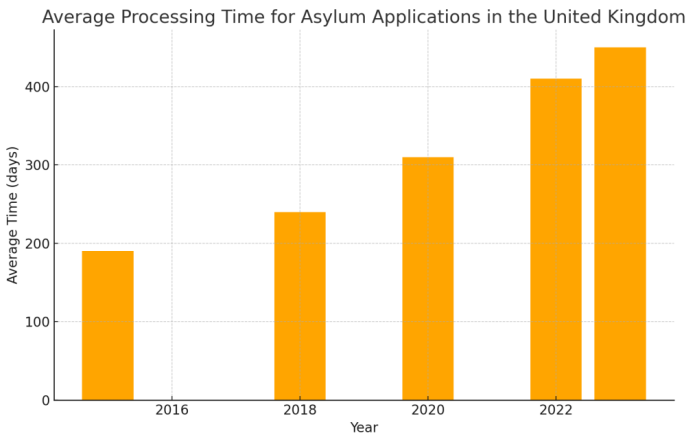
Another difficulty is the lack of a coherent integration strategy. Although some programmes – such as the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and Homes for Ukraine – provided funding for language courses, career counselling and social support, for many people arriving through informal channels, such measures are fragmented or unavailable. This creates a risk of marginalisation for refugees who, deprived of the appropriate tools for integration, have limited opportunities to enter the labour market and participate in social life (Refugee Council 2023).

Another significant problem is the overload of decision-making bodies. The Home Office, responsible for processing asylum applications, has been struggling with staff shortages and complex procedures for years. In 2022, the number of unprocessed applications reached a record high, with over 170,000 cases remaining in the so-called backlog. The government has made attempts to reduce it, including by simplifying procedures for selected groups, but these changes have often been criticised for lowering the quality of verification.

The challenges of the asylum system also have a political dimension. The debate on conflict migration is highly polarised in the UK – some emphasise the humanitarian obligation to provide shelter, while others stress the need to limit the influx and tighten border controls. These tensions are reflected in legislation, which in recent years has increasingly combined elements of humanitarian aid with policies to deter illegal migration (Morris 2023). The result is a mixed message, which on the one hand declares a willingness to support victims of war, but on the other hand introduces measures that make it more difficult for them to access asylum procedures.

Conflict-driven migration also raises questions about the UK’s ability to plan for the long term. Humanitarian crises in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine have shown that armed conflicts can last for years, and their effects in the form of mass migration do not end with the conclusion of a truce. The UK must therefore have a flexible yet stable system in place that is capable of responding to both sudden crises and long-term migration processes. Without such a strategy, the risk of system overload, growing social tensions and erosion of public trust will only increase.

Figure 2. Average Processing Time for Asylum Applications in the United Kingdom.



Source: Home Office. (2024). Immigration Statistics, Year Ending June 2024.

THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT-INDUCED MIGRATION ON BRITISH SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

Migration caused by armed conflicts is playing an increasingly important role in shaping the social and economic structure of the United Kingdom. Its effects are multidimensional, including demographic changes, impact on the labour market, the social welfare system, and relations between different ethnic and national groups (Castles, de Haas & Miller 2020; The Migration Observatory 2022).

In demographic terms, the influx of refugees and people covered by humanitarian programmes contributes to an increase in the working-age population. At a time when the UK is struggling with an ageing population and low birth rates, migrants provide important support for

maintaining demographic balance. ONS data shows that in 2022, almost 60% of those arriving under humanitarian pathways were under 40, and more than a quarter were aged 18–29. This means that many refugees can enter the labour market and contribute to economic growth (ONS 2023).

However, the impact of conflict migration on the economy is complex. On the one hand, refugees often bring valuable skills – in the case of Ukraine, these included skills in IT, medicine and engineering, while among arrivals from Hong Kong, specialists in the financial and education sectors predominated. In other cases, such as migration from Afghanistan or Syria, the structure of qualifications was less suited to the British labour market, requiring greater investment in training and professional integration. Access to English language learning plays a key role here – Migration Observatory research shows that language skills are one of the most important factors determining the pace of integration and employment levels among refugees.

Conflict-induced migration also puts pressure on social infrastructure, particularly in terms of housing, education and healthcare. In cities that have taken in larger groups of refugees, there is an increased demand for school places, often requiring additional language support, and longer queues for medical services. This problem is particularly evident in areas where there were already staff and infrastructure shortages (Jones & Kilkey 2023; NatCen Social Research 2023). At the same time, however, many local governments point to the positive effects of the presence of migrants, including the revitalisation of local labour markets and increased economic activity in neighbourhoods that had previously struggled with depopulation.

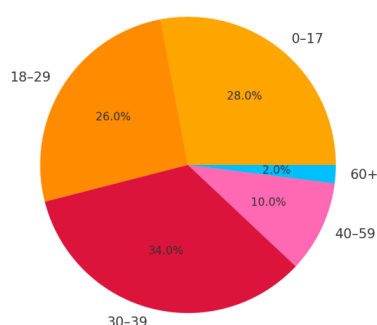
The social aspect of conflict-related migration is closely linked to public attitudes. In the case of Ukrainians residents, the narrative of solidarity prevailed, which facilitated a smoother adaptation and reduced tensions. On the other hand, migration from the Middle East and Africa was more often the subject of political disputes and media campaigns that emphasised security and border control issues. Research by the British Social Attitudes Survey shows that attitudes towards refugees are strongly dependent on the origin of migrants, the manner of their arrival, and whether they are perceived as having a legal route of entry.

From an economic point of view, the long-term balance of conflict-induced migration can be positive if the process of professional integration runs smoothly. The history of post-war immigration in the United Kingdom shows that migrant groups that initially place a burden on the social welfare system become net contributors in the long term. However, this requires access to education, vocational training and employment opportunities from an early stage of residence. Otherwise, the risk of permanent integration barriers – unemployment, poverty and marginalisation – increases, which can lead to social and political tensions (Dustmann, Frattini & Halls 2010).

As a result, conflict migration is both an opportunity and a challenge for the United Kingdom. A properly planned integration policy can transform the influx of refugees into a stimulus for development, while a lack of systemic measures risks deepening social divisions and overburdening public services.

Figure 3. Age Structure of Conflict Refugees in the UK.

Age Structure of Conflict Refugees in the United Kingdom



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2023). *International migration: age and sex distribution of humanitarian arrivals, UK, 2022*.

FORECASTS FOR THE FUTURE OF CONFLICT-DRIVEN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

An analysis of current trends and geopolitical conditions indicates that conflict-related migration will remain one of the key challenges for the United Kingdom in the coming decades. Changes in the global security environment, growing tensions in strategic regions and the effects of climate change will influence the scale and direction of population movements, and thus the migratory pressure on the British Isles.

According to UNHCR data, the number of people forced to leave their homes due to armed conflict and persecution reached a record high in 2023 – over 110 million people. This increase is not a temporary phenomenon; subsequent reports indicate that conflicts are becoming increasingly protracted and that peace processes often do not lead to lasting stability. In practice, this means that a significant proportion of refugees remain outside their country for many years, or even decades, which increases the likelihood of their resettlement to third countries, including the United Kingdom.

Over the next 10–15 years, the main sources of conflict-driven migration are expected to be:

- Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet region – the war in Ukraine may continue in the form of open conflict or frozen confrontation, and instability in countries such as Belarus and Moldova may generate new waves of refugees.
- The Middle East – Syria remains a divided country, and tensions in Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon may escalate depending on regional dynamics.
- Sub-Saharan Africa – conflicts in Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, often overlapping with humanitarian disasters, will force migration towards Europe.
- South Asia – the situation in Afghanistan remains unstable, and repression of women and ethnic minorities may lead to further emigration.

Another important factor shaping the future of migration will be the climate-induced ‘multiplication’ of conflicts. The World Bank predicts that by 2050, climate change will force up to 216 million people to be internally displaced, a significant proportion of whom may seek refuge outside their own country in the longer term. Dwindling water and arable land resources may accelerate the escalation of conflicts in many regions, increasing the number of war refugees.

The United Kingdom will have to adapt its migration and asylum mechanisms to this new context. Current challenges – lengthy procedures, housing infrastructure shortages, insufficient

integration support – may become chronic in the face of increased refugee inflows. This means that a long-term strategy needs to be developed, including:

- The development of legal humanitarian migration channels to reduce pressure on illegal routes and smuggling activities.
- Increased administrative capacity to process asylum applications through process automation and better staff training.
- Investing in housing and social infrastructure to enable the rapid accommodation and integration of new arrivals.
- Strengthening international cooperation, both in responding to current crises and in preventing conflicts at their source.

Demographic and economic forecasts indicate that, with properly managed conflict migration, the United Kingdom stands to gain – both in terms of human capital and international image. However, this scenario requires a coherent policy based on realism and pragmatism, rather than merely ad hoc responses to successive crises.

By 2040, conflict-induced migration will test the state's ability to combine humanitarian commitments with the protection of its own interests. The scale of this challenge means that it cannot be treated as a temporary problem – it will become a permanent feature of the social and political landscape of the United Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

Migration caused by global armed conflicts has become a permanent feature of the social and political reality of the United Kingdom. From refugees from the Balkans in the 1990s, through victims of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, to those fleeing Russian aggression in Ukraine, each of these waves of migration has required swift and varied responses from the British state. However, analysis shows that the UK's migration policy is largely reactive, often responding to current events but rarely based on a long-term strategy.

Successes – such as the Homes for Ukraine programme and the relocation of British armed forces personnel from Afghanistan – prove that the state can act efficiently when there is a clear political goal and public support. At the same time, protracted asylum procedures, inadequate housing infrastructure and the phenomenon of small boats point to deep structural challenges.

In the coming decades, the scale of conflict-driven migration is likely to increase, driven by factors such as geopolitical instability, climate change and growing international tensions. The UK's response will test its ability to balance humanitarian commitments with the protection of national interests. From the perspective of national identity, the history of the UK shows that successive waves of migration – despite initial tensions – have enriched the country culturally and economically. The key challenge remains to ensure that the integration of refugees is planned and supported, rather than left to chance.

Ultimately, conflict-induced migration is not only an administrative and economic challenge, but also a test of a country's moral compass. The United Kingdom, wishing to maintain its position as a responsible actor on the international stage, must strike a balance between protecting its borders and upholding the humanitarian values that have been part of its political and cultural tradition for centuries.

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Lennart Junge

Between Derogation and Defiance: Article 72 TFEU and the Erosion of Human Rights at the EU's External Borders. Assessing Latvia's Push-Back Practices at the Belarusian Border

IN A GIST

Latvia's push-back operations at the Belarusian border test the limits of EU treaty derogations, raising fundamental questions about human rights obligations at the EU's external frontiers.

INTRODUCTION

12 February 2025 marked a long day at the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Within one day, the Court held hearings in three cases, that all pertained to the so-called 'instrumentalisation of migrants' at the EU's external borders to Belarus (H.M.M. and Others v. Latvia; R.A. and Others v. Poland; C.O.C.G. and Others v. Lithuania). What culminated in the hearings had largely begun in the summer of 2021. After the Belarusian regime brutally cracked down on protests against the outcome of the 2020 presidential elections, the EU imposed sanctions against high-ranking Belarusian officials (Schmalz 2025). As retaliation, Belarus started to issue tourist visas to nationals from Middle Eastern and African countries and facilitated their passage to Minsk with the help of travel agents (Bruneau et al. 2021). As it simultaneously halted any efforts to keep migrants from accessing the EU border, the number of irregular entries onto EU territory surged (Ibid.). The affected neighbouring EU Member States, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia were quick to react to what the EU Commission coined a 'hybrid attack' by Belarus (European Commission 2024a). They restricted or fully suspended the right to asylum and began exercising push-backs of migrants to Belarus without an assessment of their protection claims (Ganty et al. 2024).

Determined to show support for Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, the EU Commission released a Communication in December 2024, in which it pointed to Article 72 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (European Commission 2024a). It is a norm that ensures EU Member States' responsibilities to maintain law and order and to safeguard internal security in the Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice – which inter alia contains the EU's competence to develop a Common European Asylum System (Article 78 TFEU). With that, Article 72 TFEU seemingly grants Member States the discretion to sidestep EU asylum law in extreme cases.

In using the example of Latvia, this paper seeks to investigate whether Article 72 TFEU provides a valid legal basis to justify push-back practices at the EU's external borders to Belarus. To answer this question, the paper first assesses the actions taken by Latvia in response to the border situation and considers their legal compatibility with EU asylum law. It then asks if Article 72 TFEU can be used to remedy any potential violations of EU asylum law and if Latvia can find a way to comply with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (CFR).

Latvia's Push-back Practices at the Border and their Compatibility with EU Law

Latvia's response

In response to the increased number of irregular border crossings from Belarus in the summer of 2021, Latvia declared a state of emergency in all territories bordering Belarus through a governmental order in August 2021. Under the order, it outright suspended the right to asylum for anyone entering Latvia irregularly from Belarus, including at official border crossing points (Ganty et al. 2024). In addition, the Latvian State Border Guard, the National Armed Forces, and the State Police were given broad powers to immediately return individuals to Belarus without any formal return procedures (Ancite-Jepifánova 2024). Following a domestic Court decision in March 2022, which found Latvia's border practices incompatible with EU and fundamental human rights law, the Latvian government began allowing for asylum applications at official border crossing points as well as at the Daugavpils Detention Centre (Broks et al. 2024). After prolonging the Order on the state of emergency multiple times, Latvia opted for a more permanent solution in June 2023 and consolidated its push-back practices through an amendment of its Border Laws (Ibid.).

Compatibility with EU law

Principle of non-refoulement (Article 19(2) CFR)

One of the key legal safeguards that stands out when assessing the potential entry of third-country nationals at the EU's external borders is the principle of non-refoulement. It stipulates that no individual may be returned to the territories of a state where he or she would face a serious risk of being subjected to the death penalty, torture, or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The principle is a cornerstone of EU and international human rights law and is widely considered to have acquired customary law status (UNHCR 1997). Within Europe, its contours were substantially formed by the ECtHR which has read the prohibition of refoulement into Article 3 ECHR (Hamdan 2016), a provision which states that "no one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." In EU law, the principle of non-refoulement is explicitly codified in Article 19(2) CFR.

The situation at the Latvian-Belarusian border raises multiple concerns regarding the principle of non-refoulement. As early as December 2021, Amnesty International gathered testimonies of individuals who had suffered beatings, deprivation of food, water, shelter, and sanitation as well as theft of phones and money by Belarusian forces when moving from Minsk to the EU border (Amnesty International 2021). According to the report, these individuals were held in exclusion zones, a fenced-off area on the Belarusian side of the border which they were not allowed to leave before ultimately being forced to attempt a border crossing into the EU through physical violence and dogs chasing after them (Ibid.).

In light of the dire conditions in Belarus, Latvia would need to grant individuals who are forced across the EU-Belarusian border the possibility to apply for asylum if they sought to comply with the principle of non-refoulement (Ancite-Jepifánova 2025). In reality, it either repels those individuals at the border or, if they manage to cross into their territories immediately apprehends them and pushes them back to Belarus without due process and any assessment of their asylum claim (Ibid.). Through the repetitive process of push- and pull-backs, the affected individuals remain stuck in forests for weeks, sometimes months without an opportunity to apply for asylum as such applications are only accepted at border crossing points (Ancite-Jepifánova 2024). Besides accusations of systematically confiscating people's phones, the Latvian authorities reportedly also pressured those trapped in the forest into signing voluntary return papers, making their transfer to the Daugavpils Detention Centre contingent on their signature

(Ibid.; Amnesty International 2022).

Overall, Latvia's border practices themselves likely amount to inhuman and degrading treatment, given the reports of violence against apprehended third-country nationals and the health hazards they are subjected to during push-backs and as part of their limbo status at the border (Ancite-Jepifánova 2024). Besides, Latvia clearly violates the principle of non-refoulement by returning people to Belarus without an examination of their asylum claims, considering the numerous reports of violent and coercive measures used by Belarusian border officials (Broks et al. 2024; Ancite-Jepifánova 2025).

The prohibition of collective expulsions (Article 19(1) CFR)

Latvia's legislative changes and border practices also come into considerable tension with the prohibition of collective expulsions. Similar to the principle of non-refoulement, the interpretation of the prohibition of collective expulsions was significantly shaped by the ECtHR which has defined collective expulsions as "any measure compelling aliens, as a group, to leave the country, except where such a measure is taken on the basis of a reasonable and objective examination of the particular case of each individual alien of the group" (Andric v. Sweden, 1999). In essence, the prohibition of collective expulsions – which is laid down in EU law in Art. 19(1) CFR – largely functions as a procedural safeguard against summary returns at the border, guaranteeing a minimum examination of each case (Thym 2023a).

In 2020 the ECtHR introduced a crucial exception to the principle in *N.D. and N.T. v. Spain* (*N.D. and N.T. v. Spain*, 2020). The Court ruled that push-backs do not violate the prohibition of collective expulsions if the lack of an individual expulsion decision is attributable to the applicant's 'own conduct' (Ibid., paras. 200–201). It held that the 600 individuals that had stormed the border fences of the Spanish exclave Melilla had been given "genuine and effective access to means of legal entry" (Ibid., paras. 212–217, 220–227, 229). By failing to use these legal avenues without cogent reasons and instead crossing the land border in an unauthorised manner while taking advantage of their large numbers and using force, the Court attributed the lack of individual removal decisions to the applicants, finding no violation of the prohibition of collective expulsions (Ibid., paras. 201, 231). Despite strong criticism (ECCHR 2020; Markard 2020) the ECtHR firmly established the exception in subsequent cases (*Shahzad v. Hungary*, 2021, paras. 59–68; *A.A. and others v. North Macedonia*, 2022, paras. 13, 114, 123).

In the case at hand, it is undisputed that Latvia does not conduct an individual examination of each case before returning the concerned individuals to Belarus. It nonetheless argued before the ECtHR that their national legislation did not violate the prohibition of collective expulsions because the 'own conduct' exception from *N.D. and N.T.* was applicable (Ancite-Jepifánova 2025). Even though it will have to be awaited how the ECtHR sees the exception in light of the alleged 'instrumentalisation' of migrants, several aspects seem to preclude its applicability in the present case. For one, there are no reports that those seeking to enter the EU through Belarus deliberately took advantage of their large numbers and used force. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the Latvian border procedures come even remotely close to providing "genuine and effective access to means of legal entry" (*N.D. and N.T. v. Spain*, 2020, para. 201). As indicated above, Latvia fully suspended the right to asylum from August 2021 until April 2022. While it allowed for asylum applications at official border crossing points thereafter, Latvia currently only operates one border checkpoint along its 172 kilometre woodland border to Belarus (LSM+ 2024). In March of this year, it further restricted access to the border point by ordering it can only be

crossed by motor vehicle, but not on foot or by bicycle (LSM+ 2025). Even if this sole existing crossing point somehow qualifies as genuine and effective access to means of legal entry, it must be noted that the crossing point is nearly impossible to access in practice, as reports indicate Belarusian authorities intentionally bring individuals attempting to cross into the EU to places far away from these points and, in some instances, take their phones away (Broks et al. 2024; Ganty et al. 2024; Ancite-Jepifánova 2025). Therefore, those stuck at the Latvian-Belarusian border arguably have cogent reasons not to use the (scarce) means of legal entry. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the principle of non-refoulement was not at play in N.D. and N.T., as the ECtHR ruled out a violation of Article 3 ECHR early in the procedure (N.D. and N.T. v Spain, 2015, para. 15). The situation at the Latvian-Belarusian border does not allow for a similar conclusion. As outlined above, Latvia violates the principle of non-refoulement if they return individuals to Belarus. To apply the 'own conduct' exception in these circumstances would essentially free States from their obligation to carry out a minimum examination of each case despite the imminent risk of refoulement, thereby hollowing out the exact purpose of the prohibition of collective expulsions (Schmalz 2022).^[1]

In light of these considerations, the irregular entry of third-country nationals on Latvian territory via the Belarusian border cannot be attributed to their 'own conduct', meaning a push-back of these individuals without an examination of their case violates the prohibition of collective expulsions.

EU Secondary Law and the Right to Asylum in Art. 18 CFR

Besides the safeguards in the Charter, the legal assessment of migratory movements at the EU's external borders is heavily informed by EU secondary law. Articles 3(1), 6 and 7(1) of Directive 2013/32/EU (Asylum Procedures Directive) provide for an individual right to apply for asylum in the territory of a Member State, including at the border. This right applies to anyone, "even if he or she is staying illegally in that Member State" (M.A. v. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2022, para. 58). Latvia's initial outright suspension of the right to asylum evidently falls foul of these obligations. The same applies to the later imposed requirement to apply for asylum at official border crossing points. Such requirement impedes the effectiveness of the right to asylum, since border crossing points are scarce and practically impossible to access (Ibid., para. 65; M.A. v. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2022, Opinion of AG Emiliou, para. 75). Lastly, Latvia breaches Article 9(1) of the Directive by denying the provisional right to remain during the asylum procedure. Further violations of secondary law arise from the return of asylum seekers to Belarus without any formal procedures, most notably without issuance of individual return decisions. Such conduct is incompatible with Articles 6(1), 12(1) and 13(1) of Directive 2008/115/EC (Return Directive). As far as Latvia detained asylum seekers solely for staying illegally on its territory (Amnesty International 2022) such practice violates Article 8(2) and 8(3) of Directive 2013/33/EU (Reception Conditions Directive) (M.A. v. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2022, para. 93).^[2]

It is worth noting that Latvia also restricts Article 18 CFR, which enshrines the right to asylum in primary law. The contours of this right are not exactly clear, as the European Court of Justice (CJEU), so far, has only vaguely addressed it. The Court did clarify, however, that the effectiveness of Article 18 CFR is impeded if Member States do not allow third-country nationals to make an application for asylum in accordance with the Asylum Procedures Directive (Ibid., para. 63; European Commission v. Hungary, 2020, para. 102). By disregarding its aforementioned obligations under the Asylum Procedures Directive, Latvia thus violates Article 18 CFR.

Art. 72 TFEU: A potential pathway to justification?

Having laid out that Latvia's border practices violate EU asylum law the following chapter now seeks to investigate if Latvia could justify said breaches. It will begin by addressing the potential of Article 72 TFEU to derogate from EU secondary law before turning to EU fundamental rights.

Conditions for derogation

On paper, Article 72 TFEU safeguards Member States' responsibilities with regard to the maintenance of law and order and the safeguarding of internal security. Essentially, the norm functions as a caveat to the transfer of competence by Member States to the EU in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice – an area that traditionally concerns matters deemed to strike at the core of state sovereignty such as immigration or asylum (De Verdelhan 2024). Whether Article 72 TFEU contains a derogatory function was long unclear (Thym 2023a). Much of the uncertainty was resolved when the CJEU acknowledged in a 2020 judgment that in “exceptional and clearly defined cases” Article 72 TFEU can be used by Member States to derogate from EU law (European Commission v. Republic of Poland and Others, 2020, para. 143). It clarified, however, that Member States must show it is necessary to have recourse to the provision (Ibid., paras. 143, 147), installing a two-tier test. First, Member States must prove a genuine and concrete risk to their public order or internal security. It does not suffice if a Member State “merely invokes, in a general manner, the risk (...) that arrivals of large numbers of asylum seekers might cause” (European Commission v. Hungary, 2020, paras. 217, 261). Second, Member States need to show that existing EU secondary law does not take due account of their responsibilities under Art. 72 TFEU (Ibid., para. 263). In other words, where the relevant secondary legislation already provides a framework for Member States' security interests it functions as *leges specialis*, which means the necessity of applying Article 72 TFEU simply does not exist (ECRE 2020; Thym 2023a). To this date, there has not been a single case where the Court has deemed these requirements to have been met, rejecting any attempts to justify non-compliance with EU asylum law based on Article 72 TFEU.

Derogating from EU secondary law at the Latvian-Belarusian border

To successfully invoke Article 72 TFEU in the present case, Latvia would first need to prove the necessity of such action, i.e., it would need to show specific evidence of a genuine, present and sufficiently serious threat to its society. The arguments put forward by Latvia in its communications as well as its defense before the ECtHR largely center around two aspects, namely the large number of asylum seeker arrivals at the border and the geopolitical context in which they took place, i.e. the targeted actions pursued by the Belarusian regime (Broks et al. 2024). As for the first argument, it must be recalled that the CJEU has rejected the notion that the mass influx of third-country nationals in itself suffices to claim a threat to public order and internal security (European Commission v. Hungary, 2020, para. 217; M.A. v. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2022, para. 72). As for the second one, Latvia may come back to an argument made by Poland before the ECtHR, where it asserted that many third-country nationals were not manipulated by the Belarusian authorities but rather actively cooperated with the latter to enter the EU illegally. The potential of such claims may be limited, however, as research indicates that those attempting to enter the EU through Belarus make up a highly heterogeneous group and frequently do not have any connections to Belarusian or Russian authorities (Ancite-Jepifánova 2024). Arguably, the legal implications of Belarus' involvement may therefore be reserved for international law and remain without any direct effect on Latvia's obligations towards

third-country nationals at their borders (Broks et al. 2024; Schmalz 2025).^[3]

Even if Latvia managed to convince the CJEU of the risk posed by the ‘instrumentalisation of migrants’ to their public order or internal security, they would also need to show that existing EU secondary law does not suffice to remedy such risk. This will prove challenging as the instruments Latvia seeks to depart from are essentially the same that the CJEU has already found to take due account of Member States’ security interests in previous judgments (European Commission v. Hungary, 2020, paras. 221, 224, 263). The Court held that the relevant provisions of the EU’s asylum *acquis* already afford Member States discretion to manage exceptional migratory pressures, for example through the use of prolonged border procedures, and that recourse to Article 72 TFEU was therefore not necessary. Besides this aspect, the prospects of using Article 72 TFEU are further diminished by the fact that the ‘instrumentalisation of migrants’ has found its way into EU law as part of the Pact on Migration and Asylum which will come into effect in June 2026 (European Commission 2024b). Art. 1(4)(b) of the newly adopted Regulation (EU) 2024/1359 (Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation) makes explicit reference to the scenario of ‘instrumentalisation’ and was evidently drafted and adopted, at least in part, against the backdrop of the situation at the EU-Belarusian border. Where an ‘instrumentalisation of migrants’ takes place, the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation allows Member States to derogate from several provisions of Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 (Asylum Procedures Regulation), e.g., by delaying asylum application registrations or adapting border procedures (Ineli-Ciger 2024). Even though these changes to EU secondary law have not yet come into effect, they further diminish any chances of successfully invoking Article 72 TFEU before the CJEU in the future. After all, Member States will have a hard time arguing for the necessity to derogate from EU secondary law, when EU secondary law itself lays down concrete derogatory mechanisms for exceptional circumstances (De Verdelhan 2024; Stiller 2025).^{[4][5]}

Fundamental rights as the final hurdle

Even if a Member State could convince the CJEU of the necessity to derogate from EU secondary law based on Article 72 TFEU, any derogation mechanism would ultimately be tested against fundamental human rights in EU law (ECRE 2020; Stiller 2025). As shown above, Latvia breaches the principle of non-refoulement, the prohibition of collective expulsions and the right to asylum through its conduct at the Belarusian border. All three fundamental rights provide little or no room for exceptions and derogations. The ECtHR has repeatedly affirmed the principle of non-refoulement as an absolute and non-derogable right (Aksoy v. Turkey, 1996, para. 62 with further references), a notion derived from Art. 15(2) ECHR. By virtue of Art. 52(3) CFR this absolute nature of the principle of non-refoulement also applies to EU law, i.e., Art. 19(2) CFR (M.A. v. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2022, Opinion of AG Emiliou, para. 139). As for the prohibition of collective expulsions, it is not per se among the list of non-derogable rights. Due to its function as a procedural safeguard against refoulement any limitations or exceptions must, however, be met with strict scrutiny. The ‘own conduct’ exception from N.D. and N.T. remains the only one to date and does not apply in the present case as the requirements are not met with regard to the situation at the Latvian-Belarusian border. The only conceivable way for Latvia to reconcile their border practices with EU fundamental rights would therefore be an extension of the ‘own conduct’ exception to situations of ‘instrumentalisation’ which also covers the principle of non-refoulement (Thym 2025). Even though it needs to be seen, if the Court will give in to mounting pressure by States amid the geopolitical tensions with Belarus, such an outcome would come as a major surprise. Not only would it disregard the evident risk of inhuman and

degrading treatment faced by third-country nationals upon return to Belarus. It would also hollow out the absolute nature of the principle of non-refoulement as a whole, rendering its meaning illusory in the present case.^{[6][7]}

Even if all other legal hurdles are cleared, Latvia would, in EU law, need to show as a last step that the push-back practices do not violate the right to asylum in Article 18 CFR (Thym 2025). As mentioned above, the contours of said right are not fully clear. The CJEU has rarely addressed Article 18 CFR but has emphasized that it sees the right to be ‘given concrete form’ or to be ‘specified’ by EU secondary law (Commission v. Hungary, 2023, para. 44; Den Heijer 2021). As long as secondary law enshrines an individual right to apply for asylum in the EU, including at its borders, the scope of Article 18 CFR does not have much practical bearing (Thym 2023b). Should the secondary law, however, be amended to no longer contain such right or a Member State be allowed to derogate from it based on Article 72 TFEU, then the meaning of Article 18 CFR could take on a much larger role in the future (Ibid.). Provided that the CJEU sees it as an individual right, whose scope goes beyond protection from refoulement to also cover, e.g., access to an asylum procedure and a provisional right to remain (Thym 2025), Member States would be confronted with yet another substantial hurdle in an attempt to reconcile push-backs with EU asylum law.^[8]

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the legal implications of the measures adopted by Latvia in response to the alleged ‘instrumentalisation’ of migrants at its external border with Belarus, with a particular focus on the potential use of Article 72 TFEU as a derogation mechanism from EU law. As demonstrated, Latvia essentially “legalized” push-backs after the Belarusian regime began facilitating the passage of third-country nationals to its borders in the summer of 2021. Such practices are plainly incompatible with EU primary and secondary law. As shown, the prospects for Latvia to justify these practices under EU law are meager. While Article 72 TFEU theoretically permits derogations from EU secondary law in exceptional circumstances, the strict conditions imposed by the CJEU remain unmet in the present case. In addition, the denial of access to asylum procedures and the return of third-country nationals to Belarus without an assessment of their protection needs constitutes an open violation of several human rights safeguards in EU law. On a larger scale, the Latvian response to the Belarusian border situation reveals the fragility of the EU’s asylum law framework. Confronted with a geopolitically orchestrated migratory movement, Latvia has systematically departed from said framework, a move that the EU Commission has endorsed rather than scrutinized, as demonstrated by its Communication from December 2024. Firmly set on avoiding any confrontation with Latvia and the other affected Member States and keen to maintain unity within the EU at all costs, the Commission has fully abolished its role as the ‘Guardian of the Treaties’ in the contentious field of EU asylum law (Grześkowiak 2023). Through such conduct, the Commission contributes to the erosion of fundamental rights at the EU’s external borders and tolerates that those wishing to enter the EU at such borders are subjected to arbitrary and abusive Member State policies.^[9]

NOTES

1. See Chapter “Principle of non-refoulement (Article 19(2) CFR)”.
2. See also Chapter “The prohibition of collective expulsions (Article 19(1) CFR)”.

3. Cf. the reply by the Polish Government in their hearing before the ECtHR on 12 February 2025, <https://www.echr.coe.int/w/r.a.-and-others-v.-poland-no.-42120/21-> (at 2:05:48 hr).
4. The Asylum Procedures Directive, Reception Conditions Directive and Return Directive.
5. In a situation of instrumentalisation Art. 10(1), 11(1) and (6) of the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation allow for derogations from Art. 27, 44(1)(b), 51(2), and Art. 53(2)(a) of the Asylum Procedures Regulation.
6. See Chapter “The prohibition of collective expulsions (Article 19(1) CFR)”.
7. See Chapter “Principle of non-refoulement (Article 19(2) CFR)”.
8. Art. 3(1) of the Asylum Procedures Directive and Art. 3(1) of Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 (Dublin III Regulation).
9. The author provides a detailed analysis of how the Commission’s response to the Belarusian border situation speaks to a general trend of complete acquiescence to breaches of EU asylum law in recent years (pp. 95–102).

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Emmanuel Learnmore Gumbo

Climate-Induced Displacement and the Limits of Protection: Towards a Rights-Based and Narrative-Centered Response

IN A GIST

Current international protection frameworks are ill-equipped to address climate-induced displacement. A rights-based and narrative-centered approach is essential to safeguard dignity and agency of the displaced.

INTRODUCTION

Climate-induced migration exposes persistent gaps in international protection, as the 1951 Refugee Convention generally excludes people fleeing environmental harms. At the same time, media narratives can either entrench those gaps through securitization and misinformation or help close them by humanizing displacement and building political will for reform (Greenslade 2020). This paper advances a dual analysis, a doctrinal examination of emerging human-rights and environmental jurisprudence and a critical analysis of media framing, arguing that responsible storytelling can operate as a legal adjunct that enables non-refoulement, pre-displacement adaptation duties, and dignified mobility where law remains under-specified.

To ground this analysis in a contemporary European context, the study focuses on Poland and Croatia as comparative case studies. Both countries are European Union member states operating within the same supranational legal framework, yet they differ in political discourse, historical migration experience, and public narratives surrounding mobility. Poland has exhibited a highly securitized approach to migration, with political rhetoric frequently framing migrants as threats to national sovereignty and identity. Croatia, while less overtly securitized in political tone, has similarly centred its migration discourse on border management and regional refugee flows rather than climate-induced mobility. Neither country currently recognizes a distinct legal status for climate-displaced persons. By examining these two contexts, the study explores how legal gaps and narrative environments interact within states that are legally bound by shared European human rights obligations but differ in political framing. This comparative approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how narrative dynamics influence the practical implementation, or neglect of emerging climate-related protection norms.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Climate change is already driving widespread displacement through extreme weather and slow onset crises, yet people uprooted by climate impacts fall largely outside existing protection frameworks. Cross-border climate-displaced persons do not fit the narrow refugee definition requiring persecution by a human agent, leaving most climate migrants without a defined legal status. The result is a protection gap addressed only by piecemeal human-rights principles, ad hoc regional instruments, and discretionary humanitarian pathways rather than a coherent global regime (UNGA 2018). This gap constitutes a significant human rights problem, those displaced by rising seas, desertification, or severe storms face existential threats but lack

guaranteed rights to asylum or resettlement. Compounding this challenge is the role of public narrative. Media portrayals can shape whether climate-induced displacement is seen as a humanitarian responsibility or a security threat. Sensationalist metaphors of “floods” or “hordes” of migrants can fuel exclusionary policies, whereas narrative frames that highlight shared humanity and responsibility might build solidarity (Threadgold 2009). The protection gap and its narrative dimensions thus form the core problem this research addresses.

Research Questions

Drawing from the doctrinal, policy, and socio-legal gaps identified in the literature, this study is guided by three interrelated lines of inquiry. First, it interrogates the limitations of existing international and national legal frameworks in protecting individuals displaced by climate change. Despite the evolution of international refugee law, human rights law, and soft-law instruments addressing environmental mobility, significant normative and protection deficits remain. This research therefore examines where these regimes fall short, particularly in relation to cross-border displacement, slow-onset climate impacts, and loss and damage, and explores emerging legal principles, jurisprudence, and normative developments that may contribute to closing these protection gaps.

Second, the study investigates how media representations and public narratives shape policy responses to climate-induced displacement. Legal frameworks do not operate in isolation; they are embedded within political and discursive environments. Media portrayals of “climate migrants” frequently oscillate between securitization, victimization, and depersonalized crisis framing. This research analyses how such narratives influence public opinion, state responsibility, and the political willingness to extend protection. It further explores how shifts in narrative framing from threat-based discourse to rights-based and dignity-centred storytelling, can generate more inclusive and humane policy outcomes.

Third, the study examines how a rights-based legal approach can be meaningfully complemented by a narrative-centred strategy to strengthen protection for climate-displaced populations. While doctrinal reform remains essential, law alone is insufficient to secure transformative change. By integrating legal analysis with insights from media studies and ethical storytelling, the research proposes a combined framework that not only advances normative protection but also reshapes public understanding and political engagement. In doing so, it seeks to move beyond a purely regulatory response and toward an approach that empowers displaced communities as rights-bearing agents rather than passive victims.

In line with these guiding questions, the study pursues three principal objectives. It first evaluates the structural and doctrinal limitations of current international and regional protection regimes addressing climate-induced displacement and identifies emerging principles capable of expanding protective scope. It then analyses the role of media and public narratives in shaping perceptions of climate-induced migrants and influencing state and societal responses. Finally, it develops an integrated strategy that combines rights-based legal reform with narrative transformation, leveraging both legal tools and ethical storytelling practices to strengthen protection and agency for climate-displaced persons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal protection gaps

Climate-induced displacement remains largely unaddressed by binding international law. Individuals fleeing environmental disasters, sea-level rise, desertification, or other climate-related harms do not fall within the 1951 Refugee Convention's definition of a refugee, which requires persecution linked to specific protected grounds. This restrictive interpretation has been confirmed at the domestic level, most notably by the New Zealand Supreme Court in *Teitiota v. Chief Executive of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment* (NZSC 2015), where a climate-based asylum claim was rejected on the basis that environmental degradation did not amount to persecution under the Convention.

In the absence of a dedicated treaty for climate-displaced persons, limited protection has emerged through general human rights law. In *Ioane Teitiota v. New Zealand* (UNHRC 2020), the UN Human Rights Committee affirmed that returning an individual to a country where climate change poses a real risk to life could, in principle, violate the right to life under the ICCPR. Although Teitiota's individual claim failed due to the Committee's assessment that the risk was not sufficiently imminent, the decision marked an important doctrinal development by recognizing environmental harm as potentially engaging non-refoulement obligations. In *Daniel Billy et al. v. Australia* (UNHRC 2022), the Committee went further, indicating that states may bear positive obligations to adopt adaptation measures where foreseeable climate impacts threaten communities' rights to family life and culture.

Regional jurisprudence has also begun to engage with climate-related harms. In 2024, the European Court of Human Rights acknowledged that inadequate climate action can amount to a breach of human rights obligations (ECtHR 2024), reinforcing the broader principle that environmental degradation may trigger state responsibility. At the regional level in Africa, the 2009 Kampala Convention explicitly addresses internal displacement caused by natural disasters and climate change (AU 2009), yet its effectiveness remains contingent on domestic implementation, which has been uneven. Similarly, the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration recognizes climate change as a driver of migration and calls for cooperative responses, but it operates as a non-binding framework without enforceable rights.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate incremental doctrinal movement but not the creation of a comprehensive legal status for so-called "climate refugees."

The emerging principles often impose high evidentiary thresholds, rely on soft-law authority, or depend on discretionary interpretation by states. As a result, climate-displaced persons who cross borders continue to fall outside any guaranteed protection regime. In practice, they must rely on ad hoc humanitarian visas, temporary protection schemes, or general immigration categories rather than an entitlement to asylum or permanent status grounded explicitly in climate-related harm. A significant protection gap therefore persists between the scale of climate-induced displacement and the fragmented legal mechanisms currently available to address it (UNHCR 2019).

Media narratives and public perception

How displacement is framed in the media significantly affects public attitudes and policy. Studies show that alarmist or dehumanizing metaphors, for example, describing migrants as an "invasion" or a "flood", recast a humanitarian issue into a security threat and narrow the space for protection. Such sensational frames can create a feedback loop, fear-driven coverage increases public support for restrictive measures, and those policies then reinforce the sense of crisis. On the other hand, exaggerated rhetoric about looming hordes of "climate refugees", e.g.

predicting tens of millions of migrants can also backfire, provoking defensive nationalism rather than proactive solutions (Bonneux & Van Praag 2024).

In contrast, research finds that narratives which humanize climate migrants, by telling individual stories and clearly linking losses to climate change can engender empathy and solidarity instead of fear (Müller 2021). Effective storytelling is not about glossy “positive spin” but about truthfully depicting agency and causation without voyeurism or pity. By showing displaced people as dignified agents and clearly attributing their plight to broader injustices, journalists and advocates can help audiences connect notions of fairness to legal principles like nonrefoulement and the right to dignity, thereby making supportive policies more politically acceptable (Goldberg 2024). Furthermore, scholars argue that those affected should be protagonists in these narratives, their voices and testimonies need to be front and center, so that personal stories become evidence in debates over legal reform rather than mere afterthoughts (Robinson 2018).

Case insights

Real-world examples from outside Europe help illuminate the structural dynamics that this study later observes in Poland and Croatia. While the empirical focus of this paper is European, cases from the Global South demonstrate more visibly how legal frameworks and public narratives interact to shape outcomes for displaced populations.

In Mozambique, Cyclone Idai struck in March 2019, causing catastrophic flooding in Beira and surrounding regions and displacing more than 400,000 people (World Bank 2020). Mozambique is a party to the African Union’s Kampala Convention, which formally recognizes and protects internally displaced persons (IDPs), including those displaced by natural disasters. On paper, therefore, a regional legal framework existed to safeguard rights related to shelter, assistance, and durable solutions. However, while the disaster initially attracted substantial international humanitarian attention, media coverage declined rapidly after the emergency phase. As global visibility diminished, so too did sustain financial and political commitment to long-term recovery and rights implementation (Humanity & Inclusion 2019). The Mozambican case illustrates that even where progressive legal norms exist, their realization depends heavily on continued public and political engagement, both of which are shaped by narrative attention cycles.

A similar dynamic can be observed in Bangladesh, where slow-onset climate processes such as sea-level rise, salinization, and river erosion are gradually displacing coastal populations. Many affected families migrate internally to Dhaka, where they settle in informal settlements without secure tenure or legal protection (Ali 2021). Unlike sudden disasters, slow-onset displacement rarely generates dramatic headlines, yet its cumulative impact is profound. Public discourse in Bangladesh has alternated between framing these migrants as contributors to urban congestion and portraying them as victims of global climate injustice (Rahman 2023). These competing narratives influence local policy responses: where migrants are framed as burdens, policy emphasis shifts toward containment and urban control; where they are recognized as rights-bearing citizens displaced by structural environmental harm, there is greater support for integration measures and adaptation planning.

These cases are analytically relevant to Poland and Croatia for two reasons. First, they demonstrate that the presence or absence of formal legal instruments, such as the Kampala Convention or national disaster policies, is insufficient to guarantee meaningful protection. Implementation is mediated by political will. Second, they reveal how narrative framing directly

affects that political will. The Polish and Croatian contexts examined later in this study show limited public discourse on climate-induced displacement. The Mozambique and Bangladesh cases therefore serve as contrastive illustrations: they reveal what becomes visible when displacement is clearly attributable to climate events and how even then, protection outcomes fluctuate depending on sustained narrative engagement.

In this way, the Global South cases function not as digressions, but as structural mirrors. They clarify the central argument of this paper: that legal norms and narrative environments operate in tandem. Where narratives sustain empathy and responsibility, legal frameworks are more likely to be implemented robustly. Where attention fades or securitized framing dominates, even well-developed norms remain under-realized. The lessons drawn from Mozambique and Bangladesh thus sharpen the analysis of Poland and Croatia, where the absence of a strong narrative around climate-induced mobility contributes to political inertia despite emerging international legal developments.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multi-method research design combining doctrinal legal analysis with a comparative case study of narrative contexts in Poland and Croatia. Although exploratory in orientation, the research followed structured selection criteria and sequential analytical phases to ensure coherence and rigor.

The doctrinal analysis examined international and regional legal instruments relevant to climate-induced displacement, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, core human rights treaties, selected UN Human Rights Committee communications, regional jurisprudence, and soft-law frameworks such as the Global Compact for Migration and the Kampala Convention. In addition, national legal frameworks in Poland and Croatia were reviewed to determine whether domestic asylum or complementary protection mechanisms could extend to climate-related claims. The legal analysis proceeded thematically, identifying protection gaps, non-refoulement standards, and emerging human rights principles.

The narrative component analysed a purposive sample of media articles, opinion pieces, and official statements published between 2018 and 2024 in Poland and Croatia. Approximately twelve to twenty items were selected based on their relevance to migration, border governance, or climate-related mobility. Materials were examined in Polish, Croatian, and English to ensure accurate representation of domestic discourse. Using qualitative content analysis, the study identified dominant frames such as securitization, humanitarianism, economic burden narratives, and the relative absence of climate-linked migration in public debate. A small number of expert informants from both countries were consulted to contextualize and validate interpretive findings. The research proceeded in three stages: doctrinal mapping of legal protections, analysis of narrative framing, and synthesis of both strands to assess how legal norms and public discourse interact. Triangulation across legal texts, media materials, and expert insights strengthened the reliability of conclusions.

NARRATIVE DYNAMICS AND PROTECTION GAPS IN POLAND AND CROATIA

The analysis of media discourse, political rhetoric, and expert consultations in Poland and Croatia reveals a striking pattern: climate-induced displacement is largely absent from public and policy debate in both countries. This absence constitutes a significant empirical finding with

serious implications for the development of legal protection. While climate change is acknowledged in environmental and adaptation policies, it is rarely framed as a driver of cross-border mobility, and the category of “climate refugees” is not meaningfully recognized in domestic discourse.

In Poland, migration narratives are predominantly securitized. Media coverage and political rhetoric tend to frame migrants through the lens of border control, sovereignty, and cultural threat (Tiido 2020). Within this narrative environment, migration is treated as a matter of national defense rather than humanitarian responsibility. Climate change is virtually never cited as a cause of movement, and no discursive space exists for recognizing climate-displaced persons as a distinct protection category. As a result, even if international human rights jurisprudence continues to evolve, there is little domestic narrative foundation upon which climate-related protection claims could gain political traction.

Croatia presents a somewhat different political tone but a similar structural outcome. Public discourse has largely centered on the European refugee crisis, regional conflict displacement, and economic migration. Although Croatia has direct historical experience with forced displacement and actively participates in European Union migration mechanisms, climate-induced mobility remains peripheral to policy discussions. National attention focuses primarily on domestic climate adaptation, such as coastal protection and drought response, rather than on receiving or legally recognizing climate-displaced persons from abroad. As in Poland, no formal legal category exists for climate-related displacement, and expert informants confirmed that the issue is not currently on the political agenda.

The convergence of these findings underscores a broader conclusion: the absence of climate-induced displacement from public discourse significantly contributes to the persistence of the legal protection gap. Where migration is framed primarily as a security issue, political incentives favor restrictive policies. Where climate change is discussed without linking it to human mobility, the structural drivers of displacement remain invisible. In both contexts, the lack of a coherent narrative connecting climate harm to migration reduces public awareness and diminishes pressure on policymakers to expand protection frameworks.

This narrative absence interacts directly with the legal limitations identified earlier. While emerging human rights jurisprudence suggests that non-refoulement obligations may extend to life-threatening environmental conditions, such doctrinal developments remain abstract unless embedded within supportive domestic discourse. Legal innovation requires political will for implementation, and political will is shaped by narrative framing. In environments where migrants are portrayed as threats, there is minimal appetite to extend complementary protection or develop new asylum criteria based on climate risk.

The findings therefore point to a structural interdependence between legal reform and narrative transformation. Expanding protection for climate-induced displaced persons cannot rely solely on judicial interpretation or treaty development. Legal principles require public legitimacy and sustained political support to become operational. Conversely, empathetic narratives alone cannot secure durable rights without institutional mechanisms capable of translating moral concern into enforceable protection.

Effective responses thus require a coordinated interplay between legal innovation and narrative change. Media agenda-setting can elevate climate displacement from a peripheral concern to a recognized policy issue, while responsible storytelling can humanize abstract legal doctrines

and make emerging norms intelligible to broader audiences (Goldberg 2024). When courts or UN bodies articulate obligations related to climate harm, narrative framing that emphasizes dignity, causation, and shared responsibility can transform those principles from technical rulings into socially resonant claims.

At the same time, this interaction is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Empathy generated by singular crises may be temporary, and competing narratives of fear or xenophobia can undermine humanitarian framing. Sustained progress requires institutionalizing responsible storytelling practices and embedding climate mobility within long-term public discourse rather than episodic crisis reporting. It also requires moving beyond isolated judicial victories toward the codification of clearer protection standards, such as explicit climate-related complementary protection pathways or structured mobility schemes.

Taken together, the Polish and Croatian cases demonstrate that the invisibility of climate-induced displacement in public discourse is not merely descriptive but constitutive: it actively shapes the limits of legal imagination and political possibility. Closing the protection gap will therefore depend on a continuous feedback loop in which evolving legal norms inform narrative framing, and transformed narratives generate the political space necessary for legal reform. Only through this iterative process can climate-displaced persons move from discursive absence to recognized rights-bearing status within national and international protection regimes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are derived directly from the combined doctrinal and narrative analyses conducted in this study. The legal review demonstrated the persistence of a protection gap for climate-displaced persons, while the narrative analysis revealed that the absence or securitization of climate mobility discourse in Poland and Croatia limits political willingness to operationalize emerging legal principles. The recommendations therefore respond to both dimensions of the problem: normative under-specification and discursive marginalization. They do not stem solely from expert interviews, although expert consultations inform contextual interpretation; rather, they represent analytically grounded proposals based on the structural interaction between law and narrative identified throughout the study.

First, governments and international agencies should explicitly incorporate climate-related risks into existing protection mechanisms. The doctrinal analysis established that non-refoulement principles and complementary protection pathways already contain interpretive flexibility. States could therefore instruct asylum and migration authorities to treat severe climate-related harm as grounds for subsidiary protection or humanitarian visas, particularly where return would expose individuals to conditions incompatible with the right to life or dignity. This approach builds incrementally on existing legal frameworks rather than requiring immediate treaty reform.

Second, in light of emerging human rights jurisprudence recognizing state obligations to prevent foreseeable harm, states should develop proactive relocation and mobility arrangements for communities facing predictable displacement. Such measures could be supported through national legislation or international funding mechanisms, including those linked to Loss and Damage frameworks. Planned relocation must be grounded in informed consent and accompanied by livelihood restoration, housing security, and social integration support to ensure compliance with human rights standards. This recommendation follows from the finding

that reactive, discretionary measures are insufficient to address structurally foreseeable displacement.

Third, the narrative findings suggest that legal innovation alone will not gain traction without discursive transformation. Media institutions therefore play a constitutive role in shaping the political environment within which protection norms operate. Journalistic guidelines should discourage alarmist or dehumanizing metaphors and instead contextualize migration within broader climate justice dynamics. Highlighting first-person accounts that emphasize agency and structural causation can counter securitized framing and foster public empathy. This recommendation is grounded in the study's finding that the absence of climate-displacement discourse significantly limits policy development.

Fourth, legal advocates should integrate strategic litigation with coordinated public engagement. The analysis showed that emerging human rights jurisprudence risks remaining abstract unless translated into accessible narratives. When legal claims concerning climate-related harm are pursued, parallel media engagement can help embed these principles within public understanding, increasing their political durability. This proposal reflects the study's central conclusion that legal and narrative strategies function most effectively when mutually reinforcing.

Finally, sustained protection reform requires the development of a durable political constituency. Coalitions among environmental organizations, migrant-rights groups, and civil society actors can maintain climate-induced displacement within public debate beyond episodic crises. The research indicates that without continuous narrative visibility, political attention dissipates and implementation gaps persist. Building long-term advocacy networks can therefore convert episodic sympathy into stable policy commitment.

CONCLUSION

Climate-induced displacement lies at the intersection of environmental crisis, human mobility, and global justice. This study has highlighted that no single sector, neither law nor media, can close the protection gap on its own. International human rights bodies have started to open doctrinal doors, for example, by recognizing that removing people to climate-disaster zones may violate the right to life, but turning such principles into concrete protection will require broad public and political support. A narrative-centered approach is crucial to build this support, responsible storytelling can recast those displaced by climate change not as distant "others" or security threats, but as rights-bearing neighbors whose safety and dignity concern us all. In tandem, a rights-based legal approach can provide the mechanisms to protect and assist these people, provided there is the will to implement it. If policymakers normalize the inclusion of climate considerations in refugee and migration policies, integrate human mobility into climate adaptation planning, and commit resources for relocation and resilience, and if journalists and community leaders consistently portray climate-displaced populations with empathy and accuracy, then the gap in protection can begin to narrow substantially in the coming decade. A coordinated rights-and-narrative strategy offers a path toward a more just and humane response, ensuring that those who lose their homes to climate change do not also lose their rights or hope for the future.

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Premton Asllani

Migrant Labor and Europe's Demographic Dilemma – Case Study: Germany and Italy

IN A GIST

Aging populations and shrinking workforces in Germany and Italy make migrant labor economically indispensable – yet political discourse consistently underestimates migration's demographic necessity.

INTRODUCTION

Europe has historically been shaped by migration (Raduta 2015). Migration is the movement of people from one place to another, to settle in a new location. Migration can be voluntary or involuntary and can occur for a variety of different reasons, including economic, environmental and social issues (European Parliament 2024). Many foreign immigrants cross its borders as asylum seekers, fleeing threats, persecution, and abuse in search of legal and physical protection (Raduta 2015). However, most immigrants arrive seeking better opportunities; good jobs, healthcare, a brighter future for their families, and security (European Commission n.d.). In the EU, 29.0 million people (6.4%) of the 449.3 million people living in the EU on 1 January 2024 were non-EU citizens (Eurostat 2025). Recent data show that immigrant workers to EU come from diverse origins: 3.1 million from non-EU European countries, 2.3 million from Africa and the Middle East, and 1.4 million from Asia, Central, and South America (Joint Research Centre 2024).

EU member states face persistent labor shortages, particularly in agriculture, construction, healthcare, ICT, and hospitality. Demand is expected to intensify with the shift to green energy and digitalization. While efforts often focus on attracting highly skilled workers, shortages are most acute in medium- and lower-skilled roles. Migrants in these categories face strict entry requirements and recognition barriers, limiting their ability to fill gaps. Despite political resistance, countries like Italy and Germany have adopted pragmatic measures, such as bilateral agreements, to address labor needs. However, bureaucratic inefficiencies continue to slow progress (Labour Migration 2024). The EU's persistent labor shortages pose a serious threat to its economic stability. As the population ages and technological change accelerates, policymakers face urgent pressure to secure a sustainable workforce. While recruiting foreign workers can provide short-term relief, durable solutions depend on strengthening education systems, deepening industry partnerships, and enacting meaningful policy reforms. Whether these measures will suffice remains uncertain (EU Struggles... 2025).

In 2023, one million immigrants entered Europe irregularly, making immigration a central driver of European politics. Concerns over crime, integration challenges, and outdated asylum laws, unchanged for two decades, have fueled public discontent and strengthened anti-immigration movements. The expansion of the Schengen Area has further complicated border control, as entry into one country often means entry into all. In response to rising tensions and demographic decline, the EU adopted the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, which includes entry screening and expedited deportations. Yet, declining fertility rates and the integration of diverse, often

non-European communities, especially Muslims, now estimated at 25 million in the EU, make effective immigration policy a critical and unresolved challenge (Michta 2024).

Exploitative employers and recruitment agencies often take advantage of migrants' weak bargaining positions, especially when their legal status is precarious or tied to a single employer. Common abuses include excessive working hours with little or no pay, unsafe working conditions, denial of medical care, lack of clear contracts, being assigned unauthorized or illegal tasks, and being housed in unsanitary or degrading accommodation. This exploitation often occurs due to precarious legal status, language barriers, and lack of awareness about their rights (FRA Opinions n.d.). Many migrants work in fear and are often reluctant to report abuse, making it difficult to uncover violations through interviews alone (Anand 2023).

The influx of illegal immigrants has fueled the rise of far-right parties across Europe. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has expanded its influence, while in France, Marine Le Pen's populist movement has repeatedly advanced to the final round of presidential elections. Italy saw Giorgia Meloni become the first anti-immigrant populist to win a major European election in 2022. These developments illustrate how migration has intensified political polarization throughout the continent (Bremmer 2025).

In this paper, I examine how Europe's growing reliance on migrant labor, driven by demographic decline and labor shortages, intensifies political and social tensions, focusing on Germany and Italy as case studies. These two countries, both central to the EU, are struggling with aging populations, illegal labor, and the mistreatment of migrant workers. Amid these challenges, far-right parties are gaining ground by capitalizing on public anxieties about immigration. Given the influence of Germany and Italy within the EU, the rise of such parties threatens to complicate Europe's balancing act: sustaining its economy with migrant labor while managing increasing political resistance to immigration.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC-LABOR MARKET IN EUROPE

European countries, especially EU member states, have faced significant challenges resulting from decades of immigration. While most migrants come to Europe seeking better work and living conditions, some companies and agencies exploit this vulnerability, subjecting migrant workers to various forms of abuse and mistreatment. In response, EU policies have expanded migrants' legal rights to access employment and are continually evolving to address labor market needs.

The EU is addressing labor shortages by expanding legal migration pathways, such as the EU Blue Card for skilled workers, the Single Permit, and long-term resident status. In 2024, the EU also adopted a new Pact on Migration and Asylum, aiming to streamline asylum procedures, strengthen border management, and increase solidarity among member states. Countries will have two years to implement these reforms into national law (European Parliament 2024).

Refugees who participate in the labor market often contribute to GDP growth by applying their skills. Studies show immigration generally has a positive effect on European employment and wages; for example, immigrants can prompt locals to seek better jobs or start businesses. Research also finds that second and third-generation immigrants are eager for job security, political participation, and citizenship, factors that promote integration. However, persistent discrimination undermines these outcomes and hinders immigrants' sense of belonging (Raduta 2015).

Europe's labor market faces acute worker shortages, driven by record-low unemployment and an aging population. The working-age population is projected to decline by nearly 10% by 2050, intensifying demand in sectors like healthcare, construction, and manufacturing. Labor shortages now limit production and services across the EU, especially in countries such as Germany, Belgium, Czechia, Netherlands and Austria. In Q1 of 2024, around 28% of businesses in construction and services point to labour shortages as a factor limiting production (McCaughey 2024).

Roughly one in four workers in Europe's agriculture sector are migrants, yet they often face long hours, underpayment, unsafe conditions, and systemic rights violations. A 2024 report by Oxfam and the University of Comillas highlights widespread abuse, including violence, wage theft, and exploitative accommodation, across nine EU countries. Women, in particular, face greater wage gaps and sexual abuse. These abuses are exacerbated for migrants with temporary or irregular status. In response, the EU's new Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive aims to hold companies accountable and improve access to justice for exploited workers (Agejas & Tenwick 2024).

According to a report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, labor exploitation of migrant workers in EU countries takes many forms, including pay below minimum wage or unpaid work, excessive hours without breaks or safety equipment, lack of work contracts or contracts in unfamiliar languages, substandard or overcrowded housing, and employers deducting food, accommodation, or other expenses from wages. Migrant workers are also sometimes forced to perform illegal or unauthorized tasks (EUAFR 2019).

The most common forms of labor exploitation reported by migrant workers interviewed were low pay and poor working conditions. Agriculture and domestic work migrant workers, especially in Portugal, Poland, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, and Italy, faced the most severe and overlapping violations, such as lack of breaks or days off, with over a third in France and half in Poland working seven days a week. Victims of human trafficking reported even more abuses. Additional issues included lack of medical assistance after work accidents and, notably, employers in Italy, Poland, and Portugal charging up to €2,000 for work contracts needed to obtain residence permits, often requiring payment in cash or salary deductions (EUAFR 2019).

In Sweden, sociologists of law report that only 2% of migrant labor exploitation cases reach court. From 2012 to 2020, out of 237 cases reported to police, just five went to trial, resulting in four convictions. The main barriers are challenges in gathering evidence and the dependence of migrant workers on employers for visas and income, which discourages victims from reporting abuse (Schoultz & Muhire 2023).

In central and eastern Europe, companies increasingly rely on third-country nationals to replace domestic workers who have moved to higher-paying jobs in western Europe. Many migrants are hired through intermediary agencies and posted abroad, a system that often results in social dumping and severe exploitation. Labor unions warn that these practices undermine social protections and facilitate abuse. According to a 2019 EU report, many migrant workers in construction and forestry endure extreme mistreatment, including pay as low as €5 a day, 92-hour work weeks, constant surveillance, and degrading living conditions such as sleeping in shipping containers without water or electricity. Some face violence, debt bondage, and forced criminal activity, highlighting the urgent need for stricter enforcement of labor standards across the EU (Bérastégui 2021).

There are many European companies that mistreat and exploit migrant workers. Some are very well-known, such as Loro Piana (Parodi 2025), Giorgio Armani and Carrefour (Archer & Fraser 2025). Others operate in different sectors, including greenhouse agriculture in Almería (The Guardian 2025) and the Champagne harvest in France (Levitt et al. 2024); demonstrating that exploitation is not limited to marginal firms, but includes some of Europe's most prominent brands and industries.

These trends highlight the urgent need for integrated EU policy approaches to reconcile labor demand, migrant rights, and political stability. The "Six Points for Labor Inspectors – EU Law Safeguards for Non-EU Workers" highlights key areas for intervention: better information, access to justice, identifying exploitation, ensuring full pay, decent housing, and the right to change jobs (FRA 2024). Unless these gaps between policy and practice are addressed, exploitation will remain a defining feature of Europe's demographic-labor market landscape.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL TENSIONS – GERMANY AND ITALY

Since the 1980s, electoral support for anti-immigration far-right parties has increased across several European countries (Edo & Giesing 2020). Countries like Italy, France, Germany, the UK, and Spain receive the most asylum seekers, leading to parallel communities and social divides. Economic crises and rising unemployment have made immigrants targets for populist right-wing parties. These parties seek to restrict free movement within the EU, with leaders in different countries, such as France, Italy, Germany, and Slovenia (Raduta 2015).

In this chapter, I examine Germany and Italy, two of the European Union's most influential states, as case studies in the interplay between demographic decline, labor market pressures, and rising social and political tensions surrounding migrant labor. Both countries face similar challenges: aging populations, low fertility, and the need for migrant workers to sustain key economic sectors. Yet these same dynamics have fueled the rise of far-right parties, different forms of exploitation (including criminal networks like the mafia), and growing public anxieties and tensions. By comparing Germany and Italy, I seek to clarify how labor migration shapes, and is shaped by, Europe's broader demographic dilemma and political polarization.

Germany

Germany is among the world's few "super-aged" societies, with nearly one-third of its population projected to be over 65 by 2050. The number of Germans aged 65 and older will rise by 41 percent to 24 million, while the working-age population will decline sharply. This dramatic aging trend underscores the country's growing reliance on migrant labor (AARP International n.d.). Germany's immigrant population increased from 16.9 million in 2023 to 17.4 million in 2024, rising from 20.3% to 20.9% of the total population. This confirms Germany's position as the leading destination for immigrants within the EU (Rockwool Foundation Berlin 2025). Germany had the largest number of third-country nationals found to be illegally present in 2024 among EU states, with 249,155 illegal migrants (Eurostat 2025).

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), became the country's second strongest political force in the last national election, winning 20.8% of the vote. The party made immigration a major theme of its campaign (Conesa 2025). Alternative for Germany (AfD), has used fears around immigration and crime, especially knife attacks (such as the recent Solingen stabbing, in which a Syrian refugee killed three people and injured ten others, a crime for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility) (Sasipornkarn 2025), to rally support and make immigration a central

campaign issue. AfD leaders promote narratives like the "great replacement" theory and frame isolated crimes as evidence of a broader societal threat. This strategy resonates especially in eastern Germany, where economic hardship and population decline have fueled resentment and a defensive attitude toward migration. By blaming migrants for social and economic problems, AfD offers a simple scapegoat and uses this rhetoric to win votes (Mellersh 2024).

Germany's severe labor shortages, supposed to reach seven million unfilled positions by 2035, make migrant workers increasingly essential, especially in eastern regions with shrinking workforces. Despite this economic need, far-right parties like AfD are gaining ground by campaigning against immigration and stricter asylum policies. Their rise, fueled by public anxieties and recent attacks, threatens both social cohesion and Germany's ability to attract skilled migrant labor needed to sustain economic growth (Mellersh 2024). According to an Infratest survey, 73% of respondents believe that the distribution of refugees within Germany is not working well. Additionally, 78% feel that refugee integration into society and the labor market is failing, and 80% think authorities are not effectively deporting rejected asylum seekers (Kinkartz 2023).

The AfD advocates for stricter migration controls, reduced welfare benefits for asylum seekers, and tougher deportation policies. The party proposes capping social benefits for foreign nationals after one year, revoking refugee status for those who return to their home country, and aligning Ukrainian refugees' benefits with those of other asylum seekers. The AfD also calls for higher qualification standards for migrant healthcare workers, reserving more medical study places for German citizens, and using payment cards to distribute welfare. Asylum seekers who refuse work or have been ordered to leave would see their benefits further reduced (Wallis 2025).

Incidentally, a significant number of older-generation migrants in Germany are now supporting the AfD for a variety of reasons. Many feel that their own efforts to integrate have been overlooked, while the recent influx of new migrants has created a sense of competition for resources, jobs, and social recognition. As a result, some long-settled migrants see the AfD's strict stance on immigration as a way to protect their hard-earned place in German society (Guatri et al. 2025).

The AfD's growth can be largely attributed to public frustration with the previous government coalition under Social Democratic Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the current dissatisfaction among Christian Democrat voters with Chancellor Merz's coalition-building process. Even though Merz promised to implement much harsher border controls due to the security crisis and spike in irregular migration, the coalition with the SPD watered down these plans considerably (Alipour 2025).

Italy

Italy's demographic issue is critical economically, politically and socially (D'Agostino et al. 2024). Italy is facing significant problems with low fertility. In 2024, it had one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe, at just 1.21 births per woman (Espinosa 2025).

Despite these challenges, many Italians hold negative views of immigrants. A contrasting narrative portrays migrants as a threat to social cohesion and stability, often emphasizing concerns about crime and labor market competition. As a result, migrants are frequently depicted as a menace in several ways: as security risks (associated with violent crime), as economic threats (believed to take jobs from natives), and as cultural outsiders (highlighting a perceived clash of civilizations) (Ambrosetti & Miccoli 2025). In Italy, there is a phenomenon

known as “caporalato” – an illegal system of recruiting and organizing labor, especially in agriculture, through intermediaries (caporali). These intermediaries hire day laborers on behalf of employers, often in exchange for a bribe, bypassing official employment channels and ignoring legal wage and contract standards (Treccani n. d.).

Migrant workers in Italy’s renowned wine regions, such as Barolo and Barbaresco, often face severe exploitation, working 12-hour shifts for as little as 3 – 4 euros an hour, without contracts or legal status. Recent investigations in the Langhe vineyards uncovered over 30 cases of “caporalato,” where intermediaries recruit migrants into abusive, inhumane conditions. Labor groups estimate that among the 4,000 – 5,000 vineyard workers, most are migrants and at least two-thirds are at risk of exploitation (Spaggiari 2024).

There are about half a million agricultural laborers in Italy, 80% of whom are migrants, with many forced to work illegally (Combating abuse...). Tuscany’s renowned viticulture sector relies heavily on foreign workers, yet recent research reveals widespread exploitation and precarious conditions. Many lack regular contracts, earn below-minimum wages, work long hours without breaks, and face unsafe conditions. Over 40% of Tuscany’s 58,000 agricultural workers are foreigners, 90% on fixed-term contracts, often misapplied or abused. Migrants also report threats and pressure to work faster. Despite ongoing funding efforts, legal insecurity and poor living conditions remain widespread among migrant workers in Tuscany (Gianetto et al. 2024).

Italy’s national strategy to combat labor exploitation and “caporalato” is anchored in Law No. 199/2016, which promotes legal labor intermediation, better transportation for workers, active labor policies, and monitoring of the agricultural labor market. Legislative Decree No. 119/2018 established an operational committee to coordinate national efforts, recently extended through 2025. The Three-Year Plan to Combat Labor Exploitation and Gangmastering (caporalato) (2020–2022) introduced emergency and systemic measures, focusing on prevention, protection, and reintegration for victims (Ministerio del Lavoro... n. d.). Additional guidelines address victim assistance and minimum housing standards. In 2024, a Special Commissioner was appointed to address the poor living conditions of thousands of migrant workers in informal settlements across Italy. Many of these workers continue to live in so-called “ghettos” – unauthorized, makeshift settlements where living conditions are often terrible (Ministerio del Lavoro... n. d.).

Italy’s right-wing majority and Prime Minister Meloni have taken strong measures to stop illegal migration, one of them through a bilateral deal with Albania. The agreement, announced in 2023 and launched in 2024, allows Italy to process asylum claims of non-vulnerable male migrants in Albania under Italian law, aiming to accelerate procedures and facilitate deportations without migrants ever reaching Italian soil. Although legal challenges delayed the project and saw most transferred migrants returned to Italy, the government maintains that such policies, along with deals with North African countries, have contributed to a 40% drop in irregular arrivals in 2024. Meloni’s government sees these actions as a model for EU migration policy, despite some migrants were returned to Italy after their case was referred to the European Court of Justice. The Italian government criticized the decision, and now both Italian and European judges are reviewing whether sending asylum seekers to Albania for processing and deportation is legal (Wallis 2024).

Furthermore, in 2023, Italy adjusted its immigration policies to welcome more than 450,000 new workers in sectors such as agriculture, health care, and caregiving, in exchange for agreements with origin countries on the return of those residing without legal status (Pope 2025).

Italy's legal paradox leaves many asylum seekers unable to move elsewhere in Europe or secure stable status where they live, trapping irregular migrants and exposing them to exploitation by caporalato networks and other dangers. It remains uncertain whether recent EU policy changes, including the New Pact on Migration and Asylum set for 2026, will improve their situation. As long as legal barriers persist, many migrants will remain vulnerable to criminal networks and exploitation (Hoque 2024).

MIGRATION AS NECESSITY: GERMANY AND ITALY COMPARED

Germany's ageing society is a decisive driver of future skills shortages. The working-age population (20–64) is projected to fall by 3.9 million by 2030 and by 10.2 million by 2060. While migration from within the EU has fueled recent economic growth, forecasts show it will not fully offset the shrinking labor force. Studies indicate that without the skills gap, Germany's economic output would already be higher (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy n.d.). In the last legislative period, Germany reformed its migration and integration framework. The Skilled Immigration Act broadened access for foreign workers, recognizing varied qualifications and experience. Citizenship law was revised to speed naturalisation, allow multiple citizenship, and incentivize integration, while excluding extremists. Integration courses were expanded to asylum seekers, focusing on language and civic values from day one (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2025).

Germany still requires 288,000 to 400,000 foreign skilled workers annually, according to a 2024 Bertelsmann/the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) study. Without this level of immigration, the country risks major labor shortages by 2040, undermining growth and competitiveness. As of April 2025, around 646,000 vacancies, particularly in IT, healthcare, and education, remained unfilled. To address this, Germany introduced the Opportunity Card in June 2024, enabling skilled non-EU workers with vocational training or a degree, plus basic German or English, to seek employment without a prior contract (Deutsche Welle 2025). Germany's ageing population has created persistent shortages in the health sector, particularly in rural areas. The most in-demand roles include registered nurses, general practitioners, elderly care workers, and physiotherapists (Pioneer Global 2025).

Italy's demographic crisis and ageing population are driving a rising demand for domestic help. Experts argue that immigrants could play a much larger role in meeting this need if entry and stay policies were reformed, as current quota systems and regulations remain poorly aligned with actual labor demand (ANSA 2024). Italy's ageing population and labor shortages have prompted new regulations admitting 164,850 foreign workers in 2026 and nearly 500,000 between 2026 and 2028. Of these, 230,550 will be non-seasonal employees for permanent roles and entrepreneurship, while 267,000 will be seasonal workers in agriculture and tourism. The decree aims to sustain competitiveness but raises concerns over integration and working conditions (Aliyeva 2025).

A North East Foundation study predicts northern Italy will lose 2.4 million workers by 2040, requiring two million immigrants to sustain jobs and GDP. Measures such as higher female participation, longer working lives, or internal migration will not offset the demographic decline driven by low birth rates (Italianismo 2024). Italy's Law No. 187/2024, adopted in December 2024, revises entry rules for foreign workers, strengthens protections for victims of exploitation, and introduces new measures on migration flows and asylum. Notably, it restricts reception services for asylum seekers applying more than 90 days after entry and prioritizes those rescued at sea

over arrivals by land or air, raising concerns of unequal treatment (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs 2025).

An OECD report on immigrant integration gives Germany a mixed but largely positive assessment. Immigrants reached a 70% employment rate in 2022, above the EU average, and more than half participate in language and integration courses, also well above average. These outcomes underline Germany's relative success in labor market integration, though challenges remain in education, gender gaps, and the underuse of highly qualified migrants (European Commission – Migration and Home Affairs 2024). Germany's skilled labor shortages now affect wide sectors, with healthcare, especially geriatric and nursing care, among the most severely hit. Demand for elderly care workers will rise further as the population ages. The government's 2022 Skilled Labor Strategy acknowledges that domestic measures, such as higher participation of women and older people, will not suffice, making immigration and better integration of refugees essential to meeting future needs (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy n.d.).

The Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR) recommends a migration policy that both attracts skilled workers and strengthens integration through investments in housing, childcare, and education, while combating extremism and discrimination. Economic studies, such as Martin Werdning's analysis on migration and public finances, show that sustained net migration can ease fiscal pressures by boosting tax revenues and economic output. SVR also highlights the importance of engaging young migrants, urging early political education and stronger support from civil society to foster participation and social cohesion (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs 2025).

Italy's new "flows decree" seeks to curb irregular migration while expanding legal pathways for non-EU workers. It raises visa quotas, adds 10,000 caregiver slots in 2025, introduces residence permits for victims of labor exploitation, and extends the buffer period for seasonal workers from 30 to 60 days. At the same time, it tightens rules for NGOs conducting sea and air rescues, imposing stricter coordination requirements with authorities (ANSA & InfoMigrants 2024). However, Italy's integration system is under-resourced and fragmented, with weak coordination among institutions. Limited language training, poor recognition of qualifications, and inconsistent job placement services leave many migrants with low proficiency and inadequate access to training, resulting in sub-optimal use of their labor (Basso et al. 2025).

Italy must expand legal migration pathways while clearly distinguishing them from efforts to combat irregular migration. This requires reforms to the Flows Decree and quota system to better match labor supply with demand, simplify procedures, and address overqualification among non-EU workers. Additional measures include reintroducing sponsorship programs that allow job seekers, supported by relatives or institutions, to enter legally under defined conditions (Migration Partnership Facility 2024).

Germany and Italy show that migration may be inevitable, but its impact depends on how it is managed. Germany's more structured policies have turned migration into an important contribution to the economy, though challenges remain, such as discrimination and the fact that one in four migrants does not plan to stay permanently (Kinkartz 2025). Italy, on the other hand, faces fragmented policies and weak integration, even as its economy depends heavily on foreign workers. In the end, migration can be either a resource or a burden, what makes the difference is whether countries provide clear plans and real opportunities for integration, so that migrants strengthen rather than strain society.

Japan is facing its own distinct social issues. Hyper-aging society: As of January 2023, 28.6% of Japan's 125 million people were aged 65 or older, meaning one in every 3.5 people is a senior citizen. Low birthrate: The birthrate continues to decline, reaching just 1.26 in 2022, with fewer than 800,000 births. Despite this, Japan historically did not rely on labor migrants, but this trend is changing. In 2023, there were 3.2 million foreign residents and 2 million registered foreign workers, with the numbers increasing every year, though these groups still make up only a small share of the population (SSF 2024). Japanese women have consistently chosen to have fewer kids due to a variety of deterrents, including high childcare costs, long work hours, and stigma around mothers returning to work (Faber 2024).

In Japan, foreigners still face racial barriers, even amid rapid societal diversification and an increasing foreign worker population. Growing labor shortages have pushed Japan to reduce immigration rules, most notably through the 2019 Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) system, which officially welcomed blue-collar workers for the first time. SSW visas allow foreign workers up to eight years in Japan, with SSW2 offering family reunification and a path to permanent residency. The government also plans to replace the Technical Intern Training Program* with a new system allowing greater job mobility and long-term stays (Burgess 2024).

Japan is increasing the number of young immigrants to strengthen its workforce and reduce reliance on an aging population. Unlike Europe, these reforms have not sparked a populist backlash, but integration remains limited. Immigrants often face language and cultural barriers, as Japan prioritizes economic utility over social inclusion. To address its population crisis, the government is offering more short-term visas, longer residency periods, and easier re-entry, especially in sectors like healthcare and construction. The Highly Skilled Foreign Professional (HSFP) program, launched in 2012, uses a points-based system to attract scientists, researchers, business people, and engineers and allows their family members to join (Faber 2024).

Japan will need 4.19 million migrant workers by 2030 to sustain economic growth, but at the current pace, it will still face a shortfall of 770,000 workers. Expanding regular migration pathways is critical to fill these gaps, but current restrictions leave many migrants working without authorization, heightening the risks of exploitation and abuse (Pope 2025).

Japan's 30-year-old foreign technical trainee program (TITP), originally meant to transfer skills to developing countries, has become notorious for abuse. Nearly 70% of businesses hiring under the scheme were found in violation of labor laws. Migrant workers often face language barriers, lack support, and are especially vulnerable to exploitation. In April 2023, a government panel recommended abolishing the program and replacing it with a new system focused on protecting workers and addressing human rights violations (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2025). A Japanese immigration scheme has faced criticism for widespread worker exploitation. BBC interviews with migrant workers reveal cases of overwork, underpayment, unsafe working environments, bullying, and labor for major international brands (Zuo 2019). According to the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, even well-known companies such as Toyota have faced multiple cases (four cases) of migrant worker abuse (Archer & Fraser 2025).

While Japan has seen little resistance to recent immigration, government policies provide inadequate support for newcomers' integration. Immigrants receive healthcare and the option for permanent residency, but there is limited language assistance, education access, disaster

training, and cultural orientation. Japan is also the only developed democracy without anti-discrimination laws, leaving immigrants without legal recourse if they face bias (Faber 2024). Many immigrants in Japan cannot become naturalized citizens, which limits their ability to vote, hold public jobs, or travel freely. Citizenship is mostly inherited, and naturalization is difficult, requiring five years of residency, financial proof, and give up all other citizenships. As a result, even children raised in Japan by long-term resident parents often remain non-citizens. These strict requirements can discourage potential immigrants (Archer & Fraser 2025).

Despite Japan's reputation for homogeneity, there has been little backlash to recent demographic changes driven by immigration. Most Japanese people understand the need for immigration to address labor shortages. Public support is strong: a 2018 Pew Research Survey found 58% favored maintaining current immigration levels, 23% wanted more, and only 13% wanted fewer immigrants. In 2024, 62% supported more visas for skilled foreign workers. Most Japanese believe immigrants strengthen the country (Archer & Fraser 2025). Moreover, a majority of Japanese believe that immigrants make Japan stronger through their hard work and talents. Additionally, 60% say that immigrants do not increase the risk of future terrorist attacks in Japan (Stokes & Devlin 2018).

However, to foster "positive assimilation" and help immigrants advance economically, Japan would benefit from stronger language support and anti-discrimination measures. Without these, many immigrants risk "negative assimilation," earning less over time due to persistent structural barriers (Faber 2024).

CONCLUSION

The cases of Germany, Italy, and Japan demonstrate how the labor market is not only an economic necessity but also a political battleground. Demographic decline, whether through low fertility in Germany, population ageing in Italy, or the combination of both in Japan, creates structural labor shortages that no country can ignore. Migration, in this sense, becomes both inevitable and contested: it can be managed to sustain growth and welfare systems, or it can be politicized to serve the interests of parties mobilizing against it. The "how" of migration policy; how laws are designed; how institutions implement them; and how societies prepare to receive migrants, determines whether migration strengthens or destabilizes. Bureaucratic barriers and rigid quotas, as seen in Italy and Japan, risk turning necessity into dysfunction, while Germany shows that even structured frameworks still struggle with retention and discrimination.

Looking forward, the labor market of immigrants will remain a decisive issue for advanced economies. Solutions cannot focus only on admitting more workers; they must also reshape the environment in which migrants and citizens interact. Programs that address integration, combat discrimination, and prepare societies to adapt to demographic realities are as essential as visa reforms. Equally, policies that promote fertility, extend working lives, and harness underutilized domestic labor pools must complement migration to prevent overreliance. If governments fail to design balanced strategies, far-right actors will exploit the resulting tensions to push exclusionary agendas, further destabilizing societies already under demographic strain. Thus, the future of migration policy will not be decided by whether countries need migrants, the answer is clear, but by how effectively they integrate them into both the economy and the social fabric.

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Kateryna Fadieieva

Future of Migration: Opportunities and Threats in the Context of Development, Climate Change, Global Conflicts, and Labor Markets

IN A GIST

At the intersection of development pressures, environmental change, armed conflict, and labor transformation lies the future of global migration – a complex landscape of both vulnerability and opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

Migration, one of the most profound social processes of the contemporary world, remains central to debates about globalization, development, and security. Defined broadly as the movement of people across borders or within states, migration is neither inherently positive nor negative. Instead, its impact depends on the conditions under which it occurs and the policies that shape it. As human mobility continues to grow in scale and complexity, it exposes fault lines in global systems, including inequality, environmental degradation, and the fragility of international law (Menjívar, Ruiz, & Ness, 2019).

In the 21st century, migration is no longer an issue confined to specific regions or states; it is truly global in scope. People migrate for work, education, safety, and family reunification, but also because they are forced by disasters, wars, or structural economic inequalities. This complexity has made migration a political flashpoint in many societies, where governments struggle to balance humanitarian obligations with security concerns and domestic political pressures.

This paper aims to analyze migration from a dual perspective—opportunity versus threat—and situate this discussion within the broader forces that will shape migration in the future: climate change, global conflicts, and labor market transformations. It incorporates two major works: (1) a critical essay on the interdependence of development and migration, and (2) a presentation analyzing migration as both threat and opportunity. Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of rethinking migration not simply as a crisis to be managed, but as a transformative process with far-reaching implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Migration studies often rely on classical theories such as push–pull models, which describe migration as the result of pressures in the country of origin and attractions in the country of destination. While these models remain useful in explaining basic dynamics, they are limited in capturing the complex realities of migration in a globalized world. Contemporary theories suggest that migration is not merely a response to poverty or instability but an inherent part of social transformation and development.

Hein de Haas (2020) emphasized the “paradox of development-driven migration,” showing that rising development often increases migration rather than reducing it. Economic growth expands education, infrastructure, and aspirations, equipping individuals with both the means and the motivation to move. Rather than signaling failure, emigration can be seen as a product of

development itself, reflecting the interconnectedness of societies in a globalized economy.

Similarly, concepts such as productive migration stress the potential of migration to enhance sustainable development in both origin and host countries (International Organization for Migration, 2020). Migrants bring skills, remittances, and transnational networks that contribute to the prosperity of both sending and receiving societies. This highlights migration not as an anomaly but as an integral part of modern economies.

Menjívar, Ruiz, and Ness (2019) expand on this by showing how migration crises are produced not only by displacement events but also by policy regimes, power asymmetries, and the narratives constructed around migrants. Their work stresses that migration cannot be detached from broader social, political, and economic contexts, which ultimately shape whether migration is perceived as a destabilizing force or as an opportunity for growth and renewal.

MIGRATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY AND A THREAT

Migration has historically been framed in opposing ways: as a driver of growth and cultural enrichment, or as a challenge to stability and identity. This tension is not new—it has accompanied migration flows for centuries—but it has intensified in an era of rapid globalization, digital connectivity, and heightened political polarization.

Opportunities for Host Countries

Migrants contribute to the labor force, often filling gaps in essential sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and construction. In countries with aging populations, such as Japan, Germany, and Italy, migrants sustain welfare systems and mitigate labor shortages. Beyond economics, migrants bring cultural diversity, stimulate international trade, and enhance global knowledge transfer. Innovation often thrives in multicultural environments, as seen in the contributions of immigrant communities to the tech industry in the United States and Europe.

Fiscal contributions by migrants can also improve long-term economic balances (OECD, 2014). Migrant communities expand global networks, enabling countries to participate more effectively in international markets and diplomacy. In the long term, this helps host societies build resilience in a rapidly changing global economy.

Opportunities for Origin Countries

For origin countries, migration can reduce unemployment and relieve pressure on limited resources. Returning migrants often transfer knowledge, entrepreneurship, and new cultural practices, enriching local economies and societies. Perhaps most importantly, remittances form a vital income source for families and communities, fueling consumption, healthcare, and education (World Bank, 2022).

Menjívar, Ruiz, and Ness (2019) argue that migration from origin countries must be seen as part of a global redistribution of resources, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities. Migration is not a one-way loss of talent but part of a broader process of exchange that links societies through remittances, trade, and diaspora networks.

Threats to Host Countries

At the same time, migration can create tensions in host societies. Migrants may face difficulties in assimilation, fueling social divides and xenophobic backlash. Competition in labor and housing markets can create perceptions of unfairness, especially when migrants are blamed for broader structural problems such as unemployment or rising costs of living.

Security concerns, particularly when migration occurs without regulation, may strain political systems. The politicization of migration—as seen in recent elections across Europe and North America—demonstrates how narratives of crisis can overshadow the real contributions of migrants. Populist leaders often frame migration as a threat to cultural identity, sovereignty, and security, shaping public opinion in ways that make integration policies more difficult to implement.

Case studies—such as Schwäbisch Gmünd’s proactive integration strategy in Germany, Kazakhstan’s reliance on Central Asian migrant workers, and the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar—demonstrate how migration’s impact is contingent on governance. Each example highlights the thin line between successful adaptation and perceived crisis, emphasizing the importance of institutional capacity and inclusive policy frameworks.

MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT: A MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP

Migration and development are deeply interconnected social phenomena. Migration is not simply the result of poverty but is often generated by development itself. As Hein de Haas (2020) argued, migration is an “inescapable part of modernization.” This means that migration should not be framed as a failure of development but rather as one of its inevitable byproducts.

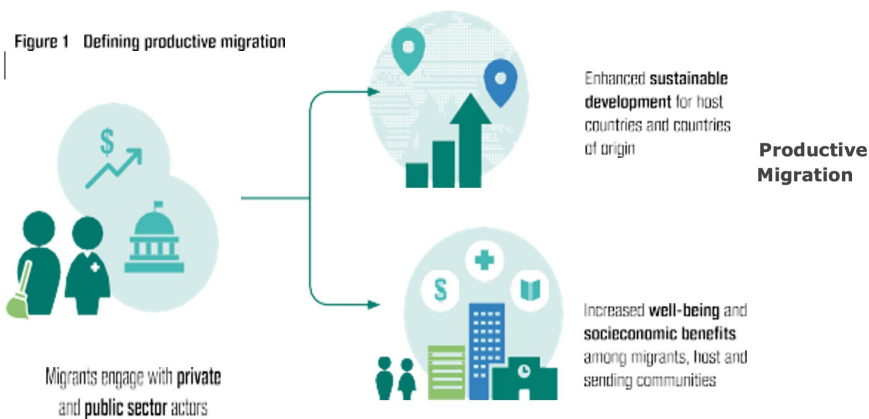
At the macro level, development transforms societies in ways that increase mobility. Infrastructure improvements, expanded educational opportunities, and enhanced communication systems provide the tools that enable migration. Middle-income countries often see higher emigration rates than poor countries, as modernization provides both the resources and aspirations to migrate. Thus, mobility is not merely a coping mechanism but also an expression of ambition and opportunity-seeking behavior.

At the micro level, migration represents hope for a better life and access to opportunities unavailable at home. Families may invest in migration strategies as part of long-term livelihood planning, diversifying income sources through remittances while building transnational networks. Migration becomes a family-level development tool, where education, savings, and entrepreneurship are financed through earnings abroad.

A case study of Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates this paradox. Rising levels of education, income, and connectivity have fueled migration, even as poverty remains entrenched. For example, while earlier generations were often trapped in immobility due to weak infrastructure, today’s improvements in transportation and digital connectivity are enabling more people to migrate internationally. This demonstrates that migration is not merely an escape from hardship but a strategic choice linked to evolving social and economic aspirations.

This aligns with insights from Menjivar, Ruiz, and Ness (2019), who stress that crises cannot be detached from development trajectories. Development can produce crises of immobility—where opportunities are restricted and people are forced to stay—as well as crises of mobility, where opportunities expand but governance structures fail to manage the flows. Thus, migration and development form a feedback loop, influencing one another in ways that policymakers must address holistically.

Figure 1. Productive Migration: The cyclical relationship between migration and development.



Source: Smart and Hargrave (2020).

As shown in Figure 1 (Productive Migration), the interaction between migration and development is not linear but cyclical. The graph illustrates how migration both contributes to and is influenced by development processes, underscoring the productive potential of mobility. Far from being a simple response to poverty, migration is embedded in broader social transformations that generate opportunities for individuals and societies alike.

Climate Change

Climate change is expected to become one of the most significant drivers of future migration. Rising sea levels, desertification, and extreme weather events will force millions to leave their homes. The World Bank (2021) estimates that over 200 million people could be displaced internally by 2050 due to climate-related factors. Unlike traditional economic migration, climate-induced migration often occurs suddenly, in response to disasters such as floods, hurricanes, or droughts, putting immense strain on state institutions.

Yet environmental migration also provides opportunities for international cooperation. Regional agreements, humanitarian aid frameworks, and climate adaptation strategies can help states respond proactively rather than reactively. Menjivar, Ruiz, and Ness (2019) point out that environmental crises often intersect with political and economic vulnerabilities, compounding displacement effects.

This means that addressing climate-induced migration requires holistic solutions that integrate environmental policy with social protection and migration governance.

Global Conflicts

Wars and instability remain leading causes of forced migration. The conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and Myanmar highlight how violence and persecution drive people across borders in massive numbers. Such flows are often sudden and politically sensitive, challenging the capacities of asylum systems and humanitarian organizations. Future migration flows will be shaped not only by conventional wars but also by emerging geopolitical tensions, terrorism, and resource conflicts.

Effective asylum and protection systems will be vital to manage these crises without eroding host-country stability. Migration crises, as outlined in The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises (2019), also reveal the fragility of international refugee regimes, which often fail to address the needs of displaced populations comprehensively. Strengthening global solidarity through burden-sharing mechanisms will be essential for addressing these challenges.

Labor Markets

Labor shortages in aging societies—such as in Europe, Japan, and parts of North America—will increase demand for migrant workers. Migrants can revitalize economies by filling labor gaps, sustaining pension systems, and contributing to welfare states. Skilled migrants are especially critical in healthcare and technology, where shortages are acute.

However, unmanaged labor migration risks generating resentment among host populations, particularly if integration policies lag behind. Discrimination, wage competition, and political manipulation of migration narratives can turn opportunity into conflict. As Menjívar, Ruiz, and Ness (2019) note, migration crises frequently arise not from migration itself but from how states and markets respond—or fail to respond—to new demographic realities.

DISCUSSION

The future of migration will depend on governance frameworks that balance opportunity and threat. Migration should not be seen merely as a problem to be solved, but as a resource to be managed. International organizations like IOM and UNHCR emphasize the importance of humane migration policies, while institutions such as the OECD stress the need for better labor market integration and skills recognition.

A key challenge is addressing unequal burdens: countries bordering conflict zones or facing climate change impacts often bear disproportionate responsibility. Wealthier states frequently adopt restrictive policies while leaving frontline countries to handle mass inflows. This imbalance highlights the necessity of shared international responsibility and stronger cooperation mechanisms.

Another dimension is the narrative surrounding migration. As long as migration is framed primarily as a “crisis,” policies will lean toward securitization rather than inclusion. Shifting the discourse toward migration as a transformative process can open space for innovative solutions that harness migration’s benefits while addressing legitimate concerns about governance and integration.

As Menjívar, Ruiz, and Ness (2019) argue, migration crises reveal the structural inequalities of the global system. Addressing migration requires not just national-level reforms but a rethinking of global justice, responsibility, and sovereignty. The sustainability of migration governance will depend on whether global institutions can adapt to these realities while fostering cooperation instead of competition.

CONCLUSION

Migration is a defining feature of human societies, and its future is intertwined with global challenges. As this paper has shown, migration is both an opportunity and a threat. It enhances development by transferring skills, remittances, and cultural capital, but it also poses risks if unmanaged, including social tensions and security concerns.

Climate change, global conflicts, and shifting labor markets will shape the next era of migration. Each of these forces has the potential to generate crises but also opportunities for innovation, cooperation, and resilience. The central lesson is that migration itself is not inherently destabilizing; rather, instability arises when governance fails to respond effectively to changing migration dynamics.

Ultimately, whether migration becomes a driver of prosperity or a source of insecurity will depend on political choices, institutional capacity, and international solidarity. By embracing migration as a productive and transformative process, while managing its risks with fairness and foresight, societies can turn one of the great challenges of our time into a foundation for inclusive global development.

Beyond these insights, it is essential to emphasize that the governance of migration will remain a test of global solidarity and adaptability. While economic, environmental, and political drivers will continue to intensify mobility, the real challenge lies in whether states and international institutions can move from reactive crisis management to proactive, cooperative planning. Migration should not only be integrated into development strategies but also into climate adaptation policies, conflict-resolution mechanisms, and labor market reforms. Only by embedding migration within a broader vision of global justice and sustainability can societies transform what is often portrayed as a looming crisis into a cornerstone of inclusive and resilient futures.

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CHAPTER III

IDENTITY AND BELONGING DILEMMAS

The lived experience of migrants navigating new cultural landscapes

Dragoș-Alexandru Ioniță

Voices behind the journey, The impact of personal accounts in migration discourse

IN A GIST

Individual migration stories offer critical insights into lived realities and possess the capacity to humanize and fundamentally reframe how migration is understood publicly.

INTRODUCTION

Migration and borders research almost always focuses more on macro-structural trends and broad statistics, but individual stories can reveal hidden complexities that such large scale analyses often miss. By focusing on individual people's life stories, researchers should remind themselves of the "person behind the number". Microhistory as a research method came about in the 1970s, from the thought of mainly Italian historians like Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, because "social scientists have made generalizations that do not hold up when tested against the concrete reality of the small-scale life they claim to explain" (Iggers 1997, p. 108). Such an approach is perfect for the study of migration and borders, especially as case studies for how migrants themselves make sense of causes and consequences of their own mobilities, adding much-needed nuance. For example, James Dennison notes that migration narratives pushed by politicians and the media shape both people's perceptions and public policy, and that sharing stories of migrants as "unique individuals whose lives have been overturned" (Dennison 2021) can counteract dehumanising talking points and thinking. In this essay, I'll use narrative case studies to explore these ideas. Three anonymised stories will be presented – Ema, Zaki, and Nabila, each of them reflecting different personal motivations and individual trajectories. Apart from connecting each of these cases to classic push-pull factors and to general cognitive-migration framework, I will explore the broader implications, how personal voices can increase migration research and reshape media narratives about mobility. In this sense, the voices of migrants are not just anecdotes, but vital data points that reveal how motivations, imagination and general context interact in deeply complex ways.

METHODOLOGY AND CASE SELECTION

The narratives presented in this paper were gathered through semi-formal and informal conversations with acquaintances and peers who have direct migration experiences. I did not use structured interviews or recordings, instead, I relied on personal discussions, notes, and follow-up clarifications to reconstruct their personal accounts. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. As the conversations took place in different languages (Romanian, English, and French), I translated the material into English for consistency, and the stories were later rechecked with the individuals involved to ensure factual accuracy and to obtain their consent for use.

MICROHISTORIES AND MIGRATIONS

Microhistory as a research method refers to the study of migration through individual life stories. This specific approach reveals usually overlooked “micro-level” decisions behind large-scale migration flows. Briefly put, instead of only looking at aggregate push-pull statistics, we examine individuals’ life stories. For example, consider a young Romanian woman in the 90’s who grew up on a remote farm. She describes how the collapse of local industry left her village without schools or jobs, pushing her to seek work abroad. Her account shows how national and international events, such as the fall of the Iron Curtain rippled down to personal crisis. Even today such effects can still be felt, Romania having the highest percentage of citizens living in other EU countries at around 17% or just a little over 3 million people (Statista 2025). In this essay we also meet Zaki, a young man raised in Switzerland by Mexican immigrant parents who later studied in the United States. His perspective is entirely different, he grew up comfortable and safe in Europe, yet felt curious about his Mexican heritage and attracted to study in a large, vibrant city. Finally, Nabila, a physician from Iraq who fled her country to Romania in the late 2000s, and then to Ireland by 2020.

By comparing these cases, microhistory highlights how structural factors like economic collapse, educational opportunities or open conflict become by themselves part of the core stories of people. For example, in a 2022 study (Koikkalainen 2022), Saara Koikkalainen found that young Europeans differ widely in how they decided to move abroad, from career goals, to personal life goals or just random luck events. Even if the context for many of these migrants was similar, their individual choices varied drastically. This mirrors our case study examples, perhaps Zaki had always dreamt of going to university abroad, whereas E left the country when a single job opening coincided with her need.

Example 1: The Accidental Migrant

Ema didn’t set out to leave Romania. She grew up in a rural town during the last years of communism, in a household where money was always tight. After the regime collapsed, things didn’t improve, factories shut down, jobs vanished, and the village seemed suspended in a slow unraveling. She was in her early twenties, working whatever jobs she could find, when someone mentioned Lebanon. A friend of a friend had found work there.

One day she said yes. Like many others, this was supposed to be temporary, maybe a few months. She didn’t speak Arabic, barely managed to obtain a passport – something that was still quite rare in the 90s in Romania, hadn’t researched the country, and didn’t know what her life would look like there. But once she arrived, things started to fall into place. She found work as a waitress, sent some money home, and slowly built a life, even if she eventually returned home to Romania a few years later, as the socio-economic situation improved.

Her story fits into what Koikkalainen describes as the “accidental migrant”, someone whose trajectory is shaped more by openings and urgencies than long-term planning. Ema didn’t imagine herself abroad until she was already there. The push factors were clear, economic collapse, a stagnant town, but the decision to move was less a strategy than a reaction to a narrowing life. What began as a chance decision became a life.

Example 2: The Dreamer

Zaki was born in Mexico but grew up in Switzerland. His parents moved when they were young, so he grew up fluent in multiple languages, surrounded by structure and wealth. but he never felt entirely at home. He often described himself as “between cultures,” belonging everywhere and nowhere. When he chose to study in the U.S in 2022, it wasn’t because of a scholarship or a

career goal. It was more of an emotional decision. He imagined the sea, the foggy mornings, the chance to start over without old expectations. There was no clear strategy, no mapped-out full life trajectory. While it wasn't quite exactly as he had imagined, as the current situation for foreign students in the U.S. is quite precarious (DHS 2025) to say the least, according to him, he doesn't regret anything and is quite happy with the change in scenery and people.

Koikkalainen would frame this as a form of prospective cognition, a loosely imagined future where emotional resonance matters more than logistics. This is the dreamer profile, someone who is pulled by moods, by fragments of imagined futures, by the open-endedness of becoming. Life in America was not exactly as pictured, lonely at first, colder than expected, but it evolved. He made friends, found new ways of expressing themselves, and over time, that dream became more real than imagined.

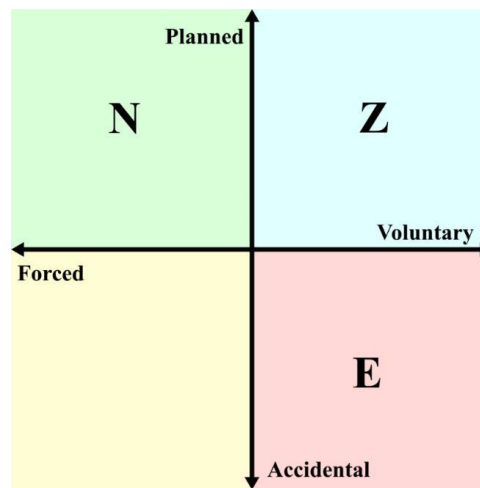
Example 3: The Strategist (Planner)

This third case centers on a woman who is now a doctor in Ireland, but her story started much earlier, in Iraq. Nabila had a clear goal from the start: to become a doctor, to make a difference in her community, to stay. But war disrupted everything. At first, she resisted leaving. She stayed longer than many peers. But eventually, when the violence became impossible to live around, she left.

Unlike the accidental migrant, her next steps were meticulous. She researched visa options, language exams, and credential transfers. In 2007 she first moved to Romania, where she took temporary work in health-related jobs while saving money. Over the next years, she prepared for the Romanian medical licensing exams at the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest, collected documentation, and sat English-language tests. Ireland wasn't chosen at random: she knew she could requalify, as it was also an EU state with generous pay for medical doctors, where she would continue practicing, and eventually gain stability there. Would she have left without the war? She says no, while she had thought about visiting fellowships abroad but had initially planned to remain in Iraq. Her story shows how violence pushed her out, but her subsequent journey was marked by deliberate planning.

THE TYPOLOGY OF MIGRANTS

To make sense of the different journeys, we can sort them on two axes: planned/accidental on one hand, and voluntary/forced on the other. The vertical axis is about choice, whereas the horizontal one suggests whether the move was deliberate or more unexpected. As we see from the figure below, each of the stories we've explored can be placed into one of four boxes with Ema being accidental and voluntary, Zaki, planned and voluntary and Nabila planned and forced. As for the accidental and forced quarter, we don't have a story like this here but this quadrant corresponds to many refugee trajectories, where people flee suddenly with no time to plan. Recognising this "empty cell" reminds us of how migration doesn't fit into tidy categories.



THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION AND PLANNING

A key component in such individual stories is how migrants themselves envision their futures. Koikkalainen and Kyle Koikkalainen & Kyle 2015) introduce the theory of “cognitive migration”, meaning individuals in many cases rehearse their lives abroad before moving. In research terms, this is sometimes called prospective cognition, or more simply, the mental, preparatory phase of migration. For context, migrants may read travel blogs, talk to friends or family already living abroad or even just daydream about a new career. Zaki’s story illustrates this: she often spoke with relatives in the United States and mentally pictured himself studying there. For years she had the idea of “someday studying at one of the Ivy League colleges,” but only acted on it in his final year of college. According to Koikkalainen, this kind of person, who has long-held intentions and then suddenly acts fits the dreamer category. Zaki’s case shows that although the U.S. wasn’t a family tradition, the mental image of a better future there eventually made him act on this dream.

By contrast, Ema did not spend years imagining herself in Lebanon, she hadn’t even been to her country’s capital, let alone dream of travelling abroad. Instead, when a cousin offered her a waitressing job, she seized the chance “now or never.” Her choice was largely reactive, fitting Koikkalainen’s accidental migrant. There was no long-term plan or research on what awaits, the future image only crystallized right in that moment. While cognitive factors still played a role – she had heard distant stories from relatives, her decision was driven more by immediate necessity rather than long-standing dreams. Noor’s path illustrates yet another pattern: as a professional who had trained for years, she fits the planner type, before leaving Iraq, she had already applied for fellowships and mapped out continuing education in the U.K. Her vision of a future career was clear, and she worked steadily toward it, even amidst political instability.

Thus, these narratives align with research that categorizes migrants by decision style. Koikkalainen et al. found three overlapping profiles: planners (clear long-term plan), dreamers (idea activated later), and accidental movers (unplanned). Each approach shows different interplay of push-pull factors. The planner, N had academic credentials that pulled her to the Ireland’s medical system, while push factors (such as insufficient healthcare infrastructure, conflict, and low pay) made staying long-term untenable. The dreamer Zaki pulled himself toward American education even though Switzerland itself is undeniably comfortable, with his push factors being more subtle. The accidental E illustrates a volatile case: she was both “pushed” by rural poverty and “pulled” by a chance job, but without long-term planning. These life stories underscore that migration decisions are not one-size-fits-all.

PUSH-PULL FACTORS AND COMPLEXITY

Everett Lee's 1966 study of push-pull framework (Lee 1966) remains a useful starting point for micro-migrations research. In sum, migrants evaluate negatives ("pushes") at home against positives ("pulls") abroad. However, migrants often experience a blend of motives. The narrative cases show why: E felt forced by economic hardship (a push), but she also saw Lebanon as offering community and work (a pull). N fled war (an obvious push), yet her move was planned and not purely reactive to immediate violence, she also had personal goals. Z had no dire necessity at home, so his move was largely pull-driven by education and adventure.

Importantly, we must not forget that the forced-voluntary divide is best understood as a continuum. No migration is 100% voluntary, even in economic migration, a lack of career opportunities or low pay can push people to move. Nor is any migration 100% forced, since even in the direst situations there are moments of choice about timing, routes, or destinations. Instead of binaries, we can present movements as closer to one or the other extreme. For instance, E would say she was forced to leave Romania, the village's economic collapse left her family starving and with no future. Legally she wasn't a refugee, but in her mind leaving was not a free choice. N definitely fled direct threats (qualifying as forced), but also felt driven by the slim chances to continue her profession under sanctions and sectarian quotas. Z's case was mostly "voluntary" (education and self-realization), yet social expectations and identity (being raised as Mexican in Europe) also played a role in his decision.

This is why a nuanced view is needed, migrants' experiences often lie on a continuum from voluntary to forced. Even what seem like simple pull-factors (better jobs) may mask deeper, more hidden motives (family traditions, educational aspirations, or gender norms). In all three stories, decisions were dynamic, none was a single moment. E could not afford to stay home after years of declining local economy; N could not stay amid escalating violence; Z chose to go after years of imagining a new life. These variations echo research finding that migration is a "dynamic and constantly evolving process", not a fixed one-time choice, as motivations can shift over time due to personal and structural factors.

OTHER FACTORS OF MIGRATION

Besides the push-pull theory, migration studies now often use the aspiration-capability model: people migrate when they both want to (aspirations) and can (capabilities). Our examples reflect that: Z had high aspirations and the capability (EU mobility) to study abroad; N had the aspiration of continuing her career and had the skills and networks to move; E had a strong aspiration to support her family (escape poverty) but very limited capability until an opportunity arose.

Importantly, these categories are not fixed personality types but patterns of decision-making. They illustrate how migration is presented in research: more complex than a simple push-pull story. These groups still blur in reality, acknowledging that migrants' attitudes evolve. For instance, today Zaki may develop a clear plan (becoming a planner), and Ema could aspire to further education after settling.

CONCLUSION: PERSONAL STORIES VERSUS THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES

The three brief stories presented here, Ema's chance leap into Lebanon, Zaki's pursuit of education, and Nabila's carefully planned escape from conflict, show that migration decisions emerge from a tangled mix of necessity, opportunity, imagination, and strategy. Thus, we can affirm that microhistory shows us just how these big forces (economic collapse, education systems, war, etc) play out in people's lives, and how different individuals interpret and act on them differently. By framing migration as a continuum rather than a binary, and by recognising categories such as "accidental," "dreamer," and "planner," we can better capture the complexity of human mobility. Above all, personal accounts remind us that migration is never just about flows and numbers, but about people navigating uncertainty in their very own futures.

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Vesa Maxhuni

Dialectic Diaspora: Construction of Gender and Ethnicity among Kosovo-Albanian Women in Austria

IN A GIST

Kosovo-Albanian women in Austria navigate a dialectical tension between cultural continuity and adaptive pressures, constructing identities at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and diasporic experience.

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora is often imagined as an “in-between” space, suspended between home and host, here and there. Yet this binary framing obscures the dynamic and dialectical processes through which belonging, identity, and agency are continuously negotiated. This paper approaches the Kosovo-Albanian diaspora in Austria as a dialectical space, where gender and ethnicity are co-constructed and actively redefined. The negotiation of identity among diaspora communities is a multifaceted and dynamic process, shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, gender, and transnational experiences. For women growing up in the Kosovo-Albanian diaspora in Austria, these processes involve navigating complex expectations tied to cultural norms alongside the influences of the host society.

This research is trying to explore how these women construct and reconcile their gendered and ethnic identities, focusing on the tensions and negotiations that arise, but also on the liberating and active part they take in these negotiations. They are not merely a “product” of the diaspora, but an integral part of its fabric, acting as transformative agents within it.

Drawing on qualitative narrative interviews and guided by Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, this paper examines how participants experience and articulate their belonging to both Albanian and Austrian contexts. Central themes include the gendered expectations placed on women within Albanian communities, the asymmetrical nature of gender roles, the intergenerational relationships towards the parents and the transnational experience with Kosovo.

Furthermore, the research highlights how these women actively negotiate their relationships with family, particularly in the realms of dating and parenting, and how these negotiations shape their evolving sense of self. The formation of identity will be investigated within the Kosovo-Albanian diaspora, emphasizing the interaction between ethnicity and gender. These two dimensions are deeply intertwined and significantly shape individuals' self-understanding and social roles.

By attending to these lived experiences, this paper contributes to broader discussions on migration within diasporic contexts. It challenges essentialist understandings of culture and identity, emphasizing instead their fluid, selective, and context-dependent nature. At the same time, it conceptualizes the diaspora as a dialectical space – one that does not dissolve into mere notions of fluidity and hybridity but sustains its own tensions and transformations.

Ultimately, this research offers insight into how young Kosovo-Albanian women in Austria navigate the complex interplay between heritage and gendered expectations as they forge their own paths within a transnational landscape. Rather than situating the individual solely in an “in-between” space, as much of diaspora research tends to do, this paper deconstructs the relationship between host and home societies to foreground the agency of women within the diaspora.

METHODOLOGY

For this research, I conducted in-depth, open narrative interviews following the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is a qualitative methodology that enables the systematic generation of theory directly from empirical data. The empirical research is conducted without imposing preconceived theoretical frameworks, allowing the theory to emerge organically from the participants’ narratives.

Charmaz developed a constructivist approach to Grounded Theory, building on but differing from the objectivist, post-positivist models of Glaser and Strauss (Charmaz 2014: 53–56). She argues that theories are not “discovered” but “constructed,” as meaning is actively interpreted and reality is socially shaped through researcher–participant interactions (ibid.: 37–38, 55). Her approach emphasizes flexibility and openness, avoiding predetermined hypotheses and allowing theory to emerge from the data (ibid.: 36, 57). The process is cyclical, moving iteratively between data collection, coding, and analysis to deepen understanding (ibid.: 57). Researchers should remain aware of existing theories but avoid imposing them, aiming instead to “capture participants’ experiences and life worlds” (ibid.: 61) and generate theoretical insights grounded in their perspectives.

The interviews were deliberately designed to be open-ended and participant-led, allowing respondents to guide the conversation toward topics and experiences they considered significant, thus fostering rich and nuanced narratives. I began the interviews with an open-ended question designed to serve as an entry point into more focused discussions on gender roles, migration experiences, and cultural expectations. The opening-question was phrased as follows:

“I’m interested in the life stories of women who grew up in Kosovo-Albanian families in Austria. Please tell me everything you remember that relates to your upbringing. How do you see your life story up until now? What are the most important memories or experiences that come to mind? Have there been moments or aspects that were particularly formative for you? Tell me everything that comes to your mind. You can take as much time as you need. I won’t interrupt you. I’ll just listen and take notes on questions I might want to ask later.”

It was essential to keep the opening prompt broad and non-directive, deliberately avoiding the imposition of predefined theoretical constructs, while still guiding the conversation toward my research focus. Consequently, I refrained from asking a question such as: “What is it like to be a woman in the Kosovo-Albanian diaspora?” or “How do you identify?”, as these formulations carry conceptual assumptions that could have constrained the inductive emergence of categories from the data. Preserving this openness was fundamental to the constructivist Grounded Theory approach, which emphasizes theory development grounded firmly in participants’ narratives. This narrative format created space for participants to reflect on their personal histories, everyday experiences, and identity negotiations in their own terms. The interviews were

conducted in German in person and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. As per Charmaz's guidelines, I wrote analytic memos after each interview and engaged in initial coding shortly after the conversations, letting the data guide further questions and sampling decisions and then again engaging in further coding.

A total of six interviews were conducted, which lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours each. Participants were recruited through online calls on social media and Albanian organizations within the diaspora. The interviews were conducted between February 2025 and November 2025. Individuals who expressed interest were provided with information about the study and its procedures, and participation was voluntary, based on informed consent. Initially, I focused on participants who were born or raised in Austria, as my primary interest lay in understanding how ethnic identity is maintained – or potentially transformed – outside the homeland, particularly among those who did not grow up in Kosovo. These cases shed light on processes of intergenerational identity transmission, while also revealing the tensions that can arise from growing up in a cultural and national context different from that of one's parents. At first, I operationalized "diaspora" narrowly, focusing on women whose families had fled the Kosovo-war. However, as the research progressed, I came into contact with women whose fathers had migrated to Austria as guest workers prior to the war, as well as others who arrived with their families in the early 2000s due to economic hardship after the war. These encounters broadened my participant criteria and allowed for greater variation in the sample. Including such contrasting cases is consistent with the logic of theoretical sampling within Grounded Theory and serves to enhance the analytical depth of the study, contributing to the aim of reaching theoretical saturation.^[1]

DIASPORA, IDENTITY AND GENDER

The term "diaspora" originally referred to the Jewish exile and dispersion from their homeland, often associated with persecution (Safran 1991: 83). Today, the term is used quite loosely to describe various groups such as expatriates, displaced persons, political refugees, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities (ibid.). Scholars such as Safran (1991) and Cohen (2022) present a typology of diasporas. Safran (1991: 83–84) outlined key characteristics of a diaspora, which can be summarized as follows: a group's dispersion from its homeland, the preservation of collective memories about it, and a sense of not fully belonging in the host society. The homeland is seen as the true place of origin, to which return is desired, and members feel responsible for its well-being while maintaining cultural or emotional ties to it. Cohen constructed typologies of diasporas: victim, labour, imperial, trade, deterritorialized and incipient (Cohen 2022: 11). A victim-diaspora, for example, is "normally formed by a calamitous dispersal, a rupture of ordinary life so profound that its recollection becomes inscribed into the subsequent collective memory of the group" (ibid.: 10).

Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, by contrast, propose understandings of diaspora that emphasize fluidity, hybridity, and the ongoing construction of identity. Hall (1990) defines diaspora through heterogeneity, hybridity, and transformation. For him, diasporic identity is not fixed or unified but lives through difference – it is continuously re-created through processes of change, negotiation, and renewal. Gilroy (1997) views diaspora as a concept that challenges fixed, national, and essentialist notions of identity. It values forms of belonging that extend beyond the nation-state. By positioning the diaspora over the "coercive unanimity" (ibid.: 334) of the nation, Gilroy presents it as an anti-national and anti-essentialist framework that reconceptualizes dispersal

as an ongoing, complex process rather than a single traumatic rupture.

Brubaker (2005) offers a critical perspective on the various definitions and conceptualizations of diaspora. He points out that many discussions either emphasize strong boundary-maintaining definitions that view diaspora as a distinct, bounded community or weak definitions that focus on the numbers and dispersal aspects. However, both approaches face problems: the former can lead to essentialism and groupism by reifying fixed identities, while the latter risks diluting the concept by universalizing it to the point of meaninglessness. He argues that diaspora should be thought of as “an idiom, a stance, a claim” rather than a group or “bounded entity” (ibid.: 12). But at the same time, he himself identifies three core elements of the diaspora concept: “dispersion”, “homeland orientation”, and “boundary maintenance” (ibid.: 5–6).

One of the aims of this paper is to analyze diaspora but at the same time deconstruct it by rejecting a binary logic, such as reducing diaspora to a conflict of the home versus the host. Demir (2022) offers an alternative concept to the analysis of the diaspora. In a first step, she identifies the two usual approaches to the diaspora: the “ideal type” and the “hybrid” type. She refers to the before mentioned scholars and how they define diaspora, that is: “diaspora discussed as a Weberian ideal type has features that are either too loosely constructed (e.g. Brubaker’s) or too strictly conceptualized (e.g. Safran’s), limiting their use for empirical examination of diasporas.” (ibid.: 17). This “ideal type” of diasporas is too fixed and “cannot easily account for social change or transformation, and also lack a temporal dimension.” (ibid.: 18).

On the other hand, diaspora is theorized through hybridity and subjectivity, like how Hall, and Gilroy do. The focus is on how transformative, heterogenous and anti-essentialist these definitions are – which is important to note, but if this approach is taken too far, it can be almost too loose and fail to critically analyze diasporas. Demir describes this as a “tyranny of in-betweenness” (ibid.: 24): “Diaspora should not be reduced to subjective experiences of longing, homelessness, emotional connections of belonging and of straddling two places at once; it should be much more than these.” (ibid.: 26–27).

Demir views diaspora through the lenses of translation and decolonisation. The concept of diaspora as translation views diasporic life as an ongoing process of negotiation and reinterpretation between cultures. Diasporas act as intermediaries and translators – communicating with both the host society and the homeland – while reshaping identities and challenging existing power relations. The idea of diaspora as decolonisation highlights diasporas as political agents who challenge Eurocentric or North- centric narratives. Newer generations of the diaspora, unlike the first, openly contest exclusion and demand participation in shaping shared national stories, thus decolonizing dominant understandings of nationhood and belonging. This gives the diaspora and its members agency and power. Demir describes diasporas as the “archetypal translators, as they put new identities, language and world-views in circulation” (ibid.: 6).

Kadriu (2019) analysed the evolution of the Kosovo-Albanians diaspora. They maintained strong ties to their homeland through political engagement, which initially positioned them as “nationalists in the distance” (ibid.: 69). However, following Kosovo’s independence, their focus has shifted: while political and patriotic attachments remain, family ties and cultural practices have become central ways of sustaining identity across borders. This demonstrates that their diasporic identity is flexible, evolving, and rooted in the maintenance of social and cultural bonds beyond national territory.

However, I do not want to rely only on the before mentioned criteria as the only definition of a diaspora, as it has been argued before that this typology can be too fixed. Instead, through empirical research, I aim to show how the participants themselves construct their understanding of their lived experience in the diaspora.

Similar to how diaspora can be defined to loosely or to strictly, identity can be too. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) critique the use of "identity" in social sciences, arguing it often means too much, too little, or nothing at all (ibid.: 1). The term lacks a clear definition. Rather than discarding the term, Brubaker and Cooper call for clearer theoretical framing. Jenkins, for example, describes identity as "the most fundamental of all social theoretical concepts" (Jenkins 2006: 262). Jenkins also highlights the distinction between "external" and "internal" identification. His model applies to both individual and collective identities. Identity is not a fixed trait, but a process – something one "does", not "has" (Jenkins 2014: 6). While not deterministic, it influences decisions. Hall similarly uses both "identity" and "identification". Hall's contributions enriches the identity debate and emphasizes the need for theoretical engagement. Like Jenkins, Hall insists that identity can no longer be understood in "old" ways but remains vital to analyzing central questions (Hall 1996: 2). He describes identity as a "suture"—a stitch or thread (ibid.: 5). Identity is the meeting point of temporary discourses, practices, and subjectivities. It is shaped by ongoing interaction between subject and discourse and is thus constructed and contingent. The metaphor of the "suture" shows that identity is not a closed system and new meanings can be added or fall away.

In the context of the diaspora, there are many ways to approach the construction of identity. Dhar and Raman (2024) for example point out the complex ways identity can exist in the diaspora: between integration and assimilation, transnationalism and dual belonging, and cultural hybridity. Similar as for the diaspora, we cannot rely on too hybrid or too fixed definitions of identity. One possible approach could be the concept of "blocking" and "threading" (Karppinen et al.: 2025). Blocking and threading are two interconnected practices in talk that relate to how individuals and groups construct identities through communication. Blocking involves emphasizing differences and creating social boundaries between groups or individuals. This would be a more essentialist approach to identity construction. Threading, on the other hand, focuses on creating similarities, connections, and unity among people. These practices are intertwined and mutually sustain each other. In talk, people navigate between emphasizing differences (blocking) and building connections (threading), and this dynamic plays a key role in how identities are produced and negotiated over time.

In the context of this research, the gender aspect is central and is one who has been disregarded in diaspora research for a while. Bhandari (2024) describes phases of the "evaluation of female agenda", where in the beginning there was a focus on "victimhood" which evolved to a "more socially constructed view of identity formation that transcends the binary distinction between home and host countries" (ibid.: 159). Diaspora Scholarship became more diverse and now gender is a "foundational element shaping how women interpret and navigate their experiences" (ibid.: 165).

Identities do not exist in isolation; rather, as I will argue in this paper, they emerge within a dialectical space shaped by the interplay of host and home societies, gender, ethnicity, and family. As Berger and Luckmann (1969) observed in their influential work "The Social Construction of Reality": "Identity itself is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between the individual and society" (ibid.: 186). In this sense, identities are inherently relational, discursive, and processual. Building on this perspective, Ehrkamp (2006) analysed assimilation discourses

among Turkish immigrants and native-born Germans, noting that such discourses are “central in the dialectical process of identity” (ibid.: 1673).

This dialectical understanding can be extended not only to the relationship between individuals and the host society, but also to their engagement with the home society, as well as to the interpersonal dynamics within diasporic communities themselves. In this way, the construction of identity is always situated, negotiated, and shaped by multiple, overlapping social contexts. Thus, the diaspora itself can be regarded as a dialectical space, where identities are continuously produced and transformed through the interaction of transnational, social, and cultural forces.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The following analytical categories emerged from the empirical analysis conducted within a Constructivist Grounded Theory framework (Charmaz 2014). They reflect how participants construct and negotiate meanings around gender, belonging, and transnational experience within the Kosovo-Albanian diaspora in Austria. These categories are not separate but closely intertwined; their intersections reveal the processes through which identities are constructed. For this reason, I conceptualize the diaspora in this context as a dialectical space – a space shaped by ongoing negotiations, tensions, and transformations between the individual and the collective, the local and the transnational.

1. Family as a Site of Tension
2. Belonging as a Fragmented Practice
3. Kosovo as an Ambivalent Space of Experience
4. Dating as a Space of Negotiating Gender

Family as a Site of Tension

The participants’ narratives reveal a complex experience of parental upbringing. Their accounts highlight not only how they were socialized within their families but also how they actively interpreted, challenged, and reshaped parental authority in everyday interactions.

The “strict” dimension of parenting was a recurring element in nearly all interviews. Participants described rules that limited their social freedoms, such as not being allowed to sleep over at friends’ houses, having to assist with household chores from a young age, or facing restrictions on going out late at night. Yet, strictness was not the sole defining feature of their upbringing. Many participants emphasized that their parents also placed great importance on education, often valuing schooling over traditional gendered expectations of domesticity or early marriage. The participant recalled how her father explicitly prioritized her education over domestic skills:

Across all interviews, participants described their upbringing as a balancing act between strict control and moments of leniency, where boundaries were constantly tested and negotiated. While parental authority was firmly established, it was not absolute or unchangeable. Many women recalled that achieving personal freedom, such as the ability to go out late at night, meet friends, or go clubbing, required persistent negotiation and gradual acts of resistance. A common strategy described by participants was to push parental boundaries incrementally. Participants emphasized that while their upbringing imposed constraints, there remained a room for negotiation within family dynamics.

One participant reflected on this process, noting that she had been “lucky” to have parents who, despite their initial strictness, were ultimately willing to compromise, highlighting that not all girls in similar contexts might have enjoyed the same possibility for negotiation.

“But it’s not like that now. I think if he [her father] hadn’t been so easygoing, my aspirations for freedom would never have come to fruition. So, yes, it was a combination of factors. And I was just lucky, I know that now. It could have turned out differently. ”

It is important to note that the participants usually compared themselves to other Albanian women from the diaspora rather than to their Austrian peers. This highlights the complexity and diversity within the diaspora itself: not all women share the same upbringing, and it is therefore not possible to speak of a uniform diasporic experience. Moreover, the diaspora functions as the primary frame of reference – rather than, for instance, Austrian society.

“But I have to say, when it comes to my parents, I was actually quite lucky compared to other Albanian girls. My parents weren’t the kind who would forbid me from going here or there. Of course, there were occasional arguments, but I was able to move out before marriage, which wasn’t a problem at all. Things also got better and more pleasant as I got older.”

The participant explains how “things” got better with time, referring to her relationship with their parents and how strict they were with her. This is something that was described across almost all interviews, revealing how relationships can change over time. Participants described a delicate interplay between confrontation and empathy in their relationships with their parents. On the one hand, they spoke about holding their parents accountable for enforcing restrictive gender norms, questioning rules they perceived as unfair and openly challenging double standards. On the other hand, these confrontations were often tempered by an understanding of their parents’ life circumstances, migration histories, and the generational gap in socialization experiences. This ambivalence highlights how family relationships are not simply oppositional but shaped by a continuous negotiation between critique, reflection and empathy. This also reveals a processual character of the relationship with the parents and the agency of the daughters. The agency of the daughters is also highlighted by them taking on an educational role towards their parents, trying to raise their awareness about things like gender equality, racism and LGBTQIA+ issues. One participant recounts how her father used a slur for Roma people in Albanian and how she reacted to it:

“He still uses the M-word to refer to them. So I told him, “Dad, you can’t say that, stop saying it. Just say “komuniteti i romve” [the Roma community]. Or if you know what group someone belongs to – Ashkali, for example – then just say that, or Egjptjan, whatever it is. What’s the problem?” And he actually took that to heart, which I thought was really cool. ”

This passage demonstrates intergenerational negotiation, where the participant actively challenges and reshapes her parents’ attitudes and language regarding marginalized groups. While her father already expressed non-discriminatory values, the daughter engages in the language he uses and offers alternatives and expresses how “cool” she thinks it is that he uses the politically correct terms now. Another participant talked about how she addresses certain social issues with her parents, explicitly her mother, in regard to gender expectations:

“I keep addressing these issues with them, including LGBTQ topics, because my best friend is gay. I try to desensitize them to these things. I’m constantly talking about it. I mean, it has gotten better, but you can’t completely change them. And also regarding women, I have to say my mother has made more progress. [...] That has already changed. But I mean, I’m still training her

on this – I guess I’ve been doing that for about eight years now, since I was sixteen.”

The excerpt illustrates the active role that the daughter assumes in shaping the values and perspectives within her family. While progress has been made – particularly in her mother’s growing recognition of women’s autonomy – the daughter acknowledges the limits of change, noting that not all attitudes can be completely transformed. This process reflects a dialectical dynamic between tradition and change, where parental authority, cultural expectations, and generational perspectives interact. The daughter’s sustained efforts over several years demonstrate both empowerment and norm negotiation within the diaspora context.

A recurring theme across the interviews was the differentiated relationship to mothers and fathers. Fathers were often described as comparatively more progressive, lenient and open to dialogue, sometimes serving as figures of identification who could understand their daughters’ social realities in Austria. Mothers, by contrast, were frequently portrayed as more invested in reproducing traditional gender expectations, actively transmitting cultural norms. This dynamic often produced friction in mother-daughter relationships, as daughters resisted what they perceived as attempts to “police” their behavior and choices while still seeking closeness and understanding. This pattern suggests that intergenerational dynamics of authority and freedom are not uniform but gendered within the parental roles themselves but shaped by each parent’s migration trajectory, adaptation to Austrian society, and their own positioning within patriarchal structures.

“I would say that I actually have a more difficult relationship toward my mom than toward my dad. I think it’s because my dad has been here longer and has done more self –reflection, because he somehow understands my world better or has integrated better and also feels more friction with Kosovo because he also carries the pain of how relatives treated him. I think our stories are a bit similar.”

When discussing the difficulties in her relationship with her mother, she links them to her mother’s circumstances in Austria following her fleeing Kosovo:

“But my mother still lived in Kosovo for ten years longer. And things were actually going quite well for her in Kosovo; the only problem was the Serbs. And then she moved to a new world and was no longer the educated woman with a good job. And for her, things here are rather negative. (...) I also think that mothers often project a bit of themselves onto their daughters.”

Across nearly all interviews, participants described how their mothers struggled significantly with the daughters’ decisions to move out. While fathers tended to be more open and supportive of this step, mothers often felt a sense of betrayal or abandonment. These reactions were closely tied to broader challenges the mothers faced in integrating into Austrian society. Many had migrated later in life, usually after meeting their husbands in Kosovo, when the husband had already been living in Austria for some time. Upon arrival, the mothers were forced to leave behind established social and professional lives, encountering difficulties with the language, cultural adaptation, and employment opportunities. This sense of dislocation was further reflected in their frequent, extended stays in Kosovo during the children’s summer holidays:

„But I think, on a larger scale, I can understand it, because she probably didn’t enjoy life, except for those four to six weeks in the summer.”

The daughter’s empathy (“I can understand it”) represents a shift in generational understanding showing how younger members of the diaspora reinterpret their parents’ lives within broader structures. The different experience of migration between mothers and fathers is particularly

interesting, as the material suggests that patriarchal and gendered roles were more strongly transmitted by the mothers than by the fathers. It may also indicate that these women maintain a closer hold on their daughters and remain more entrenched in traditional gender norms due to their comparatively limited integration into the host society. Their sense of belonging to the host society is thus more fragile and challenging to sustain positively, especially when contrasted with the men who migrated at a younger age and were able to begin working and adapting more quickly.

"I think it's because my dad came to Austria when he was so young that he wasn't the stereotypical Albanian, because he didn't grow up with two cultures, but still had an Austrian influence."

The intersection of family, gender, and ethnicity offers a useful lens for understanding the dialectic nature of diasporic experiences. The family functions as a site of tension: it is experienced in a gendered way, yet it is not a fixed or static entity. Relationships within the family evolve over time and, in some cases, become more progressive through the active engagement of the daughters. These daughters do not merely respond to parental authority. They actively influence their parents, demonstrating their agency and capacity to shape family dynamics and challenge them. But it also shows that gender dynamics are not limited to the experiences of the daughters; they extend to the relationships with their parents, who themselves embody gendered experiences of migration marked by asymmetry.

BELONGING AS A FRAGMENTED PRACTICE

The participants themselves reflected extensively on their sense of belonging, which emerged as a major category. It can be characterized as ambivalent, selective, processual and contextual. All participants clearly affirmed their Albanian identity, though some also claimed "being Austrian" to varying degrees. One participant, for example, described her struggle with identifying as Albanian, particularly due to patriarchal norms she encountered, but eventually embraced the idea that she did not have to "choose" between these identities exclusively:

"Until, at some point, I said to myself, hey, you don't actually have to define yourself so strongly, you can just be both. And reject that, appreciate it, and shape your life accordingly. There's no one there to tell me: you have to live it out 100%, or you're not it. So now I think to myself, I really appreciate both sides of myself and I don't want to give up either of them. (.)"

This shows how the process of belonging also involves a selective engagement with cultural identity. Participants often reject certain cultural and traditional norms they choose not to uphold, while simultaneously expressing appreciation for others. This selective belonging can even be strategic; for instance, one participant shared that she openly identifies as Albanian in the presence of other Albanians but exercises greater caution about revealing her heritage in different social contexts. This same participant also distanced herself from "being Albanian" due to negative experiences within the Albanian community.

"Now I realize that, so now I can't really identify myself as Albanian, in certain respects I can, but when it comes to cultural things, I find it very difficult, especially the outdated ones, I can't really relate to them, because my father is also, I would say, a bit modern, not as modern as me, but yes."

She is not absolutely rejecting being Albanian, since at the same time this woman also expressed her love for the "country and people". Being an Albanian woman complicates the

process of fully identifying with the Albanian identity, resulting in a selective and ambivalent sense of belonging. This ambivalence is not portrayed as confusing or burdensome but rather as liberating, as it allows these women to embrace their heritage and ethnicity without feeling compelled to accept it in its entirety. Instead, they can consciously choose which aspects to integrate into their lives. For many, reaching this realization brings a sense of freedom, and for some, their Albanian identity has become less central than it once was:

“I like to say that I’m Albanian. But (.) it’s not that important to me now. (..) I went through that phase 10 years ago. I had a phone case with the Albania Eagle on it. Everyone had to know that I was Albanian. [...] That changed over time. I can’t really say why. (.) I just got older. I had more people to deal with. Although, back then, my circle wasn’t that Albanian either. (..) It’s that age when you ask yourself: who am I? Then you take something you want to identify with.”

This illustrates a critical and reflective examination of her evolving identity process. It demonstrates that belonging is not static or fixed but rather a continuous negotiation shaped by personal experiences, social contexts, and shifting meanings over time.

Beyond self-identification, external behaviors and encounters also played a crucial role in shaping the participants’ identities. Experiences of racism, discrimination, and confrontation with stereotypes significantly influenced how they constructed and understood their sense of self. The diaspora context is particularly important in this regard, operating on two levels: first, as members of a diaspora within Austrian society, and second, as part of the broader so-called “Balkan” diaspora in Austria. The first encounters with discriminatory attitudes were usually experienced in the context of education. A few participants recounted how teachers did not have high expectations of them to complete a higher education.

„And very often – I’ve heard this quite a few times from teachers – they would say things like, “she’ll end up like her parents anyway, they’re good for nothing.” It was like, “she’ll just end up working in a pizzeria someday.” That’s what I heard from teachers. (...) And yeah, honestly, I’d love to rub my degree in their faces.”

This account highlights the persistence of stereotypes within the Austrian education system. The teacher’s repeated discouragement reflects how institutional expectations can reproduce social hierarchies and limit upward mobility for children of migrant backgrounds. They have been implicitly positioned the participants outside the realm of academic success.

At the same time, when participants talked about experiences of racism and discrimination, they also described a certain “invisibility” of their migration background and having had it “better” than other migrants.

“I have to say, I did notice that in Austria, being Albanian wasn’t seen as negatively as being Turkish or Arab or something considered even more foreign. In a way, you were still seen as European – so there was a certain privilege in that position, even though you still weren’t quite Austrian enough.”

This reflection illustrates a nuanced awareness of hierarchies within the broader category of “migrants” in Austria. By identifying as “still European” but not Austrian “enough” she recognizes a gradient of otherness shaped by racialization and cultural proximity to whiteness. Her statement reveals how belonging is not a binary but a relational and stratified process, where some migrant groups are perceived as “less foreign” and thus afforded partial inclusion.

The discrimination and racism participants experienced from teachers or other Austrians differed from that encountered within the broader Balkan diaspora, as a few participants described:

“I’ve experienced racism from Serbs in Austria in my life. For example, in primary school, I had two Serbs in my class who would always hold up three fingers at me – like the Chetnik sign. Or they’d make those stupid jokes all the time, saying things like, “It’s your fault the war happened” or “You don’t have your own country,” and so on. Since there are many Serbs in Austria, I felt that this was primarily a source of fear for me. Otherwise, because I don’t really stand out on the street, I haven’t personally experienced that kind of racism. But as soon as I said I was Albanian, it did become somewhat of a target for anti-Albanian-racism – mostly from Serbs, somehow. And yes, that has definitely been part of my identity formation.”^[2]

This passage further illustrates the relational and stratified nature of otherness in Austria. The participant experiences discrimination that is both ethnically and historically specific – primarily from Serbs, reflecting lingering tensions from the Kosovo War. These encounters are not only a source of fear but also shape identity formation, as the participant points out, demonstrating how experiences of discrimination intersect with perceptions of hierarchy, cultural proximity, and group membership within multiple diasporas. It also underscores the enduring impact of the war and its consequences, which continue to resonate across both time and space beyond the immediate context of the conflict.

This part explored how Kosovo-Albanian women in Austria construct and negotiate their sense of belonging, revealing it to be ambivalent, selective, processual, and context-dependent. Belonging was shown to involve selective engagement with traditions and norms, sometimes strategic, as participants navigated different social contexts. Experiences of discrimination, racism, and stereotypes – both from Austrians and within the broader Balkan diaspora – further shaped identity formation, highlighting how belonging is relational, stratified, and historically grounded. Identity, as earlier explained, is constructed from both internal and external dimensions, always in dialectical exchange with the environment; the internal and external cannot be separated precisely because of this dialectical character. This analysis emphasizes that identity is not static but emerges through ongoing negotiation of personal, cultural, and social factors, where diaspora functions as a complex, multi-layered space influencing how participants understand and perform their ethnic, gendered, and national identities.

Dating as a Space Of Negotiating Gender

Romantic relationships emerged in the interviews as a crucial site where gender and ethnicity are negotiated in everyday life. The experiences of the participants illustrate that intimate relationships are not detached from structures of ethnicity and gender but are instead central arenas in which these identities are produced, negotiated, and occasionally transformed.

Most of the women reported having dated predominantly Albanian men. A recurring theme was the explicit or implicit expectation that daughters should partner with, and eventually marry, an Albanian man, even in the diasporic setting. While some parents expressed this as a preference, others demanded it more strictly, leading to fears of familial disapproval or even social ostracism if women entered relationships with non-Albanian partners.

One participant recounted how her mother attempted to arrange a match with an Albanian man she had met on an airplane, illustrating the active role some families take in shaping their daughters’ romantic lives. Another participant, who personally did not prioritize ethnicity in

choosing a partner but happened to be dating an Albanian man, described her mother's relief upon learning that her boyfriend shared their ethnic background.

As one participant explained, dating an Albanian man is not only a personal choice but also a decision laden with broader cultural and familial implications:

„And they [Albanian men] also don't understand that parents have different expectations of an Albanian woman than they would if he were now with an Austrian woman.“

The man in this context wanted to introduce the participant immediately to his parents when they first started dating, which startled her:

„I was like, what do you mean? If I visit your parents, my parents will find out the day after tomorrow at the latest. Because word gets around extremely quickly. And then it has to become official. And my parents might not say we have to get married right away, but they will assume that we will have to get married at some point.“

The narratives reveal a rift between the realities of dating for Albanian men and women, situated within a highly heteronormative framework of relationships. When talking about men, the impression appeared that they navigate romantic choices with greater freedom, while women described their experiences as constrained.

In contrast, entering relationships with non-Albanian men posed challenges, sometimes requiring secrecy to avoid parental disapproval. Several participants recounted having pursued such relationships discreetly, motivated by a desire to make independent choices about partnership. As one woman explained, she maintained a three-year relationship with a non-Albanian partner without her parents' knowledge:

„I've always felt that I need to figure out for myself whether I even want to do this.“

Another participant also described maintaining a secret relationship with a non-Albanian partner. This experience ultimately led her to conclude that she preferred an „Albanian relationship“ shaped by several intertwined factors. On one level, she longed for a sense of cultural intimacy: sharing a common language, listening to the same music, and partaking in familiar traditions, which she felt would be more readily available with an Albanian partner. On another level, practical and emotional considerations came into play: she feared jeopardizing her relationship with her parents and anticipated the stress and potential conflict that openly pursuing a non-Albanian relationship might provoke within her family:

„And then there's the fear, okay, what if it doesn't work out or if we break up or something. What do I do then? Because my parents would be even more upset. I didn't have the strength to do that.“

She also expressed a specific expectation regarding her future partner: ideally, she wished to find someone who shared the same experience of „ambivalent belonging,“ someone who, like her, was both Albanian and Austrian. This desire highlights the complex negotiation of identity that shapes partner preferences within the diaspora:

„That's what makes choosing a partner so difficult, because basically I'd prefer to have both. I'd love to have someone who is just like me. That would be ideal.“

Having an Albanian partner was also described as offering a particular sense of security and stability in intimate relationships. As one participant explained:

“But there is still a little more security than in Austrian or Western relationships. At least once you're married. Well, these break-ups and such are becoming more common here too. But you still try. It's somehow more stable. It's more stable, okay, hopefully it won't end so quickly. (.) I miss that security a little bit in all other nations. That's also one of the reasons why I actually prefer, well, it's more why I want to marry an Albanian.”

This sense of security is linked to perceived cultural values within the Albanian community, where marriage is often regarded as a long-term, even lifelong, commitment that is less readily dissolved compared to relationships in what participants referred to as “Western” contexts. Choosing an Albanian partner is not only a matter of cultural compatibility but also a strategy to ensure relational stability and predictability in the face of uncertainty. This illustrates how partner selection is embedded in broader collective imaginaries of love and marriage.

Across all interviews, participants described navigating a dense web of gendered expectations, imposed by family members, the broader Albanian diaspora, and Albanians in Kosovo. These expectations prescribe a highly specific image of “how a woman should be”, which are close intertwined with heteronormativity and patriarchy:

“Yes, of course, the values too, like a woman, a woman has to be able to cook, she has to be clean, um, preferably stay at home, she has to be able to do everything there is to do in Albanian cuisine, in terms of dishes, or, she has to be a virgin, preferably not even that, never kissed, never done that, no tattoos, or something like that, she has to come from a good family. Just take this imagination, this Albanian imagination, or this imagination of women in general: a woman must have long hair, she must be slim, she must be like this, she must be pretty, she must wear makeup, she must have a beautiful nose, you know.”

At the same time, many women actively resisted these prescriptions. Acts of rebellion – such as refusing to conform to beauty standards (e.g. one participant shaved her head) or rejecting double standards – were described as ways to reclaim agency. This active contestation shows that participants are not passive recipients of tradition but negotiate it in dynamic ways. Their narratives reveal an awareness of double standards in the Albanian community, particularly the starkly different expectations for men and women. The English word “struggle” repeatedly surfaced in the interviews, despite the conversations being in German. This choice of language underscores the depth of tension experienced:

“Well, that's just because they're men. But I had the feeling that Albanian men don't really understand the struggles that Albanian women face. Albanian men don't understand the struggle that much. [...] Precisely this expectation that one has of Albanian women. So that I cannot simply go home with someone and be relaxed and comfortable, but rather I have the feeling that one is then in one's... They already expect something from you.”

Participants highlighted a pronounced gendered asymmetry in expectations within the diaspora context. While men were often described as being expected to fulfill the roles of patriarchs and providers, these expectations were perceived as considerably less restrictive than those placed on women. Participants noted that Albanian men faced significantly less scrutiny and control regarding their physical appearance and personal behavior. Moreover, unlike women, they were not held to equally high standards of education, nor were they subjected to the same pressure to strictly preserve cultural traditions:

„Because women have to be perfect and perfect and perfect, and there can be no compromises, but the man can somehow bring home money and then everything is fine. Or he brings home

money and he doesn't hit you. That would be the minimum."

The narratives reveal that romantic relationships in the diaspora are deeply entangled with the dialectical interplay of gender and ethnicity, family involvement, and cultural norms. But they also reveal the agency and active opposition towards gendered expectations these women display. These experiences highlight how intimate relationships serve as a central arena for producing, negotiating, and contesting gendered and ethnic identities in the Kosovo-Albanian diaspora.

Kosovo as an Ambivalent Space Of Experience

One key characteristic of diasporas is the connection to the homeland. For most Kosovo-Albanians in the diaspora, mobility to Kosovo is relatively accessible, allowing frequent engagement with their country of origin. In this study, Kosovo functions as a space where all other categories – gender, family, and belonging – intersect. Most participants visit Kosovo regularly, with some travel several times a year, others only during the summer, and a few making rare visits. One participant, for example, visits Kosovo infrequently and largely unwillingly, due to strained family relationships there:

"But at some point, I also stopped going there – though actually not because of Kosovo itself, but because of my relatives. I just don't like my relatives. That's simply a realization you come to at some point."

Experience in Kosovo is very closely tied to relationships with the family there. The ones that go regularly to Kosovo usually have a good relationship with most of their family there and specifically visit to see them and spend time with them. But Kosovo is not only tied to family dynamics. The woman who rarely goes to Kosovo because of her family tells what she enjoys about being in Kosovo:

„Yes, I really enjoy being there. I love it. I love that you can speak Albanian. Everyone is so friendly. I really like that. I also like the atmosphere – I like everything about it. When I go to a café, people are so incredibly nice. The staff are always so kind. I also think it has this kind of familiar feeling. For example, I also really liked all the friends of my cousins – they were all super nice. I really liked all of them. (...) I also really like the spirit of Prishtina. I love that – the city feeling, the people."

Most of the participants enjoy being in Kosovo for different reasons: they can speak their mother tongue, engage with familiar cultural practices, visit their families and experience a sense of warmth and friendliness. On the other hand, moments of recognition emerge where they realize that their personal histories and socialization have occurred elsewhere, outside of Kosovo. In terms of identity, these experiences can paradoxically reinforce their "Austrian" identity, as being in Kosovo highlights the ways in which they have grown up differently:

"You also have to say, I was such a typical Austrian teenager. I loved the internet, I wore Vans or Chucks, ripped jeans – you know what I mean? I was simply socialized here. And that always caused conflict, but in a really silly way. Like, "Why are your shoelaces two-colored?" Exactly, yeah. So I did have a good relationship with my cousins, but I have to say, they had a completely different lifestyle than I did."

Her description of herself as a "typical Austrian teenager" – shaped by aesthetics, online culture, and fashion – contrasts with her relatives' "different lifestyle" in Kosovo. The conflict she describes is embedded in small, symbolic details ("two-colored shoelaces") that reveal the subtle ways belonging is practiced. It highlights how socialization in Austria produces embodied

habits and tastes that can become markers of difference within the extended family context, illustrating the everyday negotiations of diaspora identity. Another participant also talked about how she experienced Kosovo specifically as a member of the diaspora:

„I also went through a period where I felt like I wasn't really welcome in Kosovo. And then I reflected on why people made me feel that way. I analyzed it a bit, but that's just my own self-analysis. I think for us, we go there on vacation and don't think much about it. But for them, maybe – not that they're unhappy, but they've had much less luck in life, because of where they live. And so I took a step back and thought, okay, it's probably that they see it as unfair that I simply live this privilege: working here, going to school here, studying, and not having as many worries as they do. Because for them, life is already difficult. For example, they study but then can't get the kind of work they want. Back when I was younger, I didn't really like going to Kosovo, precisely because I noticed these kinds of comments – like, “you're from abroad.” And just this attitude of looking down on us. But over time, I was able to understand it, even if I don't agree with how some people behave. I could see where it comes from. And it was also really difficult for Albanians from Kosovo – they didn't have visa rights, and they only knew people from Kosovo. And of course, I understand that this is how it was.”

This passage highlights how diaspora identity is experienced relationally and in context of perceptions of privilege. The participant reflects on feelings of exclusion in Kosovo, recognizing that her relatively privileged life in Austria contrasts sharply with the challenges faced by Albanians in Kosovo. Her account illustrates an acute awareness of structural inequalities. At the same time, it shows the reflexive negotiation of belonging: she initially experiences discomfort and alienation but gradually cultivates and understanding of the circumstances that shape others' attitudes. It also underscores how being (negatively) marked as part of the diaspora can generate profound feelings of exclusion and alienation. The experiences in Kosovo are mediated not only by their diasporic positionality but also by the ways in which gender shapes their interactions, perceptions, and sense of belonging. Many of the participants reported cases of “catcalling” and sexual harassment while being in Kosovo:

“Yeah, well, somehow... I don't really feel comfortable there. Like I said, as a woman, you get stared at, and you have to deal with harassment in some way, whether verbal or nonverbal – sometimes even nonverbal, for example, in a club. And I'm someone who normally likes to dress casually, but when I'm there, I have to consciously choose what to wear and what to bring with me. These are the kinds of things that make me think: what am I even doing in a country like this? This isn't me.”

This passage illustrates how being in Kosovo shapes the participant's choices around clothing and their perception of their bodies, but more broadly, it reveals how her behavior is constrained by the anticipated gaze of others, particularly men. The statement “this isn't me” underscores the alienation she feels from Kosovo, signaling a dissonance between her personal identity and values and the social expectations she encounters there. This example highlights the intersection of embodiment, patriarchy, and sexism with identity, demonstrating how the spatial and social context can profoundly shape the sense of belonging. The homeland is experienced in a gendered way, shaped by family relations and the positionality of being a diaspora member. It opens up a dialectical space that transcends borders.

In conclusion, the participants' experiences in Kosovo illustrate how the homeland functions simultaneously a site of cultural familiarity, familial bonds and difficulties, and a space where

differences in socialization, privilege, and gender norms become highly visible. Kosovo thus emerges as a dialectical space, where identity is continuously shaped through engagement with cultural, social, and gendered structures, highlighting the dynamic and context-dependent nature of belonging for Kosovo-Albanian women in the diaspora.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Kosovo-Albanian women illustrate the complex, dynamic, and gendered nature of diasporic life. Far from being a fixed or homogeneous category, diaspora emerges here as a dialectical space in which identities are continuously negotiated, contested, and transformed. The empirical findings demonstrate that family, belonging, romantic relationships, and the homeland are central arenas where identity, gender, ethnicity, and transnational experience intersect and influence each other.

Family emerges as a site of tension, where parental authority, cultural expectations, and generational differences interact. Participants not only navigate restrictions and gendered norms but actively challenge and reshape them, exercising agency through negotiation, education, and subtle forms of resistance.

Belonging, in turn, is ambivalent, selective, and processual, shaped by both internal identifications and external social encounters. Participants navigate their identities with nuance, embracing different aspects while rejecting or reinterpreting norms that conflict with their values. Experiences of discrimination and stereotyping further illustrate the relational and stratified nature of belonging.

Romantic relationships serve as another crucial arena for negotiating identity, exposing gendered asymmetries and the influence of family and community expectations. Women negotiate in the space of romantic relationships, demonstrating how intimate choices are inseparable from broader social and cultural dynamics.

The homeland, Kosovo, is experienced ambivalently, simultaneously offering cultural familiarity, warmth, and belonging while highlighting differences shaped by upbringing, migration, and gendered social norms.

Taken together, these findings reveal how diaspora, identity, and gender are mutually constitutive. Kosovo-Albanian women in Austria inhabit a space that is simultaneously transnational and relational, where identity is neither fixed nor fully hybrid but actively produced through everyday practices, negotiations, and translations across contexts. This dialectical perspective underscores the importance of analyzing diaspora not as a static “type” but as a lived, contingent, and gendered process, in which agency, resistance, and relationality are central to understanding the formation of identity.

This study contributes by demonstrating that diasporas are not just a symptom of migration but foundational in shaping experiences of identity, family, belonging, and gender. It further highlights the significance of understanding diaspora as a space of ongoing negotiation and translation, where identities are constantly constructed at the intersections of culture, gender, ethnicity, and place. By highlighting women’s agency, it also redefines the diaspora, not as a marginal ‘in-between’ space, but as a space where resistance, engagement, and transformation occur.

NOTES

1. In this paper, the term "woman" is used frequently. It does not imply a naturalistic, binary understanding of sex, but rather serves as an analytical reference to socially produced situations based on the gendering of bodies and subjects. The term is employed in a strategic-essentialist manner to highlight gender-specific experiences.
2. The three-finger gesture originated as a religious symbol of the Holy Trinity in Orthodox Christianity. Over time, it became associated with Serbian national identity and nationalist movements from the 19th century onward. Although sometimes described by Albanians as a "Chetnik" or a Serbian nationalist sign, it is not inherently linked to the Chetnik movement.

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Adriana Radovanović

Who gets to call a land home? A cultural analysis of Western Balkan ethnicities

IN A GIST

In a region marked by historical fragmentation and ongoing mobility, competing claims to "home" expose the contested and relational nature of ethnic identity and belonging.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous or native?

The history of the world and the human species as a whole is incredibly complex, making it impossible for scholars and scientists to agree on what is factual and what is not. Such is the ethno-geographic history of the world, especially of the Balkan peninsula. This lack of information and the retelling of "old wives' tales" has caused quite a stir within multiple of the groups who have lived together for centuries. It is certain that the ethno-nations are trying to contradict one another by painting their neighbors in the bad light or simply erasing/rewriting most of their history to their liking. "History books are written by the winners" is an old saying that warns about the potential of subjectivity of historic records. This is especially obvious when talking about the poorest area of Europe, historically occupied by global powers and split between the West and the East. This is important to note at the beginning, so as to bring attention to the diversity of information passed on from generation to generation, country to country. In this paper, the differences in records will not be conflicted with one another. Instead, they will co-exist to prove how clueless we all still are. What's most important is to look at as many sources as possible and compare.

The original concept of this paper was to compare school curriculum history books from all Balkan countries, but due to the length of the paper and the scarcity of sources, the focus will be on Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo and/or Albania. With that in mind, this paper will lean into "popular opinions" or "here-say" in each respective country and/or ethnicity. Through interviews with people from said places, we can actually learn what each of these groups are taught about one another and what they are taught about their own identity as well. It's impossible to avoid contradiction and an emotional response. While there is an influx of research being done on separating these groups, this paper will try and prove how little we truly know about Balkan people and that they in fact have more similarities than differences.

This brings us to the concept of indigeneity, or more specifically to the definition of it. One of the most frequent definitions of indigeneity is by José R. Martínez Cobo and it states that: "Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns,

social institutions and legal system” (Sotirović 2025).

To simplify: indigenous people can be considered those whose ancestors were born, lived and died in the same area, whose culture remains even under the oppressive culture of foreign powers. This concept is more researched and respected in developed parts of the world, leading to more explanations on the topic of the definition. To simplify it even further: instead of focusing on the human species, the focus could be, for example, on nature, more specifically fruit. It is widely considered that certain plants and fruits come from the Balkan peninsula, such as: wild grapes. Wild grapes of the Old World (*Vitis sylvestris*, Vitaceae) are indigenous to the south Caspian belt, modern day Türkiye and the Balkans, and were widely distributed in the northern Mediterranean area including the Black and Caspian Seas (Janick 2010). Wild grapes are indigenous to Balkan, meaning they were first found on the peninsula, then were cultivated elsewhere.

Making the definition of indigeneity clear is important, because without it, it is impossible to introduce the term “native”. The two words are known to be used interchangeably, even though they have different connotations and are as such translated differently in most Balkan languages. For example, in Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin they are: staros(j)edelačko (indigenous) and domaće (native), in Albanian it's indigjen (indigenous) and vendas (native). So then, what is the difference? The definition of what “native” is different everywhere, but according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary it has the following definitions:

1. inborn, innate (native talents)
2. belonging to a particular place by birth
3. grown, produced, or originating in a particular place or its vicinity

Essentially, the words are synonyms, but differ in nuance. The term indigenous is used to define the autochthonous population or landscape of a place, meaning they were the first people and/or type of nature to inhabit this area. Native on the other hand means that someone or something has deep roots and origin within an area (Coates 2004). In summary, while all indigenous peoples are native to their lands, not all native peoples are necessarily indigenous in the historical or cultural sense. The difference is crucial in discussions about rights, sovereignty, as well as cultural heritage.

IDENTITIES OF WESTERN BALKANS

In order to avoid as much controversy as possible, the primary focus will be on the ethnicities themselves rather than the countries (nationalities). This group is chosen and put together due to their genetic, ethnic, geographical and cultural similarities/ differences, as well as cultural and historical context. This, however, does not erase their own unique history and representation.

The most important questions that will be asked throughout this paper are: what is ethnicity? What makes a Serb a Serb or an Albanian an Albanian? How are these identities built and why do they contradict one another's existence? Is a Subotica Serb similar to the one in Vranje? While it is impossible to find all answers right now with the resources at hand, it's still important to engage with one another and put it all down on paper. Objectivity is trying to look at all sides, as much as possible.

Serbs

When it comes to the creation of the Serbian identity, together with the legacy of the Nemanjić dynasty, there were three things which were crucial: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian language and the myth of Kosovo (Trbović 2008). While the topic of the paper is indigeneity, it is important to note that most Serbian historians view Serbs as Slavs who came from Carpathian Mountains, escaping enslavement between the 5th and 7th century. There is proof of Serbs' existence in Eastern Europe and eventually in Balkan. Other Balkan Slavic groups were not so lucky, as not a lot of them have this evidence. Serbs being part of the great Slavic migration to the Balkans isn't something that is widely debated (Božić et al. 1972). They themselves tell this story and it's evident others do too, through interviews as well as observing social media, where Serbs are often told to go back to Ukraine and Russia by Albanian users.

Remembering the Nemanjić dynasty, Serbian extreme nationalists claim the whole of Serbia (with Kosovo and Vojvodina), Republika Srpska (Krajina) and parts of Herzegovina in Bosnia, north Macedonia, the Dalmatian coastline, as well as Montenegro and its shore. These areas are places where Serbs live and where in some cases they are even a majority. There's even a Serbian joke: "At the time of Dušan every Balkan sea was Serbian." These claims get more serious and less of a joke when these demographic statistics are used to show a historic, as well as a current presence of Serbs in these areas and with that to prove their rightful ownership of said land. This feeds into the "stolen land" narrative Serbs are taught from a very young age, as well as builds the victim mentality among the population. This is ironic, because Serbs also deny statistics when talking about Kosovo.

In the paper "The Balkans and the Albanians", Vladislav B. Sotirović (2025) writes: "The present-day number of this population (of Kosovo) should not deceive modern historians and demographers, for, at least, two of the following reasons: A.) There has been a demographic explosion of the ethnic Albanians, starting at the beginning of the 20th century, which has dramatically changed the relative proportions of the existing ethnic communities in the area populated by the Albanians and other ethnic groups: Slavic and Hellenic. B.) Since the Ottoman rule in the Balkans, a noticeable Albanization of the Slavophone people has been carried out that was followed, in addition, by an extensive conversion of the Albanophone population to the Muslim religion, partly by force, partly voluntarily." If talking to a Serb it is suggested that they might have mixed with other Albanians or vice versa, it is immediately laughed off, but some specific populations, like Muslim communities in the Raška region of Serbia, have documented some Albanian ancestry, highlighting the complexity of local genetic makeup. Both populations have roots in pre-Slavic Balkan groups and some historical mixing has occurred, especially in border areas, which contributes to their similarities (Gretzinger et al. 2025).

Serbian culture is built on resilience and bravery. The folk tales and epic stories Serbs are taught about their own people evoke an immense sense of pride and respect. It's embedded with Serbian Exceptionalism, which is trying to convince the people that us, the Serbs, are the most extraordinary people that ever lived. That often leads to the development of a paradoxical co-existence of the victim complex and superiority complex on a national scale. This mix often claims everything and everyone is Serbian, everyone just hates us because they are not as exceptional as us. This is how the "everything is Serbian" pipeline is created that leads to more nationalism and separatism. This brings on the claims that Montenegrins are just lazy seaside Serbs, Macedonians are Serbs with a speech-impediment, Croats are westernized Catholic Serbs and Bosniaks are islamized Serbs.

As much as this can sound like an absurd conspiracy theory, while doing interviews for this paper, it was revealed that this isn't necessarily just a Serbian thing, but certain other groups are also taught a variation of this. For example, some Albanians also call Bosniaks islamized Serbs, or Bulgarians calling Macedonians their and Serbian descendants, etc. While a couple of interviews don't represent the entire picture, it's clear that since Serbs have a lot of written heritage, as well as a big population, they are jokingly considered to be the ancestors to all Balkan Slavs (by themselves or others) with the exception of Slovenes and Bulgarians, who have undisputedly always been their own categories in popular opinion.

Croats

The Croatian identity is a little more disputed, as they do have claims of indigeneity unlike Serbs. Their history also built on the fight for freedom, much like the Serbian one, but their oppressors differed from region to region. Balkan scholars usually propose that Croats and Serbs came to the Balkans around the same time, although they do disagree on the timeline. These claims change from time to time, depending on the political climate. If they need to, Croats and Serbs are the closest relatives in the world, but they can also be polar opposites, if the climate is bad enough. The Serbian story goes that Serbs were the first to get down to Balkan, welcoming Croats later. Croats claim the opposite (Božić 1972). Either way, modern day Croatia is built on indigenous Illyrian land. The Delmati, an Illyrian tribe, gave their name to the region of Dalmatia (Vukčević 1992).

Along with other South Slavs during the 19th century, like Macedonians, Croats were eager to contrive their own national identity, for which they sometimes used a number of extreme arguments and means, for example the Illyrian Movement, a cultural and political campaign by a group of young Croatian intellectuals during the first half of the 19th century, between the years of 1835 to 1863 (Despalatovic 1975). Some historians even took the "Illyrian hypothesis" seriously, claiming that all Slavs are of Illyrian descent. These claims were particularly popular among the South Slavs from the 16th to early 19th centuries, especially Croats and Bosniaks (Sotirović 2025).

According to the 2025 archaeogenetic study, it was revealed that around 82% of the local pre-Slavic gene pool in medieval Croatia was replaced by the Slavic ancestry, and modern Croats can be modelled as 69% Slavic and 31% of pre-Slavic Balkan ancestry. This confirms that there is some indigenous blood in Croatians, especially the closer you get to the coastline and further south to Montenegro (Gretzinger et al. 2025).

Bosniaks

When talking about Bosniak people, it is important to remember how widespread their communities are, much like Serbian and Albanian ones. Not all Bosniaks live inside of Bosnia, they also live in Kosovo, Croatia and of course in the Sandžak of Serbia and Montenegro. For the sake of this research, the two groups (Bosnian Bosniaks and Sandžak Bosniaks) shall be compared, making it easier to come to an understanding of how subjective education truly is in Balkan countries.

The total population of the municipality of Sandžak in Serbia and Montenegro is around 361,656 and a majority of people in Sandžak identify as Bosniaks. Most Bosniaks declared themselves ethnic Muslims, but it's also important to note that not all Muslims in the Sandžak area are Bosniak. In fact, there are communities around the Prijepolje area that identify as Serbian Muslims (Pavlović 1925). While the Sandžak Bosniak community has had a complex history, in talking most would say they are in fact Muslim Slavs. Nationally, they identify with being Serbian

or Montenegrin, but under the constitution they are allowed all the rights as any other ethnic identity (Sotirović 2025). This is a contradiction in and of itself, since most of Serbia's and Montenegro's cultural heritage is built on orthodox symbolism and the "fight" against Islam.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Bosnia and Herzegovina got the outlines that the country roughly holds today. Bosniaks inside of Bosnia are a disputed identity amongst their Yugoslav neighbours. Through interviews, it is apparent both Serbs and Croats claim them as "muslim" versions of themselves, rather than an additional Slavic identity. A Bosnian historian by the name of Dr Enver Imamović claims that Bosniaks come from an Illyrian tribe by the name of Posen. For this, he uses a reference by an ancient Greek historian by the name of Appian of Alexandria, who in his writing mentioned a tribe living in modern day Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This is a recurring social phenomenon within the Bosniak communities in Bosnia, but in Sandžak as well. Both older and younger generations use such claims when talking about their ethnic identity, removing a Slavic identity from their origin and embracing a supposed Illyrian one, so as not to resemble Serbs or Croats. While it's true that parts of Bosnia and Sandžak rest on the Illyrian lands, this doesn't automatically make Bosniaks indigenous. Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Bosniaks are genetically closer to each other than either of them is to Bosnian Croats (Marjanovic et al. 2025).

The claim for indigeneity within the Bosniak community has certainly gotten stronger since the wars in the 90s. Developing distrust for their Christian Slavic neighbors and empathy for their Muslim Albanian ones, Bosniaks have started referring to themselves as Illyrian much more in the mainstream, finding unity in the trauma they share with their Albanian neighbors. Through observing social media, a minority of Albanians also refer to Bosniaks as their Illyrian brothers, while the majority clusters them in with the rest of Slavs. Even though this is an emotional response and there is still no research that fully supports these claims, Bosniaks still do have a high admixture of pre-Slavic Balkan DNA, but no higher than other Slavic ethnicity (Marjanovic et al. 2025).

Montenegrins

As previously mentioned, because of obvious commonalities, Montenegrins are popularly referred to as "Mountain or Seaside Serbs" and many, but certainly not all, Montenegrins see themselves ethnically as Serb. While Serbs are the biggest minority in Montenegro, making up between 32% of the total population, they are not the only ones. Bosniaks (10%) and Albanians (5%) also live on the land, most of the Albanians in Montenegro viewing themselves as indigenous to Ulcinj (Ulqin) on the southeast part of the coast, around the Shkodra lake, as concluded through interviews.

A subjective conclusion is that culturally and historically Montenegrins are focused on proving that the Montenegrin identity even exists, more than proving they are indigenous. However, they are sometimes categorized as such, simply due to the fact that Illyrians tribes used to live in today's Montenegro (Vukčević 1992). Montenegrins becoming Illyrian is made easier by the fact that scholars still don't completely know where Montenegrins come from, much like Bosniaks. Yes, there are centuries worth of history talking about them, but there is no concrete timeline of how they came to be.

In some studies, South Slavs were found to be descendants of the Balkan Illyrians and are thus autochthonous populations in the region. These Slavs were recognized by the surrounding nations, like the Greeks, as the Illyrians. In the early Middle Ages, one group of these Slavs

migrated to Central Europe (West Slavs), whereas one group moved to East Europe (East Slavs). According to some medieval authors, South Slavs descend from the Illyrians, Thracians and Macedonians. Therefore, Alexander the Great and Constantine the Great were both Illyrian Slavs (Sotirović 2025).

According to correspondence analysis, admixture analysis and genetic distance, Serbian regional population samples cluster together and are closest to Montenegrins and Macedonians, with Western Serbs being an intermediate between them and Croatian-Bosnian and Herzegovinian clusters. Also, according to a 2020 autosomal marker analysis, Serbs from Western Serbia, Sandžak and Kosovo are closest genetically to Bosniaks, but the ethnically close Montenegrins are in-between them and Kosovo Albanians (Miladinov et al. 2020).

This in no way claims that Montenegrins are a mix of Serbs and Albanians, but it does offer us yet another perspective on what could've possibly gone on for centuries in these areas and how the people lived. Also, there's tons of similarities between these three groups, such as: Montenegrins and Albanians both lived in tribal formations, quite similar to one another. This makes sense, since these areas are geographically alike as well. Petar II Petrović-Njegoš united these Montenegrin tribes, creating a structure of the state with Montenegro's independence in 1878, as well as solidarity with Serbia, where tribes like this were also found in the Užice's Crna Gora in Western Serbia (Pavlović 1925).

Albanians

According to Western findings, Albanians are said to be among the oldest peoples of southeastern Europe. Their roots would seem to go back to the ancient Illyrians who lived in Western Balkan during Roman times. As a people, Albanians can be traced back to about the year 1,000 when the written Byzantine Greek and Latin records mention them (UN. Hammond 1992). Authors like Agron Dalipaj even make claims that most European languages are rooted in Albanian (Dalipaj 2019).

Historically, the landscape and natural barriers have divided the Albanian people from the rest of the Balkan, as well as into two distinct groups: those who live in the mountainous regions to the north of the Shkumbi river are called Ghegs, amongst which are the Kosovar Albanians. Those living south of the Shkumbi in the lowlands are called Tosks. This society was still largely intact when the communist regime began in Albania in 1944. It is regarded as the longest surviving example of a tribal society in Europe. They extended all the way from Herzegovina in the north to Tirana in the south, but are mostly prominent in northern Albania and in regions of Montenegro. Baron Nopcsa, a Hungarian adventurer, established that most Albanian tribes could potentially trace their origins back to the period between 15th and 17th century, with the earliest reference to a tribe, Berisha, around the year 1300. There are still traces of these tribes in the mountains of northern Albania (Elsie 2015).

As many Albanian school books are unavailable while doing this paper, through conversations with Kosovar Albanians and Montenegrin Albanians, it is certain that they share similar stories about their people. While they might have different cultures, along with Macedonian and Greek Albanians they consider themselves Illyrians or Dardanians, depending on where they are from, an autochthonous people who have been oppressed historically by different invading groups.

The Slavic migration during medieval times is framed as an invasion of their lands, not a migration, and they sometimes refer to Slavs, or more specifically Serbs, as bigger colonisers

than the Ottomans, which might be subjective. This is especially interesting in the context of the Battle of Kosovo, which Serbs use as their identifiers, but Albanians, Bosniaks, Bulgarians and Vlachs also participated in. It is after this battle that Albanians found themselves moving back north to Macedonia and Kosovo, due to certain freedoms of movement bestowed upon them for accepting Islam.¹²

Historic findings and recordings in other Balkan countries often do not match up to what Albanian historians claim. For example in Serbia, Montenegro or Bosnia, it is taught that in the middle ages, Kosovo was a predominantly Serbian-inhabited area, and it was the center of the Serbian state from 12th to 14th century (Kostić 1962). Serbian institutions strive to prove that since their arrival in the Balkans, Slavs have dominated the region of Kosovo and that the Albanians only arrived primarily during the eighteenth century. According to this theory, some Albanian communities lived in Kosovo until the fifth century, but then moved south into the mountains of Albania following the Slav migrations, or invasion depending on your ethnicity. They started their move back to Kosovo between the 14th and 18th century, spreading their communities. These arguments aim to present Albanians as colonisers of Serbian land (Elsie 2015).

Hand in hand with that goes the theory that Albanians were brought by the Ottomans from the Caucasus (modern day Armenia and Azerbaijan) post 13th century, making it impossible for them to be indigenous (Sotirović 2025). Claims like this make it easier to paint the narrative that Kosovo has only historically been occupied by Serbs and other Slavic groups, like Gorans or Torbeši for example. This is factually untrue, due to Western Balkan not being very homogenous, which can be seen in the distribution of population.

Phillipe Reckacewic, et al. Population groups in the Balkan region and Eastern Europe. (Balkan Vital Graphics, 2007) Accessed Feb. 25, 2014.

“Kosovo and Metohija – history and current developments in the region”, a paper by Aleksa Filipović says: “The systematic Albanization of Kosovo in the administration, the judiciary and the police was followed by education of ethnic Albanian population on school manuals imported from Albania, imbued with nationalist mythology and hate towards Yugoslavia. The theory of the Albanians as descents of Illyrians, the oldest people in the Balkans and therefore natives in Kosovo, became a simplified political program of national discrimination – all the non-Albanian population were considered as intruders on indigenous Albanian soil.”

Much like Serbs and Bosniaks, Albanians are widespread between multiple countries. They are also one of the more isolated people in the Balkans, due to their unique language. They too culturally hold certain imperialistic views, much like Serbs. Even since the late 19th century and the creation of The Prizren League the idea of a “Greater Albania” has existed. No one is immune when it comes to this type of thinking, everyone in Balkan thinks all of their people should be united, Albanians just might have the strongest claim to indigeneity, which can be debated due to them having nations in their ancestral land where they are the dominant culture and in turn no longer considered necessarily indigenous by western definition (Martinez Cobo 1972).

POST WAR WESTERN BALKAN AND THE GENERATIONAL HEIRLOOM OF PROPAGANDA AND TRAUMA: CLAIMS OF INDIGENEITY AS A MEANS OF SURVIVAL

During the second half of the 20th century, the fall of communism spread through Europe and subsequently Balkan. At that point in time, there was seemingly no oppressor. The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires had ceased to exist, leaving Balkan groups to fight amongst themselves. Of course, saying that there was no foreign oppressor doesn't negate the fact that

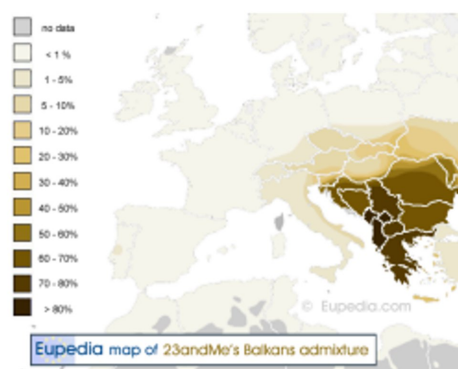
certain ethnic groups were still oppressed. It was simply a new version of oppression of Balkan people. They were now oppressing one another. This kind of fighting could be considered a natural response to centuries of violence inflicted upon them. It is learned behavior. It appeared that without a common enemy, the enemy had now become everyone else on the peninsula.

Genetic studies reveal that the Slavic migration was not a violent replacement of the local population, but an integration that occurred through marriage and settlement. Genetic differences between ethnic groups in the region are relatively small and are more pronounced geographically (north to south) rather than along ethnic lines. Western Serbia and Šumadija have more overlap with the genetic profiles of Bosnia and Montenegro, likely due to historical tribal movements (Gretzinger et al. 2025).

If conclusions were to be made about Balkan people according to their presence online, one would think the war had never ended. The tensions are high, especially among the younger generations who haven't experienced war. If someone from Balkan were to post a video on social media from a place in their country, the comment section would be flooded with others claiming the land or spewing hate, such is the case of any post from Prizren being full of Serbian flags, or how a video from Belgrade would have comments with photos of it being bombed in '99. This isn't exclusive to Serbs and Albanians. Posts from Herzegovina have Croatians in the comments putting their flags up and so on. This behavior ensures that no nation is truly satisfied with the position of the borders. This absurd claiming of a land that has given to all of us so much is an insult to it. If borders kept moving, every street would eventually be its own country.

The Balkan peninsula is small and there tends to be overlap, like previously shown, so creating a fully "clean" ethno-state is borderline impossible without harming the minorities, such was the case in the '90s. The fall of Yugoslavia has left a mark on all involved, leading to newer generations continuing the fight during times of "peace". It is unprecedented how much pride Gen-Z can find in war crimes, violence, nationalism and propaganda. With no one taking accountability for what happened, since everyone played a part, and only blaming others - no one can find closure and move on. Instead, they become perfect soldiers for the nation, hating everyone who isn't them.

In the process of defining or determining national identities, the priority of nationalistic leaders is to display the antiquity of their ethnic group. This is possibly an attempt to survive the current (feelings of) inferiority by alleged "past superiority" (Sotirović 2025). This leads to Oppression Olympics amongst the population, which further enforces the gaslighting and denial of violence, which was heavily documented. In the past decade however with the rise of genomic and biotechnological companies, research has been done in Balkan, by studying genetic admixtures. Genetic admixture occurs when previously isolated populations of organisms interbreed, resulting in a population with genetic ancestry from both sources. It occurs between humans when geographically distant individuals migrate to new regions. It results in a population with genetic backgrounds, or a gene pool, that is a mix of the source or indigenous populations (Korunes 2021).



The heatmap shows the genetic admixture of Balkan populations based on autosomal DNA, which reflects their overall genetic makeup. With the exception of northern Romania and Croatia, Balkan admixture is stronger than 50% in all shown countries.

Source: Eupedia map of 23andMe's Balkans admixture

This is still not proven a fact, but it does give us a path to some answers. After a long time of living together on the peninsula, its population and the land have seemingly become one. This heatmap is very important as it shows everyone on the peninsula, in some amount, holds indigenous genetic traces.

Whether or not these groups were encouraged by Western or Eastern powers to fight is not the topic of this paper, however it is a topic that should be addressed, due to most of the tensions boiling down to foreign intervention and religious divide. Under communism religion was forbidden, making it easy for religious institutions to be used in planting seeds of hatred and the "us vs. them" sentiment. It is exactly the propaganda of these institutions that should be questioned when talking about the divide of Balkan people, because it is exactly this divide that encourages the exploration of alternative histories and spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation.

An important question follows: when no one is answering for the violence or hatred they inflicted, is the next logical step in the fight to try and prove one's indigeneity as a means of being taken seriously? If so, why does indigeneity have to be proven for violence in Balkan to be validated? Self-identification as indigenous and acceptance as such by other groups is an essential component of indigenous peoples' sense of identity. However, self-identification can also lead to serious conflicts between nations and other self-proclaimed indigenous groups.⁴ Fighting over land is inherently Balkan culture, that's why we share jokes about aunts and uncles fighting over a piece of land with no electricity or running water on it.

A social media analysis brings to light just how much trauma there truly is in Balkan and subsequently its children, who carry the emotional baggage of what their parents and ancestors had to go through. We know the stories and have all at one point or another fallen victim to each other. Younger generations now have taken on the fight, but through social media and globalization. The fight is not about reaching justice, it's about shaming everyday people for their government's actions by using "cancel culture" jargon and methods. This behavior online not only oversimplifies words like genocide, racism, colonisation, invasion, etc., but also the actual violence Balkan people experience at the hands of their neighbors and more importantly at the hands of foreign powers. This is a westernized approach to critical thinking, which lacks depth or nuance in its approach. If Balkan people truly had a problem with genocide, they wouldn't be moving for better lives to countries who have historically committed a lot of it.

Claiming indigeneity in Balkan is about justice for personal or collective trauma through the "cancellation" of others, which is evident when under Serbian posts it's often written "Israel of

Balkan” or under Croatian ones “Nazis’ descendants”, or even under Albanian ones “India of Europe”, completely unprompted. If the “genocidal” and “colonising” neighbors are annexed by the world, then justice will have been served. This erases any dialogue about the nuances of war times, but also what these people’s lives could’ve been before them.

One group’s endurance of violence doesn’t erase the fact that they themselves were violent too, so in order to absolve themselves, the narrative of indigeneity and colonisation comes, because then the violence is actually liberation. This “the enemy is right next door” propaganda is what keeps Balkan people apart. It absolves foreign powers from their responsibility in creating these wars, investing in them or participating in them. It absolves them of ruling the peninsula for centuries, while our people did our best to survive and keep their culture going. Most importantly, this allows them to start mining companies in our lands and sell our natural resources, while we do the fighting for them.

CONCLUSION

The truth is that most of the people in Balkan are much more alike than they are different. They are examples of all the ways that people, culture and language can evolve through hardship and external rule. The survival of these identities is testament to what cultural unity can do for the human race. In fact, it’s also an excellent example of why borders and nationalism are so harmful. Movement and migration have always been the key element of human existence, putting a restriction on it is a relatively new phenomenon. In Balkan, migration is unavoidable and it leads to innovation and more cultural riches, such is the case with different Romani communities on the peninsula.

There is truly enough separatist work out there that enforces negative narratives that Balkan people are always fighting and hate each other. This is the sentiment on social media, one in which Balkan people also participate in, but it’s exactly that sensationalisation that is the problem. Not only does it fuel the fire, but it’s also simply untrue. If observed properly, it’s clear that Balkan people gravitate towards each other abroad and create close-knit multi-cultural communities, they cross each other’s borders everyday to visit family, they share words, even if their languages are nothing alike, they share religious traditions with their neighbors and they cry when legendary people from other countries die, which has been seen twice in 2025 with Gabi Novak and Halid Bešić. In full subjective honesty, there is more love in the Balkans than there has ever been hate and no research paper or war can change that.

Pacifism is the theory that peaceful relations rather than violent or repressing ones should lead human intercourse. It relates to war, but to domestic injustices and repressive policies as well. Justifying pacifism is a hard task, but it is a rewarding one and is worth exploring for its own sake, because peace should never be a controversial topic. The situation in Balkan should encourage more people to think outside of their primary frame of reference in order to invest in peace. Much of this can be seen in the support given to Serbian students during their protests against the government. All across former Yugoslavia people came together to pay respects; after years Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Slovenes stood together, fighting for justice as one. Hopefully one day this will be part of the dialogue about Kosovo and everyone living there can finally heal. Only a united can Balkan see how truly great it is. A peaceful Balkan should be everyone’s priority, despite their ethnicity or nationality. At the end of the day, we’re all children of the land of mountains and should spill no more blood on it, if we love it as much as we claim we do. Peace is possible and borders do not work.

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Marko Vulević

Forced Migration from Montenegro during the 1990s: State Response and the Politics of Memory

IN A GIST

State responses to forced migration from Montenegro in the 1990s reveal how institutional narratives and collective memory shape contemporary national identity and social cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s triggered a series of brutal conflicts and mass population displacements. Scholarly attention has largely focused on the major war zones, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and later Kosovo, often treating Montenegro as a marginal actor. This perception mirrors a tendency within Montenegro itself to downplay its role in the wars. In reality, Montenegro was not a neutral bystander. Despite being spared large-scale combat on its soil, the republic was deeply entangled in the Yugoslav wars as part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) under Slobodan Milošević. During this period, Montenegro saw substantial outflows of its minority populations: many Albanians, Bosniaks, and Croats were driven to leave their homes due to state-sponsored persecution, inter-ethnic violence, and an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear.

This paper examines two key dimensions of these wartime migrations. First, it assesses the Montenegrin government's response to displacement during the 1990s: how authorities handled refugees and internally displaced persons, and to what extent state institutions either facilitated or mitigated acts of ethnic cleansing and forced migration. Second, it analyzes the contemporary politics of memory regarding the 1990s in Montenegro. It asks how these traumatic events are reflected in official narratives, public commemorations, and education, and how that collective memory (or amnesia) influences current inter-ethnic relations and Montenegro's post-conflict identity. The inquiry situates Montenegro's experience within broader debates on transitional justice and dealing with the past, highlighting the challenges of acknowledging a contentious history in a society that long portrayed itself as only peripherally involved in the Yugoslav wars.

MONTENEGRO'S ROLE IN YUGOSLAV WAR

Montenegro's involvement in the wars of Yugoslav dissolution was neither incidental nor coerced – it was an integral part of the joint war effort with Serbia. As a junior partner in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), Montenegro aligned itself with Milošević's nationalist project to create a homogeneous "Greater Serbia" (Rastoder & Adžić, 2020). Throughout the early 1990s, Montenegrin authorities provided political support, manpower, and material resources to Serbian war campaigns. This included deploying Montenegrin conscripts and reservists to battlefronts in Croatia and Bosnia, using Montenegrin territory as a staging ground for military operations, and supplying fuel, arms, and logistics to the Yugoslav People's Army and Serb paramilitary units (Rastoder & Adžić, 2020). For example, Montenegrin units participated in the

1991–92 siege of the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, an operation later acknowledged by Montenegro’s leadership as a regrettable “plundering venture” (Rastoder & Adžić, 2020). At home, President Momir Bulatović’s government maintained unwavering loyalty to Belgrade’s agenda, making Montenegro an active participant in the conflict rather than a reluctant observer.

Wartime nationalism also seeped into Montenegro’s domestic governance. The polarization and propaganda that fueled atrocities in Bosnia and Croatia helped foster suspicion and hostility toward minority communities within Montenegro. Regions with large Muslim (Bosniak), Albanian, or Croat populations experienced harassment and intimidation of non-Serbs during the war years (Radulović, 2021). In Bukovica, for instance, local police and reservists subjected Bosniak villagers to threats and violence similar to those across the border. High-profile incidents in the Sandžak area, most notably the Štrpci train massacre of 1993, sent shock waves through Montenegro’s Muslim community and prompted many to flee (OSCE, 2003). In short, although full-scale war did not erupt inside Montenegro, the republic supported and enabled Belgrade’s campaigns externally, and it imported elements of the war’s ethnic persecution internally leading to significant displacement of its own citizens.

STATE-SANCTIONED DISPLACEMENT: KEY CASES (1991–1999)

Several incidents during the 1990s demonstrate how Montenegrin authorities or forces contributed to the forced migration of civilians. The following five cases are particularly illustrative.

Deportation of Bosnian Refugees (1992): In May 1992, Montenegrin police in Herceg-Novi arrested at least 79 Bosnian Muslim refugees who had fled the war in Bosnia and sought shelter in Montenegro. These refugees, including women and the elderly, were handed over to the Bosnian Serb Army across the border (YIHR & IDC, 2021). The transfer proved fatal: the majority were tortured and executed by Serb forces, with only a dozen surviving the ordeal (YIHR & IDC, 2021). Despite the clear involvement of Montenegrin officials in this war crime, accountability was delayed and ultimately denied. A criminal investigation was only launched in 2005, more than a decade after the fact, largely due to pressure from the media and NGOs. The trial of several low-ranking policemen ended in 2012 with acquittals, as the court controversially ruled that the conflict in Bosnia was not an “international” conflict and thus the defendants’ actions did not constitute a war crime under applicable law (Ivanišević & Gorjanc-Prelević, 2016).. This dubious legal reasoning was widely criticized. The Montenegrin state later acknowledged a degree of responsibility by paying about €4 million in compensation to victims’ families in a civil settlement (YIHR & IDC, 2021). However, no one was criminally punished. The refugee deportation case stands as a stark example of impunity cloaked in legal formalism.

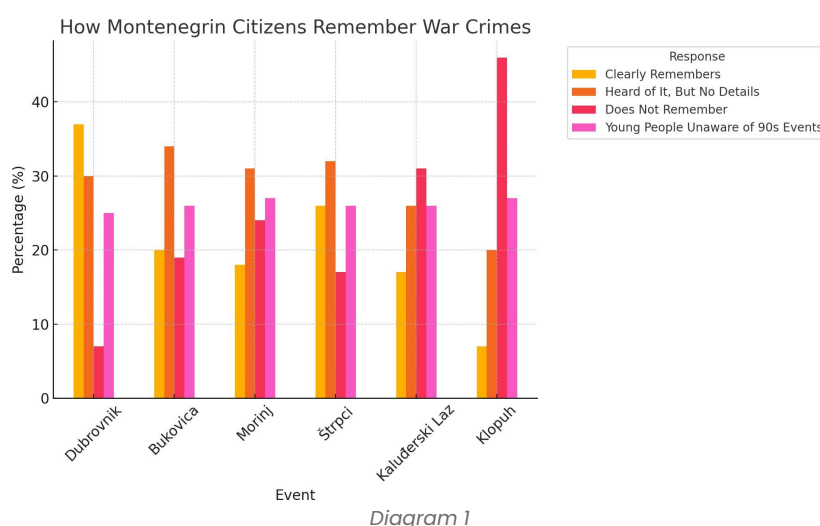
Bukovica Ethnic Cleansing (1992–1995): The Bukovica region in northern Montenegro, home to a small Bosniak community, was subjected to a campaign of intimidation and violence that effectively emptied the area of its Muslim residents. Between 1992 and 1995, Montenegrin reserve police and soldiers operating in Bukovica beat and harassed villagers, burned homes and mosques, and killed at least six people (YIHR & IDC, 2021). Terrified and with no protection from the state, approximately 93 families (around 270 individuals) abandoned their villages, seeking safety in the nearby town of Pljevlja or fleeing to Bosnia and other countries (YIHR & IDC, 2021). Although an investigation eventually led to a trial in 2010, the court acquitted all defendants in 2011, citing insufficient evidence and noting that “crimes against humanity” were not defined in

the criminal code at the time (Ivanišević & Gorjanc-Prelević, 2016). No officials were held accountable, and the displaced families never returned, and the state has yet to officially acknowledge their suffering.

Kaluđerski Laz Massacre (1999): In April 1999, at the height of the Kosovo War, units of the Yugoslav Army opened fire on columns of Kosovo Albanian refugees in the area of Kaluđerski Laz, on Montenegrin territory near the border. Over several days, at least 22 civilians – mostly women, children, and elderly – were killed (Radulović, 2021). Although Montenegro's authorities were then trying to distance themselves from Milošević's regime, they failed to prevent this massacre on their soil. A trial held years later ended with acquittals due to insufficient evidence, as key proofs were missing and direct perpetrators could not be firmly identified (Ivanišević & Gorjanc-Prelević, 2016). To this day, no one has been punished for the Kaluđerski Laz killings, and the incident remains a somber symbol of unacknowledged suffering in Montenegro.

Morinj Detention Camp (1991–1992): During the war in Croatia, Montenegrin authorities operated a prison camp for captured Croats at Morinj, near Kotor. Hundreds of civilians and prisoners of war from the Dubrovnik area were detained there and subjected to abuse (Ivanišević & Gorjanc-Prelević, 2016). Years later, Montenegro prosecuted several low-ranking guards, resulting in the only war-crime convictions in the country – with sentences of up to four years – but no commanding officers were ever charged.

Štrpci Abduction and Aftermath (1993): Although Montenegro was not a primary combat zone, Montenegrin citizens fell victim to war crimes outside its borders. The most infamous example is the Štrpci massacre of February 27, 1993. On that day, a Bosnian Serb paramilitary unit led by Milan Lukić stopped a train on the Belgrade–Bar railway at Štrpci station (in Bosnia, near the Serbian border) and kidnapped 20 passengers who were non-Serbs. All 20 abducted passengers were later brutally murdered, an atrocity that terrorized the Muslim population of the Sandžak region and fueled an exodus of Bosniaks (OSCE, 2003). Montenegro did not prosecute anyone for the Štrpci atrocity.



Source: CEDEM, *Istraživanje na sjećanje zločina devedesetih u Crnoj Gori* (2020)

This pattern of impunity is reflected in public memory as well. A 2020 CEDEM survey found that a significant portion of Montenegrin citizens either do not remember or are unaware of key war crimes committed during the 1990s. For example, over 70% of respondents lacked clear recollection of the Bukovica ethnic cleansing and the Morinj detention camp, while awareness of

incidents like Kaluderski Laz and Klopuh was even lower.

By the late 1990s, it was evident that Montenegro had largely failed to protect minorities from persecution and displacement. For many of those forced to flee during the war years, return was not feasible due to lingering insecurity and lack of support. Only in recent years has the Montenegrin state begun to acknowledge these victims. In 2021, amendments to the law finally allowed innocent civilian victims of 1990s violence to be officially recognized and receive benefits. In 2023, the government took a further step by granting one-time compensation of €100,000 to each of 16 families of war crime victims (including families of victims from the Štrpci massacre, among others) (Smailović, 2025). This was the first time Montenegro's government openly accepted responsibility for suffering caused during the wars and provided material reparations. While welcome, these gestures remain partial and long overdue. Many other victims, for example, families of those killed in Bukovica or Kaluderski Laz, have yet to see justice or acknowledgement. The selective nature of these remedies underlines that Montenegro's approach to wartime wrongs has been incomplete. True accountability and reconciliation will require a much more comprehensive reckoning with all the cases of forced migration and ethnic violence from the 1990s.

IMPUNITY AND THE JUDICIAL RESPONSE

In the aftermath of the wars, Montenegro's judicial system showed a marked reluctance to pursue accountability for war crimes. Between 1995 and 2016, Montenegrin prosecutors initiated only six war-crime cases, resulting in convictions for a total of ten individuals (Ivanišević & Gorjanc-Prelević, 2016). These cases almost exclusively targeted low-ranking direct perpetrators. To date, no senior military or police officer, nor any political leader, has been prosecuted in Montenegro for crimes stemming from the 1990s. The doctrine of command responsibility, well-established in international law, has never been applied in Montenegrin courts for war crimes (Ivanišević & Gorjanc-Prelević, 2016). This means that those who ordered or oversaw atrocities were effectively shielded from scrutiny. A culture of impunity took root: many suspects were never charged at all, and even among those who were tried, the majority were acquitted. Out of 36 individuals indicted for war-related crimes in Montenegro over the years, only 11 have been convicted, and several of those convicted never served any prison time (Gorjanc-Prelević & Malović, 2023). In one case, three men convicted in absentia for a 1992 war crime (the murder of a Bosniak family) have remained at large for decades without any effective efforts to bring them to justice (Gorjanc-Prelević & Malović, 2023).

Observers have frequently criticized Montenegro's judiciary for its handling of these cases. International monitors noted persistent deficiencies in war-crime trials, including legal errors and undue leniency in sentencing (YIHR & IDC, 2021). A lack of political will also hampered justice. It was often only under external pressure (the requirements of EU accession negotiations) that authorities took even modest action on these cases. A plan announced in 2020 to establish a war crimes documentation center in Parliament was never implemented (Shymkevych, 2024). War crimes accountability has remained a low priority domestically, addressed mainly when required by European integration benchmarks (Shymkevych, 2024). Yet meaningful justice remains largely unmet.

POLITICS OF MEMORY: SILENCE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Official narratives for years insisted that Montenegro “was not at war,” avoiding any acknowledgment of the state’s involvement in wartime abuses (Rastoder & Adžić, 2020). Painful episodes like the 1992 refugee deportations or the terror in Bukovica were omitted from textbooks and commemorations. There is still no official monument or apology for these events (YIHR & IDC, 2021). When Montenegrin leaders have made gestures of regret, they have usually been aimed at neighboring countries (such as apologies to Croatia or Bosnia) rather than at acknowledging crimes against Montenegro’s own citizens. Overall, a form of state-sponsored amnesia prevailed for decades.

Public discourse about the war legacy in Montenegro is fragmented and often politicized. Media analyses show that civil society and victims’ families produce most of the public commemorative messages, while state officials remain largely silent (Kovačević & Velimirović, 2021). Discussion of wartime crimes typically flares up only on anniversaries or when prompted by non-governmental reports, rather than as a continuous national dialogue (Kovačević & Velimirović, 2021). Political leaders condemn war crimes in general but rarely acknowledge Montenegro’s specific culpability or their own party’s past role (Kovačević & Velimirović, 2021). Meanwhile, a large portion of society prefers not to discuss the 1990s at all. Surveys indicate that a majority of citizens seldom or never talk about the war period, and young people especially often lack awareness of key events (Asboth & Griesbeck, 2025). School curricula have not filled this gap, as history textbooks offer only cursory overviews of the Yugoslav breakup and do not address Montenegro’s internal conflicts in any depth.

Against this background, non-governmental actors have taken on the role of memory keepers. Organizations like the Youth Initiative for Human Rights and the Civic Alliance have documented wartime human rights violations and organized alternative commemorations. Each May in recent years, activists in Herceg-Novi have laid wreaths and read the names of the Bosnian refugees deported in 1992 – a ceremony not (yet) part of the official calendar. Local communities and families of victims also strive to preserve memories. In Rožaje, the hometown of many Kaluderski Laz victims, the community privately marks the anniversary of the massacre, albeit without state presence. These acts of remembrance challenge the official reluctance and help transmit knowledge of the past to the next generation. However, many people still receive their understanding of the 1990s through ethnically tinted family narratives or partisan media. Nationalist discourse is still present. Some groups downplay or justify the 1990s crimes, framing any focus on them as an attack on the nation, while others emphasize that confronting the past is crucial for Montenegro’s future. This polarization means that establishing a truthful, inclusive collective memory remains an ongoing challenge.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEMORY ACTIVISM

Non-governmental organizations and activists in Montenegro have taken the lead in preserving the memory of the 1990s. Projects such as *Tragovima sjećanja* have compiled survivors’ testimonies to document what happened (Radulović, 2021), and activists mark anniversaries of events like the Štrpci massacre when official commemoration is absent. Persistent advocacy by civil society was crucial in pressuring the government to acknowledge victims and provide reparations in recent years. Still, without systematic institutional support, these efforts reach only a limited audience. War narratives remain contested and politicized, indicating that building a shared, fact-based remembrance will be a gradual, bottom-up process in Montenegro.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Montenegro's reluctance to confront its wartime past is broadly in line with patterns seen in other post-Yugoslav states, where denial and selective remembrance are common (Council of Europe, 2012). Like Montenegro, Serbia for years minimized its role in atrocities, and Croatia has tended to emphasize its own suffering while glossing over crimes against Serbs. The difference in Montenegro's case is one of scale and visibility. The number of war-related incidents in Montenegro was smaller, and yet even those have been largely swept under the rug. In terms of judicial outcomes, Montenegro also lags behind some of its neighbors. Bosnia and Herzegovina, with international assistance, has prosecuted hundreds of perpetrators from all sides; Croatia and Serbia have each held dozens of domestic war-crime trials. Montenegro's record appears particularly poor. The external incentive of European integration, which helped push reforms in Croatia and Serbia, has only recently begun to influence Montenegro. As a candidate country for EU membership, Montenegro is expected to meet benchmarks on rule of law and human rights (including addressing war crimes) (Shymkevych, 2024). This has led to some formal changes, but substantive progress remains slow. In essence, Montenegro's challenges in facing its 1990s legacy are a microcosm of a wider regional struggle: every post-Yugoslav society has had to balance confronting painful history with internal political realities. Montenegro is one of the last – and smallest – to do so, and its journey toward a full reckoning remains incomplete (Council of Europe, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Montenegro's experience in the 1990s and its aftermath underscores that ignoring a painful past does not erase its legacy. The state's failure for many years to acknowledge and address its involvement in forced migrations and war crimes allowed injustices to fester and left victims feeling forgotten. Although Montenegro was not a primary theater of war, its complicity in events like the deportation of refugees and the persecution of Bukovica's villagers had a profound impact on the affected communities and on the moral fabric of the nation. Only in the past few years has there been some progress with modest legal reforms, public apologies, and initial reparations for victims. These are important beginnings but remain partial, and a comprehensive reckoning with the past is still needed. As Montenegro strives for European integration and a stable multiethnic democracy, confronting the truth of its wartime role is essential. Genuine reconciliation cannot be built on selective memory. This means prosecuting remaining war criminals, compensating and honoring victims, and educating new generations about what happened and why it was wrong. While this process is challenging, the cost of not doing it is higher: unresolved grievances, ethnic mistrust, and vulnerability to nationalist manipulation. Ultimately, dealing honestly with the legacy of the 1990s is not only a moral duty but also a foundation for a more just and cohesive future for Montenegro.

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CHAPTER IV

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES IN MIGRATION RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Literature, digital storytelling, and methodological diversity

Yaffah van Schie

Migrant voices in Dutch literature (post-World War II)

IN A GIST

Migrant authors in post-WWII Dutch literature articulated complex narratives of belonging, displacement, and identity – transforming a national literary landscape across seven decades.

INTRODUCTION

In march 2001 the theme of the Dutch Bookweek was ‘Het land van herkomst – schrijven tussen twee culturen (Land of origin – writing between two cultures)’. The Book Week gift is an annual publication in the theme of the Dutch Book Week. It is offered free of charge during that week by booksellers in the Netherlands to customers who come to buy books for a certain amount during that week. For the first time in the sixty-six years of the history of this yearly literary event the Bookweek gift was written by a non-Dutch author, Salman Rushdie (Breure & Brouwer 2001). This choice for Rushdie by the organiser, Stichting Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek (CPNB), raised many questions in the literary world. The CPNB was accused of not having a literary motivation for choosing to highlight literary work by immigrant authors, but rather a combination of commercial and political motives (Breure & Brouwer 2001). The debate that followed revolved on the effect the multicultural society had on the Dutch literature.

The literature researcher Gruttemeier defined migrant literature as follow: ‘The literature of writers who no longer write in their mother tongue or, in the second generation, in the language of their parents’ (Gruttemeier 2005, pl.). When you apply this to the Dutch context the definition could be: ‘literature written in Dutch by migrants [that functions within Dutch literature]’. Before migrant literature became a literary genre, the portrayal of migrants in Dutch literature was limited. In early research (early 2000s), the focus was placed on the origin of the writers, specifically on authors with a Moroccan or Turkish background, and their reception into Dutch literary world. More recent research, shifts the focus from background of the authors themselves to the portrayal of migrants in literature by migrants themselves. By emphasizing on the agency of migrants in telling their own stories, I want to explore what effect this has on the representation and inclusion of migrant voices in Dutch literature. By using this approach, I want to provide a deeper understanding of the diversity in the literary world and its reception by analysing two different novels.

My research question will be: ‘How are migrants represented and received in in the Dutch novels *Oeroeg en Orroppa*? And how do the authors themselves transform conventional forms of figuration by representing their own experiences?’ In this essay I will look at the figuration of migrants in Dutch literature by analysing two different books written at different periods and migrants groups. I will analyse first the book *Oeroeg* written by Hella S. Haase in 1948 and after that I will do the same with the book *Oropa* written by Safae El Khanoussi in 2024. The book *Oeroeg* was chosen because the author Hella S. Haase is considered one of the most important writers of Dutch classical literature. Although the book was first published almost 80 years ago it is still often taught in Dutch schools. With the renewed interest in Dutch colonial history, I think this

book will be an interesting to analyse. The book *Orroppa* is only a few years old and already won an important Dutch prize. I think *Orroppa* will become a new addition to the list of Dutch classical literature. Besides, by choosing two books from different time periods I hope to show the reader how the voices of migrants in Dutch literature developed from just after the Second World War to the present day. In the first part, I will give a brief overview of migration to the Netherlands post-World War II. After that I will explore how migrants are represented in early migrant literature. In the final part I will look at the agency of migrants to tell their own stories and how this transformed the conventional forms of figuration. In the conclusion, I will give an overview of my earlier findings and give some suggestion for further research.

MIGRATION TO THE NETHERLANDS POST-1945

After World War II, migration towards the Netherlands can be defined in roughly two different categories: migration from the former Dutch colonies and labour migration.

Migration from the Indonesia and Suriname started after they became independent from the Netherlands. Even before the independence of the colonies, there was migration from and to the Netherlands (Obdeijn & Schrover 2008). The decolonisation changed this in a number of ways. The migration from Dutch East Indies (nowadays Indonesia) took place in a short period and led to the complete disappearance of the Dutch East Indies community in the colony and the emergence of a Dutch East Indies community in the Netherlands (Obdeijn & Schrover 2008). For this group return was not an option. The Molukkers, who also came from the former Dutch east Indies, hoped for a long time to return at some point. The hastily executed 'model decolonization' of Suriname inevitably led to the migration of half a nation (Oostundie 2011). The Netherlands Antilles turned out to be a whole other matter. The Antilles stayed part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands making movement of people back and forth easier. In reality, decolonization nowhere went according to predetermined planning and Dutch politics was, time and again, surprised by the unforeseen phenomenon of postcolonial migrations and equally failed to anticipate the scale of the migration (Oostundie 2011).

Labour migration to the Netherlands after 1945 was completely different from the migration from the former Dutch colonies. After World War II, there was great fear in the Netherlands of a return of the big unemployment of the 1930s (Obdeijn & Schrover 2008). The policies of the Dutch government were thus focussed on maintaining employment in the Netherlands and encouraging Dutch people to emigrate to other parts of the world (mainly Canada and Australia). From 1955 onwards the Dutch economy grew steadily. The number of vacancies grew faster than the number of available workers, creating shortages of workers willing to do unskilled, unpleasant, and low-paid work (Obdeijn & Schrover 2008). This resulted in the Dutch policy of recruiting workers in other countries such as Turkey, Morocco and Southern European countries. The initial idea was that the migrant workers would only stay in the Netherlands temporary. This idea of temporariness had consequences for the political opportunities that the Netherlands: policies were initially designed to facilitate migrants or emigrants return and the maintenance of strong ties with the homeland (Mügge 2010). In practice, this turned out differently. Many of the migrant workers stayed permanently and started families. In 1973 the recruitment of migrant workers came to a halt. Labor migration became increasingly difficult in the 1990s. Family reunification became one of the few legal ways to migrate to the Netherlands.

REMEMBRANCE LITERATURE: OEROEK WRITTEN BY HELLA S. HAASSE

Writing about the migrant experience happened from the very beginning. One of the essential themes in the literature of the first generation of migrants was the longing of the homeland left behind and dreams of returning to the space of origin, which is romanticized and glorified in memory (Yegenoglu 2005). One example of this remembrance literature is the novel *Oeroeg* (1948), written by the author Hella S. Haasse.

Haasse (1918–2011) was born into a Dutch civil servant family in the colonial Dutch East Indies. During Haasse's lifetime, the East Indies gained independence from the Netherlands and became the Republic of Indonesia – formally acknowledged by the Dutch government in 1949 (van Gemert 2016). The young author and her family by then had moved from the Indies to the Netherlands. The decolonisation of Indonesia caused a major movement of the Indonesian diaspora which consisted of women, men and children from different ethnic backgrounds. There were people of Chinese, Indonesian, Papuan, or Totok (White European) background, but the majority had an Indo or mixed background (Pattynama 2003).

The novel *Oeroeg* tells the story of the friendship between two young boys during the Indonesian decolonisation and Independence War. The nameless first-person narrator is the son of a tea plantation administrator. As an only child, the boy is very attached to his playmate Oeroeg, a village boy who has a privileged place in the household since his father drowned in a mountain lake while rescuing the narrator. The boys explore the world together. It seems to be a wonderful childhood but the inequality between the white masters and their native subordinates corrupts the innocence of their friendship.

In *Oeroeg*, Hella S. Haasse frames remembrance through a complex interplay of nostalgia and critical distance, a dynamic that resonates strongly with migration literature. The Dutch narrator looks back on his childhood in the Dutch East Indies with a “tempo doeloe” longing, but this yearning is complicated by his later awareness of the injustices underpinning colonial life. This tension between idealized memory and critical reflection mirrors migrant and diaspora narratives, where recollection of a homeland is both cherished and interrogated for its silences, omissions, and distortions.

The central friendship between the narrator and Oeroeg becomes a metaphor for the unequal intimacy of colonial relationships. As boys, they share experiences and landscapes without fully comprehending the structural barriers between them. In the realm of remembrance literature, this private memory of companionship is reinterpreted in light of public histories—Japanese occupation, Indonesian revolution, and decolonization—showing how personal bonds are reshaped by political rupture.

Themes of belonging and estrangement dominate the narrator's later return to Indonesia. Once a familiar home, the country is now politically and culturally transformed, leaving him an outsider. This experience reflects the migrant condition of physical return without psychic homecoming: displacement that is both spatial and emotional. Such moments in migration literature often underscore the instability of “home” as a fixed concept, turning it into a site of memory rather than a tangible location.

Silences and narrative gaps pervade *Oeroeg*, reflecting the limits of witnessing. The narrator cannot fully grasp Oeroeg's political transformation or the reasons behind their estrangement. This fragmentation mirrors diaspora remembrance, where trauma, loss, and political divisions leave parts of the story untold. Language itself becomes a motif: shifts between Dutch and local terms, and the narrator's struggle to articulate his experiences, signal the way language can

both preserve and distort memory—a familiar theme in migration literature, where code-switching often reflects cultural negotiation.

Finally, the novel stages moral reckoning. The narrator's backward gaze forces him to confront complicity in colonial structures, turning remembrance into an ethical act. Paired with recurring rites of passage—departures, returns, and border-like encounters—Oeroeg captures the irreversible thresholds central to migration stories. Together, these motifs make the novel not only a postcolonial reflection but also a concise meditation on the act of remembering across the ruptures of displacement and historical change.

DECOLONIZATION AND RECEPTION

In 1954, Hella S. Haasse described the theme of *Oeroeg* as follows: "What has taken shape in my story, *Oeroeg*, besides the memories of the country where I was born? Perhaps the longing for the real 'Indonesian' life that I never actually knew, and the secret guilt towards the Indonesian people whom I accepted in my youth as part of the scenery, as a self-evident part of the environment, but whom I never consciously saw, even though I may still remember so many details (*Literature-geschiedenis* n.d)." In an interview in 2002 Haasse refers to her first novel as 'een soort wensdroom' ['a sort of wishful dream'] about a never-existent friendship.

In the year that *Oeroeg* was published the Independence war in Indonesia was still ongoing. That the decolonisation was still ongoing might explain how the novel was received by the public. The author Kees Snoek says the following about the novel *Oeroeg* ; 'The main theme of *Oeroeg* is estrangement the Dutch narrator suffers from 'statische visie [...] onvermogen om in te zien, laat staan te accepteren, dat Indië een fundamentele verandering ondergaat' ['static vision [...] an inability to see or, more so, to accept, that the Indies are fundamentally changing'] (*Gemert* n.d., p. 122). Other critical responses on the book have more to do with the authors alleged vision on colonialism. Dirk de Vries had the following to say about this; 'It could also be that the author is trying to conceal in this way her colonial vision, of which she is perhaps only half-conscious' (de Vries 1948, p. 59). The critic August Hans de Boer criticises the way the author positions herself in the decolonization of the the Dutch Indies. According to him Haasse didn't take a clear position in the decolonial debate (den Boef 1992).

In the acknowledgements, Haasse indicates that with her novel she wanted to contribute to 'improving mutual understanding between people'. It remains the question if Haasse considered all the implications her novel brought thought through. Later she has spoken several times about her emotions while writing it and her intentions with the book (Snoek 1993). Nostalgia was the main feeling she had during the writing of the novel *Oeroeg*.

OROPPA WRITTEN BY SAFAE EL KHANOUSSI

In 2025 Safae El Khanoussi won the Libris Literature prize for her debut novel *Oroppa*. The jury praised her novel for giving us an unique insight. According to the Belgian broadcasting station VRT the Libris Literature Prize jury was astonished by el Khannoussi's remarkable depiction of European society. "Our winner is a page-turner that exudes urgency. This story, the reader senses page after page, simply had to be told, and now, because this is our story too (VRT 2025)."

Safae El Khanoussi (1994) is a Dutch-Moroccan writer and PhD candidate. At the age of four she moved to the Netherlands. Her father was a migrant worker who came to the Netherlands in the 1970s. She is known for her debut novel, "*Oroppa*," which received critical acclaim and won

prestigious literary prizes. El Khannoussi's work often explores themes of migration, exile, and the complexities of identity, particularly within the context of the Moroccan diaspora in Europe. She is currently pursuing a PhD in political philosophy, focusing on prison abolitionism from a decolonial perspective.

The work of El Khannoussi brings a powerful transgenerational lens to questions of identity, migration, and cultural memory. In *Oroppa*, she portrays the complex lives of migrants without falling into cliché, exploring the tension between narrative heritage and individual freedom. It's a rich, layered tale of a Europe that remains invisible to many (Brussels Museums n.d.).

Her voice — both intimate and bold — shapes a literary language that gives form to Europe's plural realities.

Oroppa tells the story of the disappearance of the Jewish-Moroccan artist Salomé Abergel. A swirling, exuberant tale of the side of Europe that remains invisible to most. Irad Abergel's Parisian pub is the last refuge for the sisters and brothers of the night. His mother, Salomé Abergel, has disappeared, and the girl Hind finds her leftover paintings in the basement of Salomé's house in Amsterdam's Rivierenbuurt neighborhood, images that speak to her, that keep her awake at night. The absence of his mother becomes the narrative thread that connects diverse characters, from her son to figures marked by violence and marginality. This central motif of disappearance functions both literally and symbolically, representing the erasures and silences that often accompany histories of migration and exile.

'*Oroppa*' is about how power can make people do things they never knew they were capable of. And about those who refuse to participate in that system any longer. From Amsterdam to Paris, from Tunis to Casablanca, they have built lives, haunted by ghosts from the past.

Safae El Khannoussi's *Oroppa* is a novel that engages deeply with questions of migration, displacement, and memory. The novel deliberately resists a linear storyline. Instead, it unfolds through fragmented, multi-vocal narratives, each perspective adding a layer to the mosaic of lives surrounding Salomé. This fractured style mirrors the discontinuities of migrant memory: experiences of dislocation, rupture, and reconnection. The shifting voices also highlight how no single account can fully contain the complexity of diasporic existence. In this way, El Khannoussi aligns the form of the novel with its thematic concern for multiplicity and hybridity.

Europe itself emerges as one of the book's most striking motifs. The title *Oroppa*—the Arabic word for "Europe"—underscores the ambivalent role of the continent as both refuge and prison. For some characters, Europe represents safety, opportunity, and escape; for others, it is a site of alienation, confinement, and unfulfilled promise. This duality resonates with migration literature more broadly, where host societies are often portrayed as both hospitable and exclusionary.

Another major theme is marginalization. El Khannoussi shifts attention to those on society's edges: addicts, café-goers, petty criminals, and socially displaced figures. By placing these characters at the center of her narrative, she transforms lives typically considered peripheral into rich, dignified stories. This focus reflects a commitment to portraying migration not only as a political issue but also as a deeply personal, everyday struggle for belonging.

Stylistically, *Oroppa* draws on oral traditions, lyrical language, and defamiliarizing imagery. Urban spaces are transformed into surreal, emotionally charged landscapes, evoking the disorientation and wonder of migrant life. This stylistic richness, coupled with the novel's fragmented form, echoes oral storytelling from the Maghreb while challenging conventional European literary expectations.

Finally, the novel engages with colonial afterlives and the politics of narrative. Though it does not reconstruct history in detail, it reveals how colonial legacies and migratory struggles shape everyday lives. Language itself becomes an instrument of resistance: through storytelling, El Khannoussi reclaims the power to define migrants not as passive subjects of discourse but as active creators of meaning. In this way, Oroppe exemplifies how literature can function as both cultural remembrance and political critique, illuminating the multiple belongings and unsettled identities that migration produces.

DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND RECEPTION

The second generation of migrants experiences the migration history of their family different than the generation of their parents. An important difference is that the second generation often is born and raised in the Netherlands and in Dutch culture. They are often better educated than their parents and more critical of their migration story.

A recurring struggle for this generation is their diasporic identity. The result of this can be the feeling of 'In-betweenness' which is closely related to the sociological issue of diasporic identity, one which emphasizes the liminal subjectivity and consciousness that emerges among members of a de-territorialized community in relation to their self-identification and sense of belonging (Karas 2022). What happens is that they hold on to long-term connection with a distant place of origin. This place of origin needs to be nuanced however, since individuals may be reluctant to identify with a monolithically defined national identity (such as "Indian"), and may prefer to emphasize membership in smaller entities, such as religious, ethnic, or linguistic communities (Karas 2022). In the country where they settle the diasporic communities are often afraid to lose their traditions. To prevent this members of a diasporic community often fall back on the parts of their culture they think are most authentic. This then becomes a powerful symbol of their migrant community and their sense of belonging. Indeed, transnational personal relations and the emotions ensuing from these relations are manifested through a co-presence fabricated by tangible and intangible elements designated as "diasporic objects," such as foods, national and religious symbols, or traditional folk items (Pechurina 2016). Separated from their place of origin, these objects acquire new layers of value through ongoing use and circulation. They can signify both loss and continuity, expressing the migrant's multifaceted ties to different places.

Safae El Khanoussi's migration experiences was different from that of Haasse. Besides their different experiences, the time period in which they published their books is also important. In El Khanoussi's case, the reception of her novel was mainly positive despite the rise of anti-migration sentiments in Dutch society. The jury of the Libris Literature prize praises how she portrays this very actual story with humanity and at the same time inhumanity (Libris Literatuur Prijs 2025). Besides the jury of the Libris literature prize there were also other critics who read and reviewed the book. One example of this is the rubric 'recensie Marieke' from the ncrv-guide (television broadcaster). There the following is said: What reading this novel has certainly given me is a completely different point of view, namely that from the invisible lives of immigrants, exiles and outsiders (NCRV GIDS 2026). While most reviewers are mainly positive some admit that they find it on occasion difficult to differentiate between the many characters in the book.

CONCLUSION

By comparing *Oeroeg* by Hella S. Haasse and *Oroppa* by Safae El Khannoussi, it becomes clear that the representation of migrants in Dutch literature has changed a lot over time. In Haasse's *Oeroeg*, the migrant or colonial subject is mainly viewed from a Dutch perspective. The novel shows nostalgia for the Dutch East Indies and a struggle to come to terms with the changing colonial relationship. Even though Haasse tries to create understanding between different people, her story still reflects the limited view of her time and her position as part of the colonial system.

In contrast, El Khannoussi's *Oroppa* shows how migrant writers today take control of their own stories. Her novel gives a voice to people who have often remained invisible in European literature. Through different characters and perspectives, she shows that migrant life is not one single story, but made up of many experiences, emotions, and identities. The themes of displacement, memory, and belonging are central, but they are told from within the migrant experience rather than from the outside.

The difference between *Oeroeg* and *Oroppa* shows how Dutch literature has developed from writing about migrants to writing by migrants themselves. This change has made Dutch literature more diverse and inclusive, reflecting the multicultural society of today. Migrant voices have become an essential part of the literary world, offering new perspectives and challenging traditional ways of thinking about identity and belonging.

For future research, it would be interesting to look further at how new generations of writers continue to shape Dutch literature and how their work influences the way we understand migration, identity, and culture in the Netherlands.

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Nahel Sedira

Accounts of Migratory Experiences in Marseille's Migrant-Authored Literature

IN A GIST

Marseille's migrant-authored literature constitutes a 'migratory polyphony' – layered voices and memories capturing the city's dynamic interplay of cultures, histories, and ongoing human mobilities.

INTRODUCTION

Marseille, French port city and major historical hub of the Mediterranean, has long been a melting pot of migration, and although its demographic complexity is undeniable, the dominant narratives over-simplify its heterogeneity, oscillating between romanticised exoticism and narratives of social crisis (Mucchielli). The metropolis is constantly imagined and represented, but rarely by its own terms (Peraldi et al.). This paper thus seeks to pose the following question: what do migrant-authored literary accounts of the migratory experience of Marseille reveal, and how can this literature contribute to a broader and more polyphonic understanding of migratory identities?

The works of Ousmane Sembène, Tahar Ben Jelloun and Kmar Douagi provide substance for this analysis. Taken as a whole, they articulate a counter-narrative: what we will refer to as a migratory polyphony.

The following analysis explores two main themes: firstly, the city as a contested space between alienation and belonging, and secondly, the subversion of cultural and linguistic hegemonies by the margins. Ultimately, this study argues that these literary narratives are not merely descriptive, symbolic, fixed writings, but form in themselves a genuine politically-charged impetus, and significant acts of narrative re-appropriation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic discourse on the literary representation of Marseille fluctuates between two dominant but often reductive genres. On the one hand, the Marseilles crime thriller cultivates an image of the city as a lawless place of crime and social decay (Guillemin). As Collovald and Corcuff point out, this genre often feeds on sociological clichés, propagating a “miserabilistic vision of the suburbs” and transferring “the redeeming value of the proletarian to that of the immigrant” (5–7). On the other hand, an idealised, folkloric vision, often present in “white literature” (*littérature blanche*, a French term denoting general, non-genre fiction as opposed to *littérature noire* or crime fiction), can also perpetuate stereotypes by exoticizing the city.

This literal “white and black” discussion obscures a more complex and polyvocal literary tradition, centred on first-hand accounts of migration. As Ellen Declercq points out in her reflection on the imprecise concept of “migration literature”, this field seeks to transcend mere biography and focus on the intratextual thematics of migration itself, challenging the definition of national literature (301–302). There is a significant gap in studies that specifically apply this migrant-focused perspective to Marseille literature.

The primary corpus for our analysis of migratory polyphony form a chronological timeline stretching from the late 1940s to the present day, in the second decade of the 21st century. These stories are all linked by their geographical setting, but address different themes (gender identity, race, social class or age), and, due to their temporal differences, describe snapshots of differing social and political contexts. They have thus been chosen in an effort to reflect the demographic diversity and socio-political evolution of Marseille, always through the prism of migration:

- The Black Docker (1956) by Ousmane Sembène follows Diaw Falla, the “black docker” of Senegalese origin precariously working in Marseille, who is accused of the murder of a white woman author, who he claims stole his manuscript. This semi-autobiographical novel provides us with a late 1940s post-colonial perspective, focusing on racialized labor exploitation and press bias.
- Marseille: comme un matin d’insomnie (1986) is a collection of photographs taken by Thierry Ibert, capturing the urban transformation of Marseille in the early 1980s. The photos are interspersed with texts written by Tahar Ben Jelloun, famous French-Moroccan author, who lends his voice to the monochromatic scenes.
- Kmar Douagi’s contemporary poetry (2020s) introduces a crucial 21st-century, digitally-native racialized female voice that explores religious syncretism, linguistic rebellion, and embodies a diatribe of femonationalism.

It is important to recognise that Marseille’s literary world also includes works by authors from dominant social groups whose representations of the city’s multicultural reality are debatable. For instance, Marseille-based author Hadrien Bels explores the themes of gentrification and identity in his novel *Cinq dans tes yeux* (2020). With noble intentions, he states in an interview that he aims to write the metropolis as a living entity: “Marseille is the main character of my book” (Poinot and Bels 174). However, this preoccupation with humanising the city seems to have left out the humanisation of its marginal inhabitants, perpetuating perspectives that tend to bifurcate towards stereotypical representations. His approach, which he articulates as follows: “It’s not enough to have lived through certain situations to be able to describe them. I had to put myself in people’s skin over and over again” (173) echoes the problematic tradition of speaking for marginalised communities rather than with them. Thus, by analysing migrant-authored literature, our study will explore the specific strategies they use to articulate a more nuanced, concerned, and polyphonic Marseille.

METHODOLOGY

This study will make use of a qualitative methodology rooted in literary and critical theory. The main method is a close reading of the selected texts, which we will conduct through the following a dichotomous theoretical reading grid:

- Coined by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*², “contrapuntal reading” will be used to analyse how the texts articulate experiences of resistance to imperialism, racism and cultural hegemony. We will detail how these narratives challenge the “single, central, dominant [...] point of view” (Bourdieu 3) that prevails in dominant discourses on Marseille and migration.
- Following on from Barthes’ *Mythologies*³, we will treat the city of Marseille (its cafés, streets, vieux-port, and linguistic landscapes) as a system of signs within texts. This semiotic analysis consists of analysing how these urban elements are valuable because they carry meanings in themselves, whether of alienation, community or liberation.

Literary devices will also serve our analysis, including metaphors (e.g., Ben Jelloun's "migraine"), diction (e.g., Douagi's use of verlan and slang), narrative voices (e.g., Sembène's internal monologue) and the juxtaposition of artistic mediums (e.g., Ibert's images and Ben Jelloun's text).

ANALYSIS

Identity Negotiation, Cafés, and Sayak's "Double Absence"

The literary Marseille is, as we have seen, not a unified space, but in fact deeply contested. Migrant identities are constantly being negotiated in a context of systemic alienation and racialisation (La Barbera 1-13). This situation echoes Abdelmalek Sayad's concept of the double absence, in which the immigrant, caught between the loss of his or her original social milieu and the difficulty of integrating into the host country, exists in a state of sociological invisibility. The works of Sembène, Ben Jelloun and Douagi each articulate this experience, staging Marseille's urban landscape.

In Ousmane Sembène's *The Black Docker*, the protagonist Diaw Falla's existence is defined by this double absence. He is physically present in Marseille, his "adoptive town" (43), yet systematically excluded from its humanity and legal fabric. The courtroom scene crystallizes this: reduced to a spectacle, he feels dehumanized "like a newly-discovered animal from the Ark" (24). His labour as a docker is precarious, his literary aspirations are deemed an "insult to our literature" (34), and his very body is rendered monstrous and "bestial" (33). His social death is exposed in his refusal to marry, knowing that a "hand to mouth existence in a hotel room" (45) is the only future offered. The title itself, *Black Docker*, depicts the protagonist as a monochromatic entity, rendering Diaw's body to a Shadow of His Former Self, to echo the title of Kerry James Marshall's painting. Alienated and depersonalized, stripped of his identity, he experiences the feeling of not belonging in a space that is both a melting pot and lacking in identity cohesion: "Because Diaw was black, nothing was sacred" (9).

Tahar Ben Jelloun's texts in *Marseille: comme un matin d'insomnie* depicts a similar landscape, but more directly through the description of photos of melancholic ruins. The city is an "enigma" and a "misunderstanding" (7). For Ben Jelloun, the double absence teems through the urban space itself. The Porte d'Aix district is a place of "where everything is cracked, the walls, the faces, the streets, the memories" (5), where the condition of the migrant is that of a spectral presence: "Languages spoken but not heard" (7).

Cafés are a key symbolic space in our semiotic analysis, and are mentioned in both texts. Ben Jelloun's cafés are a space of profound sadness where "everything is fake" and where "gathers grey Maghrebis whose lives have been so crumpled and trampled underfoot that all that's left is malaise and dismay" (7). In *Black Docker*, the cafés of "little Harlem" of Marseille do not offer belonging but a mere "gathering in groups" (41) within the hostility of the metropolis: In this little Africa in the south of France, all the countries, all the different ethnic groups were represented. In keeping with the customs of their native land, each territory had its own boundaries: the cafés. (41)

Nowadays, cafés have been replaced by bars, and according to M'barka Myriam Elbichr, "these bars constitute in-between zones: visible, yet marginalized from dominant forms of cultural legitimacy" (7). Thus, this urban visual presence contrasts with "the first generation of neighborhood cafés, which were discreet and inconspicuous, telling a different story of silent resistance, rooted in time and collective memory" (8), once again echoing the double absence,

both physical and cultural. However, this newfound visibility, in a way, symbolizes progress, a will for “partial reappropriation of urban space” (8). Another indicator of progress is that these bars are favored by younger generations because, “unlike cafés [...] these places are frequented by both men and women” and represent a certain “social and symbolic neutrality” (8), demonstrating a desire for unity and cohesion through inclusivity.

In this vein of hope, Kmar Douagi’s contemporary poetry reclaims Marseille as a site of potential becoming, even as she navigates the same structures of absence. Her work actively negotiates the very identity crises the previous authors document. She explicitly grapples with the bureaucratic absurdity of the double absence, where official documents dictate belonging: “The further the naturalisation procedure goes, the more absurd I find it that I have to get a passport of a different colour in order to have rights” (1). Douagi finds in Marseille a transformative space that allows for reconciliation: “I realised how sad I was to be so far away from my family... Here I slowed down, to realise the depth of my sadness, that I have emotions, that life isn’t just work, that good people do exist” (3). Marseille is, for her, a land of reconnection, be it spiritual, linguistic or communal.

While Ben Jelloun associates the sea with guilt: “Calm and serene, the sea witnesses – with impunity – the removal of men”, Douagi finds shelter in intimate, spiritual, and natural spaces: “The closer to the water, the closer to God. Hamdollah, hamdollah” (3). For her, Marseille is the antithesis of Paris, where she left “silence and self-censorship”; it is a “fertile city that gives when we give” (3), enabling a fragile but active reassembly of a self shattered by migration.

These three texts show Marseille as a territory of contested identity. From Sembène’s brutal colonial racism and Ben Jelloun’s melancholy ruin of a disintegrating community, to Douagi’s rocky but hopeful path towards reconstruction, we see the emergence of a youth determined to rebuild itself collectively. Nonetheless, through these descriptive accounts, we must not misunderstand the authors’ intentions, which are not to respond with resignation, but with narrative and linguistic strategies of subversion.

Subversion of Cultural Hegemonies

More than just testifying to their marginalized situation, the narratives in this migrant-authored corpus concretely and actively subvert dominant narratives and cultural hegemonies that legitimizes the marginalization of immigrants. Ousmane Sembène’s *Black Docker* is an indictment of the racist media and the role they play in constructing a dehumanising narrative about racialised immigrants. The press cuttings on the Diaw Falla murder case, functions as a metafictional examination (reaffirming its postcolonialism) of the way language itself is used to perpetuate the status quo. As Nous affirms, this is one of the main purposes of migrant literature: “make visible what those in power wish to keep hidden” (164). Diaw’s descriptions in the press are not simply biased; they demonstrate what Frantz Fanon calls the “zoological terms” of the settlers’ worldview, which “dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal” (42–43).

Sembène illustrates this process with devastating precision: journalists describe Diaw as having ‘the gait of a hunted animal’ and resembling ‘a creature that has never been exposed to the influence of civilisation’ (10). This bestialisation is no accident, but a systematic process designed to strip Diaw of his humanity and justify the public’s fear and aversion.

Sembène’s novel, thus, is the counter-narrative theorized by Edward Said, a testimony to the humanity of the “black docker” personified by Diaw, asserting that the real “insult to [...] literature”

(34) is not Diaw's claim of ownership over the manuscript, but the system that dispossesses him of his literary freedom.

While Sembène denounces hegemony by revealing its mechanisms through language, Kmar Douagi does so by dismantling language itself. Her writing is an act of linguistic resistance, vibrant and contemporary, and challenges the purist and elitist norms of formal French (embodied among others by institutions such as the infamous Académie française). Douagi's text is a living archive of the youth and multilingual reality of Marseille, infused with words from Maghrebi Arabic (e.g., "seum", which loosely translates as being "bummed"), verlan (French slang where syllables are reversed), and references to rap culture, a genre of which Marseille is the French capital (Boivin).

Her style is rather political than ornamental. Douagi explicitly states: "Deconstructing language / It means understanding that the miscreants are those who cause harm around them." (8). The usage of inclusive writing (e.g., "celleux", "toustes", neologisms combining the masculine and feminine variants of words to make them neutral) grammatically embodies this commitment to subverting normative structures (Abbou). Douagi's provocative linguistic play embodies Toni Morrison's idea of a language: "reworked, adapted to their daily lives and ultimately deconstructed," that is, a language that flaunts its vitality against "unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis."

The polyphonic, hybrid vernacular of the Marseille's youth, notably in the quartiers nord is a real grassroots socio-political tool, which has a function in protecting identity, particularly against gentrification and the erasure of the (linguistic) culture specific to these communities (Gasquet-Cyrus). Where Sembène's protagonist is crushed by a system that controls the narrative, Douagi seizes the means of narrative production, using a language that is authentically her own to define her identity and world on her own terms.

Thus, while the intentions are similar, the two endeavors towards subversion differ in their approach. Sembène confronts and deconstructs the dominant narrative from the outside in, exposing the racist and violent nature of its language. Douagi, decades later, outflanks it from the inside out, creating a new linguistic territory where the hegemony of "proper French" has no hold, where "language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries" (hooks 167).

Both strategies exemplify acts of resistance against cultural forces that seek to define, belittle, and silence migratory polyphony.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it seems as though Marseille leaves no one indifferent, whether for better or for worse. Indeed, recounting an experience in an elaborate manner, taking the time to incorporate a certain literary sensibility, always comes from a driving force that gives the writer momentum. What Said called, in the case of exile literature: "an urgency [...] that renders the use of language something much more interesting and provisional than it would otherwise be" (10). This applies to the authors we have compiled, for whom Marseille even becomes a character in its own right.

In the words of Susan Sontag: "Eloquence—thinking in words—is a byproduct of solitude, deracination, a heightened painful individuality" (401). And this analysis does not seem far removed from the experience of the aforementioned authors: Ousmane Sembène discovered the literary world upon his arrival in Marseille, taking refuge in the library of the CGT (General Confederation of Workers), which explains the politically engaged aspect of his writings (Cagnan

144). When Tahar Ben Jelloun arrived in France and obtained his doctorate in psychopathology, his writing took a new direction and began to focus on the loneliness of immigrants in France, with *La Réclusion solitaire* in 1976 and *La plus haute des solitudes* in 1977. Kmar Douagi describes her arrival in Marseille as a silver lining after leaving Paris, referring to the French capital as “other people’s dream”.

All things considered, the significance of this migratory polyphony transcends literary studies. By forcing readers to eschew a detached perspective, and confront a human, passionate, and unapologetically subjective reality, these works fulfill a both ethical and political function. They diversify literature and its canon, but also the imagination of their readers, awaking them from passivity, “an awareness of how language is about experience and not just about itself” (Said 10), and contributing to the urgent task of formulating a shared, cohesive but not assimilating identity that embraces its intrinsic diversity and long history of cultural and genetic mixing, free from any pseudo-scientific hierarchy.

(...) following the lead of novelists such as Faulkner, Joyce or Woolf, we must relinquish the single, central, dominant, in a word, quasi-divine, point of view that is all too easily adopted by observers – and by readers too, at least to the extent they do not feel personally involved.

– The Weight of the World, Pierre Bourdieu

Notes

¹ Quotes in italics are translated by myself for lack of any provided translation.

² “The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded” (Said 66–67).

³ In *Mythologies* (1957), French literary critic Roland Barthes analyses semiotically series of objects, events and concepts (“signifiers” in the structuralist tradition) generally considered to be “banal”, in the manner of a literary text, thus underlining the usefulness of transferring this process to other topics.

Quartiers nord are Marseille’s northern districts, notorious for precarious living conditions and high crime rates, predominantly inhabited by populations of African descent, particularly from North Africa and the Comoros. Despite what the term suggests, it is not a uniform and continuous space, and the HLM (“public housing”), which are over-represented in the media, only represent a minority of housing (30%) and are scattered throughout the area (Peraldi et al. 53–64).

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Johanne Prøis Fearnley

– Experiences of Seven Content Creators

IN A GIST

Seven content creators who counter fear-based migration narratives demonstrate how digital storytelling can challenge misinformation, foster solidarity, and amplify marginalized perspectives in public debate.

INTRODUCTION

I am back on Utøya in Norway, the island where 69 young people were killed at summer camp on the 22nd of July 2011. They were murdered for their wish to contribute to building a multicultural society. The terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, wanted to “cleanse” immigrants from Norwegian streets. He believed that Norway was on the verge of being taken over by Muslims, and that they were being aided by the Labour Party (then in government). He wanted to kill the party’s future leaders, and chose to carry out the attack against their youth organisation – the Worker’s Youth League. More than a decade later, I am asked to speak for a new generation of campers, about migration and social media.

The ideology that legitimised the attack still lives on throughout Europe and beyond, but here, on Utøya, the youth has taken the island back. It continues to be a place for remembrance, and a place where new generations can carry forward the ideals of democracy and diversity that came under attack that day. Every year, well over 10 000 young people come here to learn about radicalisation and extremism, and how to stand up against the hate they see in their own lives (Utøya AS n.d.).

I am part of thousands of young people in Norway to call the island a second home. In my teen years, this island carried some of my best memories: morning baths, birthdays and conversations on night shifts. Since then, I have worked with legal aid for asylum seekers, with empowering young people in the public debate, and – only recently – started a TikTok-account talking about immigration. I walk up the ever-steep hill from the ferry, into the new main building, grab a coffee as I go, and start my presentation.

“So, you want to make content on social media on immigration and racism? Here is what you will navigate. For a long time now, hate has gained momentum more quickly than the efforts to push back against the rise of the far-right,” I tell the campers – and we are on. “Radical right-wing parties usually do not openly encourage violence or get directly involved in violent acts. Publicly, they tend to steer clear of that kind of behaviour. But at the same time, they often use language that is hateful toward minority groups.” I look directly into their happily sleep-deprived, caffeinated morning eyes. They are still with me.

“Even if they are not throwing punches, these political actors still know how to tap into people’s fears or prejudices. We need to see this in the context of online platforms growing in importance for right-wing extremism in recent years. Across Europe, political right-wing actors exploit popular prejudice, proactively organise, and take part in public events with an inflammatory or violent potential.” This is listed as two of the key findings on the presentation behind me, from the

report Right Wing-Extremeism in the EU (Liger & Mirja 2022). “Political right-wing actors do not have to make content about it themselves. Clips of their speeches and political acts go viral without context, without nuance, and without anyone knowing who sent them.”

And then, a new empty slide. “There are plenty of studies about radicalisation online. But there is little shared knowledge about those who take a stance and challenge how political norms shift away from international obligations and human rights on social media platforms. As social media has become the primary news source for young Europeans (Cabanas 2025), young content creators now play a significant role in shaping the premises and rhetoric of the migration debate.”

What follows is a collection of experiences from content creators I have spoken to across Europe, and from my own work. Between us, our accounts range from a few thousand to well over a hundred thousand followers. Together our videos have reached millions – without editorial oversight, for better or worse. Our stories of navigating the algorithm show what breaks through and what does not, and how it is possible not only to answer exclusionary narratives but also to build alternative framings rooted in well-cited material, human rights and international law. Other than me, you will hear from:

Abbey Heffer, @openbookshelf

Germany-based creator and PhD candidate making English-language content that debunks misinformation and “bad research” circulating in policy debates. She shares sources and methods to strengthen her audience’s ability to challenge misleading narratives and address authoritarianism precisely.

Bogdan Burdusel, @bogdanburdusel

Romania-based Roma rights creator posting in Romanian (occasionally English), centring Roma experiences within wider migration debates on TikTok. He aims to humanise migrants and shift discussion away from crisis headlines toward everyday realities.

Elisabeth Hosszú, @hszelisabeth

French creator with a political science background who has interned in the EU. She posts primarily in French (often with English subtitles). She blends personal narrative and professional experience, making political points through humour and pop-culture references.

Selma Mazili, @ltsselma

Italian creator with Moroccan roots, now based in Brussels. She posts mainly in Italian with English subtitles on Instagram and TikTok. Her goal is to make international politics and the migration debate understandable for non-specialists, countering fear-based framings with clear, explanatory content.

Synnøve Dørum, @synnovedorum

Norway-based creator publishing in Norwegian, focused on dismantling the false link between crime and origin. She uses statistics and research to give viewers practical language for countering persistent stereotypes and oversimplified narratives.

Zoe Gardner, @zoejardiniere

UK-based creator producing in English, speaking to audiences that are saturated with polarised migration talk. She wants to show migration is human and necessary, focusing on calm, fact-led explainers that can persuade movable centrists.

Project Nuance

Anti-immigration discourse serves as a unifying and powerful lever for far-right actors, shaping public opinion and dragging centrist forces into reactive positions. Far-right assumptions about migration typically frame migrants as threats to national identity, economic stability, or public safety, often relying on xenophobic and exclusionary ideologies (Federico 2025).

Successful rights-affirming migration narratives, on the other hand, require migrant, youth and academic voices to shape public discourse and debunk myths directly. As Abbey Heffer points out, "Misinformation and deliberate disinformation from official sources is a constant struggle." Selma Mazili agrees: "In Italy there is a lack of simple background information and definitions in mainstream media, so I started explaining the basics that newsrooms assume everyone knows."

The creators I have spoken with mostly have a dual aim: to share factual, well-reasoned arguments and useful information with those already in agreement with them, and to reach people who are indifferent or undecided, hoping to influence their perspective. Some creators put their strongest emphasis on increasing viewers' critical literacy, while others focus more on widening perspectives by storytelling. Most of the creators are somewhere in the middle.

"I want to communicate two things," Zoe Gardner says. "Migration is not scary, and migrants are humans. Migration is needed in Europe. If you think about how many times people have heard negative stereotypes and racist lies about migrants, we have to make the counter argument as many times plus one." Bogdan Burdusel has a similar approach in his Roma context: "For me, it is about making sure migration is not only discussed in moments of crisis but as an ongoing part of our societies. Migration should not only exist as a crisis headline. It's part of ordinary European life, and our social media should reflect that."

Synnøve Dørum has another approach to disarm fear-based arguments on immigration. "What I push back on is the idea that where you are from predicts crime. If no one else is going to show how socioeconomic background, integration policy and social attitudes play into crime rates, then I guess I will."

Elisabeth Hosszú had the same call to stand up and use her platform when silence no longer felt viable. "George Floyd's murder was a before-and-after for me. I started posting every day and moved from personal posts to political content."

I somewhat relate, from my beginner start point. When I first began making content, I made videos about migration from a place of anger and a feeling of powerlessness after years of witnessing how little attention human rights violations against asylum seekers got in Norway. Sitting at Utøya years later, surrounded by high schoolers drafting video ideas on whiteboards, I recognise that same determination I felt at 14, when I started to visit a reception centre for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. I was tired of hearing media outlets and adults around me reduce children fleeing alone to mere statistics – and when they did speak of them as people, they were portrayed as criminals or dangerous "anchors" for families trying to reach Europe. The stories my new friends told after my first day at the reception centre changed something in me. I decided on the bus home: I was going to become an expert on their rights, and I would use that knowledge to hold accountable those who had violated their rights.

Nine years down the line, I have come to realise that accountability demands more than what practitioners of law can do in court and appeal boards alone. It demands a continued belief in human rights and respect for international obligations in the general population. Social media seemed to me the easiest place to call for change in public perception.

People-driven advocacy on social media delivers a democratic contribution to reclaiming migration as a field of human experience, rights, and possibility rather than a site of baseless political fearmongering, and I wanted to participate. The question was how.

Crafting a Migration Narrative Within the Algorithms

We live in an era of politicised facts. It can be hard to ensure nuance, quality research dissemination and the human story in a landscape fully controlled by algorithms that always rewards strong emotion and conflict. At a whim, the algorithm can be modified, and the format that always worked for you previously, will indefinitely not receive the same reach.

There is no one single recipe to obtain both credibility and reach talking about subjects touching upon migration, but the creators outline two main strategies that work. On one hand, you have the academic approach: non-personal videos made up of objectively disseminated research, filled with citations, sometimes spiced with personal analysis. On the other hand, you have the more activist approach: person-fuelled content, largely built on the premise that young people trust other young people with shared interests. In the middle, where a great portion of the content lies, is where own emotions and everyday experiences are used to hook people in, followed by political commentary (with varying quality of sourcing).

Where most creators feel forced, or want, to splice humour or personal life into their feeds, Heffer doubles down on neutrality: long, never-personal videos stacked with citations. After most playbooks, her content should not work. Yet, 176,000 people now follow her for the calm, clear (and long) reasoning that the platform's outrage machine rarely delivers. She gives her audience tools to unpack claims, so they can see the manipulation behind them. "It is absolutely possible for independent political commentators to share quality, well-researched and cited opinions," she argues. "That is all I want to communicate: Good research practices, verifiable findings, and the bare minimum of professional integrity."

However, playing the "algorithmic game" can be effective. Gardner admitted she started with posting short, catchy clips on TikTok to hit 10,000 followers, and was surprised when even eight-minute explainers started getting pushed, simply because people stayed. When you have built a following that recognise you and trust you to not waste their time, it is easier to communicate on your own terms. "I have literally never posted about anything but migration. You have to be crazy to think I do not deeply care about this issue." She chuckles a bit. "I make a point of never giving up personal reasons for my arguments on migration. I repeat again and again that we as a nation, and as Europe, benefit from migration. That we in fact need it. I guess my steadfastness and professional experience is what gives me credibility for the viewer."

Contrastingly, Hosszú's content style is more personal by choice. "I mix personal life, youth opportunities and politics to inform people, but the goal is always to open a discussion, not just drop information and walk away." Mazili adds to this: "I want to show you can live a normal young life and still care about international politics. Yet, I keep my analyses explanatory and objective, holding back my own opinions, so people can trust the information. You can use trends to your advantage, but if you only chase visibility you end up losing your goal. For me, it is always about staying true to the message while adapting creatively."

"The platform rewards emotional content, so to reach people I sometimes have to be sharper and more tactical than I would like in the beginning," Dørum explained. "When I have drawn the viewer in, that is when I can bring in the nuance, while still reaching the people I want to see my content." Burdusel uses the same approach: "The first 5–10 seconds have to grab attention, but

the rest must add depth.” He makes a point to reframe conflict as curiosity, allowing him to ease into sensitive topics without unnecessary provocations derailing the conversation.

Dørum has experienced this to not be enough in and of itself. “I have to use some manipulating tactics now and then, there is no way around it. Because now I am playing by rules that are not on my premises. Social media favors the far-right, so if you want to counter them and get the same visibility, you have to match them in their own game.”

Interestingly, several of the creators have shared that mainstream media often pressured them to simplify or reduce nuance beyond what they felt comfortable with. Dørum is one of them: “The harsh wordings in the public debate goes beyond social media. It has become an intrinsic part of our debate culture. I recently wrote an article for a national newspaper, and the editor made my tone much more “bitchy”, and less nuanced, than I wanted it to be.” Burdusel relates. “I have also had mainstream media reach out, fishing for soundbites to fit their own narratives.

Heffer sees this as a key concern. “Polarisation paralyses politics. It prevents governments from being able to act and overcome crises and it prevents citizens from being able to discuss and form opinions on vitally-important daily life issues.” Her way of dealing with the polarising and angry responses she gets, is “deadpan politeness.” Regardless of their intention, she forces herself to correct their logical fallacies and claims with evidence. She stresses yet again: “and then I cite that evidence”.

Back at Utøya, my coffee is far gone, and the high schoolers have moved on to work in groups on video ideas. At one of the tables, a girl asks: “So how do you find out what strategy works for you, when finding your voice on TikTok?”

It is a hard question to answer. The only short and honest one, is that you have to try and fail until you have found a format and rhythm you are comfortable with. This is the collected advice from the creators:

1. Find your fuel

Ask yourself: What is pushing you to post? Anger at bad statistics? Fascination with law or history? The need to tell the story no one else will? All of these are good starting points. What matters is that the viewer feels you are authentically confident. If you try to fake being an academic, people will spot it. If you are not very funny, do not shoehorn in humour (trust me, it easily (p)undermines your message).

2. Choose your voice, not someone else’s

Build character. Viewers sense authenticity in tone, genre and aesthetics. Continue to test out video ideas until you find a format you are comfortable in.

If you are a fast talker, lean into it (try a teleprompter app, my go-to is Sophiana).

If you have got a calm, bookish vibe, show your bookshelf in the background.

If you are bilingual, subtitle your content so more people can join the conversation.

If your lived experience connects to migration, and you are comfortable with it: be open about it. If it does not, be clear about the perspective you do bring.

3. Endure the algorithm

There are some simple things that make videos more likely to get good reach: if you edit in the app, have subtitles, use trending sounds in the background, strategic hashtags to your niche.

Test different formats: try to adapt trends to migration issues, make longer explainers or do split-screen-commentary. See what travels. Sometimes a two-minute myth-buster reaches more people than a flashy trend-jump.

Keep up to speed on what video format TikTok says the algorithm pushes when you start to publish – sometimes it is videos over 30 seconds with a high complete rate, sometimes it is faceless photo dumps with added text – it is ever-shifting. Do not be afraid to try and fail. We all do.

4. Know who you are talking to

Not everyone is your audience. The far right? They are unlikely to budge. The people in the middle, or uncertain individuals? That is where you can make an impact. Your own community? They may want your help articulating their thoughts on migration policies, or to feel represented and defended.

Clarify this for yourself early. It makes choices about tone and content so much easier.

5. Prepare for harsh comments

The moment you post, someone will likely accuse you of being brainwashed, corrupt, or part of a conspiracy. Some will likely DM you things you would rather not repeat. Do not let that dictate your content. Filter, block, ignore or report. Above all: talk about it to the people around you. Maybe you can recruit some friends to modify your comment section, or respond to critical comments? If you get a comment with a bad (or hateful) counter-argument, and manage, you can try to explain respectfully why they are wrong.

6. Celebrate the micro-wins

The algorithm will not congratulate you, and likes will not necessarily measure your impact. You will never hear from most of the people you influence. Reap the feedback you sow. The DM from a student who says they chose their high school track because of your video, or the teen who feels prouder of their identity after watching you. The friend who tells you that you gave them the words to call out misinformation at a family dinner.

You are not just posting into a void. You are part of a larger digital ecosystem where far-right voices are rewarded most. When you add your story, your explainer, your commentary or myth-bust, you are helping shift the balance.

7. Final, practical rules of thumb:

Remember that you have around 2-3 seconds to capture someone's attention

Subtitle your videos: it widens your reach.

Post at regular times. Early in the mornings, at dinner time or in the evening. For growth: ideally a couple of times a week, but this is not a must.

Be consistent. Do not change your format, aesthetics and topics every week: people like to know what they can expect.

To become good, you need to practice. It is scary to begin with, but it is even scarier if there is no one there to share your perspective.

Role Awareness and Personal Toll

As we walk to the cafeteria at Utøya, another guy, around 16 years old, takes me aside. He shows me a video from his For You-page. An anonymous user has posted a speech (AlfredAffe3 2025)

from the killer of the 69 young people that had been in our exact spot at the island 14 years ago. 18,900 likes. One of the top comments: “His theory was right, nobody talks about it!” – the theory being that Norwegian society is under existential threat from multiculturalism, with muslims as the main scapegoat.

If you post about migration on social media, it is almost inevitable that you get these attitudes into your comment section. As Gardner nicely puts it: “Sometimes the algorithm decides to show my video to men over 50, and then the comments are a barrage of horrible hate.”

I thought I was immune, after I had posted a video about the migrants that were killed in the school shooting in Örebro, Sweden this February. 137 000 views, not one hate comment. Little did I know how short that would last. My first death threat came in March, under a video on illegal pushbacks. No personal critique against me, only a flow of blunt racism and one wish for my death. But I am definitely one of the lucky ones.

Burdusel said he has noticed a “clear rise” in hate speech over the past couple of years. “It is not just the occasional troll. It is an increasing wave of coordinated hostility, often echoing the language and framing of political actors who scapegoat minorities. The majority population’s online response to migration content is, in many cases, overwhelmingly negative. On TikTok especially, anonymity emboldens hate speech, so I have had to learn when to engage and when to let moderation do its job. The most frustrating feedback is when people misinterpret nuance as “defending illegality” just because I refuse to dehumanise migrants.”

Multiple interviewees shared that being an online content creator, it can feel lonely – one of them being Dørum. “There are so few people standing up for immigrant rights in the Norwegian public debate. I often wear myself out just to make sure views other than the far-right are heard on TikTok”. She shrugs her shoulders. “When you do not have this community around you, with other people who do not know how it is to take a stand in difficult and hurtful debates, then you become alone. And it is lonely to deal with on your own.”

Though rarely dialogic, the critique that fills our comment sections often points to the very misunderstandings and the misinformation we want to address. Heffer, for instance, is often dismissed as a “radical leftist” for simply being a university-affiliated academic, while others call her a “fed” due to her PhD being funded by the German Foreign Office. “Mostly, I take these comments as a fundamental misunderstanding of what academia is and does. Fault lies with academia itself, which loves to speak only to itself in its own exclusive languages and closed-practices.” Her mission to demystify social sciences brings with it a personal impact too: “With a 2–3 minute video, I can start productive, thoughtful conversations at home and, for the first time, share my work with my family.”

Hosszú, however, met more hostile reactions at home. “Since I started posting more political content, I have noticed people unfollowing me, including childhood friends. At first it bothered me, but in the end I prefer to share what I believe in, even if I have just two followers. We live in a democracy, I am not going to let them dictate my voice.”

Stories about Roma people are rarely told by Roma people themselves. Burdusel notes that all in all, his feedback is mostly positive. “I have received messages from other young Roma who say my videos made them feel seen and prouder of their identity, and from non-Roma who said they finally understood an issue they had only heard in negative terms. That is progress.”

Migratory movement has almost always been an integral part of European culture, and yet, it is mostly talked about when addressing migration as a threat to that culture. Mazili has a tactic to

address this. “I am Italian with Moroccan origins, born and raised in Italy, and I have always lived with two cultures coexisting and two mother tongues. Still, I do not like calling it a migratory background because I never migrated myself, but society still frames me that way because of my parents’ story.” She laughs. “Now that I have moved to Brussels, I call myself a migrant. I do not want it to be seen as negative, and the words we use in content hold power.”

Gardner has a clearly defined relationship to her role and responsibility as a white, British-perceived creator. “I recognise my place in the conversation: I cannot speak for migrants, but I can represent the ordinary Britons who want a compassionate and sane immigration policy.” Dørum aligns herself with this way of thinking: “As an ethnic Norwegian I have a responsibility. I cannot sit in a debate about racism without first doing the internal work to confront the unconscious attitudes I grew up with. You are either a racist or an anti-racist, and that requires that you take responsibility.”

“Many creators, especially creators of colour, have posts dealing with sensitive identity issues mass-reported,” Heffer adds. This censors important voices from the migration debate on a large scale. Not to mention every person with migration experiences, or immigrant family members, who stay away from the public sphere in fear of reprisals if they do speak.

How can we as creators centre migrant voices – the stories and messages we wish to amplify – without jeopardising them? I am not alone in knowing plenty of asylum seekers whose experiences and stories could have gone viral. These are often people with uncertain residency permits still not out of the dangers they fled from, who risk hatred if they share their message and have stories that are hard to anonymise. Yet, they hold a part of the current story of migration in and to Europe that is hard for people to get to elsewhere. Some people in this situation reach out because they think their asylum claims can be strengthened if their story was heard by more people. This is rarely the case. Until I find a better solution, I only cite facts and lift the stories of asylum seekers that have already been named in the media.

“We are all standing in our national context, dealing with the same dilemmas, and it is the same story everywhere.” Gardner continues. “Migration as an issue literally cannot be solved in one country. It has to be solved between all of us internationally. The media narrative and the political narrative does not reflect it, but we are standing shoulder to shoulder doing this every day. When I feel very low, then I try to think about how many we are, who we are.”

Mazili, who shares this mindset, adds: “If I start thinking too much about what people will say, I would stop creating content altogether. You are not responsible for what people do with your words if your message and goal are clear.” Hosszú nods to Mazili as she talks, and stresses: “The most important thing for me is engagement. When people send me long DMs agreeing or disagreeing, or adding sources, it means they took the time to think and discuss.”

Thinking Forward

So many lived stories remain unheard – while grounding statistics and basic information remain in the background of the European migration discourse (IOM 2024). Counter-narrative efforts on migration on social media require a broad plurality of voices producing content that tells the human story and affirms human rights perspectives. Entering content creation should not require advanced technical skills or an unusually high tolerance for online hostility. There is a large potential in utilising already-existing physical communities, such as civic organisations, academic forums and activist networks, as better-equipped incubators for digital literacy. With guidance or some sort of tool book, these spaces can provide practical training in producing

quality, well-sourced, and algorithm-aware content, while also offering peer support when creators face online harassment. Another approach is to establish a transnational network or platform where already-producing creators can pool resources: sharing successful video scripts for translation into other languages, exchanging “tips and tricks,” and coordinating content strategies. Such a network could make the production of nuanced, evidence-based content more sustainable and less isolating.

On the ferry back to the mainland from Utøya, I ran into the author of the prominent new Norwegian book, *Ingen tenker alene* – “No one thinks alone”, Bjørn Stærk. He had also been speaking on Utøya, on how to influence people. He asked why I was there, and I told him about the project – the hours spent listening to content creators who try to make space for nuance in a debate crowded with fear. He shook his head gently. “I doubt it changes much,” he said. “People do not shift because of one video. They shift when the groups of people around them shift.”

I thought I understood what he meant, but I argued against it. I have seen a teenager write to say a video gave him the words to call out racism on the bus. I have heard how a video helped someone choose a school track they had not dared imagine before. I have read messages from young people saying they finally felt proud of a background that had always been framed as shame. I tell Stærk that maybe these are not revolutions, but they are shifts, and shifts travel; first within a person, then within their groups – and, eventually, societies.

“I do not doubt those messages mean something,” he said, “but people rarely change because someone tells them they should. They change because their surroundings change, or because they run into something concrete they cannot ignore. A video can prepare them, but it is their group, or their own experience, that tips the balance.”

As the ferry closed in on the mainland, I found myself holding his words alongside what I had heard from the creators. For some, the goal is exactly those small preparations inside families and classrooms. For others, there is no way around sharper manipulation tactics when the far right sets the frame. They argue that if you do not meet them where they are, you have already lost. The work happens on both levels at once: nudging groups toward openness, and pushing back against the manipulation that makes openness impossible.

But listening to the creators also made clear how fragmented this field still is. Each creator works in their own corner of the algorithm, learning through trial and error, without much chance to compare strategies or lean on each other when waves of hate come. The research gap I began with remains at the end: We still know too little about how content creators, one-person editorial teams, shape the migration debate. Creators themselves often want more tools and contact to make the work more sustainable. If we want more people to step into this space, especially people of ethnic minorities and with migration experiences, there is a need for resources and support.

The boat docked. We went our separate ways. Stærk’s doubt stayed with me, but so did the stubborn insistence that even against fear, influence is possible.

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Migration & Media

Stories Cross Borders, Voices Traverse Screens

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