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Narratives of Crisis and Their Influence on Attitudes, Behaviour, and Policies of Migration and Mobility: A Framework

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Abstract

This document presents a framework for studying narratives of crises and their influence on attitudes, behaviour, and policies of migration and human mobility. The framework emphasizes four axes: time, space, narratives, and crises. Data from a media analysis of claims in newspaper articles in nine European countries provides an empirical basis to illustrate potential research avenues.

Keywords

crisis, framework, narratives, norms, media analysis, research avenues

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Contents

1   Introduction

When people consider whether to move to and live in a different place, they are guided by evaluations and narratives that inform their decision (Bennour, Manatschal, and Ruedin 2022). Similarly, immigration and integration policies are shaped by narratives of who the immigrants are, how they behave, and what should be done about them (Blinder 2015; Paquet and Lawlor 2022). Without a proper understanding of these different ways migration — both emigration and immigration — are perceived and constructed by different actors, we continue to struggle to understand many aspects of the politics of migration, from decisions to migrate despite seemingly impossible odds, decisions to stay behind even though migration promises better life prospects, but also the rise of radical right parties that undermine democratic rule and propagate exclusionary policies to limit immigration despite economic benefits or against human rights (Belloni 2016; Harteveld et al. 2021).

We present a framework to better understand immigration politics in liberal democracies, by relating discussions and debates over politics to considerations of solidarity, utilitarianism (or economy), and nationalism as drivers of migration narratives and policies (Freeman 1995). In particular, we identify crises as episodes in which the relative importance of different narratives — always contested and in competition with one another — is challenged, realigned, and potentially changed radically (Tooze 2018). This framework is suited to study the origin and consequences of different competing narratives on migration using a mix of methods and across disciplines, covering research questions such as:

1. What are the prevalent narratives of migration and mobility in countries with different migration regimes, and how did they evolve at the national level and the level of supranational organizations?

2. Do economic, political, and public health crises shift narratives on migration and mobility?

3. What is the impact of shifting narratives on social behaviour (attitudes, discrimination), political policies, and migration intentions?

4. What are the implications of such narratives and their effects on democratic legitimacy, justice, and citizenship regimes to overcome unjust inequalities?

2   A framework for the study of narratives

In broad lines, a theoretical framework on narratives needs awareness of the context: the time, space, and situation in which a narrative is used. In this sense, such a framework draws on a constructionist approach because language, communication, and speech are considered central to the way humankind understands the world and itself (Galbin 2014): Differences and changes in mainstream narratives are not only triggered by objective strains and events, but they also — if not mainly — reflect choices in the political and civil sphere. In this sense, we develop recent work on the role of narratives in political and social lives (Shiller 2019), applying it to human migration.

Narratives are stories that frame the representation of society and its transformation, providing a (normative) justification for a proposed course of action. Such narratives, however, are not static entities, but can vary across time and space, as well as by actor constellation — with which we acknowledge differences in power. In the following, we differentiate four dimensions that need to be considered for a better understanding of changing narratives and how they affect attitudes, behaviour, and policies of migration and mobility:

- differences across time
- differences across space
- diverse narratives and counter-narratives (in the plural)
- crises as focal points

With a better understanding of the origins and entanglements of narratives, we argue that this framework is also suited for the formulation of alternative, new narratives on migration based on the newly created knowledge — knowledge that also includes perspectives of emigration and migration in the Global South that compete with established storylines. In other words, the framework is suitable to "talk with" rather than only "talk about" migrants (Berkhout and Ruedin 2017; Smith 2021).

2.1 Time

The first dimension in the framework is time. Narratives of migration and mobility can change over time, reflecting human development and changing interactions between people and countries. Two approaches are suited to examine developments over time: we can examine specific points in time as temporarily fixed photographs of a dynamic world, and compare dominant narratives in the 1970s with dominant narratives in the 2020s, for example. Alternatively, we can focus on a specific narrative — say immigrants as welfare scroungers — and follow it over time: which political actors used the narrative, in what way, and how exactly was the narrative presented and justified?

Literature on narratives of migration and mobility has recently focused on how specific narratives — by national and supranational actors and institutions —develop over time (Bello 2022; D'Amato and Lucarelli 2019). Much attention has been dedicated to narratives of migration concerning the so-called "migration crisis" of 2015, the "Covid-19 crisis" of 2020, and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The framework we outline here, however, readily applies to other potential turning points, such as the oil crisis of the 1970s (Bitschnau et al. 2021), the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of Apartheid, or changes after World War II.

2.2 Space

The second dimension in the framework is space. Narratives of migration and mobility differ across countries and world regions, reflecting different realities on the ground, different ways (welfare) states are organized and (state) capacity to regulate human movement. This opens possibilities for comparative analysis, exploring different national, international, and subnational constellations that are conducive to certain narratives, or constellations where certain narratives lack social or political legitimacy.

We consider differences between sending and receiving regions and countries (also colonized and colonizing), as well as state capacity and economic developments as possible reasons for certain narratives to become dominant and shape migration policies. Put differently, even if the causes for changes in narratives are the same in different countries, the institutional, economic, and social contexts may lead to different outcomes because the same developments — like economic crises — are read differently and can produce contrasting narratives.

Work on the role of the radical right in shaping immigration narratives and policies may be instructive for understanding the importance of space (Meyer and Rosenberger 2015). While grand theories such as world society suggest a common, interconnected world, different polities reacted quite differently to the rise of the radical right. In some places, so-called "cordon sanitaires" were installed, where all mainstream parties refused to work with the radical right, effectively ostracizing them from political discourse and reducing their impact on shaping dominant narratives (Heinze 2017; Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015).

2.3 Narratives in the plural

The third dimension in the framework is the recognition that multiple narratives and counter-narratives coexist and compete — a sign of a healthy democracy (Nassehi 2015). While some narratives may become dominant, and different narratives fight for hegemony, we recognize that different groups in society can subscribe to different narratives and counter-narratives that coexist in the same space. Narratives can become so dominant that they are taken for granted by most members of society and that they are unaware of the existence of alternative narratives. In moments of crisis, alternative stories can become the new mainstream if they offer a convincing portrait of the situation and how it should be resolved.

In particular, we think that considerations of social networks and how different actor constellations may be fruitful for understanding opportunities to shape narratives and counter-narratives, or have privileged access to relevant media outlets. In this sense, a crisis on its own is unlikely to produce changing narratives — the context plays an important role.

2.4 Moments of crisis

The fourth dimension in the framework is moments of crisis. If context is already mentioned in the sense of time and space, moments of crisis are episodes in history when social organization is re-ordered and re-organized because politics re-considers "solutions" that no longer seem to work in a situation where the future no longer seems "predictable" — otherwise there would not have been a crisis. In this sense, the focus on crises suggests a perspective of episodic or punctuated social change (Walgrave and Varone 2008). Whether the crisis is economic or political in nature, or whether a war or public health concerns lie at its basis is *a priori* unimportant for a rupture to develop. What matters is the perception of discontinuity.

In this sense, we suggest that a crisis is best understood as a claim (Marino and Ruedin 2023). For a crisis to exist, a political actor makes a claim that the current situation differs substantially from what should be, and that the consequences of this difference are grave; hence, urgent action is needed. The claim is made to an audience who can accept (and potentially perpetuate) the claims to

a crisis, or reject it. Crisis claims are a priori more likely to be accepted if the actor has legitimacy and if they draw on a convincing narrative explaining the situation, the way the world should be, and the urgency of action.

At moments of crisis, we expect a re-ordering of narratives in the sense that different narratives can become dominant. Crises are important because of the disruption they cause, the structural changes they bring in societies, and because of the erosion of 'truths' — narratives so dominant that they are not questioned —, and the related loss of legitimacy for political actors and institutions associated with 'old' narratives. It is also possible that new narratives are created in a true search for novel solutions, likely a new combination of existing narratives. Of particular interest are the *changes* in narratives, and the consequences of changing narratives.[2]

In the literature, the nature of crises is debated. There is a tension between accounts that regard crises in objective terms, and those that emphasize subjective aspects such that a moment is understood as a potential turning point (McAdam 2014). In practice, most accounts are somewhere in between: quantitative analyses of the impact of the sudden arrival of refugees, for instance, draw on objective changes in asylum requests (Faigle, Polke-Majewski, and Venohr 2016). At the same time, these accounts recognize that the consequences of these changes are moderated through narratives that may emphasize human rights or unwanted competition to name but two ways. Similarly, accounts emphasizing how crises are constructed by political actors as a process (e.g. Roitman 2013) tend to acknowledge some form of social change on the basis of claims to crisis.

3   Applicability of the framework: an example of changing narratives in the media

To apply this framework, multiple research methods can be used — separately or in conjunction with one another. In the following, we use media analysis (Van der Brug et al. 2015), but more generally, we consider document analysis from discourse analysis to quantitative text-as-data approaches, sentiment analysis based on the frequency of words with positive and negative connotation, survey experiments, or oral histories as just some of the ways the framework can be applied in empirical work. In general, we believe that narratives are best captured when different approaches are combined, such as when an empirical media analysis is combined with reflexive theoretical and normative approaches, both to better understand the nature of narratives and their impact on human mobility, and to propose convincing alternative narratives (Fouka, Mazumder, and Tabellini 2021).

Narratives may address utilitarian aspects such as economic growth, issues of nativist cultural-national preservation, or the need for solidarity with recently arrived people. Mobilizing the category of crisis in narratives entails implicit comparisons (i.e. non-crisis or post-crisis), and therefore constructs a crisis as a normative problem, questioning the moral or ethical grounds of actions, policies, and ideas.

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[2] We note that 'crisis' may be considered a colonial perspective in that it presumes a 'normal' (as in ordered, compare Smith (2021)) situation that is interrupted, something that may not exist for dominated populations for whom life is a constant struggle or 'permanent crisis'.

By including variation over time and space, this media analysis includes variation in contexts and narratives that helps isolate and control the effects of different types of crisis on narratives and behaviour. The data collected by Van der Brug et al. (2015) were expanded in time to cover the period 1995 to 2018, thus including a broader set of crises. For comparative reasons, data for the 1970s were added, and the range of countries (Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom) expanded by including Sweden as a country with a strong welfare state, and Hungary as a country in Eastern Europe with a different immigration history than countries in Western Europe.

The coverage of countries across time is visible in Figure 1. In the figure, each dot identifies the year covered in the media analysis. Within the years, a random sample of days was covered, and all articles on immigration and integration that (potentially) affect the country under study were included and manually coded.
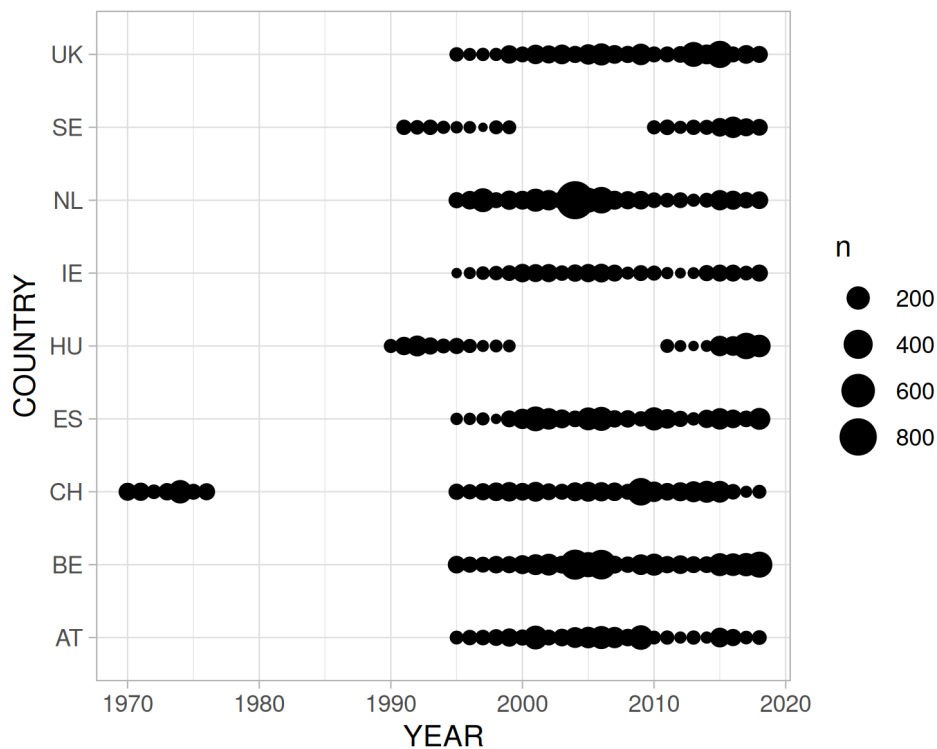

Figure 1: Years covered by the media analysis. Each dot identifies a year covered. For Sweden and Hungary, non-contiguous periods were chosen to capture crises of the 1990s that were identified as potentially important. The sample of the 1970s (oil crisis) was only conducted in Switzerland. The size of the points indicates the number of claims recorded per year. The countries are: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Switzerland (CH), Spain (ES), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NL), Sweden (SE), and the United Kingdom (UK).

Table 1 shows the number of claims coded by country. Claims in the news were manually coded (Van der Brug et al. 2015), and capture instances when political actors — in the widest sense — say something about immigration or integration in relation to the country under study. Even though the random sample of days studied is comparable across countries, we can observe clear differences

across countries. If this difference in salience does not capture narratives as such, it indicates the importance of immigration and integration as topics in public and political debate.

COUNTRY	N
AT	1898
BE	3456
CH	2853
ES	2287
HU	1225
IE	1097
NL	3195
SE	740
UK	2224

Table 1: Number of claims coded by country, all years combined. Even though these numbers indicate clear differences in salience, with the media data alone, we cannot identify which part of the differences can be attributed to newspapers (because newspapers are constant within countries). Similar trends in salience from other sources are needed to better capture differences in salience.[3]

As visible in Figure 2, the salience not only differs across countries, but also within countries. According to the theoretical framework outlined above, we suspect that some of the variance over time can be directly attributed to moments of crisis: moments when the 'normal' ceases to exist and new narratives on immigration and integration potentially emerge.

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[3] The countries are: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Switzerland (CH), Spain (ES), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NL), Sweden (SE), and the United Kingdom (UK).
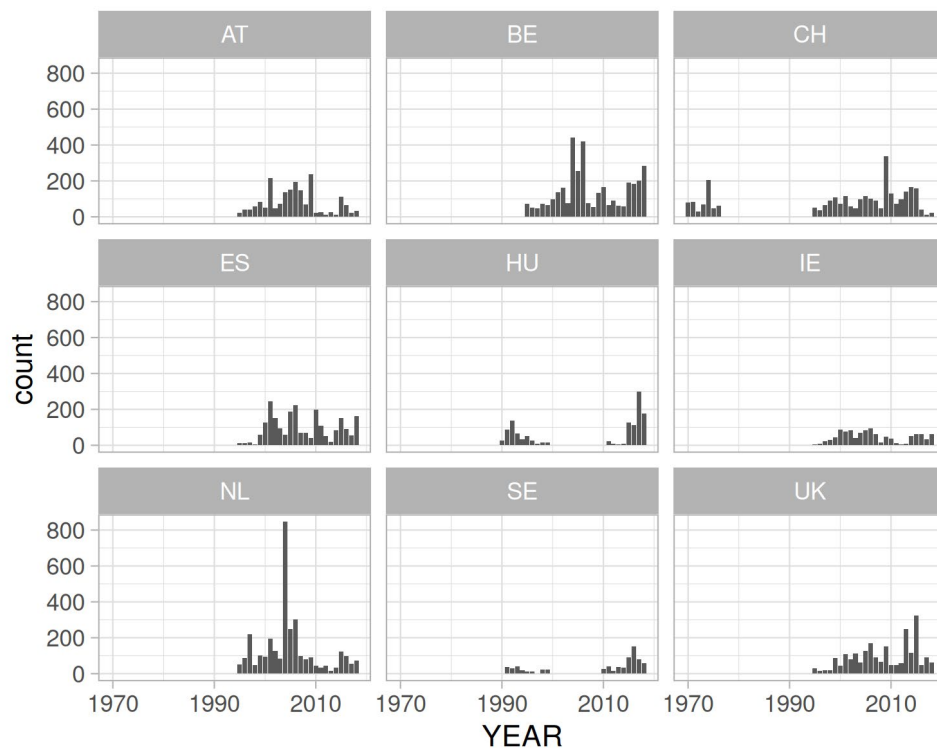
Figure 2: Number of claims found by country and year. A random sample of days was used in each country. The countries are: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Switzerland (CH), Spain (ES), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NL), Sweden (SE), and the United Kingdom (UK).

4   Position

A first dimension of changing narratives can be the position in claims on immigration and integration. Each time a claim is made by an actor — government representatives, politicians, academics, civil society organization, etc. — this claim can be positive (as in it would have a positive impact on the immigrants about whom the claim is made: inclusive) or negative (as in it would have a negative impact on the immigrants: exclusive). Claims can also be neutral, and we capture the position on a scale from -1 (negative) to +1 (positive). In Figure 3, we show the distribution of positions for each country.
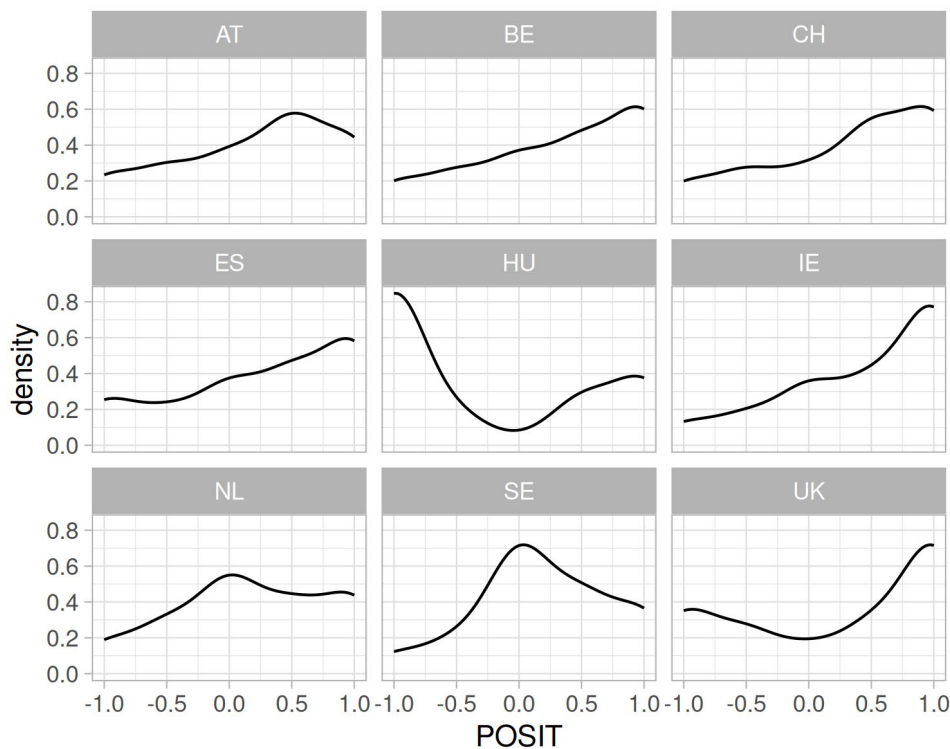
Figure 3: Position on immigration and integration by country, all years combined, kernel densities. The position of claims is measured on a scale from negative (-1) to positive (+1). The higher the line at any point on the x-axis, the more claims with this position can be observed. The countries are: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Switzerland (CH), Spain (ES), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NL), Sweden (SE), and the United Kingdom (UK).

We can see from the figure that the way immigration and integration are covered in newspapers — and presumably in public and political debate — varies greatly. In countries such as Belgium or Spain, the narrative is more often positive than negative, as we can see from the lines that are higher at the positive end of the scale. In the Netherlands, and especially Sweden, neutral claims are the most common: the hump in the middle of the distribution. By contrast, in two countries, narratives are clearly polarized. In the United Kingdom and especially in Hungary, claims tend to be either (very) positive or (very) negative, with few neutral claims in between.

5   Frames

When claims are made in newspapers or in public speech (or oral histories), they can be justified with specific frames: *why* something should be done about immigration and integration. Rather than classifying narratives into positive and negative as done in the preceding section, here we draw on a distinction between frames that use instrumental arguments (e.g. immigration is good for the economy), draw on collective identities (e.g. the 'Western' way to do things), or highlight normative principles such as human rights.

In Figure 4, we trace claims that use instrumental frames. These are claims that draw on narratives that refer to cost-benefit considerations. We can see both differences across countries and across time. Of particular interest will be *changes* in the use of instrumental frames over time. For

instance, looking at Switzerland and the United Kingdom, we can see an increasing use of instrumental frames at the end of data collection.
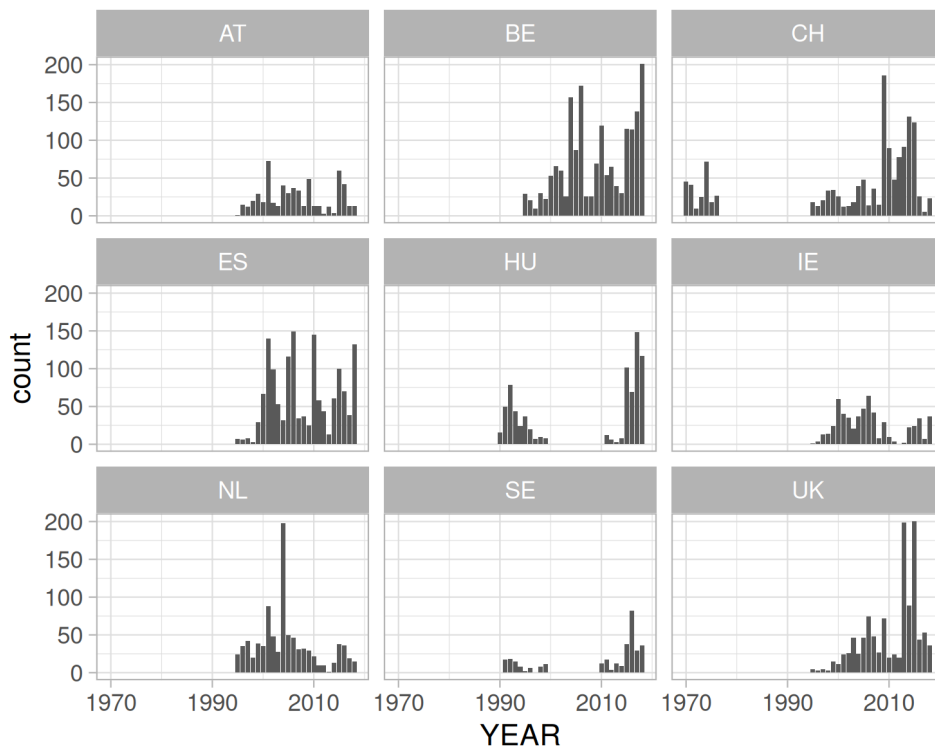

Figure 4: Instrumental frames by country and time. A random sample of days was used in each country. The countries are: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Switzerland (CH), Spain (ES), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NL), Sweden (SE), and the United Kingdom (UK).

In Figure 5, the same analysis is replicated with identity frames. For one, we can see how these narratives are less common than the instrumental frames shown in Figure 4. We can also see a decline over time in Belgium, but a contrasting increase in use in Hungary.
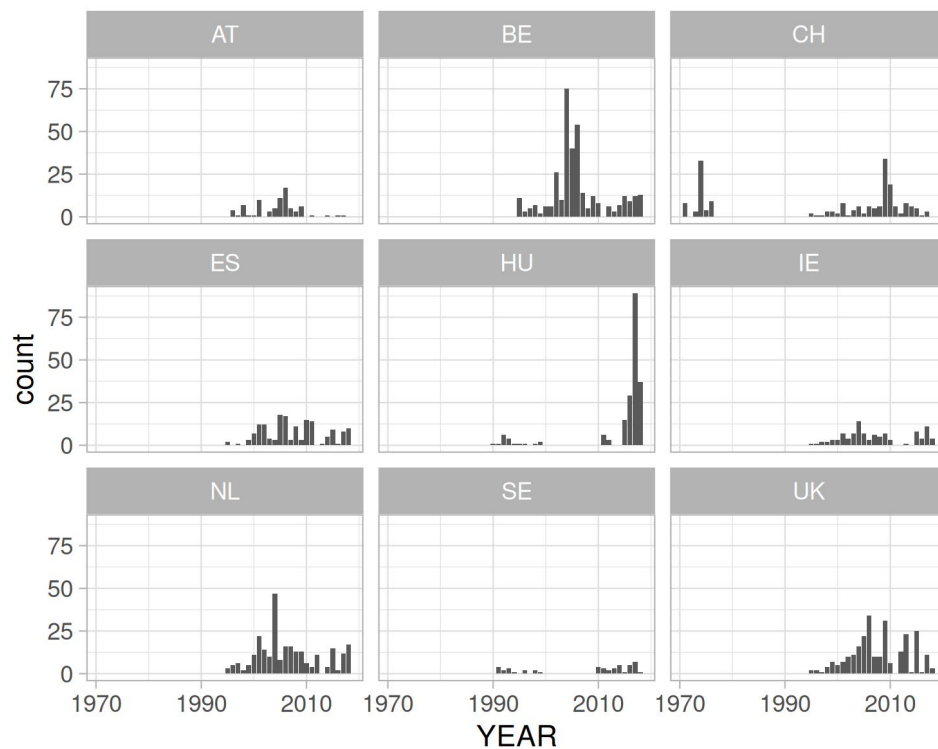
Figure 5: Identity frames by country and time. A random sample of days was used in each country. The countries are: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Switzerland (CH), Spain (ES), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NL), Sweden (SE), and the United Kingdom (UK).

In Figure 6, moral rights — principally considerations of human rights — are traced across time and countries. In comparison to instrumental and identity frames, we observe less change over time.
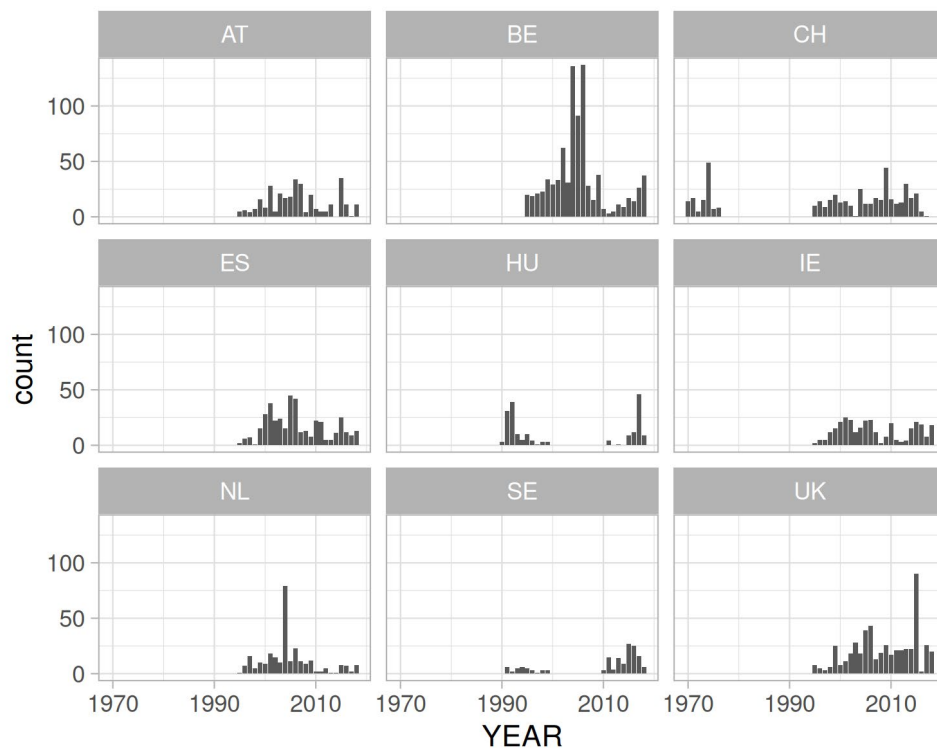
Figure 6: Moral arguments/human rights frames by country and time. A random sample of days was used in each country. The countries are: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Switzerland (CH), Spain (ES), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NL), Sweden (SE), and the United Kingdom (UK).

6 Research avenues

Narratives on migration are dynamic: they vary across time and space, there are multiple narratives that live in parallel and compete, and moments of crisis are particularly conducive to changes in narratives. With this framework in hand, we propose a better understanding of migration decisions, attitudes to immigrants, and policies regulating immigration and integration.

The applicability of this framework was demonstrated through a media analysis spanning multiple decades and countries. However, there are many more research avenues to explore narratives on migration and their implications. We draw on the migration-mobility nexus to organize these research avenues along the lines of enablement, continuum, hierarchy, and opposition (Piccoli et al. 2023). In particular, we argue that the migration-mobility nexus is articulated and justified through narratives. Specific research avenues that we can discern include:

- textual analysis can be automated, and the sentiments of texts can be analyzed automatically to study even larger bodies of text

- newspapers are far from the only texts that contain relevant narratives on migration: parliamentary speeches, party manifestos (Ruedin and Morales 2019), policy documents, press releases, parliamentary bills, online videos (Czymara et al. 2023; Spörlein and

Schlueter 2020), personal diaries, personal correspondence, online posts, or oral histories are just some of the possibilities that come to mind

- changes in narratives can be correlated with other data sources, such as changes in survey responses on attitudes or patterns of discrimination, or intentions to migrate — with panel data particularly suited

- normative implications of different narratives can be explored, considering, for example, questions of legitimacy and justice in different narratives on migration

- the content of different narratives can be studied in detail, examining differences in terms of gender, social class, or ethnic minority status

- consideration of actor networks and power may be useful to understand conditions for continuities and (rapid) changes in which narratives on migration are dominant in a particular context

- the use of narratives on migration in the justification of borders, boundary making, and exclusion may reveal dualities and ambiguities of classification

- changing narratives on migration may be associated with broader questions of democratic legitimacy and citizenship

- narratives may be explored from different perspectives, including perspectives of the Global South and members of the elite

- parallels and differences between narratives on migration and global inequalities or the impact of climate change may reveal shared mechanisms in terms of justification and decision-making

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